

TEMPORALIZING THE ENCLAVE: DESIRE SMUGGLING IN CHINESE
GENDERSWAP FANFICTION

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

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August 2023

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ABSTRACT

Chinese genderswap fanfiction emerges at the intersection of Real Person Slash (RPS) fiction and the trope of gender reversal. By reimagining male idols as female characters, genderswap works fulfill readers' desires to either observe or engage with these genderswapped personas. However, the genre has faced criticism, with some fans finding the fantasies offensive, leading to a boycott and sparking the February 27th Incident. This incident ignited conflicts between the genderswap fandom and other fan communities.

My study of genderswap centers around its textual production, especially the flashpoint text of the February 27th Incident, *Falling*, in order to examine how desires are enabled, manifested, censored, and smuggled in genderswap works. As the outcome of my three-year research, this thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the prototypes and the defining trope of genderswap works. To contextualize the analysis of genderswap works, it explores the silence of idols and the transcendence of androgyny. Chapter 2 investigates the narrative functions of two features I summarized about genderswap works, namely, preference of boy band members as prototypes and character mutilation. Chapter 3 focuses on fans' post-227 sentiment and reactions to dominant fandom discourses. By presenting the conflicts and the power structure within fandom, it illustrates how female desires are censored in genderswap works and how temporalities are incorporated as anti-censorship strategies.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Junko Cui was born on the Loess Plateau and raised on the North China Plain. During her childhood, one of the cherished pastimes was acting as a translator between her grandmother, who only spoke the Northwestern dialect, and those who conversed in Mandarin while shopping for groceries. So she chose to major in Chinese-English translation and interpreting and started her undergraduate studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen in 2016. After four years in the Pearl River Delta, an exchange semester in South Korea, and a gap semester in Japan, she earned her bachelor's degree and a basic knowledge of Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese in 2021. In the same year, she joined the M.A. program in Asian Studies at Cornell University.

Outside academia, Junko writes stories, learns languages, films documentaries, shoot portraits, travels, and translates. She is expected to receive her master's degree in August 2023, and after graduation, she will attend a one-year language program at Waseda University and enjoy writing, learning, filming, shooting, travelling, and translating.

In memory of my grandmother, Guiqin Cao.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Recently, there has been a popular phrase circulating on the Chinese internet: “[A bullet from X years ago] hits one exactly at the bullseye.” Before becoming an abused internet meme, this sentence originally appears in Sun Lizhe's “Yearning for Shi Tiesheng (想念史铁生).” Some people marvel at the sluggishness of education through the metaphor of a bullet's flight speed, while others liken its belated trajectory to the Karmic cycle of cause and effect. However, my most profound moment of connection with this phrase came a few days ago when I was revisiting my documents and came across my SOP of MA application. In the “why school” section, I expressed my hope to explore my interests extensively at Cornell, filling the gaps in my undergraduate humanities training and transforming my research on genderswap fanfiction since my senior year into a graduation thesis.

At this moment, as I finalize the formatting of my thesis and prepare to conclude these three years of effort by writing this acknowledgment, I am struck by the sensation of a bullet hitting my bullseye — for me, the phrase perfectly encapsulates the delightful surprise of suddenly witnessing the fulfillment of a seemingly casual wish. After all, having achieved my dream of studying at Cornell and crafting a thesis that fills me with pride, with support from the best advisors, supportive friends, and loving family members by my side, what more could I ask for?

I am deeply appreciative of my advisor, Professor Nick Admussen, for his invaluable guidance, support, and mentorship throughout this two-year journey. Professor Admussen's academic guidance has helped refine my premature projects

into more well-thought arguments, making them intelligible to a broader readership. Paragraph by paragraph, he gave me comments on wording, styles, and ways of reasoning, liberating my writing, long suppressed by language and ideology. I would also like to thank my co-advisor, Professor Andrew Campana, for guiding, encouraging, and inspiring me as I delved into the domain of Japan and Trans-Asia studies. The weekly reading group he invited me to join, in particular, reframed my understanding of how media and game studies is situated in Japan studies and helped me structure a large part of my thesis.

My two-year journey at Cornell could not have been so lucky without immense encouragement and inspiration I received from female role models. My sincere thanks also go to Professor Kristin Roebuck and Professor Katherine Sender, who inspire me intellectually as I delved into the domain of history and communication studies, who capture my low mood, reach out to me, and help me get rid of the PhD application anxiety. More importantly, their wisdom, gentleness, and strength have shown me the kind of scholar I aspire to become in the future. I also want to acknowledge the instruction and help of Larson sensei, Suzuki sensei, and Ichikawa sensei, without which, my Japanese would not have improved so quickly.

My deepest appreciation goes to my beloved mother, Yuling Shi, and father, Yonglong Cui, whose support and unwavering belief in me helped me overcome the tearful days of not receiving a Ph.D. offer. They patiently shared their life experiences, teaching me that the timing and pace of achieving goals shouldn't be a concern, for life is not a sprint but a marathon. I want to also express gratitude to my younger brother David for his care and humorous consolation during moments of emotional low, and

to my cat Medusa for always lying on my belly and purring away all my negative moods.

Also, I don't think I could have made it through the long upstate New York winters without my friends. So I would like to especially thank my mood stabilizer Rui Li, my emergency rescuer Xiao Hong, my Hyrule adventure companion Joy Li, my spirit-jumpstarter Gin Wang, and my milk tea ally Katherine Tran for always being by my side and making Ithaca a more memorable place for me. Last but not least, I would like to thank the individuals who contributed their time, insights, and expertise to this research project, who shared profound insights and experiences, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Their willingness to engage in candid discussions and share personal narratives has been instrumental in shaping the depth of this research.

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IDENTITY, ETHICS, AND METHODOLOGY

My interest in fan studies originated from the curiosity about my own fandom identity. Lurking in margins of fandom, I seldom identify myself as an earnest participant in fan communities. I hold extensive knowledge about idol groups' music and gossip, yet don't closely follow any group or member; I read fanfiction, but often struggle to locate myself within the fan-created imaginative spaces. As I could clearly perceive, there is a barrier between me and avid fans, but it doesn't seem as clear-cut as Joli Jenson's categorization of "them" versus "people like us" categorization.¹ So after reading Henry Jenkins' "Textual Poachers" and Matt Hills' "Fan Culture," I briefly labeled myself as an aca-fan, believing that my detachment may serve as a precaution against getting too fannish, until my fanness was playfully questioned by a friend.

That was during the outbreak of the February 27th Incident, when fan fiction was thrust into the spotlight and garnered an abundance of unwanted attention, to the extent that it has ultimately impeded the creative freedom of the entire community. As a fanfiction enthusiast, a self-mocking "rogue reader," my friend suffered alongside the entire fan community in the aftermath of the February 27th disturbance. Despite her attempts to share her anguish with me, I often failed to empathize with her experiences. Eventually, she came to the conclusion that "you are just not the target consumer of fan narratives." As my preliminary investigation of the February 27th Incident advanced, I soon realized that the "narrative" in her remarks not only refers to the storylines of poignancy or emotional draw, which hardly reach my heart, but also encompasses their collective narratives of fanfiction reader identity. This realization made

¹ In Joli Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization," essay, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 9–29, 9, she presents a conventional view that insistently characterizes fans as "them," distinguished from "people like us" (students, professors and social critics) as well as from (the more) reputable patrons or aficionados or collectors," to indicate a hierarchy of taste and affection in public perception.

me aware that even though we might adore the same idol and consume the same fan-generated works, nuances in identification can still significantly affect an aca-fan's understanding, namely, aca-fan should be a set of identities, rather than a definite one. Therefore, anchored in my initial position as an unmoved reader excluded from insider-only fanfic conversations, I decided to delve into the vast and diverse Chinese popular fandom, and with the one of the most controversial, genderswap fandom, as my research topic, to explore my position on the aca-fan spectrum.

Centered around this friend and her network of acquainted fans, I met several genderswap fans through a snowball sampling method, with most of them later becoming my informants and connecting me with insider fan conversations. Meanwhile, I have also encountered interviewable fans through the common trajectory of genderswap fandom that I was aware of – Weibo, Douban, Archive of Our Own, Lofter, and sometimes WeChat groups – over the course of three years. In 2020, I conducted an online genderswap-themed survey and posted the questionnaire link onto Weibo and Douban. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions regarding gender, sexual orientation, educational background, as well as questions about their most consumed male celebrities as genderswap prototypes, characters celebrities are genderswapped into, their corresponding imagined identities when reading these works, and perspectives on genderswapping as a philosophy and the positionality of genderswap fandom within fan communities. Out of 151 valid responses, I selected 15 informants who expressed willingness to participate in follow-up conversation and developed online focus-group discussion with them.

Additionally, I do online walking-throughs a lot, observing and engaging in conversations with commenters who voice their thoughts and resonance in comments sections of genderswap works. While answers I collected in these discussions, online and offline, cannot represent thoughts of all genderswap fans, together with three years of digital ethnography

research, they helped me establish a collective perception towards fandom climate and also towards the selected works for analysis. Moreover, due to the ephemerality of online sources, posts concerning genderswap works often became inaccessible once reported and deleted. But informants and the genderswap fan community who responded to my requests could always support my work with screenshots they saved and memories they recalled, from their undocumented collective archive and fan chronicle. Together, we build a narration of the February 27th Incident as an episode of Chinese fandom history. Taking the introduction of the first chapter and the fifth section as an example, which specifically focus on the February 27th Incident itself, their memories and post-227 sentiments provide crucial firsthand data for my research. Based on this, along with news reports and a few existing literatures, I was able to reconstruct the conflicts within and between fan communities during that time.

When writing these sections, I sometimes contemplate the archival value of these hardly documentable fan memory, in terms of both gossip and popular expertise. Although fans' gossip has long been dismissed as "worthless and idle chatter" by patriarchal discourse², the feminist reappraisal of its role within female culture³ has made me aware of its constructive function in establishing homosocial bonds among fangirls and preserving their dissenting voices. For instance, before the mainstream discourse reduced the February 27th Incident to a boycott against Xiao Zhan, complaints in WeChat groups and the hashtag #I am an ordinary person and I dislike Xiao Zhan(我是普通人, 我讨厌肖战) on Weibo helped preserve dissents in the writing of popular cultural history. In addition, as presented in the first section, the production and consumption history of idols as cultural products, the ongoing power negotiation between entertainment companies and fans revolving around idols and concepts

² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 81.

³ Deborah Jones, "Gossip: Notes on Women's Oral Culture," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 3, no. 2-3 (1980): 193-98, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0148-0685\(80\)92155-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0148-0685(80)92155-7).

idols embody, the intricate design by companies, and the close attention and interpretation fans pay to idols, constitute a complex power relationship no less complex and significant than that between traditional authors and readers. Therefore, considering fans' memory also as a kind of cultural capital⁴, I believe the "intimate knowledge and cultural competency" of fans⁵ is well worth documenting and analyzing.

The communication and interaction with fans, as well as thematic analysis of idea exchanges with them, continuously deepen my understanding of them and reshape my research questions. Initially, under the influence of the resistance/incorporation model of subculture studies and the notion of "valorizing of resistance" in the early phase of fan studies⁶, I attempted to argue for the rebellious and subversive nature of genderswap fandom, vaguely suggesting that by participating or observing imaged sex with feminized male idols, fans are actually retaliating against patriarchal control. However, as my investigation progressed, I realized that violent resistance was just one often unintended textual significance of genderswap works and in contrast, for most authors and readers, the driving force behind their production and consumption is simply desire, rather than the awareness of using sexual fantasies as weapons against patriarchal discourse. Upon this realization, I prioritized textual analysis and devoted a significant portion of this thesis to investigating fans' desires from selected texts.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice and Tony Bennett (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

⁵ David Bradby et al., "The Politics of the Popular? From Melodrama to Television," essay, in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film, and Television, 1800-1976* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 275–96, 282.

⁶ Judith May Fathallah, "From Foucault to Fanfic," essay, in *Fanfiction and the Author: How Fanfic Changes Popular Cultural Texts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 17-32, 26.

The approaching towards texts also brings up the core question in studying fanfiction, as stated by Busse: “how to choose specific texts or events for close analysis,”⁷ to solve which, I turned to furious reading and dialogue with fans. As a result, in this thesis, the choices of text mostly stem from my own immersion in and gradually increasing familiarity with genderswap fandom and works. And undoubtedly, recommendations from the reader community and small reader groups I participate in have also enriched my selection. Among them, one WeChat group I was invited to join plays a decisive role in solidifying my primary methodology as close reading and content analysis of genderswap fanfiction. In this clique that gathers out of a shared interest in the idea of genderswap, although everyone adores different idols, members often share genderswap works featuring their respective idols in the group and engage in discussion about character portrayal and fantasy world building. These frequent discussions, which often unconsciously touch upon literary criticism, have led me to question, similar to Abigail Derecho: “what if we are to think seriously about fanfiction as art?”⁸

To enable a close reading of genderswap fanfiction as a genre, in the second and third sections, I use textual analysis to define the boundaries of genderswap as the reversed gender and existing real-life prototypes, distinguishing it from predominantly fictional BL fictions and traditional RPS fictions that depict exclusively same-sex romance. Moreover, an interpretivist reading of theories, not only those in feminism and fan studies but also ideas borrowed from other field, is widely applied throughout the sections to support my arguments. For example, in section 3, Foucault’s concepts of the panopticon and docile bodies⁹ are used to explain how band members’ collective living makes them ideal prototypes for band slash

⁷ Kristina Busse, Introduction, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 1–40, 23.

⁸ Abigail Derecho, “Arhontic Literature: A Definition, A History and Several Theories of Fan Fiction,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), pp. 61-74, 63.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2009).

and facilitate readers' fantasies. In section 4, psychoanalytic theories such as the Oedipus complex and the triple-structured model of the psyche, as well as feminist perspectives in post-Freudian dialectic like the Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott's object relations theory¹⁰, are employed to explore the reasons behind genderswap texts' mutilation of characters.

Discourse analysis, too, is an important aspect in my research methodology. As the February 27th Incident can be seen as a result of discursive friction and conflicts, in the fifth section, I unfold the power relations within fan communities and investigate reasons behind the marginalization of genderswap fandom by analyzing the anti-fandom discourse against genderswap (which I often refer to as fandom fundamentalist discourse) and the queer discourse represented by genderswap fandom. In the analysis of fandom fundamentalists' starstruck discourse, I also borrow from and reflect on Michael Warner's and Catherine R. Squires' divisions of media space to consider the layers and relative positions of different niches within fan communities. Furthermore, while each niche in the fandom power dynamics that I argue is embedded with its own discourse, I heed Foucault's caution that us scholars should not attempt to delve "from discourse towards its interior" for presumed "true" signification but are instead ought to pay attention to "discourse itself, its appearance and its regularity," and move "towards the external conditions of possibility."¹¹

Failure in discursive conflicts often leads to desires being censored and suppressed, and genderswap fandom can only resort to literary strategies for resolution. Therefore, in the sixth sections, I decode their strategies and analyze how fan writers employ temporality and reflexivity to avoid unwanted reader responses. In this section, which involves the non-textual production, such as retro-styled portraits of genderswapped idols by a fan artist @99.16,

¹⁰ Susan Kavalier-Adler, *The Klein-Winnicott Dialectic: Transformative New Metapsychology and Interactive Clinical Theory* (London: Karnac Books, 2012).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," essay, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981), 51–76, 67.

methods like visual analysis, iconographical and symbolic reading, interpretation of intertextuality, and audience reception are also utilized.

In writing this thesis, I gradually redefine my identity as a close reader of fanfiction and fan communities, where the closeness allows me to fully immerse myself in their realm of fantasy and connection while maintaining my identity as a not excessively involved participant helps me avoid the “fannish uncertainty principle,” that “the more embedded a scholar is within a given fan community, the less she will want to write about it, thus divulging its potential secrets, entwined as they are in personal interactions.”¹²

Therefore, compared to my initial discontent for unconscious exclusion from fannish conversations, I become able to reconcile with the fan enthusiasm that I couldn't fully integrate into. Because as I often think to myself, what drives my research is curiosity, critical inquiry, and skepticism, rather than an auto-ethnographic desire for self-display, and my intention is hermeneutics, not apologetics. Then, can this positionality be considered participatory observation? Probably not, since I do not think that the distance between me and genderswap fandom is sufficient for participatory observation to be listed as a method in this thesis. After all, the term “observation” sounds to me implying an “undercover academic spy aping the natives.”¹³ So, if asked to find a suitable verb for my mode of seeing, I would choose “witness,” which represents the internal approaching and recording based on shared interests and experiences, rather than a peering observation projected from the outside. Therefore, the ambiguity and in-betweenness of my fandom identity preclude me, ethically, from fully identifying and allying with any implicated group in the thesis; instead, I can only

¹² Kristina Busse, Introduction, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 1–40, 3.

¹³ Catherine M. Roach, “‘Going Native’: ACA-Fandom and Deep Participant Observation in Popular Romance Studies,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47, no. 2 (2014): 33–49, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2014.0011>.

try to reflect the truth of fandom incidents, decode the meaning of fan texts, and present my own argument enabled by a nuanced standpoint and blended methodologies.

CHAPTER 1

IDOLS IN REVERSAL: ANALYZING PROTOTYPES AND TROPES OF CHINESE GENDERSWAP FANFICTION

The February 27th Incident: disturbance, discourses, and deprived voices

Although the Chinese internet has seen the end of many celebrity careers, which is known in fandom slang as “house-collapsing (塌房),”¹⁴ Xiao Zhan’s involvement in the February 27th controversy was something of a special case. Out of no sexual scandals and no law violation, this young celebrity was failed by his fame quite unexpectedly – support from fans made him the blue-eyed boy of media overnight, however, he was eventually turned back in the same way, by online traffic.

Before the disturbance, Xiao had a fairly positive image and was known as “the beneficiary of Danmei adaption,”¹⁵ “the unifier of fan circle aesthetics,”¹⁶ and so on. His popularity could largely be attributed to *The Untamed* (the 2019 TV adaption of a Danmei)¹⁷

¹⁴ House-collapsing, a metaphor connotating celebrities being abandoned by fandom and industry for not being able to maintain the image to attract fans’ attention and loyalty, where the collapsed house refers to public persona crafted for certain celebrities. For more translation and elucidation of this term, see Hu Jingning (胡静凝), “Emotional Attachment and consumption Rationality: A Study on the Phenomenon of ‘House Crashed’ in the Era of Idol Industry 情感依恋与消费理性：偶像工业时代的恋爱塌房现象研究,” *Contemporary Youth Research*, no.5(2022): 49-56.

¹⁵ URL for a Weibo post proposing this title, “耽改红利”的受益者:

<http://m.weibo.cn/status/4870969585567855?> (Accessed September 12, 2022). Although Danmei and BL, or even most of Real Person Slash fiction all feature male-male romance, this thesis does not use them interchangeably, especially when Danmei is used particularly to refer to original Chinese BL works, Real Person Slash indicates real-life prototypes and a fan-generated nature, and BL functions more as a generic term of consumable textual products centered around male-male sexuality. For instance, in Xiao’s case, the TV series he starred was adapted from a Danmei novel, and the male-male romance (not necessarily explicitly) depicted in the TV series appealed to BL consumers in general and led to their writing of RPS fictions about him.

¹⁶ “统一饭圈审美的男人。” For context, see <http://m.weibo.cn/status/4873353036828826?> (Accessed February 27, 2023)

¹⁷ A Chinese term that denotes the genre of homoerotic relationships shaped in Chinese web fiction, often literally translated as “addict to/indulge in beauty.” Borrowed from the synonymous Japanese term, *Tanbi*, this name also indicates a narrative focus on romantic relationships between young

novel, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*), its affinity with Boy's Love media, and especially the coded homoerotic relationship as a queerbaiting strategy in Chinese TV series production. To avoid or even please the homophobic censorship regime¹⁸, Chinese entertainment companies, encouraged by the potential for serious profits, tend to feign the romance between two male characters as brotherhood by inserting female characters or employing symbolism in TV adaptations. The smuggled chemical, however, could still be decoded, received, and even ironically referred to as “socialist brotherhood”¹⁹ by its knowing audience, who “revel in the thrill of discovering tiny hints of romance that scriptwriters have managed to slip in.”²⁰

Beyond simply detecting the camouflaged affection from the censored representation of on-screen homoeroticism, the fanbase soon shifted their shipping focus from characters to main actors of *The Untamed*, Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo, which brought them instant fame and spawned a multitude of real person slash (RPS) fiction, casting the borrowed images of them into imagined scenarios²¹ and portraying them as a real-life couple. Here, the imagined scenarios are mostly achieved through identity rewriting and time traveling or, a step further, gender reversal. However, as a small fraction of fans applauded gender reversal as a trope embodying their fantasies, the majority of fandom stayed skeptical or even contemptuous about genderswap fanfiction.

boys and an emphasis on aestheticism. For more discussion of the genre Danmei and its importation history, see Jin Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 1–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491008>.

¹⁸ Weihong Bao, *Queer China: Lesbian and Gay Literature and Visual Culture Under Postsocialism*, 4.

¹⁹ Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, “A Queer ‘Socialist Brotherhood’: The Guardian Web Series, Boys’ Love Fandom, and the Chinese State,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (2020): 479–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1754627>.

²⁰ Viola Zhou and Koh Ewe, “Boys Keep Flirting With Each Other on Chinese TV But Never Fall in Love,” *VICE*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7k95mg/boys-love-drama-china-tv-untamed-lgbtq>.

²¹ Paul Booth, “Slash and Porn: Media Subversion, Hyper-Articulation, and Parody,” *Continuum* 28, no. 3 (2014): pp. 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.893985>.

Back in February 2020, a fan piece titled *Falling* was shared on Weibo, in which Xiao was portrayed as a sex worker suffering from gender dysphoria, prostituting herself to pay for the sex reassignment surgery. This transformative work seems determined to follow a realistic style and abandon the aesthetic narrative of “Mary Sue”²² and “pure love”²³ as cultural codes commonly used in female-oriented media, where innocent characters, self-inserted or shipped, are all designed with ideal and promising endings. As a result, Xiao was not only stripped of his original gender identity, but also depicted as someone with obvious sexual peccadillo, luring a high school boy to taste the forbidden fruit. In this respect, to enjoy *Falling* and similar works, one must be able to discover the femininity of Xiao’s image, appreciate the logic of reinventing him as a woman, and possess a relatively low moral expectation of fictional sex. Under those multiple conditions, a community therefore has gathered around this niche on Archive of Our Own (hereinafter referred as AO3), a non-profit fanfic platform that aims to “preserve the history of transformative fanworks” and “offer shelter to at-risk fannish projects”²⁴ with high tolerance for fluid sexualities and out-of-character adaptations.

Like English fan writers who use mail lists to secure the uncensored circulation of their stories, Chinese writers and readers of this subgenre also protected themselves through limited accessibility. However, as the link of *Falling* brought more fans from Weibo to AO3, increasing visibility opened the niche to fandom fundamentalists, a dominant group enjoying heterosexual “romantic simulacra”²⁵ based on masculine charisma, whose networks are mainly

²² Anupam Chander and Madhavi Sunder, “Everyone’s a Superhero: A Cultural Theory of ‘Mary Sue’ Fan Fiction as Fair Use,” *California Law Review* 95, no. 2 (2007): 597–626. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20439103>.

²³ Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 49.

²⁴ URL for “Our Projects” on Organization for Transformative Works: <https://www.transformativeworks.org/our-projects/> (accessed February 12, 2023)

²⁵ Gi-Gook Kim (김지국), “Winter Sonata, indulging in or keeping the distance ‘겨울연가’, 빠져들기와 거리두기,” in *Drama “Winter Sonata” between Contents and Context “겨울연가”: 콘텐츠와 콘텍스트 사이*, ed. Young-Soon Kim and Ji-Seon Park (Seoul: Dahal Media, 2005), pp. 20-59, 35.

established through Weibo and especially Super-Topics²⁶. Despite the loosely characterized definition of masculinity, the principal element of such simulacra and these fans' emotional connection with idol hinge on undoubtedly the sex opposite to theirs.

Moreover, belief in idols' public persona is equally essential in sustaining fandom fundamentalists' loyalty, which necessitates occasions that enable offline contact, such as fan meetings and concert. That is to say, if the authenticity of idols' images is visualized as a spectrum, fandom fundamentalists and fan writers can be regarded as groups settling down at two ends of the spectrum, tailoring and appropriating parts of idols public persona according to respective narrative motivation of their fantasies. While fandom fundamentalists incorporate the marketed persona into their fantasies, or at most, apply careful and disciplined appropriation to idols' image, genderswap fandom rewrites idols thoroughly. However, the delicate balance between the two groups was broken by *Falling*, and tensions simmering beneath the surface of fan communities eventually manifested around the major disagreement: whether fans have right to appropriate idols image?

Xiao's fans felt that their idol was being unfairly targeted by *Falling*, where Xiao is portrayed in explicit and controversial scenarios, and therefore characterized this work as "vulgar underage prostitution literature."²⁷ An opinion leader among Xiao's fandom even asserted that transformative works like *Falling* "not only infringe on the artist's reputation, but also pollute the online environment and brings down a large number of underaged fans who

²⁶ A section on Weibo, where fans gather around the hashtag-like Weibo topics, posting about, commenting on, or voting for celebrities, and eventually leading to profitable online traffic for celebrities. For more discussion on Super-Topic data's role in idol-fan relationship and Chinese government's attitude towards this, see Lianzhang Wang and Chuchu Zeng, "Weibo Drops Ranking Lists to Counter Celebrity Culture," SixthTone, August 14, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008208>.

²⁷ "Behind Boycott against Xiao Zhan: Fans Who Became God and a Bond Capital Game (‘反肖战‘背后：变成‘上帝‘的粉丝，被捆绑的资本游戏)," March 3, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/377373166_391294.

lack judgement.”²⁸ Soon, as such charges of *Falling* was listed, a war finally boiled over on February 27th, 2020; Xiao’s fans assembled on Weibo to launch an all-out attack on those who consume Xiao’s feminized fictional characters. Accusing them of engaging in inappropriate and disrespectful behavior, Xiao’s fandom later called for a boycott of all fan fiction sites and writers²⁹. This unexpected conflict quickly spilled over onto other social media platforms, inundating the Chinese internet with a storm of heated debate, vitriol, and even outright censorship. The expansion of the attack, however, marked an escalation of the conflict, with both sides accusing the other of censorship and harassment.

Two days after the outbreak and the following massive denunciation, AO3 was officially blocked from mainland China. Although the site has never clarified specific reasons in their official announcement, the coincidence of timing, when China’s National Press and Publication Administration issued a statement condemning “harmful” fan fiction and announced a sweeping range of new measures for online literature³⁰ in the wake of the conflict, seemed to complete the casual logic and made Xiao and his fans the culprit of wreaked havoc and therefore target of criticism. Eventually, Xiao and his fans were retaliated against and boycotted in return by both three-dimensional (real person celebrities) and two-dimensional (ACG and slash fictions) fanbases.

²⁸“这种行为不光侵害了艺人名誉权，还污染了网络环境，带坏了一大批缺乏判断力的未成年小粉丝。” For context, see screenshot of the Weibo post: <https://archive.org/details/Xiaotuzanbi>.

²⁹ Yuqing Dong, Yiran Zhao, and Manfei Xu, “In the Name of Xiao Zhan: A Pre-Publicized Mass Reporting(以肖战之名：一场事先张扬的举报),” *The Paper*, March 4, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20220601115039/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_6296285.

³⁰ Alexandra Stevenson, Amy Chang Chien, and Cao Li, “China's Celebrity Culture Is Raucous. the Authorities Want to Change That.,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, August 27, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/business/media/china-celebrity-culture.html>.

There are no actual winners in this war: on the one hand, fan writers and readers lost access to AO3, their “home,”³¹ a “refuge for literature created by and for women,” and “last Utopia.”³² Moreover, beyond the grief over the actual loss, the sense of insecurity that knowing “it’s pointless to invest more energy into building a new community”³³ struck fan communities even harder. On the other hand, Xiao’s image and business value suffered greatly. According to Solarina Ho, “dramas that he had filmed were being shelved, pre-recorded appearances in variety shows were being edited out, endorsements were dropped like hot potatoes.”³⁴

However, Xiao was always invisible in this incident: fans defended his innocence, his personal studio spoke over his voice, and even his name had not been captured in Weibo trending topics ever since the incident fermented. And it was only after a year, on February 27th, 2021, that he finally posted a reflective message on Weibo, explaining and apologizing for his silence, and highlighted the phenomenal absence of East Asian idols’ voice.³⁵

Before formally commencing the analysis, I find it imperative to expound on the significance of the February 27th incident as an introduction to this thesis. Firstly, in terms of its relevance to the writing of this thesis, the February 27th incident stands as an episode that

³¹ “Our home was ganked (家被偷了)” is frequently used after the Incident and my conversations with interviewees, as they described the caught-off-guard loss of access.

³² Quoted from Aquamarine-w’s reflection of February 27th Incident on her Tumblr homepage, accessible via URL: <https://aethel.tumblr.com/post/611590555218100224/ao3-is-banned-in-china-on-29th-feb-2020-you-are>. (Accessed January 14, 2023)

³³ Quoted from an NPR interviewee. Accessible via URL: <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/16/913689551/dream-boy-and-the-poison-fans>. (Accessed January 14, 2023)

³⁴ Solarina Ho, “Reflections, Part I: Xiao Zhan, AO3, Toxic Fandoms, and China’s Idol Economy,” Solarina Ho, November 16, 2021, <https://www.solarina.ca/dramaddicts/dramaddicts-blog/2021/3/2/reflections-part-i-ao3-toxic-fandoms-and-chinas-idol-economy>.

³⁵ See screenshot of Xiao’s self-reflective Weibo post: <https://archive.org/details/xiao-zhan-weibo-post>. (Accessed March 5th, 2023), where he acknowledges the societal criticism of “idols losing their voices” that “I now clearly and clearly realize that in the course of this year, questions and comments on my personal case of ‘idols losing their voices’ are correct (我现在清楚而明白地认识到, 在这一年当中, 大家针对我个人提出的关于“偶像失声”的质疑与评论, 是正确的。).”

cannot be overlooked when analyzing Chinese genderswap fanfiction, primarily because its narration provides a necessary social context for studying genderswap works. Additionally, the dramatic nature of the event amplifies the involved conflicts, offering pertinent entry points for analysis. For instance, the conclusion of the February 27th incident (i.e., Xiao Zhan's statement and the reaction) acknowledges the phenomenon of idol silence; upon this understanding, I noticed the accelerant role of not only idols' lost voices, but also their emptiness in general, in idols' being incorporated into fans' fantasies. In light of such realization, the first section focuses on the speechlessness and emptiness of East Asian idols as cultural products and endeavors to explain why their characters have been flattened, their appearance overemphasized, and their voices silenced. Similarly, other aspects of the February 27th incident led me to questions pertaining to sexuality, positionality, temporality, and textuality and subsequently address them in the following sections, which can therefore be seen as the threads that tie this thesis together.

Secondly, the distinctive nature of the incident itself determines its significance as a reference for fandom studies. Phenomenally speaking, in the contemporary context of subcultures, where mutual respect and peaceful con-existence among niche groups has been prevalent in the English-speaking fandom, the power imbalances and conflicting politics between Chinese fandom niches stand out as a unique case. In terms of research, accordingly, traditional media studies tend to concentrate on power disparities between different nodes on the media circuit, such as the role of producers in shaping media texts and how audiences in power downstream accept and react to certain media texts. However, the multifaceted discourse conflicts in the February 27th incident encompass not only these conventional logics but also conflicts centralizing around the same node, i.e., between audience/fan groups. Therefore, starting from the manifested conflicts in the February 27th incident, this thesis is able to compose an important part on the conflicting dynamics within fan communities and,

correspondingly, the coping strategies and anti-discourse of censored genderswap fans. Moreover, the adaptation and innovation of the media circuit by the February 27th incident are also reflected at the textual level, as the pivotal role of fanfiction in this incident highlights the equal value of fan texts compared to visual productions as media texts, which inspires me to put fan works under literary analytic framework and even inspires me to consider idol images as media texts and cultural products.

Soulless Marionettes:

Idols as Cultural Products in the Celebritization and Imagination

In the common understanding of Chinese AO3 users, as the trigger of the fanon-canon tussle, Xiao's inaction towards his own fans' fanatical harassment of other fan communities led his tattered reputation to be the ultimate price. However, this section does not intend to prove Xiao's culpability, because his speechlessness is never an isolated case, but just one case of how idols are groomed as soulless marionettes under the spotlight. In the East Asian entertainment industry in general, it is risky for idols to speak out on social issues, or even just to clarify the controversy in which they are involved.³⁶

Cyberattacks targeting Irene, a member of K-pop group Red Velvet, can be seen as an example. Irene encountered cyber violence after she shared a book with the public³⁷: her social media account was flooded with hate comments, her photos were burned by furious fans, and her name was posted on anonymous forums to be humiliated and boycotted. And the only reason of the digital bile targeting her is simply what she read, *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982*, a

³⁶ For example, RM (a member of BTS) made remarks about China's political situation and caused considerable controversy. Accessible via URL:

https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2023/04/732_297622.html.

³⁷ For context, see <https://www.aprilmag.com/2018/03/23/k-pop-star-irene-of-red-velvet-blasted-with-misogyny-masked-in-fandom>.

book that tells the story of an ordinary Korean woman juggling work and family, and the gender discrimination she experiences in her everyday life. However, anti-feminists believed the author's ascription of female dilemmas to male behavior aggravated the already tense gender conflict, and that any celebrities endorsing the book deserve criticism or even insult for creating gendered conflict anew.

Looking at the misogynistic scrutiny flocking around idols, I realized that idols can be muted by external forces; therefore, instead of putting merely idols as the objects of my investigation, I would like to explore how their voice has been lost in the celebritization and imagination by examining the idol production and consumption sequence. To be more specific, this section investigates where the power discourse that deprives idols' capability and desire to speak comes from. The "gemstone" simile³⁸, commonly used in K-pop idol production, where idols are discovered as rough stone, polished, and peddled, can serve as a starting point, as it underlines three constituting logics behind the idol-producing discourse against idols' self-expression: the causal relationship between appearance and value, the discourse of institutional power, as well as the consumer market's shaping effect on cultural products.

In the first place, the over-emphasized significance of visual attraction has given the priority to development of appearance over actual talent. In the gemstone simile, before the ornamental value of a gem was defined, it by itself carries no value. The moment noticed by human beings by virtue of its appearance, it was doomed to maintain its value exclusively relying on visual appeal. Driven by a similar belief that worship "springs from the visual spectacle,"³⁹ beautiful faces then became the fundamental requirement of idol scouting, given that performing skills are cultivatable through intensive training. Youjeong Oh, in her *Pop*

³⁸ Youjeong Oh, "Image Producers: The (Re)Production of K-Pop Idols," in *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 105-135, 106.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place, considers the narrowly characterized beauty as an oppressive regime⁴⁰, which regulates both established idols and aspiring trainees and forces them to internalize the notion that beauty is a developable asset and that they are obligated to maintain and enhance it.

In this respect, such oppressive structure of appearance supremacy does not only produce beautiful faces, but also docile bodies recognizing and internalizing it, since it rewards idols with iconic status and thus encourages them to keep staring at their bodies from an alienated stance and to trim parts that fail to meet aesthetic standards and market expectations. Since visual attractiveness, as a recognized talent⁴¹, competes and even outweighs performing skills, idols and trainees aiming at overnight popularity naturally prioritize beauty development rather than social, intellectual, or musical skills. After all, in the image-driven market, substance is merely seen as a plus, but appearance makes actual profit. As a result, idols invest in self-polishing: carb-free diet, the regular whitening and lipo-dissolve injections, the constantly bleached and dyed hair can all be interpreted as efforts to make themselves into glittering gemstones.

What makes self-polishing a must for the majority of idols? Another myth, the “dream rhetoric”⁴² connecting idols and trainees, reveals the discursive power of idol-producing institutions. In the 1990s, Lee Soo-man, founder of SM Entertainment (a South Korean entertainment agency, hereinafter referred to as SM-E), proposed a trainee system and decided that systematic trainee management would be SM-E’s fundamental strategy. By prolonging

⁴⁰ Ibid, 114.

⁴¹ For examples of expanded definition of talent, see Eva Tsai’s “Kaneshiro Takeshi: Transnational Stardom and the Media and Culture Industries in Asia’s Global/Postcolonial Age.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2005): 100–132. In this paper, she summarizes Kaneshiro’s facial feature blending eastern and western styles and his multi-lingual abilities as necessary qualities to become a transnational star.

⁴² Youjeong Oh, “Image Producers: The (Re)Production of K-Pop Idols,” in *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 105-135, 109.

the idol-cultivating process, he created a middle ground between amateurs and idols, which later become an instrumental institution to discipline trainees and idols by overstating the potential benefits of becoming idols, sunk costs one already paid in chasing this dream, and the preciousness of opportunities chosen as trainees. As a result, youngsters picked from the crowd take the selective gaze as a compliment and the fundamental impetus of their idol-becoming dreams under the glorification of the “dream rhetoric,” and once they get used to and rejoice in the recognition of their appearance, they would be afraid of dropping out and becoming normal again⁴³. But to further realize the leap of identity from unsung joes to well-known idols requires obedience and hard work, especially when the abundant reserves of candidates who can step in as substitutes complete the cruel gemstone analogy in another way: just as the cutting technique is more important than the replaceable raw material, company investment is the most decisive factor in idol production.

Entertainment companies that provide polishing resources and promote standard aesthetic discourses are called *Jimusho* in Japan, *Gohoeksa* in South Korea, and *Jingji Gongsi* in China. Despite slightly different names and scope of business, these companies have established authority in the idol production through systematic management – from scouting unknowns, to regulating trainees and finalizing debut lists, and finally to planning career paths for established idols. And since their authority is ensured by investment and secured by profit, the economic logic, in this sense, provides a lens to understand the industry’s preference for “created idols” over independently minded stars. When the “crash of music market and decline of TV viewership”⁴⁴ in recent years made actual performance less lucrative, corporate

⁴³ In Chong-im Yi, *Aidol Yönsüpsaeng Ŭi Ttam Kwa Nunmul: Aidol Sönggong Sinhwa Wa Yönsüpsaeng Ŭi Tillema* 아이돌 연습생의 땀과 눈물 [Idol Trainees Sweat and Tears] (Seoul: Söul Yön’guwön, 2018), interviewed trainees describe their trainee life as mirage-like days (“신기루 같은 연습생 생활”), which they don’t usually feel true but fear to lose.

⁴⁴ W. David Marx, “The Jimusho System: Understanding the Production Logic of the Japanese Entertainment Industry,” in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture*, ed. Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 35-55, 50.

sponsorship became the greatest income stream for entertainment companies. Their speculative nature was then stimulated and led to a business focus transformation from performing to advertising, where idols are required not necessarily to present talent, but to maintain clean images from controversy, scandal, or otherwise disruptive possibilities, since their images are also media-commodified and coded as part of products they endorse. Therefore, as taking a clear stance in social issues like Irene can seem offensive to potential customers and bring controversial reputation for the idol and the brand he or she endorses, entertainment agencies regulate idols' public expression even more rigidly.

The discourse of entertainment companies' institutional power is also reflected in the creation of collective and individual "concepts" for idols as one of the profit-generating schemes, that is, to design unique and marketable images for idols to develop their brands. To investigate how idols are conceptualized, I will unfold the development of promoting concepts in East Asian idol culture in Japan, South Korea, and China, to present a process of emptying/flattening idols, when "life-sized idols"⁴⁵ are translated into simulacrum and elements for consumption.

Before conceptualizing idols had become a clearly defined business strategy, idols in the 1990s Japan are marketed as the "personifiers of an ideal girl or boy next door"⁴⁶ so as to satisfy young people's needs to socialize⁴⁷ or provide them with an imagined sense of intimacy⁴⁸. Following this pattern, Akimoto Yasushi founded the Japanese idol girl group, AKB48, in 2005 and marketed them as "idols you can meet"⁴⁹. Due to the group characteristics that cater to the audience's aesthetic orientation for cuteness and energy,

⁴⁵ Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 67.

⁴⁶ Ibid. "隣の女の子" or "隣の男の子" (*tonari no onna no ko* or *tonari no otoko no ko*).

⁴⁷ Ibid, 68.

⁴⁸ Hiroshi Ogawa, *Ongakusuru Shakai [A Musical Society]* (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1988), where he defines this imagined sense of intimacy as "quasi companions" (*gijiteki nakama*).

⁴⁹ Yuya Kiuchi, "Idols You Can Meet: AKB48 and a New Trend in Japan's Music Industry," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 1 (2017): 30–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12526>.

AKB48 soon became national idols, known and loved by all Japanese, with their annual elections are given prominent media coverage and their images are integrated into everyday details in Japanese life.⁵⁰ The images of affability are argued crucial in their celebritization. For instance, Okajima Shinshi and Okada Yasuhiro⁵¹ attributes AKB48's success of creating huge commercial value as a paradigm shift from goddess of distance to life-sized idols; Mark D. West, too, considers their cultural influence as a result of being "accepted in the living room as one of the family, warts and all."⁵² Such positioning influenced their scouting strategies as well, which claims to recruit the fourth or fifth prettiest girls in their class, energetic but never aggressive. Girl idols' femininity has been therefore commodified as youthful innocence, vulnerability, and meekness, relying heavily on the illusion of intimacy with fans. The relationship-based concepts also interest Hiroshi Aoyagi, who argues that idols with endearing imperfections are adored for the limits of their charm, which are above average but never so much as to "not alienate or offend the audience."⁵³

At around the same time, "concept" was reinvented as a notion in South Korean idol industry and used mainly as keywords to describe and emphasize memorable traits in idols' personality and appearance, restricting their make-up, clothes, music, and dance style. For instance, two girl groups that debuted in 2007 – Girls' Generation and Wonder Girls – were conceptualized and promoted quite differently. Portraying Girls' Generation as pure and innocent, their company, SM-E, tends to highlight their adolescent vivacity through schoolgirl styled outfits, such as high school uniforms, solid-colored shirts, and skinny jeans. Their

⁵⁰ Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, "The General Election," in *AKB48* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 33-40.

⁵¹ Shinshi Okajima and Yasuhiro Okada, *Group Idol Evolution Theory: "Idol Warring States Period" Has Arrived!* (グループアイドル進化論: 「アイドル戦国時代」がやってきた!) (Tokyo: Mainichikomyunikēshonzu, 2011), 5.

⁵² Mark D. West, *Secrets, Sex, and Spectacle: The Rules of Scandal in Japan and the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 177.

⁵³ Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 67.

music style is also designed predominantly bubblegum pop, completing the image of insouciant young girls. Wonder Girls, on the other hand, are conceptualized sexier and more mature⁵⁴, so their choreography tends to emphasize hip and waist curves. Although Girls' Generation has also experimented with sexiness, darkness and more on subsequent albums, group concepts back then were still largely trapped in the rigid and trite trope of either lovable baby doll or seductive femme fatale.

Feeling limited by extreme and monotonous adjectives in conceptualization, K-pop entertainment agencies started to complicate the image narrative, and replace single adjectives with a sensual description in 2010s and later in 2020s larger world views in concept crafting, to enrich conceptual and visual design of music production. In SM-E's case, they came up with a virtual universe called Kwangya, where digital identities enable the audience to have their own avatars, also known as Ae. In this universe, there is a mysterious being name Naevis helping us human beings contact with our Ae, and also a communication-blocking villain, Black Mamba. Aespa, SM-E's new girl group debuted in 2020, are conceptualized as four female warriors with the mission to confront Black Mamba.

The avatarized image of members embodies Baudrillard's pessimistic theory of simulacra, exposing its own nature as a pseudo-image "made up from technical elements and a code of imposed significations"⁵⁵. SM-E's announcement, that Naevis will be joining Aespa as the fifth member and making her official solo debut soon in 2023, unquestionably blurred the boundary between the real and the imaginary. Moreover, a tendency of collaging idols' digital avatars with elements can be observed in concept crafting of groups and individuals. Instead of concrete image of each member, Aespa's concepts tend to draw idols' roles and characteristics from them separately to deconstruct and reconstruct them. For instance, as SM-

⁵⁴ Youna Kim, *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 109.

⁵⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 127.

E noticed the multilingual background of the polyglot member Giselle to be a memorable trait for the public, they distilled the element of “language” from her and depict her as a “special linguist” in Kwangya.

As you might have noticed, discussion about Chinese idols is intentionally omitted in previous analysis, since the development of Chinese idol industry had long been out of sync with Japan and South Korea and thus difficult to be narrated and measured on the same temporal scale. Although Chinese entertainment industry also launched talent shows like Super Girls and scouted promising new talents as early as in 2004, lacking infrastructure and experience, it failed to develop a producing and marketing system to accompany talent scouting television shows. Consequentially, when Japanese and Korean idol culture was maturing and infiltrating global popular culture, the Chinese idol industry was still in its infancy. Also, because the influential entertainment agencies in the industry did not start until around 2010⁵⁶, compared with the situation in Japan and South Korea, where entertainment companies on the production end possess the discursive power, the fan discourse plays a crucial role in Chinese idol industry, in the sense that it functions in both the production and the consumption end. Therefore, the last part of this section will discuss Chinese fans’ role in producing and ways of consuming idols, in order to further investigate the shaping factors of idols’ lost voices.

Chinese talent shows and even the whole idol industry has been highlighting the fan-elected nature of idol groups or individuals. The weekly knockout competition’s results of Super Girls in 2000s were determined by votes from both professional judges and viewers’

⁵⁶ In 2010, with the goal of “becoming as famous and influential as Johnny’s has been in Japan and globally,” Time Fengjun Entertainment (hereinafter referred to as TF-E) formed and launched TFBOYS, the first idol group in the history of Chinese entertainment industry. This group of three young boys achieved phenomenal commercial success, but never became influential outside their fanbase.

SMS⁵⁷; a decade later, *Idol Producer*, the 2018 Chinese reality boy group survival show modeled after a South Korean talent competition franchise, even determine the debutable crew exclusively according to fans' voting results. At that point, "idol" was made a household pop culture term in China and the Chinese entertainment industry finally started its idol decade, thirty years behind the "Golden Age of Idols" in Japan⁵⁸. In my online observation and conversations, genderswap and others fans are found to have K-pop or J-pop fandom background, and some confess that apart from the attractiveness of K-pop and J-pop idols, the main reason of their flowing to the Japanese and South Korean market is the long-term absence of domestic idols. Although some fans were won back by the rejuvenation and success of the domestic entertainment industry and became interested in TV series like "Guardian 镇魂 (2018)" and "The Untamed 陈情令(2019)," their consuming preference and habits cultivated in previous cultural consumption process still retained and even became part of Chinese fan community culture. Among the fandom habits, three representative ones stand out – the voyeuristic observation, intimacy projection, and textualization of idols' image, commonly known as fanfiction.

To understand nuances in ways of fans' consumption and the significance of the fan discourse in East Asian idol industry, it seems necessary to bring the discussion back to star-idol comparison. Considering idol as a framework, it not only marks reputational extraordinariness, but also entails more restrictions than celebrities and stars have to bear. "Celebrities", summarizes Chris Rojek, "operate as models for emulation, embody desire and galvanize issues in popular culture, dramatize prejudice, affect public opinion and contribute

⁵⁷ "In China, It's Mongolian Cow Yogurt Super Girl," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 2005, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0829/p01s04-woap.html>.

⁵⁸ Ian Martin, "Golden Age' of Kayoukyoku Holds Lessons for Modern J-Pop," *The Japan Times*, May 16, 2013, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2011/05/26/music/golden-age-of-kayoukyoku-holds-lessons-for-modern-j-pop/>.

to identity formation.”⁵⁹ And often, as stardom emanates from the superposition of aesthetics and creativity⁶⁰, the most sought-after celebrities are expected to possess multiple talents and abilities, including both music producing and performing. Idols, however, are largely withdrawn from the production of media texts, and their aura is strategically produced through screening, training, debuting, and marketing. As a result, by breaking down the procedure of music production into replicable, collaborative sequences, large entertainment companies reinvent the nature of idols – as “both a labor process and product”⁶¹ – and make them mass-producible stars. To put it another way, stars become idols when their positions in the media circuit are shifted from the production node to that of texts, which makes them only able to serve as the performer and even embodiment of crafted concepts.

The relationship between fans and stars also changes accordingly. In the previous power relation, where “stars have power and the fans have knowledge,”⁶² celebrities employ mystification to stimulate fans’ awe and fans bridge the distance and balance the power asymmetry by accumulating informational knowledge about stars. Television plays an important role in the star-fan power negotiation: on the one hand, it elevates stars’ visibility to gain bargaining capital; on the other, the screen enables close-ups as the extension of human eyes to otherize idols by fans’ scrutiny and gaze. An intimate relationship based on this power dynamics was then established on the fragmentary boundary between private and public spaces – what Gabriella Lukacs refers to as the “culture of intimate televisuality”⁶³ – which requires sustained exposure of celebrities’ gossip and trivia in private lives. In other words,

⁵⁹ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.

⁶⁰ Stephen Roy, *Popular Music, stars and stardom* (Acton: ANU Press, 2018), 8.

⁶¹ Roy Shuker, *Popular Music Culture: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2012), 319. For stardom theories, also see Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁶² Mark Duffett, “‘We Are Interrupted by Your Noise’: Heckling and the Symbolic Economy of Popular Music Stardom,” *Popular Music and Society* 32, no. 1 (2009): pp. 37-57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760802207734>, 41.

⁶³ Gabriella Lukacs, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 25.

industries accompanying the emergence of stardom, like tabloid business, cultivated fans' consumption patterns of idols and led to fans defined separately from audiences, because they experienced a separate televisual pleasure fueled by consumption of celebrities' privacy.

In the idol-fan relationship, however, such asymmetry has been subverted. Contrived by agglomeration of others' talent, idols have to sustain their attraction to and connection with fans by developing their appearance, performing assigned conceptual images, and even touting intimate details. Conversely, considering their influence in producing idols and promoting their popularity, idol fans, especially those in China, have practiced and provided more and stronger evidence for beliefs in fan empowerment. For instance, fan activities within Chinese idol fandom such as fanfiction, fan art, merchandise creation, and crowdfunding help create alternative spaces of fan production and distribution and lead to what Matt Hills refers to as fan economies⁶⁴, challenging traditional media hierarchies and providing fans with economic power and influence; the February 27th Incident, too, reveals the discursive power of fan activism⁶⁵, where fan communities use their collective power to confront each other.

Within the idol fandom, there are typically three ways of consuming idols, privacy consumption, projection consumption, and element consumption, each respectively echoing the aforementioned three major fandom habits. The first category can be seen as an extension of the "culture of intimate televisuality," where fans, on the one hand, consume idols with no respect for privacy, but meanwhile, obtain pleasure from getting close to idols and knowing them in every detail. Extremists fond of this way of consumption are referred to Sasaeng fans. The word "Sasaeng" comes originally from Korean idol fandom, as a derogatory term to refer to an obsessive group of fans living on invasion to idols' privacy. Sasaeng fans are believed craving to intrude the screen-reality boundary and participate in idols' life through extreme

⁶⁴ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁶⁵ Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, "Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 10 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0303>.

actions like blood writing and car chasing⁶⁶. Later in 1990s, this culture that emerged with the rise of Korean idol industry soon spread to countries like China. Trespassing fan behavior like stalking and bugging, in my opinion, is backlash of the celebritization of idols, because screen, as a transparent barrier, obscures the idol-fan distance without changing the disjunctive nature of their relationship. So in order to mimic relationship of higher intimacy, fandom extremists opt for privacy consumption, which rivals dating relationship, or even stalking.

Similarly, projection consumption also arises from fans' desire for idols, and I would like to summarize this category as two realization paths: projecting desire away from idols, and projecting lust onto idols. In the former tendency, fans translate their desire to approach idols into purchases of idols' merch, which Lamarre interprets as "a transitional object forever in transition,"⁶⁷ to avoid desire's confrontation with social norms in scenarios like privacy consumption. In this sense, desires projected away from idols can be seen as the result of the fan discourse's compromise when confronted by the more socially accepted discourse of disciplined desires. By purchasing products emblazoned with idols' images, fans are able to interact with idols and, in the evaporation of idols' images, possess their contour, and therefore anchor and legitimate their attachments⁶⁸. The latter tendency regards idols as more of a vehicle to project their ideal romance imagination, which, compared with concrete figures, enjoys the soft masculinity that idols represent.

Despite two distinctive paths, consumption of both objects and fantasy follows the same logic that fills their own desires in the shell of idols so as to transfer the frustration caused by the never-approachable idol illusion. In this sense, both idols and idol-related merch are merely transitional objects of fans' desire; therefore, idols groomed to appeal to certain

⁶⁶ Renata Iwicka, "Every Breath You Take: Sasaeng Fans," essay, in *Disassembling the Celebrity Figure: Credibility and the Incredible*, ed. Celia Lam, Jackie Raphael, and Millicent Weber (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2018), 125–47.

⁶⁷ Thomas Lamarre, "Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shōjo Anime (Part Two)," *Animation* 2, no. 1 (2007): pp. 9-25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847706068899>, 10.

⁶⁸ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 171.

demographics, whether it be fan girls or male Otaku, do not necessarily participate in fans' imagination with actual presence since a decentered and empties shell is sufficient for fantasies. And just as is widely believed, male idols provide teenage girls with "safer objects of love,"⁶⁹ the more romantic fantasies are detached from real-life reference, the less likely adolescents will suffer from disillusionment⁷⁰ or get involved in extremist starstruck activities.

Therefore, as reality becomes a sufficient but unnecessary condition for fantasy, the entity and presence of idols is detached from imagination, which, further lowers the required involvement degree of idols in fans' imagination from shells to merely elements and advances the investigation to the third category. The major distinction between projection and element consumption can be summarized as the difference between the whole and its parts. For example, fans adopting projection consumption may expect the male protagonist in a fan work to have the exactly same appearance with a certain idol, while those fond of element would probably find close-up depictions appropriated from the idol's body parts enjoyable enough. Such lowered expectations of proportions appropriated from idols, according to Hiroki Azuma's theory of database consumption, are able to generate an almost infinite variety of further narratives for consumption once arranged in different combinations. To borrow a term from Azuma, the consumed elements can be understood as "kyara," a more abstract concept that outlines prototypical characteristics of fictional characters compared with "fully rounded literary or cinematic characters," or as he refers to it, "kyarakutaa."⁷¹ As a result, in Azuma's theory, when the metanarrative becomes replaceable, the status of kyara also changes accordingly in the context of narrative disintegration: for postmodern consumers, kyara is

⁶⁹ Rachel Karniol, "Adolescent Females' Idolization of Male Media Stars as a Transition Into Sexuality.," *Sex Roles* 44, no. 1/2 (2001): pp. 61-77, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1011037900554>, 63.

⁷⁰ Amiram Raviv et al., "Adolescent Idolization of Pop Singers: Causes, Expressions, and Reliance," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 25, no. 5 (1996): pp. 631-650, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01537358>, 633.

⁷¹ Hiroki Azuma, *Dong Wu Hua De Hou Xian Dai: Yu Zhai Zu Ru He Ying Xiang Riben She Hui* (动物化的后现代: 御宅族如何影响日本社会), trans. Henry Ho (Taipei: Da hong yi shu gu fen gong si, 2012), 87.

more fundamental than the narrative and therefore independent from the original story, which endows kyara with the legitimacy of slipping into other narratives and living in fan-generated universes. Meanwhile, the independence of kyara determines its possession of a meta-prescriptiveness, or “self-sameness,”⁷² that is, elements set a code of conduct for kyara, so that whatever world it is cast into, consumers can imagine its possible reaction.

Such prescribed character of kyara and its independence, to some extent, resonate with idols’ concepts and intertextuality since idols, as multimedia performers, are always operating “within a system of meanings and codes that are referencing other texts.”⁷³ A subgenre in Chinese idol fanfic, “meal-replacement literature(代餐文学),” is established exactly based on the resonance. By the analogy of meal replacement, this subgenre refers to fans’ appropriation of narrative fragments that are not originally produced for their consumption preference, in order to achieve expected fantasy effects. Pet images on the Internet, clips of romance novels, and even jokes with identifiable personalities, can all serve as raw material for meal-replacement literature. For instance, if shippers of certain two idols or roles that idols played might decode the intimacy and characteristics of a cat and a dog in an internet meme (regarded as Element A) and find similar elements in the pair they ship (whose relationship can be referred to as Element B), then B will be able to share A’s small narrative. Imagining through elements, fans enjoy the story-like pleasure enabled by the consumption of vague narrative possibilities. Moreover, fans in this category consume not the self-insertion fantasy but mostly the intimate relationship between two male idols. To conclude, fantasies in this category has almost completely cut out the need for the authenticity of idols’ image, but in turn, idols become somewhat dependent on attention brought by multiple shipping narrative possibilities.

⁷² Zoltan Kacsuk, “From ‘Game-like Realism’ to the ‘Imagination-Oriented Aesthetic’: Reconsidering Bourdieu’s Contribution to Fan Studies in the Light of Japanese Manga and Otaku Theory,” *Kritika Kultura*, no. 26 (December 2016): pp. 274-292, <https://doi.org/10.13185/kk2016.02615>, 279.

⁷³ Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, “Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture,” in *Idols and Celebrity in Japanese Media Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-34, 10.

Xiao's case encompasses all these three ways of consumption, where fans of privacy and projection consumption form fandom fundamentalists, and the genderswap fandom mainly consists of element consumers. However, I also notice another way of consumption besides these three among his fans, stunt consumption, which concerns an essential question in idol culture and fandom studies – the politics of taste – going beyond mere ways of consumption and making the symbolic meaning of idol consumption more of a question concerning cultural capital and class habitus. Getting back to Xiao's post-February 27th disturbance, although Xiao lost a string of endorsements because of the massive boycott, he was still unable to speak out, because of long-term interests. After all, apologizing on behalf of his fans means recognizing their mistakes, which would hurt the fanbase loyalty and his business appeal. Consequentially, he chose to bear the blame himself, and apart from reproach from the public, his choice of silence also generated a sense of dependency that he could only hang on together with fans and thus stimulated their guilt/vengeance spending on his merch and endorsement products.

The angry AO3 fans also accused Xiao's fans as “the enemy of civilization, art, and the nation” for burning down the last pure land of Chinese fan fiction. Ironically, Xiao's fans were not outraged by the accusation, but rather felt that it is quite empowering to be listed as the enemy of supreme notions like civilization and art, so that they jubilantly embraced the accusation as self-reference; some fans even printed “the enemy of civilization” on phone cases and sold them within Xiao's fan circle. In fans' self-mockery, not only were the charges dispelled, but Xiao's image also became a rallying front and a stunt that earned fans cultural capital to be elevated to the level of rivaling civilization.

This section investigates the emptiness of idols, problematized by the February 27th Incident and Xiao's reflection on it. Defining “emptiness” as flattened characters, overemphasized appearance, and deprived voices, I unfold the discussion based on my analysis of discourse conflicts in idols' production and consumption sequences so as to

demonstrate why idols' self-expression is seldom expected on both ends. In the idol-producing system, the major opposing force of idols' voices is proven to be entertainment agencies, whose intention, functioning logics, and specific strategies are examined: their muting and emptying of idols is stimulated by the fear that idols' expression may threaten their potential interest of commercial endorsement, supported by the gemstone simile and the dream rhetoric in the trainee-to-idol polishing, and strengthened by the conceptualization of idols. On the consumption end, four ways of consuming idols, the privacy consumption, the projection consumption, the element consumption, and the stunt consumption are categorized and discussion in relation with the increasing lowering requirement of idols' entity in fantasies. Also, each way among the four reflects different consideration that the fan discourse and desires negotiate its legitimacy with social norms. Therefore, through a thorough exploration of idols' silence and emptiness, I conclude that their voices are deprived as they are degraded from stars to cultural products.

Two relatively separated parts from the major reasoning thread, the review of the development in conceptualizing idols in East Asian entertainment industry and the illustration of distinctions between stars and idols, also help connect the discussion of two sequences, and most importantly, contextualize temporally and spatially my further investigation of idols in later chapters.

***Between A Feminine Idol and Fallen Woman: Analyzing Androgyny In and Outside
"Falling"***

Before Virginia Woolf famously propose the "androgynous writing mind"⁷⁴ when netting a symbol for the creative process, the notion of androgyny was a shifting

⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 77.

category, mobilized “from classical to medical.”⁷⁵ However, ever since its appearance in Symposium, androgyny has experienced polarized evaluation: while some see the unified double-sexed figure as emblematic of an atavistic and primitive civilization or redemptive and scriptural representation⁷⁶, the medical discourse had long perceived the androgyne as a pathologized identity in sexual aberrations.⁷⁷ The double reception of androgynous figures as both the sanctified emblematic and sexual deviation has even continued into contemporary understandings of intersex people.

The twentieth century marks the field shifting of androgyny into literary creation and criticism, and the positive transformation of its reception. In this period, the literary discourse represented by Woolf rebuts sexological categorizations that saw androgyny as degenerative and injurious and associate this intermediate sexual identity with creative genius. On a theoretical level, Woolf advocates androgynous minds for writers in her *A Room of One's Own*, so as to capture a new and transcendent literary sensibility; in writing practices, she creates a character that changes from male to female, through the invocation of androgynous oscillation in *Orlando: A Biography*, to imagine and explore a more thorough embodiment of androgyny. Starting from the late 1960s, connotation of androgyny became even more protean and universal, to the extent that Jungian theories⁷⁸ argue that the archetypes of the anima and animus that lurk inside us has already ensured our androgyny.

⁷⁵ Tracy Hargreaves, *Androgyny in Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 46.

⁷⁷ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study* (London: William Heinemann (Medical Books) Limited, 1939).

⁷⁸ June Singer, *Androgyny: The Opposites Within* (York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 2000).

The birth of genderswap works represents the expansion of androgyny's influence sphere from avant-garde feminist literature to popular literature. With high tolerance of fluid gender and sexual identity, the genre of genderswap fanfiction becomes a utopian space, where male characters find "the freedom to love each other fully and openly by entering into a Utopian space"⁷⁹. However, as the February 27th incident revealed, while literature embraces new narrative possibilities that androgyny brings about, societal perceptions do not necessarily follow suit. As a result, the clash between lingering shame from outdated medical discourse and the literary experiment of androgyny ignited the February 27th incident, inflicting significant damage on the Chinese genderswap fandom.

Therefore, following the analysis of voiceless idols' adaptability into flattened elements and raw materials for fantasies in section 1, this section will focus on the textual products of fan fantasies, exemplified by the focal text of the February 27th incident, *Falling*, and investigate the rupture between androgyny's despised social status and empowering literary effects. Also, since androgyny intersects with the two identities of idol and prostitute, in and outside *Falling*, this section is accordingly divided into two parts. The first introduces Chinese genderswap fanfiction by displaying the overlap between androgyny and male idols, and the second focuses on the portrayal of the genderswapped protagonist, Zanzan, in *Falling* with an emphasis of her identity as androgynous prostitute.

Genderswap fanfiction can be seen as an echo to Constance Penley's inquiry of the slash movement "why are women fans so alienated from their own bodies that they

⁷⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 221.

choose to write erotic fantasies only in relation to a nonfemale body.”⁸⁰ As a genre that indicates gender reversal of characters against canonical norms, genderswap fanfiction allows authors and audiences to depict male characters as cis women in a fantasized erotic relationship, falling in love with either other fictional characters or themselves. The reversed gender in fanonical eyes is such an effective device that it can manifest feelings camouflaged as friendship by the canon and is therefore widely employed by transformative works.

While it is yet unclear exactly when genderswap as a genre was introduced to Chinese fan culture, and there is also controversy over even whether to use the word “introduce,”⁸¹ the trope of gender reversal was made famous in 2018. In that year, *Idol Producer*, a talent show modeled on South Korea’s popularly elected idol production system, premiered. An independent trainee in the show, Cai Xukun, who received high votes from female fans and was elected champion, was viciously mocked, memed, and made fun of as a woman by male netizens who considered him to be too skinny to qualify as a man. Such mockery led to controversy within fandom on whether to highlight idols’ femininity, and some genderswap lovers even gave in to doubts in the logic of genderswapping the already effeminate-considered and stigmatized idols. Meanwhile, voices that regard feminized male idols as a community that resonates with female sufferings also exist. For instance, in the Weibo post below:

⁸⁰ Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, *Technoculture* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 154.

⁸¹ While it is believed by some fans that the genderswap trope and flower-boy syndrome are products of Japanese and Korean idol culture, others emphasize genderswap’s locality in endorsing their subcultural preference. The fluidity of genderswap, in their interpretation, can be traced back to the myth that Nuwa making human beings out of the earth, so as to underline the clay-like shapability of gender, hence the name ni-su.

“男偶像天然就是女人。泥塑不是造就，是发现。因为女人也是被秩序所造就的。当男偶像们被侮辱，被唾骂，被思想火炬们羞辱为娘炮时，那才是他们作为偶像所活着的时刻。作为直男的肉体之躯，第一次获得了女人千古以来所被加诸的，隐秘，苦痛，与伟大。”

“Male idols are women by nature; and genderswapping is never construction, but discovery, since women too, are constructed by norms. It is in those moments when male idols are insulted, spurned, and humiliated as sissies by The Torch of Thought⁸² that they really live as idols. Because it is the first time that the bodies of straight men have experienced the secrecy, the pain, and the greatness that women have been subjected to for centuries.”

(A weibo post by @白媚娘 bfk, 2019)

This paragraph affirms the moral and aesthetic legitimacy of the bent gender by ascribing the premise of idols being appreciated to the sufferings they share with women and categorizing the stigmatized male idols into the same side as women by using verbs in passive voice. Interestingly, the opposite side is not directly summarized in terms of gender but indicated in the plural form of a Weibo account, referring to an ideology that shows no tolerance to possibilities outside binary gender construction. By not limiting the contradiction to the gender level, this euphemistic narrative avoids the feminist accusation that genderswap fanfiction solidifies gender stereotypes and intensifies conflicts in between. The conflict ended in a dead heat between fans and male netizens; genderswap fan communities were then able to find enclaves to reside on platforms like Weibo and AO3.

⁸² The Weibo account of National Research Center for Cultural Security and Ideological Construction in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

However, taking refuge in literature does not guarantee genderswap fandom the freedom to write. Instead, their writing within the enclave has been besieged again and again by fandom essentialists, and the major disagreement between the two communities lies in the legitimacy of appropriating idols' image and involving them in "bad sex."⁸³ Therefore, the second part will investigate the extent to which genderswap writing appropriates idols' sexuality through close reading of *Falling*, that is, to discuss what has been removed, what remains, and what has been rediscovered in the genderswapping textualization of Xiao Zhan from a real-person celebrity to a fictional character.

Falling is a love story between salon girl Zanzan and high school boy Wang Yibo. After Wang's admission to an elite high school away from home, his parents entrust him to his aunt, who runs a hair salon in his new district. The salon, located in the old town's red-light district, does not deal with consumers' hair but their desire – a typical form of brothels in China's rural-urban fringe areas – which use salon work as a front for sex work. Unlike other salon girls, Zanzan is a preoperative MTF transgender, so without prostituting herself, she only provides massage service and sometimes perform hand jobs to regular customers so as to earn money for transsexual operation. Attracted by her seductive beauty and innocent nature, Wang confesses his love to Zanzan. The two starts dating each other and keeps their relationship under wraps for a

⁸³ In "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking": Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows," Cynthia Jenkins construes fantasy themes as "good sex" and "bad sex." The former is characterized as relationship-oriented or mutual love-based; the latter, however, generates less tolerated slash work. For examples and analysis of "bad sex" in slash fiction, like erotic force, exhibitionism, voyeurism, see Heather Meggers's "Discovering The Authentic Sexual Self: The Role Of Fandom In The Transformation Of Fans' Sexual Attitudes," in *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*, ed. Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zuberis (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 57-80.

while; however, as the plot progresses, Wang comes to find out Zanzan's preoperative gender identity by accident, which has from then on been an ordeal in their relationship.

Two protagonists in the story are based on Xiao Zhan and his co-actor in *The Untamed*, Wang Yibo. While the character Wang Yibo shares the appearance and personality with his real-life prototype, rewriting of Xiao Zhan from a male actor to an androgynous salon girl requires renaming, feminizing, and sexualizing.

Zanzan, as a stage name in the salon, represents the feminized character of Xiao Zhan in this story. While reading the first few chapters, many readers, myself included, assumed that this name is a camouflage to avoid the detection of anti-genderswap fandom, like all pseudonyms in fanfiction. But such assumption was soon proved wrong by the author's direct reference to Xiao in later chapters and representation of his unvarnished gender identity using the name, Xiao Zhan. Beside the direct reference, even the pseudonym Zanzan is impossible to guarantee the stealthy genderswapping due to its fandom-originated nature, as a way of addressing Xiao Zhan in a southern Chinese accent, which was later developed into a well-known nickname in Xiao's fan communities. Therefore, instead of evading censorship, I think naming the protagonist as Zanzan allows distinction of and transition between her multiple identities: as Zanzan, she can be a flirtatious stunner, while as Xiao Zhan, she can reveal a vulnerable inner self struggling with gender identification, so the use of the two names can also suggest to what extent Zanzan opens up to intimacy with Wang Yibo. Moreover, as a fan-bestowed nickname, Zanzan represents the fandom's

power, and using it as a stage name symbolizes her internalization of the external gaze and sways readers' stereotypical notion of the gendered gaze.

In addition to the name, some of Xiao's physical characteristics are also appropriated in the shaping of Zanzan, with part of them feminized and part of them kept masculine. From her general features ("her face is no bigger than a palm and looks seductively charming with defined facial features, and especially those eyes, with their corners drooping, disclose her melancholy"⁸⁴), to her physique ("Zanzan is tall and looks half a head taller than Wang Yibo, with her long legs and five-centimeter heels"⁸⁵), to facial traits as concrete as a mole ("She is the kind of person who cried rivers, with tears and snot cascading down her face, eyes bloodshot, nose and cheeks flushed with emotion, and even the small mole below her lips seemed to be weeping"⁸⁶), the majority of Zanzan's traits are derived from Xiao's quite discernible physical characteristics but rewritten to be more feminine. However, the feminization has not been thorough since some of her masculine traits are still easy to tell even before her reversed sexuality being revealed. Examples of her foreshadowed preoperative biological sex include her flat chest ("her dress had a low neckline, but the layers of billowing fabric obscured her barren chest"⁸⁷), manly towering build ("with her high heels off, she is finally not much taller than Wang Yibo"⁸⁸), and deep

⁸⁴ MaiLeDiDiDi, "Falling (下坠)," Archive of Our Own, accessed April 3, 2023, https://archiveofourown.org/works/22478632?view_full_work=true, Chapter 1. "她生得一张巴掌脸, 五官却都大, 所以显得有几分艳和媚, 尤其是那双眼, 眼角低垂, 竟让王一博读出几分哀伤来."

⁸⁵ Ibid, "赞赞个子好高, 腿又长, 还穿五厘米高跟, 比王一博高出半个头去."

⁸⁶ Ibid, Chapter 6, "她哭起来眼泪鼻涕横流, 眼睛通红, 鼻尖也通红, 嘴巴向下撇着, 奇怪的是她嘴下的小黑痣好像也在哭."

⁸⁷ Ibid, Chapter 2, "胸口开得低, 但层层叠叠的荡领掩盖了她胸前贫瘠。"

⁸⁸ Ibid, Chapter 5, "没穿高跟鞋终于跟王一博差不多高了。"

voice (“her voice is magnetic, and Wang Yibo, accustomed to saccharine tones, finds hers refreshingly unique”⁸⁹).

Parallel to the incomplete feminization, another feature that highlights Zanzan’s androgyny and distinguishes him from other salon girls is the indirect and implicit sexualization. Zanzan is portrayed seductive and sexy, but except few direct description of her body and her hooker costumes – such as figure-hugging dresses that accentuate her curves (“Zanzan wears a tight-fitting skirt that covers just enough of her round and perky butt, making the skirt appear even shorter”⁹⁰) and undergarments that evoke sexual associations (“her fair thighs wrapped in fishnet stockings and black lace underwear”⁹¹) – her sexualized femininity is mainly manifested through fetishistic depiction of her body parts, such as the chipped, red nail polish on her fingertips, and the wet hair draping over her shoulder. In contrast, the feminine bodily features of other hair salon girls are distinctly emphasized. For instance, when Wang accidentally stumbles upon the scene of Nan’nan servicing a client, the author describes her exposed body in a realistic but unappealing manner, “her nipples were deep purple, like ripe grapes beginning to rot.”⁹² This technique of comparing the fullness of female traits with plants’ over-maturity unconsciously echoes the gender views of Japanese poet Ihara Saikaku, who also used plant metaphors to assign negative features to women⁹³.

⁸⁹ Ibid, Chapter 1, “她的声音很有磁性，王一博听惯娇嗲女声，反而觉得她的声音很特别。”

⁹⁰ Ibid, “赞赞穿包身裙，堪堪遮住屁股的长度，她屁股滚圆挺翘，因此裙子显得更短些。”

⁹¹ Ibid, “包裹在渔网袜下的白腻大腿根和黑色蕾丝。”

⁹² Ibid, Chapter 3, “乳头是深紫红色的，像颗熟透了开始腐烂的圆葡萄。”

⁹³ In Saikaku Ihara’s *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, trans. Paul Gordon Schalow (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 56, for example, women’s hearts are likened to wisteria vines, which “though bearing lovely blossoms, are twisted and bent.”

Similar to Saikaku's intention to highlight the nobility of love with (male) youth by degrading femininity, the unseemly depiction of the female bodies in *Falling* accentuates their contrast with Zanzan's androgynous beauty, in the sense that the femininity represents fullness, and the androgyny embodies an aesthetic of emptiness⁹⁴. However, while the androgynous portrayal enhances the shaping of Zanzan aesthetically, her identity as a salon girl seems weakening her character charm. The author intentionally highlights the insurmountable gaps in Zanzan and Wang's social status and life trajectories by emphasizing two kinds of prototypical relationship in particular to illustrate the slim possibility for them to overcome the entrenched societal prejudices against their union: the prostitute-schoolgirl rivalry between Zanzan and Wang's female school mates, as well as the courtesan-literati romance between Zanzan and Wang.

That adult world that Zanzan lives in and represents had little relevance to lives of high school girls until they were linked together through Wang. Upon his enrollment, Wang's handsome appearance immediately attracted the attention and admiration of many female students in the school:

王一博入学即军训，连剃头的教官都看他帅不忍心剪掉他太多头发。他被抽去仪仗队，走正步的时候多少女生在盯着他看，每天他的水壶边上放了多少瓶贴了粉色纸条的饮料，胆子大的甚至直接来和他搭讪；也有艺术班学舞蹈的，盘靓条顺，家教良好，高中毕业后就准备出国接受顶级教育。

whenever you spot him in the march practices, there are always adoring gazes around him, and pink-labeled beverages girls brought as tokens of their affection beside his

⁹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 194.

water bottle; bold ones even dare to come up and strike a conversation. There were also dance majors from art classes, beautiful and well-educated, preparing for top-notch education abroad upon graduation from high school.

(Falling, Chapter 3)

By enumerating multiple potential life paths available to them, a foil figure of schoolgirl with upward mobilizing potential is then established, clearly distinguished from the doomed fates of salon girls. The dichotomy between schoolgirls and salon girls appears again later in Wang's self-reflection when he struggled in the relationship with Zanzan and ended up asking himself in frustration: "aren't these girls who are around my age and background good enough? Why wasn't I moved at all but even felt a little tired of their pursuit?" Thinking through the dichotomy, he firmly cements his affection for Zanzan, which stays unwavering even challenged by a bold confession in the fourth chapter. In the confession scene, the girl blocked Wang in the equipment room, took off her short-sleeved school uniform, attempting to encourage herself and win him over by the audacious expression. And we, together with Wang, are again drawn into involuntary comparison between Zanzan and her schoolgirl foil:

王一博很冷静地看着她，女同学刚刚发育的胸部像桃子一样被包裹在纯棉白色内衣里面，胸罩是半杯的，羞答答地挤出浅浅一道乳沟，随着她的动作上下抖动。很纯情，也很诱人，若是放在半年前王一博绝对做不了柳下惠，但现在的王一博看着这幅画面，根本起不来热情。对他来说这太平淡了，他被赞赞极具侵略性的女性化特质养刁了胃口。

Wang calmly looks at her. Her budding chest is wrapped in a white cotton bra. The bra is a half-cup, and a shallow groove appears between her breasts as they jiggle

slightly with her movements. It was innocent yet enticing, something that would have caught Wang's attention half a year ago. But now, as he looks at this scene, he feels no excitement. It is too bland for him, as he has been spoiled by Zanzan's aggressive femininity.

(Falling, Chapter 4)

Wang remains unmoved, lost in thought about how he would react if the person in front of him were Zanzan. Compared to the metaphor of ripe grapes, descriptions of the female student's breasts clearly attempt to highlight more positive allure. But even though every word here is rendering the softness and sweetness of this body, the high school girl's femininity fails to compete with Wang's desire for Zanzan. Zanzan, though, feels insecure about potential comparisons with younger girls, which later becomes the source of her inferiority and the catalyst for their later conflicts. For example, when they strolled through the campus, Zanzan thoughtlessly remarks that boys in Wang's age deserve a grand campus romance and so should have Wang. And when Wang bought her lipstick and explained that girls in his class were all using it, Zanzan angrily threw the lipstick at him and retorted "then how could a salon girl like me match with such high-end lipstick? I bet you mistook who your target is." Status differences are Zanzan's weak spot, and the presence of foils emphasizes her mismatched relationship with Wang, as the socially considered alternative, and reminds her of the opportunity cost Wang has to bear for choosing her over more perfect girls.

The female rivalry highlighted here echoes the Madonna-whore dichotomy, which is commonly employed in literary conventions to indicate the author's value

orientation. Most authors, not necessarily male, but those who embrace male ideology, choose to praise chastity as a female honor, or at least view rich sexual experiences, voluntary or involuntary, as sins that need to be redeemed, and regard prostitutes as fallen women. For instance, in Yan Geling's *The Flowers of War*, a story similarly centers on the rivalry and redemption of prostitutes and school girls, prostitutes dress up as female students searched by the Japanese military and sacrifice their own lives as if only in this way could they elevate their impure and lowly status for a pure and noble one. However, this redemption narrative corresponds to the idea that the sacrifice of unseemly prostitutes is less damaging to the nation than that of pure and well-educated female students. The calculation of rescuing priority and its pre-assumed value of lives, therefore, receives criticism for a "patriarchal elitist view of women."⁹⁵

The patriarchal writing style is most reflected in the instrumental use of the Madonna-whore dichotomy by male authors, especially as a disposable textual identity. In ancient Chinese literary tactic of female impersonation, scholars often liken themselves to virgins or newly married wives guarding their chastity to express their political loyalty. In contrast, the European literary conventions tend to favor the image of prostitutes, which constitutes the anxiously woven fabric of modernity by male poets. Baudelaire is one example, as he projects his shadow self onto a

⁹⁵ Yanguo Zhang, "Dianying jinlingshisanchai jinv xingxiang suzao de yishi xingtai fenxi 电影《金陵十三钗》妓女形象塑造的意识形态分析[An ideological analysis of the image of prostitutes in the film *The Flowers of War*]", *Dianying wenxue* 电影文学[*Movie Literature*], no.18(2012), pp: 80-81.

wandering prostitute.⁹⁶ As a psychoanalytic reading⁹⁷ of literary works summarized, the virgin is a representation of male projections of their inhibitory or superego tendencies while the whore is a projection of male libidinal or id tendencies.

Therefore, the dichotomy that judges value based on chastity merely provides men with a convenient discourse framework for disciplining female desire and promoting self-expression.

Moreover, fan fiction is often consumed based on their tags, and in the case of *Falling*, even the author herself categorizes it as a “salon girl/high school boy” story, featuring a prototypical relationship originating from prostitute-literati romance. Getting back to the quarrel over lipstick, in her frustration, Zanzan draws a clear boundary with Wang, using the phrase “prostitutes are heartless, actors are unscrupulous.”⁹⁸ Stemming from status difference, the conflict is further escalated by Wang’s response that “then go find someone you’re interested in! They would at least pay, unlike me, who is just freeloading,” which inadvertently highlights the decisive role of money in the crumbling prostitute-literati romance.

Stories featuring prostitute-literati romance were once a prevalent subgenre in traditional Chinese literature, especially in the *Chuanqi* of the Tang period. Moral judgment of prostitutes in this genre is often made by male literati based on their

⁹⁶ Thomas C. Connolly, “Baudelaire the Frequent Flyer: Prostitution, the Press, and How The Prose Poem Almost Sold Its Soul,” *Romance Notes* 55, no. 3 (2015): pp. 463-474, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rmc.2015.0054>.

⁹⁷ Gottschall, Jonathan, Elizabeth Allison, Jay De Rosa, and Kaia Klockeman, “Can Literary Study Be Scientific?: Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy.” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 1–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41209939>.

⁹⁸ “婊子无情，戏子无义,” a popular saying that has been passed down for centuries and reflects public perception’s contempt of prostitutes. The negative impression of prostitutes has been so deep-rooted in Chinese culture that it has been used as direct quotes or central themes in works like Li Bihua’s *Farewell My Concubine*.

attitudes towards money: for instance, they consider Du Shiniang, who gave up wealth, status, and life for love, to be of integrity, and praise Li Shishi, who donated all her savings to help resist the foreign invasion, for her loyalty. In contrast, those like Li Wa, who severed ties with lovers who were having difficulties, are considered morally suspect.

Moreover, even if prostitutes have passed the moral test, the misogynistic code of conduct prescribed for Confucian scholars would still regard sexually attractive women as a hindrance to the studies and reputation of aspiring scholars, and thus impede their path to political success. Similarly, in *Falling*, the relationship between Zanzan and Wang constantly affects his campus life, including his attendance, grades, and probably future prospects. After being scolded by his parents over the phone, Wang begins to reflect on what the two worlds of campus and the salon represent in terms of his life trajectory:

他站在丽红发廊门口，第一次开始思考自己一次次回到这个地方的意义。他突然觉得自己应该属于高中教室、属于有脚汗臭的宿舍、属于一屋子的林健 A 林健 B 林健 C，在熄灯之后一起躲在被子里拿手机看打了几百个马赛克的黄片。而不是这里，逼仄阴暗的小巷、永远散不掉的下水沟和垃圾臭、生锈的铁皮玻璃门、乌烟瘴气的麻将桌和衣不蔽体的低俗发廊妹。

He stands at the door of the Lihong hair salon and, for the first time, began to ponder the meaning behind his repeated returns to this place. Suddenly, he feels that he belongs in a high school classroom, in a dorm permeated with foot odor, in a room he shares with Lin Jian A, Lin Jian B, and Lin Jian C. And in that life, they could hide under the covers after lights out and watch mosaiced porn together. In that life, he

would be far from this cramped, dimly lit alleyway, with the perpetual stench of sewage and garbage, the rusted iron door, the suffocating atmosphere around the mahjong table, and the vulgar salon girls who barely clothed themselves.

(Falling, Chapter 6)

Just like the comparison between Zanzan and her schoolgirl foil, the subjunctive mood in Wang's inner conflict reflects the two paths open before him. As a high school student who grew up according to societal expectations, the 16-year-old boy, suffering from frustration with his unsuccessful romance and the anxiety of deviating from a purportedly righteous future, imagines a possibility of having not met Zanzan. The hypothesized, pure schoolboy life that he imagines is distinct from his reality according to the availability of sexual pleasure; that division, on the one hand, implies the insurmountable gap between campus and hair salon, and on the other, highlights how desire is believed distracting young people from studies. In the public's eyes, the unfulfilled sexual impulses of the schoolboys render them largely tolerable, forgivable, and justifiable. As long as they have sex without real partners, their lives have not fallen apart and can still be brought back on track. The recurring comparison and choices, in my opinion, is a realist strategy in *Falling*. By putting characters in dilemmas and conflicts, rather than in a vacuum environment, *Falling* was able to portray a relationship that can withstand the ordeal instead of play-house-like love affairs.

Undeniably, the two prototypical relationships prove *Falling's* adherence to the literary paradigm created by men. And even beyond *Falling*, portrayal of feminized characters as prostitute/courtesan is a commonly used trope in Chinese genderswap

fan fiction. Why would Chinese genderswap fanfiction writer, exclusively female, enjoy feminizing idols, extremely sexualizing them, producing and consuming so-called “bad textual sex”? My confusion remains unresolved until I read a fan’s analogical comment, which reads that unlike male desires, simple and direct to satisfy like buying fried chicken to eat when getting hungry, female desires are often achieved by frying their hands and simply gazing at them. Inspired by this self-frying desire circuit, I want to discuss what female writers and readers expect from genderswap fanfiction and how gender reversal as a trope help differentiate genderswap texts from works employing patriarchal logics.

Despite the awareness that those depicted as prostitutes are male, readers might still feel uncomfortable because the reversed gender as the premise of this genre never change the fact that only women are being objectified. Some may even question authors’ feminist stance that how come they have unscrupulously objectified feminized bodies upon liberation from their own objectified role in literature. I don’t deny the patriarchal root of some literary conventions employed in genderswap texts; however, I think the androgynous logic works in a circuitous manner, which cannot be simply reduced to identification with certain gender. Indeed, both prototypical relationships in *Falling*, the prostitute-schoolgirl rivalry the courtesan-literati romance, represents a patriarchal logic that evaluate women’s social value as either longtime companion or recreational partners from male perspectives, but the author’s invocation of androgyny’s dual characteristics demonstrates her seemingly deviant but actually steadfast feminist stance. I therefore conclude the author’s application strategies of androgyny as “retaliation with maleness and recovery with femaleness,” which is well

illustrated in two excerpts in *Falling*. One example is in Chapter 10, when Wang pretends that Zanzan is his elder sister and invites her to the collective parent-teacher meeting, several middle-aged male parents keep staring at her:

几个男家长毫不掩饰地用目光玩弄着赞赞，她紧紧包裹在半身裙下的丰臀和黑丝袜修饰过的美腿燃起他们肮脏的欲望...是天下乌鸦一般黑，赌赢了点钱就来发廊里买一夜春宵的无业游民与坐在教室里人模人样的给孩子开家长会的成功人士，又有什么分别？一样热衷于用眼神把漂亮女人波光，猜测她今天裙底又穿了什么颜色的内裤；一边骂人家是骚货，一边有渴望这骚货的浪洞能满足他们无止境的男根欲望。

They unabashedly tease Zanzan with their gaze. Her shapely buttocks, tightly wrapped under a half-skirt and adorned with black stockings, ignited their dirty desires...

There's no difference between jobless wanderers who come to the salon for one-night pleasure and successful people who sit in classrooms and attend parent-teacher conferences for their children. They are both enthusiastic about stripping beautiful women naked with their eyes, guessing the color of the underwear she's wearing under her skirt today. They both enjoy cursing her as a slut while longing for her hole to satisfy their endless male desires.

(*Falling*, Chapter 12)

The author harshly exposes and criticizes male parents' lewd desires hidden beneath the seemingly upright appearance of male parents by pointing out the filthy nature of their sexually charged gaze. After the diagnosis, she also ridicules their gaze by accepting Zanzan's to-be-looked-at-ness and then revealing her biological sex through Wang's voice that "if they knew that under her perfectly tailored suit, there

was a big cock and that her silky hair covered a flat chest, what would these hypocritical men think when they realized that they were leering at someone of the same sex?”⁹⁹ Here, androgyny is used as a trap, decoying obscene desires with the seductive femininity and then punishing the shallowness and foolishness of male visual animals with the preoperative male sex organ. By accusing male parents of leering at a boy of same sex, the author draws these men, who have internalized homosocial desires¹⁰⁰, into their greatest fear of male-male relationships, and erodes their dignity that relies on age and gender privilege.

As Richard Dellamora suggests, the trope of androgyny can function as an idealizing rhetoric¹⁰¹ to revise the construction of masculinity by feminizing it. Such reconstructing efficacy of androgyny makes that, in addition to retaliating the male gaze, Zanzan’s gender in-betweenness secures her an opportunity to cure her maleness and defend her relationship with Wang:

“男人喜欢男人是病吗？”王一博问赞赞。赞赞很久很久都没有说话，最后她亲吻了王一博的耳朵，小声说：“我不知道，一博，我也不知道。但我希望你不要生病，永远都不要。你要做最健康的人。”

“那你呢？”

“我会治好我的病，再来见你。”

⁹⁹ MaiLeDiDiDi, “Falling (下坠),” Archive of Our Own, accessed April 3, 2023, https://archiveofourown.org/works/22478632?view_full_work=true, Chapter 12. “若他们知道她无一丝褶皱的西装裙下面藏着一根大鸡巴，缎子一样的长发盖住的是没有脂肪的胸部，知道自己用色情目光猥亵的是一个同性时，这些道貌岸然的男人会怎么想？”

¹⁰⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Wayne Koestenbaum, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016).

¹⁰¹ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

“Is it an illness for men to love men?” Wang asks Zanzan. Zanzan doesn’t speak for a few minutes, and finally she kisses his ear and whispers, “I don’t know, Yibo, I don’t know. But I hope you don’t get sick. Never. You should be the healthiest person.”

“What about you?”

“I will cure my illness and come see you again.”

(Falling, Chapter 7)

This conversation touches on two kinds of illness, including Zanzan’s gender dysphoria and homosexuality, which is pathologized by the heteronormative public perception. Although both of them are skeptical about the pathological diagnosis of homosexuality, Zanzan’s blessing that “you should be the healthiest person” conveys her determination of exempting Wang from the diagnosis of homosexuality or any possible moral stain. Therefore, her illness becomes his health certificate, and by curing her maleness, their relationship can be resurrected. Here, Zanzan’s androgyny represents gender fluidity and identity negotiability, which never solves the root cause of pathologizing the homosexuality but at least helps avoid being confronted by it.

This section identifies and problematizes androgyny in genderswap fanfiction. Tracking the route of androgyny’s field shifting in previous studies, I noticed its polarized reception in the pre-nineteenth-century medical and literary discourses and the recurrence of such reception rupture in the February 27th Incident. Therefore, inspired by the identity conflict between Xiao Zhan and his genderswapped image in *Falling*, I determine the research question of this section to be how the idea of androgyny has been used in and outside genderswap fan works, by focusing respectively on androgyny’s overlap with idols and prostitutes.

Outside genderswap texts, androgyny is used by genderswap fandom as a shared feature to resonate with and unite male idols. Without rebutting the societal discrimination of androgyny, genderswap fans use the passive status shared by male idols and women to strengthen the connection and alliance between the two. In the most representative and controversial genderswap work, *Falling*, androgyny participates in the character shaping through the invocation of maleness and femaleness. For instance, Zanzan's attractiveness is portrayed with femaleness while her uniqueness is shaped distinctive from other salon girls with maleness, which I also conclude as incomplete feminization and implicit sexualization. Through a similar use of androgyny's dual characteristics, Zanzan's androgynous identity also helps mediate conflicts between patriarchal literary conventions and feminist stances.

CHAPTER 2

TEXTS IN DEBATES: UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE DESIGNS IN CHINESE GENDERSWAP FANFICTION

Who's the Conduit? Why Boy Bands?

Narrative Function Analysis of Boy Bands in Genderswap Fanfiction

In what forms are idols, as objects of fan desire, engulfed in fans' fervent fantasies? Two boy bands in English-speaking fan culture, Beatles and NSYNC, coincidentally become two pivotal points that have led scholars to answer the question from perspectives of symbolic infatuation and textual malleability. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie¹⁰² introduced the case of Beatlemania in the 1960s, which ignited a frenzy among adolescent girls, emphasizing the rock 'n' roll qualities of the band members – or rather, the rebelliousness associated with an open-minded attitude towards sexuality – as an explanation for their popularity. Following this line of thought, subsequent researchers, such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, Gloria Jacobs¹⁰³, and Nicolette Rohr¹⁰⁴, delve even deeper into elucidating questions like the forms protest against the adult world exhibited by the Beatles and how their rebellious spirits resonated with fans.

¹⁰² Simon Frith et al., "Rock and Sexuality," essay, in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written World* (London: Routledge, 1978[1990]), 317–32.

¹⁰³ Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun," essay, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 84–106.

¹⁰⁴ Nicolette Rohr, "Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Sixties Screamscape of Beatlemania," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12213>.

Unlike the rebellious alliance between the Beatles and young girls, pop-styled boy bands like NSYNC and Backstreet Boys often cater to the preferences of young girls by employing sentimental melodies and showcasing handsome appearances to attract fans. Such fan-oriented promotion has consequentially given rise to a subgenre of fanfiction called band slash, which allows fans a relatively high degree of creative freedom. Accordingly, scholars studying pop-styled boy band fandom tend to focus more on the textual output of fan fantasies. For instance, Kristin Busse keenly captures two perspectives, namely the observer and insertion fantasies, prevalent in fan works centered around NSYNC member Justin Timberlake, and elaborates on how these perspectives serve the logic of fulfilling fans' fantasies.

However, if symbolic infatuation and textual malleability can be seen as reasons why boy band members become popular materials of fan fantasies on the consumption/audience end, solo rock singers and actors can also share the same reasons and render the two analytic directions applicable for all celebrity-related fan works. Then what sets boy band members apart on the textual level from other objects of fantasy for adolescent girls?

To explore the cultural connotation of boy bands for band slash readers, I disassemble the phrase into "band" and "boy," and decide to explore what symbolic and narrative value in band slash writing does the plurality and boyhood of boy bands? The prevalence of romance between members of young male music groups in Chinese genderswap fanfiction works, in this sense, makes the gender-reversing portrayal of boy band members an intriguing case for band slash analysis. In "Falling" alone, for instance, the two protagonists are members of the Chinese pop boy groups X Nine and

UNIQ. Inspired by this overlap of genderswap fanfiction and band slash, I attempt in this section to explore narrative effects of boy bands with examples of genderswap works, and analyze changes brought about by the bent gender to the band slash fandom narrative, through close reading of genderswap band slash and dialogue with previous studies on band slash and boy band fandom in general. Also, given the thesis's focus on texts, this section will adopt Busse's categorization of observer and insertion framework as an introductory framework, which provides a foundational focus and classification basis for fan fiction analysis.

The insertion fantasy, as its name reveals, inserts a self-prototyped character into fan-created fantasy universe, engages personally in the imagined para-social relationship, and most importantly, develops romantic connections with idols. Mostly narrated in first-person perspective, insertion-oriented RPS works depict a world where fans' imperfections are either adopted as cuteness or sometimes exaggeratedly beautified, so as to rationalize the fantasy of a male idol falling in love with an ordinary fan. This realm of imagination, detached from reality, and its exclusive nature of these fantasy relationships have drawn disdain from scholars in celebrity studies, who assume that self-insertors are isolated and pitiable individuals, "substitut[ing] celebrity attachment for actual social interaction."¹⁰⁵ Not only scholars, some fans also

¹⁰⁵ Summarized by Kristina Busse, of the common attitude in celebrities studies towards self-inserting fans, in her "'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me': Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction," essay, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 41–56, 42. For more readings on celebrity Studies' attitudes towards fans, also see Chris Rojek, *Presumed Intimacy: Parasocial Relationships in Media, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015) and Graham Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: SAGE, 2014).

scorn self-insertors for being “obsessive, intrusive, and even aggressively physical”¹⁰⁶ and identify with celebrities against insertion fantasies, whose tendency towards misogyny and self-abnegation will be discussed in later sections. Apart from self-inserting as idols’ loved ones, another form of self-insertor fantasy lies in the embodiment of idols’ identity by authors. Viewing idols as idealized versions of themselves, fans explore their desire and vicariously circumvent gendered sexual taboos through the experimentation in idols’ male bodies, which Dyer understands as fans’ exploration of celebrities to address issues of their own “authentic” id identity¹⁰⁷.

And the observer fantasy, as categorized by Busse, fetishizes the close relationships among celebrities, particularly among boy band members, to the extent that anyone outside the group cannot become a love interest. It is named “observer” because, instead of direct self-insertion, this sub-genre creates works based on observed and gathered facts about celebrities’ private lives. The assumption of hidden personas beneath their public performances is pivotal to the observer fantasy, as their writing hinges heavily on media evidence to construct backstage celebrity identities that enable “fictional extrapolation.”¹⁰⁸

However, as you may have noticed from the previous summary, these classifications are not limited to boy slash alone and are applicable to almost all

¹⁰⁶ Kristina Busse, “‘I’m Jealous of the Fake Me’: Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction,” essay, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 41–56, 47.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1986), 17-19. In Dyer’s model of audience-star relationship, he classifies a diffuse range of aspects in fans’ interaction with stars into four categories: emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation, and projection.

¹⁰⁸ Kristina Busse, “‘I’m Jealous of the Fake Me’: Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction,” essay, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 41–56, 48.

fanfiction. In Busse's "'I'm Jealous of the Fake Me': Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction," an essay considered foundational to band slash studies, she only briefly mentions Justin Timberlake's identity as a member of NSYNC when analyzing a slash work centered around him. Apart from the ambitious masculinity and deliberately fabricated public personas, no further analysis is advanced regarding the specific subgenre of band slash and the narrative function of boy bands in fan fiction and fan psychology. Therefore, I will first take a step back from the textual level to the real-life starstruck activities and engage in a dialogue with studies on the fan base of boy bands to investigate fans' intense devotion to boy bands. And from there, I will further explore their desire to consume content that revolves around one or several boy band members.

Analyzing teenage fan girls' consumption of rock bands like The Beatles, the ground-breaking essays on boy band fandom from the anthology edited by Lisa A. Lewis powerfully refute the stigmatization surrounding boy bands' popularity by male audiences in the 1960s, which criticized the taste of female fans who enjoyed male rock bands, using the term "groupie" to insult female fans to achieve an "all-purpose insult and a slur on their professionalism"¹⁰⁹. To put an even more cruel damper on fantasied groupies' imagination of romance with rock band members, fan girls' bold devotion back then was often equaled to sexual disposability and "the high standards one might expect of a... brothel"¹¹⁰. Essays in the anthology go beyond cautioning readers about stereotypical perceptions of fans and explore the fascination of girls with

¹⁰⁹ Cheryl Cline, "Essays from Bitch: The Women's Rock Newsletter with Bite," essay, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 69–83, 77.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

boy bands, not just at the textual level but in the realm of reality, offering answers from the perspectives of gender and desire. For instance, some attribute girls' fascination to the seductive image of musicians, distinct from fan girls' "untutored and ungainly boyfriends,"¹¹¹ "a release of sexual energy" enabled by rock music (since unlike boys have sports as an outlet of the "libidinal voltage," girls' expressiveness takes the form of screaming and swooning), and even the mass hysteria and teen sexual frustration ratified by rock music¹¹².

The lens of fans' sexuality centers their desire of possessing idols, which is not necessarily limited to approaching them in self-inserting stories but often insulating them from female celebrities, and reminds me to investigate why fans tend to reject idols' love affairs and how the surveillance enabled by the form of boy band guarantees fans' exclusion of females away from being around boy bands.

One characteristic that has always been connected to East Asian fandom, especially idol fandom, is fans' apparent aversion to any kind of romantic or sexual involvement between the band members and women other than individual fans themselves. To read this tendency of female exclusion, the notion of insertion fantasy seems helpful in the sense that, both becoming and possessing idols indicate a sense of ownership over them, which might be threatened by love affairs involving idols. And the fantasy would be further disrupted if the other party involved is a female celebrity, since for an average fan, being outcompeted might inspire frustration and jealousy, and remind fans of the impossibility of their fantasy. This sense of threat triggered by

¹¹¹ Gary Herman, *Rock 'N' Roll Babylon* (New York, NY: Perigee Books, 1982).

¹¹² Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hazz, and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun," essay, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 84–106, 98.

idols' potential heterosexual rumors has also been confirmed by Jungmin Kwon, whose book on Korean female fans writing homosexual erotic fan fiction attributes the *raison d'être* of intra-band fanfiction to the fear of same-sex competition.¹¹³

In this sense, the reason why boy bands can become creative materials for fanfiction lies in the implicit or even encouraged acceptance of female fans' same-sex exclusion. The removal of women from the potential sphere of forming intimate relationships with male idols can be seen as a commitment by entertainment companies to fans for fanbase loyalty and economic interests, to assure whose implementation, the all-male composition of boy bands fundamentally prevents members from contact with women. Moreover, the plurality of idol group members, by its form, determines the external surveillance around and internal surveillance within boy bands.

Externally, entertainment companies employ the form of group/band to discipline its members, a logic that aligns with Foucault's discourse on "the art of distribution" concerning docile bodies, in the sense that the group promises a closed space, stipulates each member's elementary location, and renders the members interchangeable. Furthermore, promotional activities also reinforce this external surveillance structure since boy band promotions often emphasize their seductive yet pure image and portray them as sexually appealing but without sexual experience, to ensure that self-inserters can project their fantasies onto the ideal boyfriend figure. To maintain this image, idol boy bands not only need to be mindful of their behavior and

¹¹³ Jungmin Kwon, *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 44.

speech when interacting with female celebrities in public settings –no eye contact or physical touch allowed – but also have to carefully control interactions with females on their social media accounts. And fans, of course, are also an important component of this panoptic surveillance structure. According to my informants, who are active in the K-pop and C-pop fan communities, fans tend to closely monitor and care about every move of their idols, scrutinizing their likes and shares, and deciphering signals of secret romantic relationships. Vigilant in preventing any interactions between idols and any females they encounter, some fans even regularly share their investigation findings based on even the slightest hints. Hence, the structure of a group fundamentally fulfills the fans' demand to insulate idols from possible heterosexual romance.

The internal surveillance originates from the delicate dynamics between members and is enabled by their co-living in a shared space. Members are told to support and help each other while maintaining a positive image for the benefit of the whole group. As both co-beneficiaries of intense fans and also competitors for fans' attention and support, they form a collaborative but competitive relationship. An internal surveillance system is therefore generated in addition to handlers' discipline, where members can monitor and constrain each other to ensure that no one deviates from the predetermined behavior and image, as personal romantic relationships could jeopardize the entire group's stage life. The love affair between Hui (a member of the K-pop boy band Pentagon) and Soojin (a member of the K-pop girl group (G)I-DLE) can be an example of the devastating impact of a dating scandal on idol groups' careers, which not only caused Hui's hiatus from group events, but also resulted in a

temporary halt to the group's promotional activities.¹¹⁴ The scandal stirred up disappointment and a sense of betrayal among Pentagon fans, leading to mistrust regarding members' commitment and, more fundamentally, the effectiveness of the intra-group mutual surveillance.

The constant observation and evaluation make idol group members more cautious as they are clear their actions and words are being monitored and judged. Such obedience and docility further please self-insertor fans. For example, idols are praised as "paragons of male virtue"¹¹⁵ for their proactively maintaining a distance from their female collaborators: their eyes that never stare at female co-artists with lust and desire, their clenching fists to avoid direct touch of female co-artists' skin; and even their awkward and unconvincing acting in romantic scenes can be justified as a considerate gesture to avoid hurting fans' feelings. In this sense, boy band members seem to live under constant fan surveillance, which intangibly manipulates their relationships and behaviors by using career advancement as leverage to compel them to keep a distance from women.

Here, members' internalization of this power structure echoes the Foucauldian idea that "the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary,"¹¹⁶ since, despite the discontinuous surveillance in its action, its effects

¹¹⁴ Susan-Han, "Netizens Are Calling Pentagon 'the Rookie Idol Group with Three Dating Scandals in One Day' + Leave Hate Comments," allkpop, August 3, 2018, <https://www.allkpop.com/article/2018/08/netizens-are-calling-pentagon-the-rookie-idol-group-with-three-dating-scandals-in-one-day-leave-hate-comments>.

¹¹⁵ Xuemei Guo, "Manufacturing 'Male Virtue': An Imaginary Collapse of Female Taming of Men (制造"男德": 一次女性驯服男性的想象崩溃)," Peking University Social Media Research Center, 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_JFxZmuiJs_NnmrHxPbc9Q.

¹¹⁶ "Michel Foucault – Discipline and Punish: Panopticon (Excerpt)," Genius, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://genius.com/Michel-foucault-discipline-and-punish-panopticon-excerpt-annotated>.

remain permanent. Why does the band become an architectural apparatus creating and sustaining power, then? I tend to believe that the superposition of multiple band members' dream rhetoric makes the idol-producing myth replaces entertainment companies' authoritarian and coercive control with the mutual surveillance and self-regulation mechanism within the band, making members unconsciously influenced and dominated, thus ensuring that members' processibility into the self-insertors' fantasy as pure raw materials.

Moreover, apart from guaranteeing male idols' singlehood to make ideal materials for desire projection, another narrative value of boy bands lies in that the existence of multiple members breaks the prejudicial assumption imposed on self-inserters that, they are simply obsessed with an unattainable celebrity and using imagined romances to fill the void in their mundane lives. Multiple members in boy bands creates a space for multidimensional relationships to form; therefore, instead of a disdained romantic imagination involving the self-inserter and her beloved celebrity, an erotic triangle or even a microcosm of society becomes possible in their fantasies. The addition of a third person, mediating or blocking the desire in self-inserter fantasies, complicates narratives to advance beyond the traditional romantic tension and individual desire to include power, competition, and social hierarchies.

Such triangulation of desire, however, may lead to the instrumentalization of female characters in the narrative, which is a common narrative side effect in conduit fanfiction. In this genre, fan readers are asked to identify with female characters who are "actually physically intimate but never part of the emotional framework for either

of the two men,”¹¹⁷ to put it another way, a conduit in the m/f/m dynamic to eventually solve male characters’ homosexual anxiety with her female body. The genre is named so because the only function of female characters as the physical conduit is obligated to bridge male characters physically and emotionally and enable the intimacy that they otherwise cannot allow themselves. Besides the stand-in function, the discomfort of reading band slash potentially as conduit fiction also reminds me of a larger power structure in erotic triangles: female roles as objects in male-male transactions in exchange systems like marriage¹¹⁸, and bonds between two male rivals¹¹⁹.

Genderswap, on the contrary, frees fanfiction from the pessimistic repetition of real-life constraints: women no longer have to fulfill supporting or marginal roles. On the one hand, as we can see in “Falling,” genderswap fanfiction pays close attention to female character creation and depiction, portraying not only main characters but also a vivid and three-dimensional array of minor characters, including the salon girl ensemble. On the other, the feminization of male idols transforms the power dynamics in the gaze relationship along gender asymmetry. For example, on social media, active genderswap fans gather in the comments section of a particular work (including illustrations), expressing their unabashed desire by exclaiming, “oh, my sexy wife!” In doing so, the identification between female fans and passive female characters is cut

¹¹⁷ Kristina Busse, “Affective Imagination: Fan Representation in Media Fan Fiction,” essay, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 78–98, 87.

¹¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship / Les Structures Elementaires de La Parente* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1969).

¹¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 21. Similar m/f/m structures has also been discussed in René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

off, allowing them to gaze at erotic objects from new subject positions. In this sense, instead of self-inserted female characters, genderswapped male idols become the conduit for fans to experience and express their desires.

The narrative effect of plurality illustrates the selection of boy band members as fanfiction materials with two logics regarding how band as a form facilitates and justifies fans’ desire. Going back to Busse’s categorization, if we understand desire-related narrative functions as reasons of boy band members being favored by insertion fantasies, boyhood is obviously more connected with shipper fantasies. By boyhood here, I refer to two phases in particular: the transition phase between amateurs and idols, known as the trainee phase, discussed in section 1, and also a hazy stage between childhood and adulthood, or in Kazumi Nagaike’s words, the shonen period¹²⁰. Fan readers of band slash, as observers, consume the bonds that exist among members, formed in their mutual support and largely omitted by media coverage, and therefore the shippable couple pairs (CP) that arise from these details. A well-known song among shippers, “The Truth Untold,” provides us with context to decode shippable elements in boyhood as the consumed element:

真相是真 The Truth Untold

我给你看那几年青春再简陋潦草	Let me show you those youthful years, so simple and crude
却始终让我沉迷	Yet forever they had me enthralled.
我身边只他一个	Beside me, only him, the daring one who ventured
却敢去没天光的 疯狂梦境	Into wild, crazy dreams where there is no light.

¹²⁰ Kazumi Nagaike, *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012).

是他陪我流血破皮	He was there when I lay in pain,
陪我失眠时交换着回忆	When sleepless nights come again.
也因他才成就我	With him, all the dreams came true,
换别人就失去结局	With anyone else, the ending might askew.
没繁花红毯的少年时代里	In youth without fame's glamorous gown,
若不是他我怎么走过 籍籍无名	How can I survive, had he not been around?

The two people in the lyrics witnessed each other's misery and replaced the hollow and distant "dream rhetoric" with actual companionship, supporting each other through physical and mental limits. This companionship becomes not only the confidence in their low tide, but also a necessary condition for their eventual success — further verified and strengthened by the author's hypothetical statement of "had he not been around" in the lyrics.

In addition, the four echoing "truly"s lead the second stanza, visualizing the details of companionship and elevating the shared hardships into communal risks ("enduring hardships as we pursued our dreams"¹²¹) and the bright future ("promising to never attend a bright future without each other"¹²²). Meanwhile, the taboo of male-male romance ("hoping the world would grant me permission"¹²³) and the secrecy of hiding from the world ("we once hid in the silence of the long street"¹²⁴) deepen the sense of fatalistic love. However, the repeated use of "truly" throughout the song, including "I

¹²¹ “也一起熬梦想朝不保夕,” Xiao Lv. “The Truth Untold.” Followlyrics.com. Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://zh.followlyrics.com/lyrics/13638621/zhen-xiang-shi-zhen-Cover-a-ming>.

¹²² “承诺只去有对方的前程似锦,” Ibid.

¹²³ “希望能得到世界允许,” Ibid.

¹²⁴ “曾躲进了长街寂静,” Ibid.

truly braved the pouring rain with him/truly survived winter and summer with dream/truly embraced him tight/truly held his arm with all my might”¹²⁵ in the second stanza and “I truly chatted with him until dawn/truly with him, our connection was beyond/truly remember all his quirks and traits/truly fear the separation that awaits”¹²⁶ in the third, somehow carries a sense of self-confirmation. Instead of a nostalgic description of sweet memories, the repetition feels more like self-consoling hypnosis that assures the protagonist’s indulging in the illusion of the ongoing relationship, even though the eventual separation has been indicated by the use of past tense.

The popularity of this song within the shipper fandom demonstrates that, not only the steadfast support and companionship, but also the shippable aspects of the heart-wrenching tragedy of unfulfilled romantic feelings caused by panoptic surveillance, holds even more shipping value than the former. According to Busse’s analysis¹²⁷, observers derive greater pleasure by extracting hidden information from a public persona’s fragmented image and rediscovering their private self. Therefore, the chemistry between members, whether in eye contact or physical touch¹²⁸, once detected, can be stripped away from reality and become the raw materials of shippers’ storytelling.

¹²⁵ “我真的陪他淋过大雨/真陪他冬季夏季/真与他拥抱黑暗里/真牵过他的手臂,” Ibid.

¹²⁶ “我真的陪他聊到黎明/真的同他最默契/真的记得他所有怪癖/真的最害怕分离,” Ibid.

¹²⁷ Kristina Busse, “‘I’m Jealous of the Fake Me’: Postmodern Subjectivity and Identity Construction in Boy Band Fan Fiction,” essay, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 41–56, 47. The re-discoverability of idols’ private selves originates from Rojek’s argument that “celebrity status always implies a split between a private and a public self.”

¹²⁸ Jungmin Kwon, *Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 46.

Furthermore, during a conversation when I asked band slash readers about their preference for tragedy, one informant shared a screenshot of a Douban post that had circulated among shippers¹²⁹. The poster listed several scenarios for how can love be sublimated to a more appreciable level, including “arising from opposition,” “falling in love with someone you cannot love,” “loving under societal pressure,” “misunderstanding each other,” “getting hurt seriously for love,” and even “having gone through all the hardships, suddenly deciding not to continue the affection anymore,” and concluded that “love is the most beautiful thing in the world, especially in destruction and fragmentation.” As revealed in the informant’s reflection, for her and other shippers around her, the tragedy of unrequited love or the regret of a failed relationship is far more profound than a normal mutual attraction that leads to a happy ending, because affective failure condenses the vicissitudes and inevitabilities of life into an extreme aesthetic experience. Aristotle’s theory of tragedy is that it arouses “pity and fear,”¹³⁰ leading to catharsis and release that we call a sense of beauty. The intimate but competitive relationship between boy band members satisfies the narrative requirement of “opposition.” Meanwhile, their masculinity, which deviates from traditional gender roles, as well as the possible homosexual romance between members, cater to the narrative expectation of love that goes against societal norms.

Another facet of boyhood, the in-betweenness at the middle ground of childhood and adulthood and the rebellious adolescent spirit it represents, has also been a crucial

¹²⁹ Accessible at https://archive.org/details/img-4120_202305.

¹³⁰ Aristoteles, *Poetics* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 10-11, in which he argues, “tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.”

factor that resonates with and appeals to young fan readers. The Beatlemania of the 1960s, for instance, where teenage fangirls were reported surging against police lines and chanting the names of their favorite Beatles members, is largely interpreted as “an imperative that overruled adult mores and even adult laws,”¹³¹ in response to the Beatles’ rebellious call. Some even believe that the name “Beatles” itself represents jungle rhythms that reject constraints and returns to intuition, or even a kind of atavistic tendency¹³², which ignites the teenager-adult conflict over rigid sexual regulations imposed on teenagers. Such fanaticism, as an expressive form of protest against the adult world, has been preserved in the form of boy bands and amplified by the contradiction between culturally prescribed standard masculinity and the flower boy style in East Asia.

The second facet of boyhood seems overlapping with the symbolic infatuation point because it also uses the Beatles as an example and touches on rebellion; however, two analyses have their respective emphasis – while Frith and McRobbie see rebelliousness as the rock ‘n’ roll quality, I consider it more closely related to the puberty mentality. Also, to progress even further on this thread of rebellion, genderswap band slash works use genderswapped characters to express their resistance by rewriting boy band members as female. One of the representative works of this genre, “The Bluebird Does Not Come Anymore” (hereafter referred to as The

¹³¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hazz, and Gloria Jacobs, “Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun,” essay, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2003), 84–106, 89.

¹³² “Why the Girls Scream, Weep, Flip; the Path to Understanding Is Psychological, Anthropological and a Whole Lot Besides,” *The New York Times*, February 23, 1964, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/02/23/archives/why-the-girls-scream-weep-flip-the-path-to-understanding-is.html>.

Bluebird) by fan writer Jiang Wen, based on the Korean boy band BTS, is a prime example of this approach. Unlike genderswap band slash stories that typically depict ambiguous romantic relationships, Blue Bird is a particularly transgressive work that subverts conventional gender norms. After finishing the first half, readers might assume it is just another clichéd story of female rivalry, as the protagonist, Zheng Haoxi¹³³, seems to be constantly imitating her best friend Jin Shuozen in every way possible (“they had the same jet-black hair, the same slender build, and even wear matching pink nightgowns – people at school called them non-identical twins, and it was hard to argue with that”¹³⁴). However, she also aggressively steals all the male attention away from Kim Seokjin, exhibiting a slightly predatory behavior:

“足球队队长田怔国通过学校广播向金硕珍告白，隔天在广播室里，同样的告白被郑号锡一字不落地念给田怔国听；学生会会长金南俊给金硕珍送了一本英文原文书作为生日礼物，等到他过生日，郑号锡买了本一模一样的，夹了亲手写的情书送到金南俊班级门口；艺术特长生閔玠其给金硕珍写了首歌，元旦联欢晚会上唱给金硕珍听，郑号锡当场跳上舞台抢了麦克风，说接下来我要为閔玠其跳一支舞。”

“The captain of the soccer team, Tian Zhengguo, confesses his love for Shuozen through the school broadcast; the next day in the same broadcast studio, the exact

¹³³ The characters are based on BTS member Jung Hoseok, and to specifically refer to the member's feminine role in Chinese genderswap works, I have chosen to refer to them by the Chinese pinyin of their names in both the translation and analysis. Names below, including Kim Seokjin, translated as Jin Shuozen, Jeon Jungkook, translated as Tian Zhongguo, Kim Namjoon, translated as Jin Nanjun, Min Yoongi, translated as Min Yunqi, and Park Jim, translated as Piao Zhimin are out of the same consideration.

¹³⁴ Jiang Wen, “The Bluebird Does Not Come Anymore (青鸟不再来),” Weibo, April 17, 2020, <http://m.weibo.cn/status/4494834129236496>. “一样的漆黑长发，一样的高挑身材，就连现在也穿着一样的粉色连衣睡裙——学校里有人叫她们不是双胞胎的双胞胎。似乎确实是很像的。”

same confession is recited verbatim by Haoxi back to him. The president of the student council, Jin Nanjun, gave Shuozen an English book as a birthday gift, so on his birthday, Haoxi bought the exact same book with a love letter attached and handed it to him. As for the art-major student, Min Yunqi, he wrote a song for Shuozen and performed it at the New Year's Eve party, and immediately, Haoxi jumped onto stage, seized the microphone, and announced that she is going to dance for him.”

(The Bluebird Does Not Come Anymore)

In this story the object of pursuit, Shuozen, is described as aloof, while the proactive pursuer, Haoxi, is labeled as promiscuous and loose. Is the author trying to set up a Madonna–whore dichotomy? Clearly not. Upon closer examination of these seemingly erotic triangles, it would be apparent that they are always centered around Haoxi and Shuozen, with random male characters interchangeable as the pursuer/pursued, which highlights the replaceability of male roles. Moreover, Haoxi's pursuit seems to be more about retaliation than genuine attraction, as she copies and pastes the same methods male pursuers used onto them. The latter half of the plot confirms our intuition. It turns out that Shuozen has known and tacitly accepted Haoxi's imitation and takeover all along, understanding Haoxi's true intentions of protecting her and covering up the fact that she was raped two years ago. By imitating Shuozen's hairstyle and dressing styles, and even creating a promiscuous image for herself, Haoxi has been trying to share Shuozen's psychological pressure of being raped, namely the scrutiny and pity of others.

The theme of “sharing” repeatedly appears throughout the text, from the small matching bluebird tattoos of two girls, to the bigger issue of menstrual pain. The

bluebird represents the painful memories that Shuozen is unwilling to revisit, as it is the name of their hometown where the rape case occurred. However, the naive but sincere love in Haoxi's clumsy imitation helps Shuozen overcome the past trauma. Eventually, they embraced another connotation of bluebirds – a symbol of happiness in Western culture – and got matching bluebird tattoos. As the ink was etched into their skin, they made a firm decision to bid farewell to the past; the bluebird then becomes a symbol of mutual redemption.

“两年前在青鸟，她没能阻止的，没能帮助的，没能保护的，没能替代的，都是她欠下的。即使她和金硕珍已经离开青鸟那么久，在每次金硕珍因为生理期而痛苦的时刻，郑号锡都会被负罪感折磨到比金硕珍还疼痛万分。生理期很麻烦，生理期也证明女孩是女孩，所以金硕珍恨生理期——如果不是身为女孩，她还会被挑中吗？”

Everything she failed to stop, help, protect, or to suffer in Shuozen's place, two years ago at Bluebird, is what she owes. Even though they've been away from Bluebird for a while, every time Shuozen suffers from her menstrual pain, Haoxi would be tortured by inner guilt greater than Shuozen's physical pain. Menstruation is troublesome, yet it also proves that girls are girls. That's also why Shuozen hates menstruation - if she wasn't a girl, would she still be chosen?

(The Bluebird Does Not Come Anymore)

What binds Haoxi to Shuozen is not only love but also a sense of guilt - a guilt that arises from being of the same gender and yet spared from rape - and a deeper sadness triggered by the shared threats girls must face. Therefore, by shifting the discussion from menstruation to girls' plight, the author, through Haoxi's words,

precisely and ruthlessly exposes the pain that all girls share. When asked by a girl named Piao Zhimin about the truth of the rape case, Haoxi retorts, “What’s the difference between her and me?” and sarcastically adds, “We’re just the same kind of girl, the same kind of...container.” Here, the way that boy bands are used as “containers” for female desire has triggered an observation that women are often themselves used as conduits or receptacles for male desire. However, the trope of gender reversal employs the prototype of men to distance and mitigate the discomfort of self-identification, allowing readers to observe female suffering from a slightly detached perspective. The author uses the dialogue between Haoxi and a supporting female character, Zhimin, to represent a girl’s immediate physical and psychological reactions to Haoxi’s “container” theory, which are so detailly depicted that it resonates with many in the comments section:

“朴智旻几乎是以扔的姿态放下了端着的奶茶。她觉得恶心，喝在嘴里的珍珠颗粒很恶心，让她想到蝌蚪。她强迫自己不要再从蝌蚪接着联想到别的什么，也别去想郑号锡说的是装着什么东西的容器。强忍着没有吐出来，朴智旻脊背发麻，错觉是含了满口的蝌蚪一路向下游进她的身体。她不能吐，吐了就是一种伤害，对与遭遇过一切的郑号锡，或者金硕珍的伤害。”

“Zhimin nearly threw down the milk tea she held, feeling sickened by the chewy bubbles in her mouth, which reminded her of tadpoles. She forced herself to stop any further association with tadpoles or to think about what kind of container Haoxi was referring to. Holding back the urge to vomit, Zhimin felt a numbing sensation down her back, as if a mouthful of tadpoles were swimming down her body. She couldn’t

throw up, as that would be another form of harm, either to Haoxi or to Shuozen, who had been through so much.”

(The Bluebird Does Not Come Anymore)

The bubbles here, in my opinion, not only visualize the sexual connotation of the “container,” but also evoke a visceral discomfort through the association with tadpoles, while at the same time embodying the brainwashing of patriarchal discourse on girls. This discourse seeps into girls’ minds like milk tea, giving them a sense of sweetness, namely the notion that female purity (chastity) is beautiful and worth protecting as a sexual ideal. However, once aware of the fact that those who can threaten a girl’s chastity are often male, a nauseating sense of being deceived and betrayed arises. Therefore, despite the kind intention, the brainwashed girls might still unwittingly bring victims like Shuozen secondary trauma while instinctively expressing their anger and sympathy. The chewy bubbles, triggering Zhimin’s nausea but unable to spit out, concretize her discomfort and resonate with readers and become their shared pain.

Boy band members are favored by fanfiction readers and writers as the raw material of fantasies for their symbolic and appropriation value; however, few scholarships have examined the band as a whole and investigated its narrative value. This section, therefore, highlights “boy” and “band” in the form of boy band and explores the narrative functions of plurality and boyhood in band slash works according to their different target audiences.

For self-inserters, no matter out of the desire to possess or become their idols, the form of band facilitates and defends fans’ desires and thus allows their maximum

immersion in the fantasies. On the one hand, characteristics of bands, such as the substitutability of members and the detachability of each member's function, render boy band members docile and obedient to external surveillance. On the other, the competitive yet collaborative relationship between members entails their mutual surveillance, and co-living with members enables and promotes it. In this way, boy band members can be insulated from female celebrities and serve exclusively as protagonists in insertion fantasies. For observers, "boyhood" is a consumable element that provides shipping value and generates complicated narratives since among two connotations of boyhood, "companion" satisfies shippers' demand for shippable materials, and "rebellion" enhances androgyny's transcendent nature.

Moreover, this section also addresses how the trope of gender reversal brings changes to the meaning of "conduit" in band slash works. As Kristina Busse notices and articulates, conduit fanfiction used to be a subgenre of transformative works, where self-inserted female characters are incorporated into m/f/m triangular relationships but serve merely as the physical connection of two male bodies and conduits of their homosexual desires. However, in genderswap band slash works, "conduit" is mainly used to refer to male idols or boy band members, and this change of the word's applicable subject is achieved for two reasons. Firstly, it is male idols' bodies that fan writers choose to feminize in order to communicate female characters' suffering with readers; secondly, considering feminized characters' core status in genderswap works, love triangles in genderswap band slash mostly adopt an f/m/f dynamic, where male characters are replaceable and minor to the narrative.

Bashed Men, Whumped Women, and Erased Children:

Analysis of Genderswap's Fetishized Mutilation through a Psychoanalytic Lens

Chinese genderswap works seem to be perpetually accompanied by pain, regret, discrimination, misunderstanding, unspeakable pasts, and bleak futures. In the story “Falling” alone, we find the aborted fetus of a prostitute, men whose lives are falling apart, a wife who commits suicide after being devastated by her husbands’ visits to prostitutes, and an elderly woman whose son doesn’t come to visit even after her death. Thus, a conspiracy forms in the consumption circuit of genderswap fan fiction, where the author mutilates characters, and the readers, by reading about bloody, dirty, and sadistic scenes, join the textual mutilation and enjoy the imagined suffering from an all-seeing perspective.

Why must the suffering of reality be portrayed even in escapist fiction? Why do readers seem to always hover above the narrative, peeking at characters being feminized, objectified and even sexually abused? The motif of sadism, that emerge from this textual consumption resonates with Emily Apter’s summary of fetishism,¹³⁵ sparking my interest in using a psychoanalytic lens to question the textual positionality of genderswap readers and writers. Therefore, this section will analyze the tragic nature of the characters in genderswap works, so as to explore the reasons behind the textual violence and fetishization of unseemliness within the genderswap fandom.

To begin with, a distinction between character bashing and whumping should be made clear. As fan fiction jargons, both of them indicate a certain kind of torture to the character, but the emotions and intentions behind them are quite different: while character bashing originates from the hatred and disdain, or at least contempt of certain characters, whumping hurts a beloved character in order to “display their physical and emotional vulnerability to best

¹³⁵ Emily Apter, “Preface,” in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), ix–xviii, xiv.

advantage.”¹³⁶ And as my following analysis unfold, a gendered depiction of unseemliness can be found in genderswap works that male supporting characters are mostly bashed while female and genderswapped characters undergo mostly whumping, which I would like to examine in order to explore how feminist stances influence the design and depiction of characters in genderswap works.

The common theme of ordinary men’s weakness and negligence, along with depiction of their corruption, cowardice, and irresponsibility can be considered a frequently occurring plot in genderswap works and even all RPS fiction, which becomes understandable, if placed within the discourse conflict between female fans and the hegemonic masculinity. Fabienne Darling-Wolf concretizes the hegemonic masculinity with the image salarymen¹³⁷ when discussing the distinction and competition between male idols and ordinary men in Japan. Although in the idol-salarymen dichotomy might not necessarily be applicable to other cultures with different social structures, two points highlighted in Darling-Wolf’s framework inspires me of directions to follow in order to question the bashing of male characters. On the one hand, when concretized as salarymen, the supporting basis of hegemonic masculinity becomes easier to tell, since the delineation as middle-aged husbands, fathers, and family supporters underlines the heteronormative familial discourse and patriarchal social expectations behind them, which marks the target of genderswap work’ male bashing. On the other, idols as the identity of the other party in the dichotomy exempt characters like Wang Yibo from the bashing and introduce the fan discourse as the major opposing force against

¹³⁶ “Character Bashing,” Fanlore, accessed May 5, 2023, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Character_Bashing.

¹³⁷ Fabienne Darling-Wolf, “Sites of Attractiveness: Japanese Women and Westernized Representations of Feminine Beauty,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 4 (2004): 325–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318042000245354>.

hegemonic masculinity, striking at the normative assignment “the dominance of men and the subordination of women.”¹³⁸

The three patrons depicted in “Falling” – De Zai, Gouburu (“Lower-than-Dog”), and Mr. Xu – are all examples of ordinary men being bashed in genderswap works. De Zai, a gas delivery worker from a rural family, came to work in town to meet an exorbitant bride price demand to marry his beloved girlfriend. Like other typical Chinese families, where male heirs’ marriage are the only means of continuing the family name and patriarchal lineage and where female siblings are therefore required to share the burden of their brothers marriage, De Zai’s two elder sisters also worked in a textile factory to support his intended marriage. However, during a chance encounter at the hair salon, he walks into a sex trap designed by Sister Li. Sister Li immediately detects De Zei’s sexual inexperience and begins preaching about the preferability of sex over true love. After doing so, she introduces salon girl Nannan, who resembles De Zai’s girlfriend; when shamefacedly following Nannan into her room, De Zai bid farewell to his innocent soul. Unable to stop him, Wang Yibo laments De Zai’s fall with regret:

“王一博没说话，他知道他和赞赞心里都装着一样的东西，他们从来没有像此刻一样这么厌恶这个地方，这样厌恶自己的身份。尽管他们没有亲手杀害德仔单纯灵魂，但他们是帮凶，是沉默的旁观者，是伪善的看客，自以为说几句劝诫的话，最终目的无非只是为了安慰自己虚荣的良心。王一博猛然想起德仔钥匙扣上，翠芬那张模糊的一寸照片。尽管看不清眉眼，轮廓间却依稀和楠楠有几分相像。王一博心内大恸，他终于明白德仔为何又回到了丽红发廊。阿丽姐固然贪财，但最终杀掉那个德仔的，真的是阿丽姐和楠楠吗？为了一个“李鬼”，

¹³⁸ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>, 844.

德仔的翠芬或许再也等不到他去娶她了，两个为了给弟弟娶媳妇而在西郊纺织厂忍受着日渐乏力的呼吸、没日没夜加班加点的姐姐，或许也是白忙活一场了。”

In silence, Wang Yibo understood that he and Zanzan carried the same leaden weight in their heart. They had never loathed this place or their identities as they did at this moment. Although they did not personally kill De Zai's innocence, they were accomplices, silent bystanders, and hypocritical spectators, who believed that their few words of admonition were enough to comfort their vain consciences. Suddenly, Wang Yibo remembered the blurry one-inch photo on De Zai's keychain. Though he couldn't make out the features clearly, there was a faint resemblance between her and Nannan's profile. He was filled with great sorrow, finally understanding why De Zai returned to the hair salon. Was it really Sister Li and Nannan who had killed that innocent De Zai? The awaiting bride Cuifen would probably never meet her innocent De Zai, simply because she had an imitator. De Zai's two sisters, who worked day and night at the textile factory in the western suburbs to support the family and the upcoming wedding, might also have toiled in vain.

(Falling, Chapter 11)

As Wang's rhetorical question suggests, are Sister Li and Nannan really the culprits who kill the innocence of De Zai, ruin his chance for a happy marriage, and dash the whole family's hope for continuing the lineage? Perhaps not. Because it is his own desire, along with the ignorance of the unaffordable cost of fulfilling this desire, that drove him into Nannan's room. And Sister Li, as the nominal culprit of De Zai's corruption, provides a space for readers judge characters' negligence, after which, the writer's actual attitude towards De Zai can be figured out: despite Wang Yibo's lament and De Zai's non-villain identity, De Zai pretty much stews in his own juice. The male bashing here, can challenge, or at least

temporally suspend, the gendered expression of power since the primary factor determining power hierarchy between De Zai and Sister Li is the mastery of dominant discourse, rather than simply biological sex.

The representative character of cowardice and decadence is Gouburu, a client who was originally a Chinese literature teacher at a middle school and later became a salon regular and after his son's death and his career breakdown. The sarcastic nickname Gouburu came from salon girls' ridicule, indicating that he is so down-and-out that the life he lives is even worse than a dog. He has a formal name borrowed from classical texts, but nobody in the story can remember it. His precarious financial situation allows him only to afford the most basic massage services from Zanzan, since nobody else would take the job. One day, news of his patronizing sex workers was made public by the town newspaper, and his wife, fueled by anger, came to Zanzan to demand his spent money back. Facing his wife's angry outburst and Zanzan's helplessness, Gouburu could only cower in the salon:

“外面闹成这样，狗不如竟然能心安理得地缩在房里，晦暗灯光照着他尖瘦的鼻梁，在颤抖的嘴唇上投下一道阴影。王一博简直痛悔自己从前慷慨分给他一丝同情心，此刻他碎了一只的眼镜片看上去都是如此可憎。这样的人值得自己同情吗，他配接受赞赞的光辉和怜悯吗？王一博满脑子都在想，赞赞会有多失望，这就是她试图庇佑的信徒、她施舍爱的凡人。狗不如的后领子被王一博抓着，一路从走廊深处、怪兽的喉咙里出来，像极了一只巨大的老鼠在挣扎。他的确是连狗都不如，狗都懂得报恩和护主，他不仅不保护赞赞，甚至连从王一博的拳头下救出妻子也不敢。他是只配生活在阴沟里的老鼠...狗不如吱吱乱叫，王一博将他掼到地上，他缩成一团抱着头，既不敢看赞赞，也不敢看他老婆，更不敢看向王一博。”

“Amidst the chaos outside, Gouburu was such a coward that he hid in the massage room. The dim light cast a shadow on his thin nose and trembling lips. Wang Yibo regretted ever giving him a shred of sympathy before; now, even the shattered pieces of his glasses looked repulsive. Was this person worthy of his sympathy, or deserving of Zanzan’s compassion? Wang Yibo couldn't help but wonder how disappointed Zanzan must be to see her follower, the mortal she bestowed love upon, behave like this. Wang Yibo grabbed Gouburu’s collar and dragged him through the corridor. He truly was not as good as a dog; even a dog knew to repay kindness and protect its master, but he not only failed to protect Zanzan, but also didn't dare to rescue his own wife from Wang Yibo’s fists. He was no better than a rat living in the gutter...As Gouburu is squealed, Wang Yibo slammed him to the ground. He curled up, hugging his head, too afraid to look at Zanzan, his wife, or even Wang Yibo.”

(Falling, Chapter 13)

In a fit of anger, Wang Yibo concludes that “I’ve never seen anyone more pathetic than him.” The scandal of patronizing prostitution ruined his teaching career, but the despicable decadence of Gouburu didn’t begin on that day; instead, as early as the moment of his son’s death, his fatherly identity shattered, and his family cracked. As a result, he further indulged in desires, avoiding familial responsibility and eventually becoming a pathetic, cowardly character.

Mr. Xu, the regular of the salon girl Yue, embodies irresponsibility and heartlessness and is therefore the most despised and bashed male character in the story. He keeps unfaithful to women, cheating on his wife and promising Yue a deceptive future, yet pretends to be a considerate husband. However, when noticed of Yue’s pregnancy, his true color was exposed: he yelled at her over the phone, insulting her as a slut and warning her not to try to extort money from him. Morally flawed male characters like De Zai, Gouburu, and Mr. Xu are

bashed for reasons: on the one hand, representing the disadvantaged party in the idol-salaryman dichotomy, they are portrayed as textual foils of Wang Yibo, to highlight his determination and kindness. On the other, their weakness and culpability creates breaches for genderswap works to bash the dominant discourses behind them since both characters, despite being considered to have satisfied the heteronormative and patriarchal expectations, they soon corrupt once tempted by desires or restore to the coward and irresponsible nature when overwhelmed by the cost of their desires.

Genderswapped and female characters, however, are whumped to empower them and enable positive portrayal of their mercy, purity, and therefore divinity. Genderswapped characters are the most mutilated in the story in the sense that besides objectification, they are often designed as victims of sexual assault, abuse, same-sex jealousy, and made-up gossip. Beyond their external torment, the greater source of their pain comes from the inability to attain true love due to their gender identity.

In “Falling,” Zanzan tolerates and forgives everyone’s wrongdoing but simply cannot reconcile with her own sexuality. Even, when Gouburu’s wife torn off her clothes and shoved her down to the ground, exposing her flat chest and concealed sexuality to others, she didn’t duck or fight back. In the combined inner and outer suffering, her silent forbearance and forgiveness against the maximized distress repays the debt in her heart (“Perhaps she has always felt guilty and can only calm down after being slapped a few times, as if she has repaid some invisible debt, as if only then can she stand up and have an equal conversation”¹³⁹). Zanzan, as always adored by Wang Yibo as a caritative goddess, also redeems the sins of these people through incarnation and enhances the divinity of this character. Similarly, two

¹³⁹ MaiLeDiDiDi, “Falling (下坠),” Archive of Our Own, accessed April 30, 2023, https://archiveofourown.org/works/22478632?view_full_work=true, Chapter 13. “她也许一直愧疚，反而被打几巴掌，心里才能平静，仿佛还清了什么看不见的债，她才能直起腰来平等对话。”

genderswapped characters in “The Bluebird” are designed to experience the trauma of gossip and sexual assault, which in reverse completes the characterization of characters and adds twists to the story: when the slut-shamed Haoxi reveals her intention to share Shuozen’s pain, the assumed female rivalry transforms into sisterhood or even a nascent teenage love, maximizing the dramatic tension and the resilience of characters. And the sexually assaulted Shuozen is also baptized by distress and becomes a symbol of innocent and pure youth.

Also, beyond different intentions and emotions, there is also a difference in mutilation intensity between bashing and whumping, which leads to some readers’ questions that whether the positive twists and final redemption predestined by genderswapped characters’ protagonist halo is the beautification of reality and violate writers’ sadist stroke. After all, not all prostitutes can meet their true love, and neither can all sexually assaulted girls be cured from trauma. While I do agree that whumping indicated a limited degree of textual violence, this design seems to me reasonable and meaningful because, fundamentally, genderswap works are produced and consumed by female fans so that whumping aims to ultimately empower characters rather than hurting them. Moreover, since genderswap works overlap much with hurt/comfort fanfiction¹⁴⁰, sadist stroke is merely a method to achieve the redemptive twist. Therefore, instead of including the harmful reproduction of reality “in which sexual violence and rape culture are so deeply ingrained,”¹⁴¹ genderswap works concentrates more exclusively on challenging the dominant discourses, with a major strategy of subverting the heterosexual familial and patriarchal narratives with its queer narrative.

¹⁴⁰ A trope where one protagonist is injured and then comforted by the other, which is also referred to as a subgenre of “hurt/comfort” or “h/c.” Analysis of this genre can be found in works like Rhiannon Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014) and Ashton Spacey, *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction Essays on Power, Consent and the Body* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018).

¹⁴¹ Ashton Spacey, *The Darker Side of Slash Fan Fiction Essays on Power, Consent and the Body* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 7.

As can be seen in “Falling,” most families in genderswap works are dysfunctional, which either consist of the bashed fathers and the whumped mothers, or at least are depicted with the absent parental duty. Thus, the following part attempts to investigate the queer rewriting of heterosexual familial discourse by examining the lost children and broken families in “Falling.”

Among dysfunctional families, two death cases of Gouburu’s son and Yue’s unborn fetus especially anchor the queer nature of genderswap works and challenge the heterosexual familial discourse by destructing its core, the future represented by children. As Lee Edelman argues, heteronormativity transmits its prescribed social order to the future in the form of child-centric familial discourse. However, despite its significance as “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,”¹⁴² children in “Falling” are erased early on at his toddling age or even in its mother’s womb: Gouburu’s son fell to his death from the upstairs balcony because of his mother’s gambling addiction and unmindful babysitting, and Yue lost her child due to prostituting during her pregnancy. The author narrates the short-lived journey of the aborted fetus from its perspective:

它来自绝情无爱、游戏人间的父亲，通过了痴情的母亲在橡胶薄膜上扎的针眼，最后毫不知情的陌生嫖客用阴茎搅拌过母亲的阴道，将它从温暖的巢中破开，带着留恋离开人世。归宿是手术室医疗垃圾袋、是下水道、是被一抔黄土掩盖，是千千万万种可能，只永远不会是父母怀抱中可爱幼儿。

It came from a negligent father, traveled through the hole on a rubber condom pierced by its infatuated mother, and was eventually ripped from its warm nest and forced to leave the world after being dislodged by an unfeeling stranger’s penis. Its final fate

¹⁴² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

could be a medical waste bag, a sewer, or a heap of dirt, but never in the loving embrace of its parents among thousands of possibilities.”

(Falling, Chapter 9)

The aborted fetus here embodies symbolically the collapse of the familial discourse by recognizing the queer symbolic order of no future; therefore, a queer narrative of anti-familial and anti-reproductive logic is established. Moreover, another aspect of the queer narrative lies in the fact that the writer doesn't stop at the shattered familial expectations, but reconstruct a new Oedipal relationship centered around genderswapped characters, on the fractured original one. The relationship between Wang Yibo and Zanzan serves as a good example: Wang Yibo has rarely felt maternal love since childhood, and even in occasional phone calls, his mother is more concerned with his grades, which often leads to her complaints and conflicts between them. This affectional lack, if understood through Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus complex, leads to the child's sense of castration anxiety and fuels their desire for the mother, which somehow explains the desire he develops for the mother-like care giver, Zanzan. Unlike typical maternal roles, whose love aims exclusively at their children, Zanzan carries an indiscriminate compassion and care for everyone. Thus, when she empathizes with others' pain and offers comfort or help, Wang Yibo would be struck by a sense of loss or lack, realizing that he cannot fully possess or control her love or attention. On the other side of the triangle, the father role is not embodied by a specific individual, but by all external forces that separate the child from the mother. And since these forces, including the destitute Gouburu and the sexually addicted Nannan, all represent repressed and refuted sexual desires under the patriarchal society, what Wang Yibo regards as enemy are actually the capitalized Father, namely, the whole patriarchal society.

Moreover, the quasi-familial structure established by whumped female characters in “Falling” also challenges the heterosexual, monogamous, biological reproduction-based

family structures. Taking care of her former lover's mother, Aunt Wen, and sheltering girls who have nowhere else to go, Sister Li establishes a chosen family and non-reproductive kinship, which support members' lives more firmly than the crumbling traditional families. Therefore, the textual violence, namely bushing and whumping, fundamentally undermines the patriarchal family value and transgress the mainstream narrative, by offering alternative models of family that center on care, love, and emotional connection rather than ties of consanguinity.

What role does the textual mutilation of characters play at the symbolic level, and more specifically, what drives genderswap works to bash or whump characters and capture their unseemliness as an important feature in the stories? Inspired by the psychoanalytic school of film theory, especially their interpretation of violent scenes in splatter and horror films, I would like to decode the character mutilation in Genderswap fanfiction with a psychoanalytic lens in the last part of this section.

In general, I agree with Edelman's idea that sadism practices the instinct to undo the ego's organization and therefore consider the sadist inclination in genderswap works a result of the id-superego conflict. According to Freud¹⁴³, the ego, as an intermediary, needs to balance the desires of the id and the norms of the superego, whose irreconcilable conflicts would otherwise cause mental overload and psychological problems to arise. In the case of RPS fans, the source of mental pressure is the superego. As the voice of society, the superego prescribes deviant attributes to fans' hobbies through the shaming mechanisms around heteronormative sexual discourse. As a result, driven by the desire to return "to its continuity with the id through the collapse of 'secondary narcissism' into its 'primary' condition,"¹⁴⁴ fans demarcate

¹⁴³ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id: And Other Works: (1923-1925)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995).

¹⁴⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 52.

the superego by destructing the ego's mediation, which might lead to the refusal to enter the symbolic order and self-imprisonment within the id phase.

Therefore, as “the destructive instinct turned outward”¹⁴⁵ and an outlet for aggressive instincts, sadism channels individuals' death impulses and guards against their self-destructing tendency. So, to some extent, sadism can be seen as a tool to coordinate the relationship between the id and superego, with whose assistance fan readers can enjoy their antisocial queer jouissance in a relatively safe channel during textual consumption and smoothly return to reality afterwards. Furthermore, the act of returning to a primitive state temporarily frees female fans from individual differences constructed by society and allows them to return to a broader female identity; therefore, female homosocial bonding becomes possible between fans, and also between fans and mistreated female characters. The trope of gender reversal further ensures that resonance with female suffering can occur in the absence of a female body as the conduit, and instead by appropriating the bodies of male idols to distance the pain and distress, which expands the range of female bonding and identifies it as an anti-patriarchal bonding. In this sense, female sexual sublimation and homosocial connection displace the well-established mutual dependence between sadism and masochism, since the two seemingly separate sexual drives can be simultaneously sublimated onto absent, swapped male bodies.

In order to delve into the sadistic tendency present in Chinese genderswap works, this section draws upon distinctions summarized in fanfiction regarding character mutilation, and based on different subjects and intention, categorizes the mutilated characters in *Falling* as the bashed men and the whumped women. Male characters like Gouburu and De Zai are bashed, depicted cowardly and irresponsible, to serve as foils of the male protagonist and bash the patriarchal expectations behind them. Female and feminized characters are also depicted unseemly and designed to suffer; however, undergoing whumping, they are empowered or

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

even deified by sufferings they have experienced. Moreover, reproduction-based families and parent-child relationships in *Falling* and other genderswap works are largely dysfunctional, on whose collapse, the author reconstructs the quasi-Oedipal relationship and queer families. Therefore, in contrast with the unfulfilled parental duties and the lost kids, the mutual support between members of the non-reproduction-based chosen family challenges the child-centric patriarchal familial discourse and establishes a queer narrative of anti-familial and anti-reproductive logic. At the end of this section, I briefly attribute the textual mutilation of characters in genderswap works as a psychological vent to release and prevent the inclination of self-destruction, which, in the psychoanalytic lens, can stem from the incompatible contradiction between id and superego.

CHAPTER 3

DESIRES UNDER CAMOUFLAGE: REVEALING FANDOM POLITICS AND ANTI-CENSORSHIP TEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN GENDERSWAP FANFICTION

Exile As Blessing:

Genderswap fandom and the romanticization of eviction

The establishment of female digital spaces is often accompanied by large and small occasions of discursive defeat; in order to preserve energy to sustain a community, women often resort to boundary construction as a compromise with dominant forces. Rhiannon Bury identifies mailing lists of female fans as milestones in the history of female cyberspace, attributing female fans' choice to "stake out and colonize cyberspaces of their own" directly to harassment and denigration in male-dominated forums¹⁴⁶. However, gender is not the sole centrifugal apparatus. Within female cyberspaces, there are also ideologically divided subcultures, carving out their own spheres of influence. Among fanfiction readers and writers, each subgroup forms their corresponding "repertoire of interpretive strategies" with respect to canon and a "discourse domain" based on shared beliefs¹⁴⁷, often asserting that others have not grasped the "true text."¹⁴⁸ Scholars of English fanfiction, such as Kristina Busse¹⁴⁹ and

¹⁴⁶ Rhiannon Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 2.

¹⁴⁷ Veerle Van Steenhuyse, "'Universally Acknowledged': A Textual Analysis of Storyworld-Building Practices in Online Jane Austen Fan Fiction," *Ghent University* (dissertation, Ghent University, 2015), <http://hdl.handle.net/1854/LU-7009334>.

¹⁴⁸ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 171-172. Fish defines interpretive communities as groups "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions." Although Fish's theory does not directly touch on fan communities, I believe that conflicting fan groups can serve as an exemplary model for understanding the relationship between interpretive stances and group boundaries, because their disagreements often arise from a strong insistence on the validity of their own interpretations.

¹⁴⁹ Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 110.

Bronwen Thomas¹⁵⁰, acknowledge the potential conflicts sparked by disagreements but emphasize the solidarity of fan communities, because readers can simultaneously belong to different interpretive communities.

As stated by this theory of solidarity, a reader can possess multiple interpretations (such as simultaneously shipping different pairings of a same character) and freely navigate between various groups without hindrance. However, the February 27th Incident cautions us, with its intense struggles and devastating outcomes, not to underestimate the centrifugal forces that push apart competing interpretations. Witnessing AO3 being expelled from the mainland Chinese and genderswap fandom besieged, suppressed, and exiled, I feel the urge to answer questions regarding positionality first, such as, why groups like genderswap fans are despised and attacked and where does online hostility targeting them come from. Therefore, with a focus on positionality, the first half of this section will reveal the hierarchy and discursive power among different niches within Chinese idol fandom, as reflected in the February 27th Incident. Additionally, I will also examine the structure of fandom communities through my findings of online ethnography.

The exile of the genderswap community from the Chinese internet on February 27th, 2021, was triggered by what this thesis has previously called “fandom fundamentalists.” The term itself is a name of contempt, invented by slash fans, that refers mostly to fans who adore a single, particular idol. A less perjorative term would be “solo stans.” Cases of solo stans adoring multiple idols do exist, but even so, they often indulge in fantasies of romantic relationships with them individually, rather than works exploring the chemistry between idols.

Solo stans are considered to possess the greatest influence and discursive power within fandom and overwhelmingly influence the perception of fandom outsiders towards fangirls,

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Bronwen, “Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online,” *Dichtung Digital. Journal Für Kunst Und Kultur Digitaler Medien* 37 (2007): 1–11, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17701>.

due to their sheer numbers and organized presence on public platforms like Weibo¹⁵¹. The “Fangirl Expedition” in August 2019¹⁵² may serve as evidence of the destructive influence of the discourse, in which they temporarily adopted the nation as their object of support and adoration, personified China, and referred to it according to fandom conventions, as “Oppa China.” To express their dissatisfaction and anger towards the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill, they crossed the Great Firewall and flooded Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram with patriotic memes and slogans. It seems clear from the February 27th Incident and this expedition that the bond among fandom fundamentalists is based on a shared belief in sharing their idols’ concerns and sufferings; however, the criteria of their friend-or-foe judgment reveals a simplistic, shallow, and uncompromising sense of justice, thus the name “fandom fundamentalists.”

Their heterosexual and mostly self-inserting consumption of male idols, too, is considered “primitive tastes,” a critique I heard from one of the informants, who self-identifies as a shipper and takes great pride in her fandom identity. Like most shippers, she looks down upon the immaturity of fandom fundamentalists’ romantic fantasies. The notion of immaturity here can be understood as stemming from divergent readings between two interpretive communities: shippers acknowledge and elevate the distance between themselves and the idols, while fandom fundamentalists exploit textual affordances to eliminate this distance. To borrow Radway’s critique of romance novels¹⁵³, the reason fandom fundamentalists’ fantasies

¹⁵¹ Haoyang Zhai and Wilfred Yang Wang, “Fans’ Practice of Reporting: A Study of the Structure of Data Fan Labor on Chinese Social Media,” *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 1913–34, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/18545>, 1916. In this paper of fans’ digital labor on Weibo, Zhai and Wang highlight the “financial strength, organizational skills, and copious amounts of followers” of their fandom.

¹⁵² For detailed introduction and analysis on the 2019 “Fangirl Expedition,” see Yuyi Zhuang, Songge Huang, and Chao Chen, “Idolizing the Nation: Chinese Fandom Nationalism through the Fangirl Expedition,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2022): 53–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2022.2108861>.

¹⁵³ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

feel immature and disconnected from reality to the genderswap fandom is that these stories often focus solely on the romantic process but neglect to portray the avatar through which they self-insert. As a result, the avidly adored celebrity ends up choosing an ordinary person whose charm fails to convince the readers. Although readers who buy into this fantasy justify it as true love, shippers perceive it as low-quality daydream literature. Additionally, locating erotic agency exclusively with the idol is also jarring to shippers, as it valorizes female submission by emphasizing the joy of being chosen, which to genderswap fans further solidifies the evidence that fundamentalists have been domesticated by patriarchal norms.

Therefore, although fandom fundamentalists hold the upper hand in terms of influence, shippers tend to emphasize aesthetic and moral negotiations to assert their position within the fandom hierarchy. Recognized aesthetically as “an alternative to male-dominated heterosexual popular romances”¹⁵⁴, shippers become able to negotiate their marginalized fandom status. However, to avoid direct confrontation with the mainstream fundamentalist aesthetic, shippers, or RPS fandom, have been residing in semi-overt communities like super topics on Weibo and the RPS section on Jinjiang, forming small groups to make sure that the acquaintance network can detect and expel interlopers on time, and experimenting with any novel ideas group members brainstormed in fanfiction writing. Loosely connected, they tend to adopt a more spontaneous disposition to the unpredictability and novelty of newly emerged narrative tropes, like genderswap and omegaverse¹⁵⁵.

¹⁵⁴ Jin Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21 (2009): 1–41, <https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491008>.

¹⁵⁵ Alexandra Alter defines Omegaverse, in “A Feud in Wolf-Kink Erotica Raises a Deep Legal Question,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200611030407/https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/business/omegaverse-erotica-copyright.html>, as a subgenre of erotic slash fiction that premises a dominance hierarchy of dominant alphas, neutral betas, and submissive omegas. Romantic and erotic interactions of characters are ought to follow rules of this hierarchy.

However, shippers' sense of aesthetic superiority has hardly been acknowledged by fandom fundamentalists; instead, it often leads to censorship and humiliation. As Nagaike's summary of the narrativity in Freud's theory, which constructs "fantasy as a representation of a symbolic lack of a satisfying object,"¹⁵⁶ explicit erotic depictions by female authors have always been reduced to a revolt against repressed desires, slash fanfiction tends to be ridiculed as "single-hand pornography,"¹⁵⁷ nothing more than an aid to masturbation. However, given the way that sexual eroticism is always formulated "in terms of the masculine and the phallic,"¹⁵⁸ women are prevented from obtaining pornographic pleasures and would be branded with shame once they detect the intention to access erotic works. Thus, siding with social norms allows fandom fundamentalists to exert the power of normativity and restrict shippers through the shaming mechanism. As a result, with mutual disdain for each other's ideologies of love and sex, two groups maintain a delicate balance of occasional friction but overall peaceful coexistence: fandom fundamentalists occupy the external space, directly bordering the public sphere, while the RPS fandom resides as a niche within it.

The disparity in power and the niche-in-niche inclusion relationship between factions is, in my view, a distinctive characteristic of Chinese fan culture that is difficult to understand by referencing corresponding relationships in other cultures. In the world of English fanfiction, the shipper discourse tends to dominate fan communities¹⁵⁹. In Japanese fan culture, there is a similar dichotomy to the fandom fundamentalist-shipper one in Chinese fan culture, between

¹⁵⁶ Kazumi Nagaike, *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 14.

¹⁵⁷ Paul Booth, "Slash and Porn: Media Subversion, Hyper-Articulation, and Parody," *Continuum* 28, no. 3 (2014): pp. 396-409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.893985>, 402.

¹⁵⁸ Kazumi Nagaike, *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 113.

¹⁵⁹ Alfred A. Marcus, "From Market Dominance to Credible Commitments: Shippers' Strategies in a Deregulated Trucking Environment." *Transportation Journal* 26, no. 4 (1987): 4-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20712922>.

“dream girls” and “rotten girls.”¹⁶⁰ Although their names have been borrowed into Chinese idol fandom and fanfiction, the balanced situation between them has been slightly reversed in the case of Chinese fandom.

Also, it is challenging to assess the relationship between fandom fundamentalists and shippers within the paradigm of canon and fanon because, at first glance, two groups seem to both belong to fanonical appropriation “scribbled in the margins,”¹⁶¹ but they do have varying degrees of overlap with canon's interests. Fandom fundamentalists’ self-inserting fantasies conveniently accord with the marketing of idols as lovable and caring boyfriend ideals, achieving a win-win balance between fan consumption and company production. The situation for shippers is more complicated. Although the male-male romance of the idols they ship may not be what the company originally desires, the tremendous profits from Danmei adaptation have made entertainment companies aware of the potential for profit in shipper baiting. Thus, companies may even encourage fans' transformative works. For instance, the producer of “The Untamed” collaborated with the Chinese ACG website Bilibili, encouraging and recognizing excellent fan creations and thus creating a honeymoon period between fanon and canon. Additionally, since the original source material for danmei adaptations are homo-erotic works, there is debate over what is considered canon, and some fan authors insist they are simply restoring the original intentions of the over-censored work. Therefore, unlike the canon-fanon

¹⁶⁰ These two terms originate from Japanese Otaku culture and can be interchangeably used with “yumejoshi (夢女子)” and “fujoshi (腐女子).” As a well-studied term by manga scholarships, fujoshi refers to how boys’ love fans have been much discussed in popular Japanese media, for works concerning which, see Jeffrey T. Hester, “Fujoshi Emergent: Shifting Popular Representations of Yaoi/BL Fandom in Japan,” essay, in *Boys Love Manga and beyond: History, Culture, and Community in Japan*, ed. Mark J. McLelland et al. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 169–88. Unlike a third-person shipping position of fujoshi, yumejoshi are considered to occupy a first-person position and imagine themselves in relationships with their favorite character (Emma Hanashiro, “Girls Can Keep Dreaming: What Is a Yumejoshi?,” Japanese kawaii idol music culture news | Tokyo Girls Update, April 25, 2017, https://tokyogirlsupdate.com/yumejoshi-term-201704123003.html#_ftn3.)

¹⁶¹ Henry Jenkins, “Scribbling in the Margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers,” essay, in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 204–36.

dichotomy proposed by early fan studies¹⁶², where the differences between the two are irreconcilable, in this discourse competition, the stance of capital and producers (such as the idols' companies and the series production companies) brings new possibilities to the canon-fanon relationship.

However, the emergence of the genderswap fandom disrupts this balance. Genderswap initially originated from a compromise fantasy of shippers, which suggests that if homoerotic writing is censored by fandom fundamentalists, one of the male idols can be portrayed as a female instead. However, as this trope developed into an independent genre, it veered further along the path of erotic depiction, and even as a deviant presence, it caught the attention of other niches, leading to inevitable conflicts. The explicitly pornographic portrayal of Xiao Zhan in "Falling" as a transgender sex worker offended and irritated Xiao's fans. Both solo stans and shippers found the fiction offensive since their fantasies are enabled by Xiao's masculinity, at least his male identity. And shippers are in an even more awkward position, as the fiction revolves around the romance of the pair they ship, Xiao and Wang Yibo. Shared shipping preferences and therefore the assumed affinity with genderswap fans in fandom consensus render shippers also the target of fandom fundamentalists' rancor. And the majority of shippers, who fear to be exiled to even more marginalized positions, decided to side with the normativity represented by solo stans by demarcating with genderswap fans and joining the crusade against them. Common strategies of the anti-genderswap crusade include mocking the absurdity of gender reversal, bashing the obscenity of erotic depiction, classifying genderswap relationships as heterosexual fantasy, and despising their school-girl-like

¹⁶² In early fandom studies, the divide between the canon and fanon is often irreconcilable. If the male idol and his public persona are considered the canon, shipper fandom then falls into the realm of fanonical appropriation, characterized as "scribbled in the margins," which could potentially pose a threat to the marketing of idols' image.

juvenility, although ironically, these accusations had all been what shippers and fandom fundamentalists used to attack each other.

Furthermore, feminism is often a handy weapon in fandom debates between niches. For instance, shippers may attack self-insertors by highlighting the immaturity and passivity of their heterosexual and familial fantasies¹⁶³, while self-insertors may question the feminist stance of shippers by pointing out their disdain for femininity and asking why they detest the female body to the extent of excluding it. The genderswap fandom used to detach themselves from the debate, justifying that beneath the perceived reliance on masculinity by both groups, there is actually a hidden desire for feminine traits. As an informant explained, the ideally shaped characters in both genres are beloved precisely because of their feminine qualities, such as the gentle male protagonists in self-inserting romance¹⁶⁴ or the caring and fragile penetrated characters in RPS works. However, genderswap fans' detachment from the conflict failed when shippers and fandom fundamentalists insisted that the identity of a sex worker is synonymous with humiliation and disgrace. Not only did they disagree with placing Xiao Zhan in such a role, but their tentative feminist discourse also placed the portrayal of sex worker characters in opposition to feminism. As a result, genderswap works' moral legitimacy has been questioned and become the major rationale fandom fundamentalists attack them.

Therefore, under the joint siege and attack, genderswap had to bid farewell to its niche-within-niche fandom position and was expelled from the Chinese female cyberspace, along with their lost access to the fantasy archive. The only other option was to hide in corners of the

¹⁶³ Taking this Weibo post (<http://m.weibo.cn/status/4900575378147344?>) as an example, the shipper sighed that "I followed a dreamgirl's Weibo homepage and found many crazier dreamgirls. Reading their childish opinions and writing style, I just realized I shouldn't be so mean to elementary school students (顺着梦女主页摸到了其它疯批梦女 其三观和文笔幼稚到我意识到我不该对小学生这么凶)."

¹⁶⁴ In Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), she argues that female romance readers prefer gentle male protagonists out of a quest for "motherly nurturance." (124)

internet. With the discontinuation of K-pop and C-pop genderswap bot accounts on Weibo, the public presence of genderswap fandom seemed to have been erased. However, when researching the post-227 sentiments, I discovered a tendency in the genderswap fandom to romanticize the cyber-eviction they suffered from. Unlike the involved fan communities' overall mood of anger and grievance, which was externalized in an angry boycott of Xiao and commercial products he endorsed, the genderswap group generally holds a rather revisionist attitude, regarding the expulsion as something of a blessing. To explore the reasons behind this view, in the second half of this section, I will analyze their attitude towards the exile through conversations with genderswap fans and close reading of genderswap texts, in order to answer why the eviction did not arouse their pessimistic feelings as a minority roving in Chinese cyberspace but rather led to their indulging in the romantic idealization of exile.

As a sub-genre splintered from the shipper fandom, the genderswap fandom consists of a considerable number of writers and readers attracted to genderswapping because it stimulates more shippable fantasies. In this respect, being exiled hasn't necessarily undermined their involvement; instead, it has served to reinforce their shipping experience. To exemplify this reasoning, it is necessary to revisit the principles of shipper baiting by television producers and the fan purification strategies employed by idols' companies. Considering the popularity of Danmei in China and the profitability of its main consumers, the adaption of Danmei works has been widely recognized as a short cut to fame and fast money among the industry. However, series producers' shortsightedly profit-seeking nature tend to look at exclusively ways to multiple their interest rather than guiding fan communities to consume TV series and adore idols in a sane and proper way. An unhealthy fan ecology, where fans care more about idols' popularity more than aesthetic quality of his or her works and would even slander other idols to promote their own idols, was consequentially established.

A viral marketing logic of male idols called “fan purification (粉丝提纯)” often includes five step¹⁶⁵s: 1) starring in a Danmei adaption TV series, 2) performing intimacy or pretending to be close with the co-star, 3) attracting followers who ship the pair, 4) disclosing the inauthenticity of the pretended intimacy or dirt of the co-star, which is often spread through fans or paparazzi, and 5) purifying the fanbase by transforming shippers to solo stans. So for male idols who had practiced and finished this path, Danmei is often just a rather ignominious starting point. After attracting attention and purchase from Danmei fans, the pretended male-male couples would split and purify their respective fan communities. Eventually, the fans a pair attracted together would inevitably diverge and even become rivals.

To escape the feeling of abandonment, shippers often seek refuge in the alternate universe of fanfiction, longing for their fantasies to be prolonged. Informants generally expressed that if their passion for shipping was strong enough, external misunderstandings and attacks would not necessarily affect them; instead, it could even strengthen their sense of community and belonging. Furthermore, as Jenkins analyzed slash writers and readers, for many, “hiding their true identities is part of the game, with the reading and writing of slash often charged with a pleasure in breaking with traditional feminine roles.”¹⁶⁶ Therefore, it seems natural to romanticize the “shocking” and “scandalous” quality of their underground activities. Instead of framing it as being “forced into silence,” they often proclaim that secrecy is a guiding principle and normal within their own niche, and that the February 27th Incident was just a brief moment of exposure to public attention.

¹⁶⁵ Ying Yuan, Zidong Tao, and Rui Chen, “Behind the Fandom ‘Account Maintenance’, Is the Kidnapped Entertainment Industry (饭圈豆瓣‘养号’的背后, 是被绑架的娱乐业),” YICAI.com, 2020, <https://www.yicai.com/news/100853717.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Jenkins, “Scribbling in the Margins: Fan Readers/Fan Writers,” essay, in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 204–36, 206.

Moreover, such shipping pleasure with a twist is also reflected on the level of fantasy, which might be understood in the four-step formulaic structure of slash fiction as Jenkins summarizes: 1) the initial relationship, 2) masculine dystopia, 3) confession, and 4) masculine utopia¹⁶⁷. Dramatic conflicts often occur between the second and third steps, where characters are designed to experience conflicts in male homosexual and homosocial desire, leading to the recognition and confession of affection and desire. In other words, the sequence of the four steps determines inner conflicts to be a necessary condition for confirming characters' love for each other. Jenkins' argument of fans' consumption of these steps, namely that the emotional intensity generated in these dramatic moments is exactly what fans enjoy consuming, is also applicable in the case of Chinese slash and genderswap fandoms.

Among Chinese shippers, confirmed mutual affection is hailed as "true." Taking Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo for example, shippers of *The Untamed* combined their names and created a name for this couple pairing, Bo Jun Yi Xiao. Changing the last character from Xiao Zhan's surname to the word for smile, the name also carries the meaning of "hoping to make you smile (博君一笑)" and has been used mostly in its acronymic form, bjyx. The wide-spread slogans on Weibo in 2019 "bjyx is so true (博君一笑是真的)" was generated in this way, which, by its popularity, highlights the importance of being perceived as true in determining a fanfiction's success. This truth judgment essentially relies on whether the narration of "generic verisimilitude" meets readers' expectations, rather than the degree of simulation of reality. Upon re-reading "The Truth Untold,"¹⁶⁸ additional defining criteria of truth can be added to our understanding, which I summarize as four standards:

(1) Limited participants involved in the relationship;

¹⁶⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 212-221.

¹⁶⁸ Xiao Lv. "The Truth Untold." Followlyrics.com. Accessed April 23, 2023. <https://zh.followlyrics.com/lyrics/13638621/zhen-xiang-shi-zhen-Cover-a-ming>.

(2) The persistence of companionship: they may know each other from obscurity (“When we were young and nobody”¹⁶⁹) to popularity (“I am what I am because of him”¹⁷⁰) with indispensable moments of interdependence and companionship (“I truly braved the pouring rain with him/truly survived winter and summer with him”¹⁷¹);

(3) The restraint of contact: the physical contact can be used to confirm their affection (“truly embraced him tight/truly held his arm with all my might”¹⁷²) but stops before sexual contact (“truly kissed his neck”¹⁷³) to show how much they cherish each other;

(4) The secrecy of affection: people may wonder about their relationship (“The so-called evidence of tenderness that people thought they saw was just a fraction”¹⁷⁴) but the true sentiments can never be revealed (“There are many more romantic secrets hidden in the corner with no attention”¹⁷⁵) or publicized (“I long to express my love aloud”¹⁷⁶) for fear of possible resistance from the public.

Almost all of my informants accepted (4) as a key criterion for their truth judgement, which seems neither to fit the popular perception of the fantasy requirement in romantic fiction (that is, an ideal world for love to take place) nor accord with a highly tolerant environment in most Danmei fictions. The ideal fantasy environment can be understood in the connection Radway draws between readers’ Pre-Oedipus stage and their romance reading demands¹⁷⁷. Referring to Nancy Chodorow in object relations theory, Radway argues that the female fantasies to fulfill in romantic fictions is a return to the Pre-Oedipus stage of being

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, “没繁花红毯的少年时代里。”

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, “也因他才成就我。”

¹⁷¹ Ibid, “我真的陪他淋过大雨/真陪他冬季夏季。”

¹⁷² Ibid, “真与他拥抱黑暗里/真牵过他的手臂。”

¹⁷³ Ibid, “真吻过他的侧颈。”

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, “那些被窥探到的温柔证据其实不过万分之一。”

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, “在无人的角落里有更多浪漫秘密。”

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, “我也想把爱宣之于口。”

¹⁷⁷ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

nurtured and cared for, which determines their preference for tender masculinity and self-insertion in the plot. This escapist understanding might work well for twentieth-century romance, yet seems somewhat oversimplistic in discussing genderswap narrative inventions built on shipper fantasies. Therefore, in contrast with Radway's, I agree more with Constance Penley's insistence of the diverse relational possibilities of female self-identification and the objects of their desire projection¹⁷⁸, indicating the empowerment in female readers' choices. As individuals with agency, genderswap fandom choose to present a complex environment, where people might either throw rocks or give blessings to couples they ship, instead of a purely ideal one that filters out real resistance.

Moreover, for exiled genderswap fans, the narration of external plight heightens the protagonist's desire to resist, thus presenting their resolve to challenge prejudice. In *Falling*, for example, when Zanzan and Wang Yibo are stared at with disdainful eyes, Wang retorts, "So what, I'll curse them back once they dare to look at me like that."¹⁷⁹ As one informant explains, shippers in genderswap fandom generally believe that the more the resistance in stories closely imitates practical difficulties, the depicted affections seem truer, thus fans expect and praise the verisimilitude of real-life plight portrayal in genderswap works. In this sense, external obstruction in stories fosters a sense of resolution and intimacy between the shipped couple; the act of cyber-eviction cooperates with this logic, making genderswap fandom into co-victims and therefore reifies their affections.

Furthermore, since the limited acceptance of genderswap works in real life is a fandom consensus, the imagined resistance of society inside stories also blurs the boundary between

¹⁷⁸ Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, *Technoculture* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁷⁹ MaiLeDiDiDi, "Falling (下坠)," *Archive of Our Own*, accessed April 30, 2023, https://archiveofourown.org/works/22478632?view_full_work=true, Chapter 8. "那又怎么样, 他们看一次我骂一次。"

the textual and real world and reaffirms the self-deceptive authenticity of the coupling. This logic can be seen to enhance details onto Jenkins' formula that it refines the leap from the second to the third step and invite the notion of readers' reception into the storytelling. As a result, genderswap fans, rather than feeling aggrieved by their exile, perceive the rocks thrown by anti-fandom as free bricks with which to build their fortress of true love.

In addition to the inward cohesion, cyber-eviction also works as a protective layer that shelters readers from the moral censorship of self and others. Despite their obsessive coupling and shipping, most genderswap readers are well aware of the impossibility of pairs they ship and understand that their obstinate fabrication of the affection is an intrusion on the celebrities they adore. The moral inferiority naturally brings them a sense of guilt in consuming genderswap works and determines their lower self-esteem as compared to more normative, dominant fanon readers. One informant compared genderswap fans to children from divorced families, desperately grasping at old memories, whereas fandom fundamentalists are like children born to a second marriage and always possess the superiority of the present and future. To prevent the sense of inferiority, genderswap fans seem to reverse Bergsonian nostalgia logic from "spatial dimension (a longing for a place)" to "a temporal dimension (a desire to return to a lost time)" and transform the nostalgia into the desire to escape from Weibo to somewhere else, like AO3 and LOFTER.

In this sense, staying away from the Chinese cyberspace can be a kind of self-protection, which means they can devote themselves to fantasies in Another Universe without wasting energy fearing that individuals or groups might be offended. Considering the current public opinion environment is not conducive to either genderswap fiction based on the idol industry or the notion of gender fluidity and androgyny as the guiding theory of genderswap production, it is wise to retreat in the face of the harsh censorship. Like exiled Tang poets, being far from the center means less pressure from attention and lowered risk of erasure.

Therefore, to genderswap fans, exile is more like a fate long been destined and accepted and an early escape from the public attention allows them an opportunity to preserve the integrity of their own history.

Moreover, romanticization can likewise be seen as a justification of inferiority and frustration of the exile journey by redefining the origin of the genre. Exile has inevitably been associated with failure and isolation, since both demotion in ancient China and ostracism in ancient Greece mark the failure of political ambitions and socializing efforts, which is punished by the forced departure with their familiar environment and relegation to geographic margins. Genderswap fandom, regarded as losers of the discourse battle and exiles to marginalized cultural sphere, attempt to reverse the disadvantages caused by isolation and eviction. In one possible solution, they actively trace the origins of their subculture and look at the similarities between Chinese genderswap and foreign subcultures like genderswap works in English fanfiction or Yaoi in Japan¹⁸⁰, instead of at the severed connection to their mother language. According to an informant, English fanfiction like Star Trek related works were disseminated and discussed in her reading clique and group members felt pleasantly surprised by the cross-language resonance and affinity of both genres. The genderswap fiction, “Bluebird Comes No More,” which portrays hazy romance between genderswapped characters, has also been seen as a return to Japanese Yuri Manga, a genre that features love stories between girls. Looking at the two cases, I notice genderswap fans’ tendency to seek and resonate with other fandom cultures. In doing so, they see themselves more as a hybrid between traditional fantasy-writing fandom and idol fandom, without being bound to either; as affiliated with fanfiction in general, and not simply a splinter of Chinese RPS fiction; as

¹⁸⁰ Kumiko Saito, “Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women’s Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan,” *Mechademia* 6, no. 1 (2011): 171–91, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mec.2011.0000>.

trailblazers of a new genre, rather than inheritors of the RPS heritage. Such reimagination of fandom positionality helps replace the frustration of exile with the comfort of homecoming.

Furthermore, despite the fandom consensus that tensions and power differentials between niches might sooner or later lead to conflict, genderswap fandom is still attributed as the unintended triggers for the cyber-conflict and the blocking of AO3. As a result, though some fan groups can understand and sympathize with them, others may ignore their identity as victims and blame them for the banning of AO3. Chinese cyberspace, to genderswap fans, is both a reminder of the failure and a record of jarring accusations from peers. As reflected by a few informants, they often do not really know how to face other fan groups' disappointment and the blame for the lost access to AO3, so being exiled from cyberspace isn't necessarily humiliating yet may be the best choice for their awkward position in fandom. In this respect, the cyber eviction helped foil the passivity of their escaping and thus can be understood as an inadvertent cover for their exit.

Returning to our discussion on female cyberspace, protection from the censorship of female fans' desire censorship and facilitation of shipping activities structurally creates an enclave for the genderswap fandom. In other words, the romanticization of cyber-eviction in genderswap fandom is primarily due to the destruction of their niche, intended yet never achieved, instead promotes its concealment. Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics¹⁸¹ has been widely applied in discussions of global BL fandom and their cyberspace activities. Andrea Wood, for example, highlights the rebellious and cohesive nature of BL manga and suggests considering straight female readers of BL manga as a counterpublic to indicate their "perverse readings" and concatenation by texts¹⁸². Scholars who apply this framework to

¹⁸¹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Zone, 2005).

¹⁸² Andrea Wood, "'Straight' Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, no. The Global&the Intimate (2006): 394-414, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40004766>.

Chinese fandom have also emerged in recent years. For instance, Tingting Hu and Cathy Yue Wang view fans of SCI as a counterpublic who use bromance as a masquerade to resist censorship¹⁸³. More closely related to our discussion, Ge considers the broader fans of *The Untamed*, known as *The Untamed girls*, as a counterpublic who create and maintain a collective online space against the mainstream public¹⁸⁴.

Is the genderswap fandom also a counterpublic? My answer is no, since I believe that the terms “public” and “counterpublic” cannot adequately encompass the attitudes and positionality of genderswap fandom in relation to mainstream discourse. Therefore, I would like to position genderswap fans within Squires’ more detailed three-part model of publics¹⁸⁵. In her work on black public sphere, she categorizes publics based on their motivations, communicative practices, and behaviors, as counterpublics, enclaves, and satellite publics. The three divisions are defined by their respective intentions of union: counterpublics engage in debates with wider publics “to test ideas and may use traditional social movement tactics”¹⁸⁶; enclaves conceal their counterhegemonic ideas and strategies to avoid sanctions; and satellite publics, as hybrids of the two, pursue temporary isolation from other publics, although this isolation is not complete and allows them to be “involved in wider public discourses from time to time.”¹⁸⁷ In this regard, genderswap fandom, which seeks to avoid direct confrontation with mainstream discourse, cannot be considered a counterpublic. Furthermore, it does not meet the two criteria defined by Squires for satellite publics, namely, not completely detaching from the oppressive relationship and not fully disengaging from the public. Therefore, under

¹⁸³ Tingting Hu and Cathy Yue Wang, “Who Is the Counterpublic? Bromance-as-Masquerade in Chinese Online Drama—*S.C.I. Mystery*,” *Television & New Media* 22, no. 6 (2020): 671–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420937262>.

¹⁸⁴ Liang Ge, “Dual Ambivalence: The Untamed Girls as a Counterpublic,” *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 5 (2022): 1021–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221104713>.

¹⁸⁵ Catherine R. Squires, “Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres,” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x>.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

the siege of fandom fundamentalists and the alienation from slash readers, the seemingly exiled and vanished genderswap fandom actually forms its own networked enclave in the corners of female cyberspace. Under the shelter of enclave secrecy, genderswap fans' textual production and consumption are liberated from the “disciplining gaze of the dominant society.”¹⁸⁸

In this section, I subdivide the conflicting parties in the February 27th Incident into fandom fundamentalists, shippers, and genderswap fandom based on my online walking-through and articulate the origins of their discourse battle, which can be traced back to a mutual disdain and exclusion between fandom fundamentalists and shippers even before the incident. For a long period, they had maintained a delicate balance, where fandom fundamentalists hold influence while shippers claim aesthetic superiority. The emergence of genderswap fandom, however, disrupts this balance and renders itself the target of other two's attack. On one hand, fandom fundamentalists feel offended by tropes of gender reversal and sexualization, and thus retaliate against genderswap fans by sieging and cancelling their niche; on the other, shippers join forces with fandom fundamentalists to denounce genderswap fans out of the fear of marginalization due to their affinity with the niche.

As a result, genderswap fandom was reported and besieged, leading to their loss of access to AO3 and the banning of Weibo accounts they mainly gather around. Embarking on their exile journey, they could either find ways to bypass the Chinese firewall to access foreign fanfiction websites, or quietly settle in the corners of the Chinese internet. However, as pointed out by Murphy, “mortal danger restores to the word the potency that heedless usage has stripped away”¹⁸⁹ and similarly, exile does have a sliver lining for genderswap fans. Fans I

¹⁸⁸ Sarah Florini, “Enclaves and Counter-Publics: Oscillating Networked Publics,” in *Beyond Hashtags Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019), 69–102.

¹⁸⁹ Bruce F. Murphy, “The Exile of Literature: Poetry and the Politics of the Other(s),” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 162–73, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448578>.

interviewed do not necessarily view the cyber-eviction as a negative event; instead, they see it as an indirect means of preserving their community and thus romanticize it. Therefore, by focusing on the shipping demands of the majority of genderswap fans, I integrate Jenkins' formulaic structures of slash fiction into the analysis of genderswap fan psychology and argue that by embracing online attacks, they treat misunderstanding and resistance as an extension of the masculine dystopia within the text into reality. I also note that temporarily leaving the public attention and the site of the controversy can effectively alleviate the fans' sense of guilt and the tension of being scrutinized. Moreover, from a structural perspective, they have not lost their home but have established their own secret enclave, gaining greater creative freedom away from censorship.

Why do genderswap fans romanticize the trauma of being exiled? Perhaps because both they and the imagined couples have the opportunity to confront each other and themselves in extreme circumstances of exile. As a close witness to the incident, I also agree that suffering breeds the character of language and reboots literature with inspiration. Under the pressure of fandom censorship, genderswap fanfiction has been inspired to engage in unconventional literary experiments, such as temporality twists and self-erasure, which I will analyze in the following section.

Temporalizing the Enclave:

Analysis of desire-smuggling strategies in Chinese genderswap works

Although fanon attracts a large audience, it is morally disadvantaged when facing accusations from canon fans.¹⁹⁰ The moral judgment in this context is not based on legal or societal norms, but rather on fandom ethics, namely a consensus that fans should keep the contemplative distance in reading an idol's public persona. Therefore, one of the most widespread stereotypes about fanon is that instead of maintaining the supposed distance, it (hyper)sexualizes characters and drags heterosexual or even desexualized characters into homosexual territory¹⁹¹. Another major accusation by canon supporters is fanon's obsessive imposition of romantic relationships unrelated to the original text's plot development, which is seen to have interfered with the canonical timeline. In addition, as a fairly radical fanon trope, genderswap works depict male idols as women, a portrayal that is often associated with negative implications. For example, it has often been used as a literary weapon to smear the enemy¹⁹²; similarly, online hostility also adopts the same logic and spouts sexually violent rhetoric to frame "male targets as homosexual or effeminate."¹⁹³ In light of these beliefs, other fans perceive the feminized portrayal in genderswap texts as a form of vilification and discredit aimed at idols and thus fiercely oppose this genre.

Therefore, Despite the conclusion drawn in the previous section that genderswap fandom has sheltered themselves in an enclave, this community still needs to contend with scrutiny

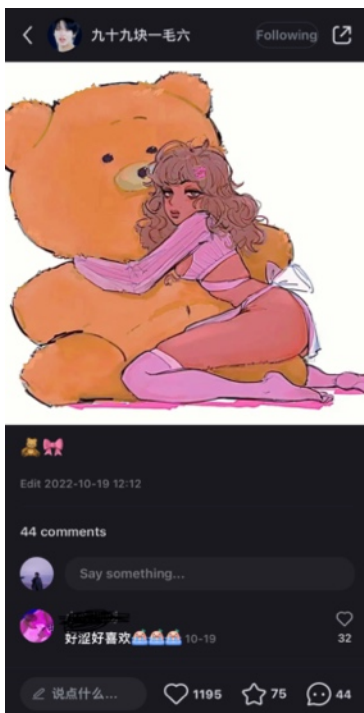
¹⁹⁰ Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," essay, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 33–40.

¹⁹¹ Rory Crath, "Reading Fanon in 'Homosexual Territory': Towards the Queering of a Queer Pedagogy," *Counterpoints*, Fanon & Education: Thinking Through Pedagogical Possibilities, 368 (2010): 123–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42980669>.

¹⁹² Sidney Donnell, *Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003).

¹⁹³ Emma A. Jane, "'You're a Ugly, Whorish, Slut,'" *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 4 (2012): 531–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.741073>, 4.

and censorship stemming from mainstream idol fandom ethics. This normalized discipline sparks my interest in exploring that beyond the February 27th Incident, what forms the anti-fandom opposition against genderswap works takes and how genderswap fans have responded to their existential crisis. Thus, this section aims to address these questions by examining two manifestations of genderswap works, fan illustrations and fan writings. To facilitate comparative analysis, selected materials of genderswap paintings (by @99.16, a fan artist active on Weibo and Xiaohongshu) and writings have a common prototype, Haechan, a member of NCT, a South Korean boy band from SM Entertainment. By analyzing these fan production in terms of production, paratext, and publics, I will investigate their strategies to canonize genderswap works. Here, by “canonize,” I mean efforts made to cater to the standards of mainstream discourse (that are more dominant in literary or political contexts, surpassing the influence and authority of fandom fundamentalists and the majority of shippers) in order to avoid harassment from other publics and smuggle their desire against fandom censorship.



The extremes of love and disgust often converge around the production of genderswap works, manifesting through unique fandom jargons. Taking a specific example, such as this screenshot of one of @99.16’s posts, we see a painting occupying half of the screenshot, showcasing the artist’s genderswap-themed production in the form of retro portraits. In the artwork, a dark-skinned girl is depicted wearing a pink costume, kneeling on the leg of a giant bear doll. Surrounding the production, we find paratextual elements, including the title and comments. Like Zanzan in “Falling,” the names of idols being genderswapped are seldom directly mentioned in

the main text or comments. Instead, they are often represented through homophonic nicknames or emojis. For instance, in the screenshot's title, two emojis are used: the bear doll and the bowknot, which summarize the two most significant elements in the painting.

Genderswap fans often respond to coded material with emojis. The hot face emoji, which represents physical attractiveness¹⁹⁴, for instance, floods the comment area along with “my wife” and “so hot,” showing their recognition and resonance with the artist's imaginative depiction. Emoji-oriented conversation in posts like this, on the one hand, establishes and reinforces the boundary of this specific public through jargonistic code-switching, and on the other, “add[s] an emotional contour and inject[s] a sense of playfulness that epitomizes youth sociability”¹⁹⁵ to this community. However, given the shared notion in k-pop fandom or at least fans of this particular group that the bear doll emoji represents Haechan, the code might also be intelligible to other publics with completely opposite shipping or fantasizing preferences.

As convergence culture has “facilitated the growth and visibility of public expressions of dislike and hatred as well as the growth and visibility of anti-fans themselves,”¹⁹⁶ critical comments are also common. . And even beyond the visible e-bile¹⁹⁷, deleted posts show evidence that fan material is being reported and flagged to authorities.

According to my three-month observation, genderswap fan art like @99.16's works rarely survives more than 48 hours, which is the average amount of time it takes for a reported post to get deleted. . As @99.16 recalls, her most debated post resulted from a confrontation between the two publics After links to her art were sent to non-genderswapping Haechan fan

¹⁹⁴ Apple, “🔥 Hot Face Emoji,” Emojipedia, accessed May 21, 2023, <https://emojipedia.org/hot-face/>.

¹⁹⁵ Dwi Noverini Djenar, Michael Ewing, and Howard Manns, *Style and Intersubjectivity in Youth Interaction*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614516439>, 194-230, 196.

¹⁹⁶ Melissa A. Click, *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020), 7.

¹⁹⁷ Emma A. Jane, ““Your a Ugly, Whorish, Slut,”” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 4 (2012): 531–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.741073>.

groups, the crowding masculinity defenders soon besieged the comment area of her posts and left judgmental comments like “obscene pornography” and commands like “delete it ASAP,” a form of disgust suggested by Ahmed in which “a community of witnesses is generated, whose apparent shared distance from an event or object that has been named as disgusting is achieved through the repetition of the word ‘disgust.’”¹⁹⁸ The clustering and regrouping properties also expand Warner’s definition of publics in that a public is a relation not only among but also against strangers.¹⁹⁹ This disgust might have dissuaded fans newly attracted to the genre by the crossposting of the art: there was a confessional remark in @99.16’s comment area that one fan considered her obsession with sexualizing and feminizing her idols to be appropriate, but that the guilt in fact rendered genderswap more exciting for her.

To answer questions raised at the beginning of this section, I feel necessary to identify the source of this guilty pleasure. My preliminary assumption is that besides shaming remarks from the societal public and other fandom publics, genderswap fandom is also judging and censoring their own desire, which denotes an internalized stricture fueled by the penetration of power. This assumption was later confirmed by my conversation with fans: most of them consider public disclosure of their fandom identity and reading preferences to be embarrassing since they have been long stigmatized as pornographic daydreaming. Thus, the external dilemma and internal torment are interwoven into the psychosexual crisis of genderswap fans.

How do they deal with the crisis and their desires as the crisis’ major cause? Norman N. Holland’s emphasis on form as a defensive structure²⁰⁰, which considers the form of the literary work as a way to tame “the turbulence of an awakened fantasy” and set it at a

¹⁹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁹⁹ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Zone, 2005).

²⁰⁰ Norman Norwood Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975).

distance²⁰¹, directs my investigation to forms and patterns in genderswap work. I found they decide to seek affirmation from discourses more authoritarian than canon and canonize their work, because only by elevating the aesthetic or ideological value of genderswap fan production and jumping off the fanon's track, may they dispel the misunderstandings and reconcile with their own desires.

In general, I categorize canonization strategies into three types according to their objects, namely those targeting respectively the characters, the narrative, the audience, with each major strategy supported by various tactics. @99.16's works exemplify the strategy of rewriting characters as an empty signifier, which is based on the re-discovery of the supporting trope for genderswap works, Rule 63, that "for every given male character, there is a female version of that character, and vice versa."²⁰² Instead of highlighting the femaleness as most genderswap works tacitly do, this strategy emphasizes that what they use as transformative material is not male idols but their female correspondence. Claiming so, genderswap fan writers and artists create empty signifiers that originates from but not equals to real-life male prototypes of idols. To support this claim, they also reinforce the division through multiple tactics, such as extreme feminization and erotization in shaping characters, as well as intertextual combination and self-relation in further developing them, which will be explored below.

Rather than denying the two major accusations – the sexualization of and imposition of romantic relationships onto characters – genderswap fandom develops them even further. As originally a shipper, @99.16 tends to paint Haechan in couple pairing with other ungender-swapped members and by exaggerating the difference in body contour between two characters and highlighting Haechan's unmasculine thinness and vulnerability; the femininity

²⁰¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 44.

²⁰² "Rule 63," TV Tropes, accessed May 24, 2023, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RuleSixtyThree>.

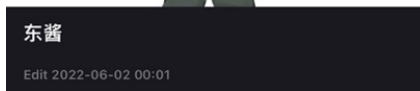
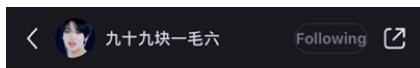
of the genderswapped Haechan is reinforced in the comparison. Also, since there are also despicable remarks targeting the juvenility in fans' heterosexual romantic fantasies, genderswap production responds with the jettison of romance and the re-focalization on erotic portrayal. The fetishistic eroticization is thoroughly manifested in the depiction details: the laziness in half-raised eyelids, the ignorance in slightly opened lips, the temptation of her dark skin, and the sense of taboo revealed by the above-knee short skirt are all integrated into the rewriting of the character, making her completely divorced from the prototype in the real-life context. An embodiment of the feminized fetish is therefore achieved in this sexualized empty signifier.



As extreme feminization and erotization help divorcing the real-life prototypes by designing and highlighting distinctions in between, intertextual combination and self-relation achieve the intended effect by discovering their projectable affinity with other sources. Intertextual combination can be seen in the attached painting on the left, where the artist merges the genderswapped portrayal of Haechan with Power, a fictional character from the anime series *Chainsaw Man*²⁰³. The archetypal features of Haechan are carefully incorporated into the depicted details, such as the droopy eyelids and honey-colored complexion.

Meanwhile, Power's distinctive attributes, including long hair, red horns, and the juxtaposition of her bloodthirsty nature and innocent nudity, are also integrated into shaping the signifier.

²⁰³ *Chainsaw Man* is originally a Japanese manga series serialized from 2018 by Tatsuki Fujimoto. The image used in the intertextual combination here is from its anime adaptation directed by Ryū Nakayama Masato Nakazono in 2022.



This painting, however, exercises the tactic of self-relation and depicts the genderswapped Haechan as an ordinary young girl without the idol industry photogenic requirements of the slender body shape. Followers in comments also confirm this image's overlap with themselves by acknowledging the pertinent details – hands always holding milk tea, bulges on thighs, hunchbacked standing gesture – fans recognize their own bodies and attitudes in this kind of picture. Thus, another effort to distance the signified and the signifier manifests itself in the absorption of the feminized image, namely taking the created image as

self-reflection. In this sense, the image constitutes a reflective but not romantic relationship with the audience.

Appropriation based on other tropes exists as well, and when the collaged elements are put together and construct a new image, the audience in the comment area would participate in this fantasy construction by following the imagination and collaboratively adding more details onto the image. For instance, the artist once portrayed Haechan as a Shibuya Gyaru, a female subcultural category in Japan that emphasizes tanned skin and makeup. The audience's reaction finalizes the creation by recognizing the vraisemblance of the created image and saying, "how can I make her my girlfriend" and "she looks like a girl who would refuse me forever."

The separation from prototypes is finalized by the naming and renaming practice, which is a convention in the idol industry to mark the birth of idols. In Haechan's case, His original name, Dong-Hyuck, had been used until his media debut; since the name is not fashionable

enough to differentiate an idol from average South Korean boys and middle-aged male actors with the same name, the company asked him to adopt the stage name Haechan for publicity reasons. Imitating the renaming convention in idol production, genderswap fans also address the created empty signifier with new, feminized names, and to give their genderswapped names more legitimacy, they often search for idols' previous public cross-dressing. Haechan did officially put on female costumes and in fact, he does it quite often for fun in company-released shows. In *SM Rookies Shows*, a variety show run by SM Entertainment, he once dressed up as a highschool girl named Dong-sook. Genderswap fan artists like @99.16 then follow this thread, adopting the name and continuing to transform comedy into erotic play.

Moreover, according to the consensus in fan comments, Dong-sook's distinction from Haechan is emphasized through not only its independence from the prototype, but also its connection with Dong-Hyuck and thus distance with the idol identity, as she tends to be portrayed as an ordinary high school girl rather than a female celebrity. This renaming practice of addressing the created empty signifier with the canonically sanctioned name makes the image of Dong-sook as a semi-canonical character and help justify the legitimacy of feminizing Haechan.

Characters are also distinguished from their idol prototypes by insertion into temporally distant, fan-generated alternative universes. As Simon Reynolds cautions us, "Nostalgia is now thoroughly entwined with the consumer entertainment complex"²⁰⁴; indeed, as toys, games, movies, and comics become part of an increasingly large market for nostalgic entertainment, the contemporary pang for "the products of yesteryear, the novelties, and distractions that filled up our youth"²⁰⁵ has then been translated into a consumption binge that re-experiences juvenility. Resonating with this trend, genderswap production also employs the

²⁰⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber, 2012), xxix.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

depiction of twisted temporality into nostalgic timelines as another canonizing strategy abreast with tactics in character creation and development. To apply a Bergsonian²⁰⁶ reading to the wave of nostalgia, this sentiment is often seen as an inhibiting and emotional phenomenon that reacts against change and modernity, not only representing a longing for the past but also manifested as dissatisfaction with the present. Following this understanding, I will focus on the temporal dimension of genderswap fan art and attempt to figure out how temporality manipulation facilitates the construction and canonization of the genderswap fantasy. This phenomenon is visible in the retro and backwards-looking elements of @99.16's painting style.

One of the destinations towards which desire guides characters and readers is their past youth. @99.16's works mainly feature girls and boys in their teens: even when their prototypical idols are well into their twenties, the depicted characters are still portrayed in a juvenile manner. Other members, who are often shipped as Haechan's lovers, are depicted similarly, with an emphasis on their juvenile temperament, echoing Gary Cross's averment of the age we are in as the personification of "boymen" where traditional notions of maturity and masculinity are being transformed alongside an increasing desire to return to the pleasures of youth²⁰⁷. Horishi Aoyagi argues that in fans' pursuit of J-pop idols, the element of youth has always been a defining factor, and successful idols utilize "capitalized adolescence" to market youthful dreams and captivate the infatuated minds of their fans.²⁰⁸ However, I read fans' obsession with youthfulness a bit differently from the conventional emphasis on the reality escaping represented by Aoyagi, and believe the youthful characteristic contains much more than merely visual attraction and escapist anesthetic.

²⁰⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2011).

²⁰⁷ Gary S. Cross, *Men to Boys the Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

²⁰⁸ Hiroshi Aoyagi, *Islands of Eight Million Smiles: Idol Performance and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 206.

In my opinion, the motif of the forever young and beautiful girl accords with the Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of girls as becoming of becoming in that, instead of virginity, girls are defined by the relation of movement and rest, speed and slowness and enabled ceaseless roaming upon a body without organs by the never elapsing temporality²⁰⁹. That is to say, instead of being read as prototypes travelling back to the temporality where they're young boys and girls, the teenage Dong-Sook herself embodies a temporality. Also, by perpetually freezing characters in their youth, this temporal tactic challenges linear chronologies and rejects traditional expectations of futurism, opting for alternative paths or rejecting the idea of a fixed and predetermined future altogether.²¹⁰

The strategy of proposing queer temporalities as an alternative to linear time can also be observed in textual works, often accompanied by setting stories within temporal rifts. For instance, 20th-century China serves as a frequent destination for time travel in genderswap fanfiction. Within genderswap fanfiction based on Haechan as the prototype, two works, “1941 (Genderswapped)”²¹¹ and “Boys Trapped in 1980,”²¹² have been praised as masterpieces in the niche for their sinicized adaption of story settings, incorporation of characters into a greater temporal framework and historical background, as well as attempts to touch on serious themes, which are rare in fanfiction. “1941 (Genderswapped)” is set in pre-revolutionary Shanghai, where the shipped male-male idol couples are portrayed as enemies forced to slaughter each other due to their opposing political positions: Haechan assumes the role of a communist undercover agent disguised as a high-class courtesan, while the lover she is compelled to assassinate is a key figure in the Nationalist Party’s intelligence agency; “Boys

²⁰⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 276.

²¹⁰ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²¹¹ Jayne14, “1941 (Genderswapped) [1941(性转)],” Archive of Our Own, March 7, 2020, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/23052115>.

²¹² Xiao Tang(小堂), “Boys Trapped in 1980 [男孩被困 1980],” Sina Weibo, May 20, 2019, <https://weibo.com/6614510347/Hv6Pfe245>.

Trapped in 1980,” however, casts the characters into post-Cultural Revolution northeastern China and depicts them as epitomes of a lost generation of young individuals caught between a painful past and an unknown future.

The nostalgic portrayal may seem incongruous with fashionable K-pop idols as prototypes, but it is this sense of mismatch and displacement that allows characters to be distanced from their modern prototypes and become materials for uncensored fantasies. This process of fantasy liberation can be deconstructed into three steps, each serving a different purpose and function: the protective function of detaching from the actual timeline, the canonizing function of incorporating historical temporalities, and finally the empowering function of temporal leaping. Firstly, genderswap fans I talked to universally acknowledge the sense of security in reading genderswap works set in rewritten temporalities. The significant temporal gap from the present prevents characters like Haechan from drawing condemnation from other fans, even if portrayed as a courtesan like Zanzan. Meanwhile, relocating characters within a Chinese context fills the empty signifier with personalities and connotations that differ greatly from the idol identities of their prototypes and thus enables the created characters to exist independently of real-life references.

Furthermore, in addition to character development, another distinguishing feature of genderswap works employing temporal tactics is the large proportion of historical backgrounds. Authors often go beyond plot and dialogue and use the characters’ voices to express their personal opinion about specific events and historical contexts. For instance, the closing chapter of “1941 (Genderswapped)” depicts the moments leading up to Zhong Chenle’s death and narrates that her last wish is to see the city her fallen lover promised to visit with her together. Between Zhong Chenle’s death in her twenties and the day her friend help realize her dream, the author directly incorporates a timeline of historical events as the transition:

钟晨棠皱着眉头用尽全身的气力从胸前的口袋里拿出一张因为老翻看而有些褶皱的照片，颤抖着手递给小赵：“以后中国的光景好了，替我……替我去看看泰晤士河，告诉……威斯敏斯特塔，走得快些……别让……伦敦塔等太久……”小赵在离上海 1941 的四平一处最稀松平常的树林外，瘫坐在钟晨棠旁边攥着张沾满鲜血的照片哭得撕心裂肺。

公元 1949 年，中华人民共和国成立。

公元 1966 年，中国“无产阶级文化大革命”开始。

公元 1976 年，十年动乱匆匆结束。

公元 1978 年，邓小平召开十一届三中全会，中国正式对外开放。

公元 1979 年，撒切尔夫人走入议会大厅成为英国第一任女首相。

赵华站在伦敦桥上，能感到整个伦敦都在为保守党执政再次充满了信心。身边的游客们戴着滑稽的、印着米字旗的礼帽靠在栏杆上照相，一批批游客说说笑笑地从赵华身边走过。

With a furrowed brow, Zhong Chenle exerted all his strength to retrieve a slightly creased photograph from her pocket, a result of countless revisits. Her hand trembled as she handed it to Zhao, saying, “When China’s fortunes improve, please... please go and see the Thames River for me, tell... Westminster Tower to hasten its steps... don’t keep... the Tower of London waiting for too long...” Outside a nondescript grove in Siping, just a stone’s throw away from Shanghai in 1941, Zhao sat beside Zhong Chenle, clutching a blood-stained photograph, weeping inconsolably.

In the year 1949, the People’s Republic of China was established.

In the year 1966, the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” commenced in China.

In the year 1976, the tumultuous ten-year period came to an abrupt end.

In the year 1978, Deng Xiaoping convened the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee, marking China’s official opening to the outside world.

In the year 1979, Mrs. Thatcher stepped into the halls of Parliament, becoming the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Zhao stood on London Bridge, feeling the entire city brimming with renewed confidence as the Conservative Party resumed its governance. Beside him, tourists adorned with whimsical hats bearing the Union Jack leaned against the railings, capturing snapshots of the moment. Waves of visitors passed by Zhao, chatting and laughing merrily as they continued on their way.

(1941(Genderswapped), 2020)

Here, beyond the temporal dimension, characters are canonized politically, as both genderswapped characters in “1941 (Genderswapped)” are portrayed as heroic fighters who ultimately sacrifice their lives for communism and embedded with the dual assurance of safeguard with political and moral superiority. While feminizing idols and depicting them as sex workers, akin to Zanzan, may provoke the ire of fandom fundamentalists, canonized characters transcend gender and stand in a secure position due to their political significance outweighing mere gender. This strategy of catering to mainstream discourse and resisting fandom censorship has become a common rhetorical tool in the discourse battles of Chinese idol fandom, with each niche using it to argue that their respective activities align more closely with the dominant ideology, thus being superior to others. For instance, as Ge reveals,

The Untamed girls once adopted socialist core values to comment on episodes, concealing the coded homoerotic content within them²¹³.

Author's criticism of corresponding eras is also prevalent in genderswap works. For example, in "Boys Trapped in 1980," the protagonist, at the brink of freezing to death in extreme cold, reflects upon the insignificance of individual life within the larger backdrop of the era.

迟早还是要死的，不是吗？像他爸妈一样，在无休无止的批斗中奄奄一息，双双没熬过这个冬天。他只是因为未成年而逃过一劫，但在这个年代，被搞死是或早或晚的事情罢了。他自己都觉得稀松平常，连复仇的心思都生不起来，甚至不知道要去怪谁。

All men must die, don't they? Just like his parents, who struggled in criticism and denunciation, who both failed to make it through this winter. He got away with it because he was underage, but he also understands that being tortured to death is nothing new in this age. He himself felt everything so ordinary that he could not even think of revenge. Nor did he know who to blame.

(Boys Trapped in 1980, 2019)

In contrast to the canonized characters in "1941(Genderswapped)," this paragraph demonstrates another tendency of canonization, which is incorporating commentary beyond the narrative and enriching the storytelling with deeper narrative layers that transcend individual experiences and emotions. It delves into the sufferings of the era and multiple individuals. Through the portrayal of the character's inner world, the text reveals his numbness towards life and personal fate, which is not a result of heartlessness or indifference, but rather a product of despair and helplessness nurtured in the Cultural Revolution. He cannot

²¹³ Liang Ge, "Dual Ambivalence: The Untamed Girls as a Counterpublic," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 5 (2022): 1021–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221104713>.

find a specific entity to blame because the entire society is engulfed in this tempest, and he is merely one helpless individual. We can observe the author's attempt to integrate an understanding of the cruelty and distortion of that era's reality and human nature into the fanfiction, moving beyond the realm of romance.

Moreover, since genderswap readers' "participation within fandom often extends beyond an interest in any single text to encompass many others within the same genre,"²¹⁴ transcending the scope of individual works we might discover a larger temporal framework. On one hand, the nostalgic tendency of genderswap works to traverse the past instead of the future represents a resistance against the progressive narrative of time. As cautioned by Bergson, instruments like clocks represent the modern translation of time, "converting heterogeneous temporalities into a series of equidistant, uniform intervals" and therefore enslaving human beings through the discipline of the present narrative. In this respect, by returning to eras without the progressive temporal consciousness and rejecting "the rigid sameness of identity"²¹⁵ in one specific temporality, genderswap works rupture from the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism and enable queer temporal possibilities.

On the other hand, if we consider different genderswap works as narratives revolving around the same empty signifier, they form a singular narrative universe characterized by constant forgetting, loss, and cyclical recurrence. In other words, the genderswapped Haechan can be understood as the protagonist in an infinite series of television episodes, each representing a different fantasy, independent of other temporal settings. The only constant factor is the gender-transformed protagonist and the ongoing time travel. This temporal philosophy of genderswap fanfiction goes beyond mere escapism into the past, as it continuously immerses itself in the past while simultaneously breaking away from it.

²¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 37.

²¹⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

Furthermore, due to the juvenility of readers' self-insertion being a major criticism, apart from downplaying the real-life references to idols, the canonization also includes strategies from readers' end. Such tendency to diminish readers' presence can be traced back to the shipper fantasies, where they remove female bodies as a means to escape the guilt associated with heterosexual pornographic consumption, which revolves around "sexual satisfaction by means of male penetration."²¹⁶ Thus, the absence of an essentialized female sexual identity helps conceal their eroticism through a psychological process known as projective identification, where female readers are able to "kill off the abject part of their own femininity."²¹⁷ In this vein, the ontological possibilities of being a spectator in fantasies of male homosexual encounters can be realized through the idealization of boy characters.

Similarly, to avoid the direct inserting possibilities of readers, genderswap fanfiction tends to adopt the third-person narration and the paradigm of gender reversal, above which, a scopophilic textual position further help smuggle their desires. The reason "smuggle" is used in this context is because the limited influence of genderswap fandom does not allow them to publicly justify their desires; therefore, they resort to literary tactics to conceal their true reading intentions. If we were to understand the underlying principle of this strategy through "canonization," I believe it stems from a compromise and alignment with the contemplative reading practices adopted by other publics. However, considering that distance filters out much of their enjoyment of reading, genderswap works establish a flexible textual position for readers that I refer to as "polyphonic voyeurism."

²¹⁶ Kazumi Nagaike, *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012), 113.

²¹⁷ Midori Matsui, "Little Girls Were Little Boys: Displaced Femininity in the Presentation of Homosexuality in Japanese Girls' Comics," essay, in *Feminism and the Politics of Difference*, ed. Anna Yeatman and Sneja Gunew (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 1993), 177–96, 186.

Before delving into the discussion of textual positions, it is necessary to first explain, using Freud's model of "A Child is Being Beaten,"²¹⁸ the three impulses that female sexual fantasies generally identify with: the sadistic impulse that blurrily identifies with the beating father, the masochistic impulse that subjectifies the situation and projects the self onto the beaten child, and the scopophilic impulse that objectifies the experience by watching the beating scene. Among these three, self-inserters or broader readers of romance typically adopt the second position, as this genre often features dominant male protagonists and readers tend to identify with females who find happiness in submission and obedience, while RPS novels, including those mentioned in the third section as conduit fiction that utilize female bodies to mediate male-male sexuality, tend to occupy a scopophilic position. Unlike these two fixed lenses, genderswap works provide readers with the ability to slide between these stages and shift their position at will, offering a versatile viewing perspective.

Taking "Falling" as an example, Wang Yibo's first-person perspective provides an immersive lens, so that readers could initially empathize with his gaze and become direct gazers but not yet secret voyeurs, staring at Zanzan's body together with him. Later, assigned the same room with Zanzan and gradually attracted by her, Wang Yibo finds himself often sexually aroused when seeing her. Description of his erect penis hinders fan readers' continuous projection by making them aware of their differences with the object of projection. Readers' identity are then transformed to voyeurs, witnessing Wang Yibo's masturbation and the sexual scene between him and Zanzan.

Polyphonic voyeurism empowers genderswap readers in two distinct ways: on the one hand, in occupying the scopophilic position, readers willingly suspend their disbelief and

²¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 175-204.

immerse themselves in the fictional world²¹⁹. This suspension grants them the authority to temporarily set aside their awareness of the text's artificiality and fully engage with the narrative. By accepting the role of the observer with the omniscient and all-seeing point of view, readers assert their authority to navigate the text and derive pleasure and understanding from it. On the other, a detached voyeuristic stance at any given moment also guarantees them a sense of security, because the non-assigned positionality legitimizes the floating position of fan readers above the narrative and the freedom of anonymous random identification.

Therefore, on the surface logic, they share the position of being outside the romantic or sexual relationship, which appears to satisfy the starstruck ethics in Chinese idol fandom, namely a kind of political correctness that despises self-insertion. In the deep structure, however, such positionality allows for immersive experience and erotic projection, that is, repositioning and prioritization of female sexual agency, while erasing traces of their self-projection by placing them in a nominally voyeuristic position.

The pleasure of voyeurism is further highlighted in scenes where the characters desire intimacy but so fear being seen by others that they have to conceal or suppress their desires. In other words, the awareness that they are gazing at the desires the characters attempt to conceal enhances the readers' awareness of the advantageous position of voyeurism. Apart from such simple voyeurist structures, the text also contains other multi-layer possibilities for voyeurism: other salon girls' teasing of Wang Yibo and Zanzan makes them aware that their sexual activity is audible to others in the narrow space of salon. At this point, readers are not direct voyeurs but also observing others' voyeurism, allowing them to experience the taboo of being listened to (if self-inserted), and the sense of control from the all-seeing perspective.

²¹⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). The term "Suspension of disbelief" was developed by English writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He used the term in an 1817 essay discussing audience's willingness in plays and literary works to suspend disbelief at fiction in order to immerse themselves in and accept the setting and plot of the work.

Moreover, in the scene where Wang Yibo condemns male parents' gaze, there exist even three layers of voyeuristic structure: the middle-aged men gazing at Zanzan, Wang Yibo gazing at their obscene desires, and the readers gazing at the whole situation. Each layer generates a corresponding stance in the voyeuristic hierarchy, with male parents' gaze represent a stance of pure sexual desire, Wang Yibo's condemnation represents that of the moral judgement, and readers' scopophilic onlooking, practicing the suspension of disbelief, thus represents the power supremacy.

In this section, I have discovered the everyday dilemmas that genderswap fandom has to confront based on the investigation of the production, paratexts, and fan communities surrounding genderswap fan art: their consumption is constantly interpellated by other fandom niches and even by themselves. In order to defend and sublimate their desires, an inclination of canonization has emerged within genderswap works. This entails authors' masquerade of actively aligning with the discourse of societal norms or shaping genderswap texts into forms resembling serious literature. Per such requirement, works must exhibit independence from their prototypes, maintain a certain aesthetic distance, uphold values consistent with mainstream ideologies, and adopt a neutral reading position without self-insertion. Through further analysis of genderswap-themed fan illustrations and fiction, I have summarized the steps that validates the canonization, with the larger directions referred to as "strategies" and smaller textual measures termed "tactics."

There are three major strategies employed, each respectively contributing to the canonization or empowerment of genderswap works in relation to character, narrative, and audience. The first strategy, the creation of empty signifiers, aims to dissociate genderswapped characters from real-life references; to further strengthen the distinction between virtual characters and real individuals, tactics such as extreme feminization, eroticization, intertextual combination, self-relation, and renaming assist in the development and finalization of these

empty signifiers. The second strategy, retro portrayal, sets the story in temporalities distant from the present, encompassing two different levels of temporal displacement: backward homing to characters' youth and their recontextualization within historical backgrounds, particularly those of 20th-century China. These commonly utilized temporal ruptures focus on the aesthetic and moral dimensions of storytelling: the former challenges reproductive futurism's obsession with linear chronologies and enriches the connotations of youthfulness through queer temporalities. The latter, on one hand, fills the monotony of solely emphasizing romantic relationships with criticism of the era and historical events, and on the other hand, imbues genderswapped characters with a communist ideology unassailable to other fandom publics. The final strategy, polyphonic voyeurism, leverages the design of multiple textual positions to allow and protect readers' freedom in interpretation and projection. Together, these three strategies repackage fanonical fantasies as subtle factors within greater motifs, thus smuggling their desires.

CONCLUSION

Consuming Chinese genderswap fanfiction is akin to engaging in extreme sports within the text, where the thrill and risks are directly proportional. The risks often stem from conflicts between genderswap practices and the dominant heterosexual discourse that regulates gender roles, as well as the mainstream fandom culture that adores idols based on their male gender and masculinity. However, the trope of gender reversal brings pleasure as well, which arises from the genre's ability to fulfill fans' fantasies. As a result, despite misunderstandings and attacks, genderswap fandom refuses to relinquish the realm of desire and has instead seized the opportunities created by their eviction from the Chinese internet to carve out an enclave and establish their own discourse. Thus, a central research question throughout this thesis has been how discourses from different fandom publics clash, struggle, and conflict, what reasons underlie their confrontation, and what outcomes they respectively lead to.

Structurally, this thesis is divided into three main chapters, each focusing on different aspects of Chinese genderswap fanfiction: sexuality, textuality, positionality and temporality. The first chapter delves into sexuality, particularly in relation to idol-fan power dynamics. Discourse clashes in this chapter are manifested through the deprivation of idols' voices by discourse of companies and fans (section 1), and the utilization of and challenge to patriarchal discourse and its resulting literary conventions in genderswap works (section 2). Beyond the abstract concept of "discourse," I also examine specific forms that idol-producing discourse takes, such as the dream rhetoric and the gemstone metaphor employed by companies to discipline

idols and commodify them as cultural products. The second chapter covers fans' textual and real-life positionality, and similarly identifies several contrasting discourses. Section 4 investigates the destruction and subversion of heterosexual familial discourse in genderswap texts, while section 5 primarily explores the discourse conflicts among different publics within the fandom. The final section problematizes temporality in genderswap works. Within this section, temporality is analyzed as both the outcome of genderswap fandom's defeat in discourse conflicts and a strategy they employ to establish their own discourse.

In terms of content, my reading and analysis have led me to discover and summarize some patterns concerning genderswap works and fans, which are used as evidence to support my arguments or as the starting point for addressing specific research questions in each chapter. In section 1, I review the development of conceptualizing idols in China, Japan, and South Korea and summarize four modes of idol consumption within Chinese idol fandom (privacy consumption, projection consumption, element consumption, and stunt consumption). This summary supports my argument that since idols' self-expression interferes with the interests of both companies and fans, their voices are ultimately disregarded and often willingly relinquished, resulting in their mediation as soulless marionettes.

In section 2, through a close reading of "Falling," I identify two prototypical relationships derived from patriarchal discourse: the prostitute-schoolgirl rivalry and the courtesan-literati romance, which raises questions about the feminist stance of genderswap works. Thus, by reflecting on the realization mechanism of female desire, I argue that the trope of gender reversal plays a role in appropriating and challenging

patriarchal literary conventions, as it establishes a shared position of being objectified between female readers and genderswapped male idols. Section 3 builds upon my observations and data analysis, highlighting the predominance of boy band members as prototypes in genderswap fanfiction, which leads to my research questions: why boy band members? What narrative structure do boy bands provide for genderswap works? In short, my answer is that the composition of a boy band creates a panoptic structure of mutual surveillance within the group while expanding the stigmatized one-on-one romance into a love triangle and even a microcosm of society. In section 6, I uncover a tendency among genderswap fan artists and writers to canonize their works and summarize the steps that facilitate this canonization as three major strategies (the creation of empty signifiers targeting prototypes, retro portrayal targeting narratives, and polyphonic voyeurism), accompanied by several smaller tactics.

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have also applied, compared with, and even expanded upon theories and previous scholarship. For example, in section 3, through a comparison with conduit fiction that also falls within the category of band slash, I find that genderswap works, instead of using female readers as mediators of male-male sexuality, employ male idols as conduits for female desire. To be more specific, ungenderwapped band members are designed to serve as objects of desire or props to validate emotions between female characters, while genderswapped characters become conduits for girls' emotions and identities, forging a connection with female readers. In section 4, a psychoanalytic lens is adopted, and models such as the Oedipus complex and the Freudian model of the psyche are applied to explore the inclination of mutilating characters in genderswap texts. By contrasting the failed parental roles and

fractured family relationships with the genderswapped characters' determination, resilience, kindness, and strong bonds with other characters, I argue that new Oedipal relationships and non-blood-related families are reconstructed around genderswapped characters. Section 5 utilizes Warner and Squires' subdivision of publics to illustrate the real-life fandom positionality of genderswap fandom. The distinction between counterpublics, satellite publics, and enclaves provides clear criteria for examining the factors and intentions behind the establishment of genderswap heterotopia.

The turmoil faced by genderswap fandom arises from the text yet ultimately finds its resolution within the text. And during their exile, the hatred and stigmatization encountered did not discourage them; instead, it has compelled them to elevate the aesthetic quality of their works, transforming what was once dismissed as "junk fiction" into appreciable serious literature. In this transformation, a crucial step, in my opinion, is their mastery of manipulating the text to enable themselves to skillfully control and smuggle their desires. As Wolfgang Iser aptly stated, "form does not stimulate, but controls that which has been stimulated, in order to hold it, so to speak, at arm's length."²²⁰ Therefore, although the word "smuggle" carries connotations of illicitness, indicating the helplessness of genderswap fandom in the face of canon and dominant fanon, I believe that this self-regulated embrace of desire is not a passive and negative response. On the contrary, it provides a behavioral and narrative approach for other repressed desires to follow.

Moreover, rather than the potential contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field, I consider the greatest achievement of this thesis to be the discovery of a

²²⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 43.

fitting fandom identity for myself. In writing this thesis, I become able to gradually redefine myself as a close reader of fanfiction and fan communities. The closeness allows me to fully immerse myself in their realm of fantasy and connection while maintaining my identity as a not excessively involved participant helps me avoid the “fannish uncertainty principle,” that “the more embedded a scholar is within a given fan community, the less she will want to write about it, thus divulging its potential secrets, entwined as they are in personal interactions.”²²¹

This position of observation brings limitations to my research as well. The tiny yet perpetual barrier between me and the most avid fans makes me feel that I don't have enough understanding to critique genderswap works. And the close relationship with informants and my awareness that they are also a potential audience of my thesis renders it difficult to critically analyze their desires. Therefore, in my presentation and deconstruction of genderswap fandom, there is a lack of criticism and this thesis has not yet covered the potential issues within the genre that I have detected, maybe slightly touched on, but have not had the opportunity to fully explore. For instance, to capture the self-canonizing tendency in genderswap writing and facilitate my literary analysis, I have chosen works that are considered of higher quality and adept at manipulating the gender reversal paradigm, according to the community recommendation and my assessment. However, apart from these selected works, what about relatively low-end genderswap fanfiction? Does their poorly portrayed androgyny fail to dissolve gender stereotypes but instead reinforce them?

²²¹ Kristina Busse, Introduction, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 1–40, 23.

In addition, due to my limited understanding of genre studies, despite my efforts to identify patterns of genderswap works through textual and visual materials, as well as to define its boundaries in relation to BL and RPS based on its characteristics, I have not been able to establish genderswap as a genre in a more comprehensive manner. However, I still believe that, despite its fluidity, genderswap has the potential to be more than just an accessory or trope of RPS fiction, but rather a genre that allows readers to indulge in fantasies through gender masquerading and a communicative action among fans. Therefore, if given more time, I hope to further explore the textual features of genderswap and its illocutionary significance for individual fans and the fandom as a whole.

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