

“Send Them to Mars!”

Boys Love Erotica and Civil Rights in Hong Kong

Katrien Jacobs and Han Hau Lai

HONG KONG BOYS love (BL) fans are invested in manga and animation trends and consume materials made in Japan, Taiwan, and mainland China. Historically, BL manga traveled from Japan to Taiwan in the 1970s and was soon after that introduced to Hong Kong.¹ BL fandoms in Hong Kong since then have been comparable to those of Taiwan and have started intersecting with mainland Chinese fandoms since the 1990s.² Hong Kong BL fans, like those from Taiwan and mainland China discussed elsewhere in this volume, call the genre “*danmei*” and refer to themselves as “*funü*”—which literally translates to rotten (*fu*) girls (*nü*), an adaptation of the term *fujoshi* (rotten girls) from Japan. While BL manga and anime are considered degenerate or “rotten” genres in the mainstream media in the above three regions, BL fans’ embrace of the identity *funü* indicates a playful self-mockery and an appreciation of a “perverse” imagination. This identity label and its self-conscious “rotten” imagination coincide with the rise of transnational queer sinophone online cultures defined by shared media products and culture flows.

As Fran Martin explains, BL fandoms could be an excellent example of positioning

a different way of conceptualising transnational queer Chinese cultures, one that allows us to see areas of commonality across geographically dispersed Chinese communities but focuses on how these arise from rhizomatic cross-flows in the present rather than from “deep” cultural heritage. According to this view, the starting point for approaching contemporary Chinese cultures is

acknowledgment of their difference, multiplicity and fragmentation, but we should recognise, too, that new forms of *shared* experience are also enabled as a result of transnational flows of media and migration in a contemporary globalising world.³

Our own observations over the course of our larger project as well as Hong Kong BL fans we have interviewed have confirmed that most fans follow and access transnational social media sites, mostly originating in Taiwan and mainland China, while they fight for recognition within the Hong Kong local media, thus establishing BL as an excellent lens through which to examine this phenomenon.

The essay will show how Hong Kong BL fandoms are nurtured by a transnational queer sinophone imagination that is also used to embrace a localized identity and comment on Hong Kong civil rights. The most notable actions in defense of a prodemocracy movement happened during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, which peaked in fall 2014 and was disbanded in early 2015.⁴ Despite widening political rifts between mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, BL fans expressed solidarity between these three cultures. As exemplified in the slogan of the Facebook page Danmei Camp, “BL rules everything and gayness (*jiqing*) unifies the world,” fans defended BL erotica as a way to experience sexual play, lightheartedness, and creative stimulation despite an atmosphere of conflict.⁵ Many Hong Kong BL fans were adamant about using queer fantasies to support the prodemocracy movement, while others defended LGBTQI rights and the right to distribute queer sexually explicit media or “meat pictures” (*rou tu*), which often include nudity, sexual intercourse, and sexual paraphilias such as BDSM.

With this Hong Kong case study we hope to show that Hong Kong BL fandom is maturing into a socially responsible and reflexive subculture in its tendency to absorb and reimagine online erotica with an activist-political edge. In 2001, Japanese theorist Hiroki Azuma posited in *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* that animation fans thrive on a kind of erotic attachment (“*moe*”) toward their preferred animated characters. He believed that because of a strong attachment to characters, fans would turn their back on a search for larger social or political world-views.⁶ It will be shown here that these perceived solipsistic and “animalistic” online behaviors are changing: BL fans do indeed provoke social media users into deeper ethical or activist approaches to characters

as well as fostering an activist defense of LGBTQI sexuality and erotic enjoyment. For instance, the fandom's penchant for sexualizing activist leaders could be seen as a frivolous and escapist urge, but it can also be seen as an endorsement of a new type of leadership. Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang have analyzed similar critiques of male leaders in mainland Chinese BL microfictions, specifically decoding father-son stories that re-order traditional power structures within the family and within Chinese society at large.⁷ Hong Kong fans use a similar imagination to reflect on the political establishment and to eroticize a new type of charismatic leader.

In recent years we have carried out most of our fieldwork on various social media sites and we have chosen in this chapter to focus on several Hong Kong Chinese-language BL Facebook pages and attitudes expressed by fans thereon toward democracy and sexually explicit media. In actuality, however, these fans are a polymedia generation using hashtags to indicate and search for their favorite couplings as well as for manga and anime across various social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the mainland Chinese sites Weibo and Baidu Tieba (a bulletin board system, or BBS, on Baidu). Around the time of the Umbrella Movement, Facebook was a very popular medium for Hong Kong BL imagery, the reason for our focus on it here.

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that Facebook has very strict regulations on sexually explicit media and bans representations of genitals, buttocks, and female breasts (excluding images of breastfeeding and postmastectomy chests), as well as sexual intercourse, along with acts of soliciting sex or hooking up by means of sexually explicit language. It does not seem to matter if an image is didactic, has artistic value, or sheds light on a pertinent issue in regard to sexuality.⁸ In order to explore how BL fans use sexually explicit media across different sites, we examined sexualized depictions posted on Facebook and other social media sites based on the popular Japanese BL anime series *Yuri!!! on Ice*, released in 2016, after the Umbrella Movement wound down. Specifically, we compared the visuals of *Yuri!!! on Ice* on the Facebook pages Funuiology, Boysloveonly, and Danmei Camp with images posted on Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. As a result, our Facebook case study includes posts shared between late September 2014 and January 2017 across a range of sites, but our primary focus is on two Hong Kong-specific fandom pages: Alex Lester Hehe and Funuiology, as well as the Hong Kong-inclusive sinophone BL pages Boysloveonly and Danmei

Camp,⁹ some of whose administrators are from Hong Kong and thus popular with Hong Kong fans.

The Local Brotherhood (Politically Radical, Sexually Chaste)

The prodemocracy Umbrella Movement began its extended occupation of three major thoroughfares in the city on September 26, 2014, impacting many sectors of higher education as well as the mass media and social media sphere at large. The movement had initially erupted to demand a new electoral system for Hong Kong that would operate independently of tight control by the mainland Chinese Communist Party. The movement also extended beyond this initial goal as people made efforts to fight to protect Hong Kong’s free-speech culture and media sphere, which included discussions about women’s rights and queer sexuality. It was an “intersectional” movement in terms of its coalescence of different activist groups, age groups, ethnic and sexual minorities, media outlets, artist collectives, and personalities who all at once were trying out various methods of activism. Since the city-state of Hong Kong is a very compact geographic region and the occupied sites were widely dispersed across the city, it was fairly easy for people to become immersed both through their walks in the city and through hourly updates on social media.

Within this multitiered movement, there were large groups of BL fans who supported the movement by publishing fantasies about the student leaders alongside more regular movement updates. While most fans and BL Facebook pages took a cautious stance toward direct participation in political activism and criticized or banned such posts, the involvement of some fans sparked debate across the fandom about what they perceived as the necessity to be less fantasy-focused and more engaged with actual politics. One Umbrella Movement–focused BL Facebook page, Alex Lester HeHe, or “Alexter,” was launched in early October 2014 and reached a following of thirty thousand within a few weeks. The site imagined a romance between the student leaders of the Umbrella Movement: Alex Chow Yong-kan (then twenty-four years old) and Lester Shum (twenty-one), who were at the time secretary-general and deputy secretary-general of the Hong Kong Federation of Students. The Facebook page was set up by a division of the Hong Kong BL fans as a “HeHe” (the male pronoun “he” said or written twice, pointing to love between two males and having nothing to do with evoking laughter)

community specifically devoted to the Umbrella Movement and, as such, differentiated from the other BL communities. The main aim of the page's founders was to brighten up the Umbrella Movement.

Funuiology is another Hong Kong Facebook page that was launched during the Umbrella Movement but which turned away from prodemocracy activism after the movement ended. It is a community of sixteen thousand followers and has been reported on in the Hong Kong news, including in *Orange News* and *HK OCC News*.¹⁰ The founders are two university students who established this page as a "small corner" for BL fans to gather since they believed that Hong Kong fans were generally not as "happy" as those in Taiwan and mainland China.¹¹ They also believed that the Hong Kong fandom was "suffering" in comparison with the more mature Taiwanese and large-scale mainland fandoms. Funuiology is not just an online community but also an actual community of fans who have social gatherings and who speak out against the commercialization of BL media. They have a "creation team" of fans who produce content for a locally distributed print magazine and who organize social gatherings.¹²

The founders of Funuiology reposted "Alexter" material on the page between November 2014 and January 2015, while encouraging their fans to actively participate in demonstrations and also reminding them to register to vote in the elections. They also expressed that Alexter exemplified Hong Kong's BL identity: "We Hong Kongers finally have our own local BL couple. That's so wonderful."¹³ Some of the Alexter imagery was explicitly antigovernment, while much of it depicted sappy stories of the imagined daily life of the student leader "couple." As explained by administrators of this FB page: "We hope we can bring in some ordinariness and sweetness to balance the gloomy atmosphere within the Umbrella Movement."¹⁴

In the post-Umbrella-Movement era, Funuiology kept up its political mission by circulating imagery of political couplings, for instance imagery about a romance between Beijing-loyalist and then president of the Legislative Council Jasper Tsang and the radical democracy activist and *enfant terrible* Leung Kwok-hung, nicknamed Longhair. These two legislators are known adversaries with a history of heated discussion in Hong Kong's Legislative Council, but they were reimagined by some BL fans as middle-aged gay men secretly in love. Other fans developed a fantasy of them as much younger in age, in classroom settings, a fantasy wherein Jasper is a good student and the class monitor while Longhair is indeed

a bad student.¹⁵ The couple is generally imagined as a pair of teenagers or of young adults in their twenties. In terms of the erotic thrust between them, Jasper is set up as an overly serious person who falls into the position of bottom (*yansu shou*), while Longhair is a playboy who comes out on top (*buliang gong*). This coupling demonstrates well the fandom’s interest in lauding prodemocracy activists like Longhair, who manage to dominate members of the establishment camp such as Jasper Tsang. As stated by fans, there is nothing particularly fancy about these middle-aged politicians, but reimagining and eroticizing their political games and power relations is a turn-on: “There is nothing that that we cannot fantasize about. . . . BL fans have extraordinary skills, such as beautifying and fantasizing everything rotten.”¹⁶

Besides sprucing up the love lives of political leaders, Hong Kong fans invented and yearned for couplings based on Hong Kong micro-celebrities and actors in TV soap operas. For instance, Wong Ka-wai and Dickson are famous hosts of the popular online TV show *TVMost* (*Maoji dianshi*). These hosts are known to satirize the programs and patriotic hosts at TVB, the dominant and pro-China TV station in Hong Kong. In one of Wong’s best-known performances, he satirized the controversial Hong Kong–China policy “One Belt One Road” (*yidaiyilu*) as “One Breast One Bra” (*yidaiyilou*), which has a similar pronunciation but a different and sexualized meaning. In Funuiology, fans picked up on the TV appearances of these hosts and cast them as lovers. In his *TVMost* performances, Wong Ka-wai is usually the harsher and more aggressive critic of political corruption, and here he is imagined as the top who always dominates the lightweight Dickson.

Funuiology’s “extraordinary rotten imagination” was coupled with a pledge toward both prodemocracy activism and LGBTQI rights. Since its inception as an online community, the founders stated that BL fantasies have to match an engagement with actual political rights for sexual minorities, as in the following statement: “No matter in what kind of homosexual coupling you are in actual life, it is all indeed about a person’s legal right to love.”¹⁷ The founders also encouraged its fandom to attend LGBTQI pride parades as well as announce sexuality-related research projects and cultural events.

It is also the case that within these activist-friendly BL Facebook pages, the depictions of gay sexual relations between characters were mostly erotically underdeveloped or kept chaste. They restricted themselves to “pure and sweet” (*qingshui tianxiang*) depictions of sex acts

while censoring all graphic depictions of genitals and sexual intercourse. This was partially because fans did not intend to delve deeply into sexual activity, and at the same time, because of Facebook's stringent censorship legislation, noted above.

The Gift of Sexually Explicit Media or “Meat Pics” (*Rou Tu*)

One image from the Funuiology site shows the president of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, and Hong Kong's then chief executive, C. Y. Leung, engaged in a passionate kiss, adorned with the slogan, “My god, help me to survive this deadly love.” This was not an original image but based on a well-known 1990s Berlin graffiti image on the Berlin Wall depicting political cooperation and/or bondage between Leonid Brezhnev, president of the U.S.S.R., and Erich Honecker, East Germany's political leader. A Funuiology administrator comment on the Xi/C. Y. coupling reads as follows: “Oh god. This coupling is very heavy in taste. Could you accept something like that? Hehe! The earth is dangerous. It would be perfect if this couple could go back to Mars, sleep together and screw each other there!”¹⁸ This administrator seems to imply that if these specific leaders were coupled in a more sexually explicit manner, the result would be simply “unbearable” and it would indeed be better to “send them to Mars.”

Unlike these Facebook communities that are devoted to satire and Hong Kong politics, other transnational sinophone Facebook pages that have a large Hong Kong following encouraged and fought for the circulation of sexually explicit media. Boysloveonly, for instance, is a Facebook page with eighty-two thousand followers that was established in 2015 by a transnational team of sinophone administrators who allow sexually explicit depictions on their page. In order to avoid Facebook censorship rules, however, people show nudity and intercourse from angles which obscure genitals, or they simply erase genitals by means of well-designed filters, which is also a common censorship practice in Japanese BL and Japanese pornographic products. Some of the most explicit pictures did not originate on Facebook but were reposted by the administrators from Tumblr and Twitter, which were then both more sex tolerant than Facebook. Boysloveonly takes a tolerant stance toward sexually explicit media, which it views as a form of erotic and sexual empowerment. Sometime around November 2016, a previously well-known Facebook BL fan page, Fuguo, with eighty thousand members,

was closed down after being reported for violating community standards, in spite of administrators trying to ban depictions of genitals. Some fans were furious and commented that this type of removal of an entire site was “blind” (*mei zhang yanjing*) and instigated by “malicious informants” (*eyi jubao*).¹⁹ After its closure, two administrators of Fuguo transferred all the content posted on the page to Boysloveonly and asserted their intention to persevere in fighting against Facebook censorship: “You can close down one Fuguo page, but there are still hundreds of thousands of BL fans. We will not give up. BL fans will never give up.”²⁰ This statement was supported by its followers with over 1,600 likes and about 122 comments in favor of the administrators’ statement.

Danmei Camp was a similar transnational sinophone Facebook page, which opened in November 2012 and had amassed fourteen thousand followers as of late 2016. On this page, the administrators defended sexually explicit depictions as an important aspect of BL entertainment. This site contained BL images containing nudity but also highly sexual postures and non-normative sexual behavior, such as BDSM, animal cosplay (fandom-related costume play), and group sex. Yet, once again, the portrayal of genitalia was discouraged, as it would be in direct breach of Facebook community standards.

Danmei Camp also experienced a period of political upheaval during the Umbrella Movement as two of the Hong Kong administrators openly supported the movement, and even posted on the page, while visiting the protestors’ encampments, “We feel scared, but we will not leave because we are afraid that the police will shoot at the students. We are sleepy but we will not sleep because the Chinese Communist Party is destroying our city. We have to let the world see our blood and sorrow. Please don’t let the 1989 Movement re-occur. The soul of democracy is waking up!”²¹ There were fifty-four comments on this post and all showed support; it also received 735 likes. In another post, one of the administrators promised one hundred free BL pictures to anybody who would join the prodemocracy movement. Two days later, however, the administrator retracted her statement after being attacked by other fans. She apologized and stated that she would no longer use the BL page to pursue her political agenda.

During the period of our study, BL fans generally complied with Facebook’s obscenity regulations but they also used hashtags to search for explicit images on other networks such as Twitter and Tumblr, the latter of which banned sexually explicit imagery completely in

December 2018, after the end of this study. In order to examine how fans adapted their sexually explicit media across different sites, we looked at fan posts related to the popular anime *Yuri!!! on Ice* by using the hashtag #yurionice to compare images on Facebook with those posted on Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. On Funuiology, fans and administrators posted many couplings of *Yuri!!! on Ice* characters, and yet the imagery was not hard core, with the most explicit imagery only showing naked couples. The administrators of Funuiology, however, did indicate that more explicit “meat pics” or “H pictures,” which could not be posted on Facebook, could be obtained in person at the manga and anime festivals that they were organizing in Hong Kong. On Boysloveonly, most of the sexually explicit pictures were reposted from Twitter, Tumblr, and Weibo. On Danmei Camp, the administrators were more proactive and discussed Facebook’s censorship mechanisms. For example, in one post, the administrator addressed the fandom as follows: “I am posting meat pictures now. Everyone come out to eat them ~ hope that I won’t be reported.”²² They also stated that they would send meat pics to the fans’ “inboxes” and that they could be traded at conventions. There was clearly an ongoing willingness to provide erotic relief to the community outside the boundaries of online social networks and their increasingly intrusive censorship mechanisms.

Hong Kong BL fans have been making use of the social media network Facebook to circulate homoerotic imagery about their favorite characters and couplings. In this chapter, we have focused on a faction of the fandom whose postings are more socially engaged, using BL imagery to comment on Hong Kong’s democracy movement, on queer identity politics, as well as on the right to post and view sexually explicit media in the years surrounding the Umbrella Movement. The era of fandom’s “database animalism,” or the obsessive browsing and archiving of BL materials for a private type of titillation, has arguably paved the way for a different kind of engagement. These fans have shown themselves to be savvy in posting and debating politically and sexually sensitive materials.

BL fans generally use BL fantasies to re-imagine the qualities of male bonding and leadership, to make fun of the political establishment, and to imagine young leaders as more fancy, otherworldly, queer, and empathic than they could be in actuality. The BL fans we studied fantasized about youth leaders to soothe a larger political

crisis. Both the erotic and political BL fantasies expressed by these Hong Kong fans can be seen as a subdued type of political critique, offering a plea for an imagined society as an important goal of pro-democracy politics.

Notes

1. Ting Liu, “Conflicting Discourses on Boys’ Love and Subcultural Tactics in Mainland China and Hong Kong,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20 (2009), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue20/liu.htm>.

2. Fran Martin, “Girls Who Love Boys’ Love: Japanese Homoerotic Manga as Trans-National Taiwan Culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2012).

3. Fran Martin, “Transnational Queer Sinophone Cultures,” in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*, ed. Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (London: Routledge, 2015), 41.

4. In August 2014, the Chinese Communist Party ruled that in future years Hong Kong citizens would not be able to hold democratic elections for a chief executive even though this right had been promised to them. In September 2014, under the name “Umbrella Movement,” thousands of activists were coordinated by the “Occupy Central Movement,” and several student organizations occupied the streets to express defiance against this ruling. After the Umbrella Movement, some groups, under the name of localism, continue to fight for the preservation of the city’s autonomy, local identity, and culture.

5. “BL rules everything and gayness unifies the world” was written on the main banner of the Facebook page for Danmei Camp when it was established on November 17, 2014. According to our talk with the administrators of this BL page, this slogan was created originally by Xiaomiao, the founder and also one of the administrators of this page. While the page was still active as of July 2017, when we were engaged in follow-up research, by the summer of 2020 the page had been deleted and, to date, we have not been able to ascertain whether it was taken down by the page’s administrators or possibly by Facebook for the kind of violations discussed in this chapter.

6. Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (2001; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvi.

7. Yanrui Xu and Ling Yang, “Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013).

8. The Facebook notion of community standards and its stringent censorship legislation can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards>, accessed December 25, 2016.

9. The Facebook page Alex Lester Hehe can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/AlexLester4everLove>, accessed February 25, 2017; Funuiology at <https://www.facebook.com/funuiology>, accessed February 25, 2017; and Boysloveonly at <https://www.facebook.com/boysloveonly>, accessed February 25, 2017. Danmei Camp was at <https://www.facebook.com/耽美集中營bl-統領世界基情一統天下-340498986047542/>, accessed February 25, 2017.

10. In the article in *Orange News*, the author interviewed the two founders of Funuiology, Stephanie and Connie, mainly about why and how they started this Hong Kong-specific BL Facebook page. See Songzi, “Zhuanfang xianggang funü manhuajia: Xihuan BL, sijie keyi henduoyuan,” *Orange News*, August 10, 2016, http://www.orangenews.hk/officelady/system/2016/08/09/010039215_01.shtml. In *HK OCC News*, there is a short interview with Stephanie and Connie from Funuiology about the terms “*funü*” and “*funü* culture” in Hong Kong: “Zhongyi ti HeHe nana aiqing, ‘funü’ tingguo meiyou?” *HK OCC News*, July 31, 2016, http://hk.on.cc/hk/bkn/cnt/news/20160731/bkn201607311137172490731_00822_001.html.

11. This comment by the Funuiology founders was made in the introduction section of their Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pg/funuiology/about/?ref=page_internal, accessed February 25, 2017.

12. This magazine can be bought online via the Facebook page of BL magazine at <https://www.facebook.com/blank.blmagazine/>, accessed March 7, 2016.

13. This comment, like all those that follow, was posted in Chinese. The comment was posted by the administrators of Funuiology on November 10, 2014, and can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/funuiology/photos/a.541637889301081.1073741827.541617562636447/541634912634712/?type=3>, accessed December 20, 2016.

14. This comment was posted by the administrators of Funuiology on November 28, 2014, and can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/funuiology/photos/a.542440225887514.1073741829.541617562636447/549259681872235/?type=3>, accessed December 20, 2016.

15. BL videos about Jasper and Longhair edited by BL fans include Sankalahaha, “‘Changmao, Yuzi’—Zhengtan zhong tian hehe gushi

‘yuanqu: laosi, laisi’ / sankala x jiyibingwu,” YouTube, March 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArrV2NQHQ4M>; and Pingwanhou, “Changmao x Zeng Yucheng ‘Yuanfen. Jiushi he nin yiqi sai Shijian’ ‘Xiayi’ Huang Yaoming MV,” YouTube, April 24, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr5wubKrTOg&feature=youtu.be>.

16. These comments were posted by the administrators of Funuiology on November 23, 2014, and can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/funuiology/photos/a.542440225887514.1073741829.541617562636447/547227965408740/?type=3>, accessed December 20, 2016.

17. This comment was posted by the administrators of Funuiology on June 27, 2016, when the Supreme Court in the United States ruled that same-sex marriage must be recognized. It can be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/pg/funuiology/posts/?ref=page_internal, accessed December 20, 2016.

18. This comment was posted by the administrators of Funuiology on November 24, 2014, and can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/100most/photos/a.292832474177740.66479.273813022746352/597201910407460/?type=3&theater>, accessed December 20, 2016.

19. Those comments can be viewed under the post in Boysloveonly on December 4, 2016, at <https://www.facebook.com/boysloveonly/photos/a.1661337237444022.1073741829.1615813268663086/1846456362265441/?type=3>, accessed December 20, 2016.

20. The statement was made by Yao, the administrator of Boysloveonly, in her post on December 4, 2016, and can be viewed at Boysloveonly, dated December 4, 2016.

21. It was posted by Xiaomiao, an administrator/founder of Danmei Camp, on September 28, 2014, and was available at <https://www.facebook.com/340498986047542/photos/a.340521462711961.75623.340498986047542/660823620681742/?type=3>, accessed December 20, 2016.

22. It was posted by Yanjingjun, an administrator of Danmei Camp, on May 6, 2015, and was available at <https://www.facebook.com/340498986047542/photos/a.340521462711961.75623.340498986047542/777284675702302/?type=3&theater>, accessed December 20, 2016.