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School of Sociology and Social Policy

Boys' Love, Byte-sized: A Qualitative Exploration of Queer-themed Microfiction in Chinese Cyberspace

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This project undertakes an in-depth, qualitative investigation into queer-themed 'Boys Love' microfiction within the realm of Chinese cyberspace, with the aim of further understanding both the features of the genre and the motivation for production and consumption among its primarily heterosexual female user-base. Expanding upon previous studies, which have focused primarily on investigation into the consumer groups of such fiction, this project seeks to establish links between the linguistic/discursive features of queer Chinese-language microfiction and observable social phenomena or cultural frameworks.

Using and developing Gee's *tools of inquiry* (2014) for textual analysis, this project explores the situated meanings, figured worlds and Discourses embodied in very short fictional stories representing male same-sex intimacies and queer sexualities. In doing so, I proposes a development of Johnson's circuits of culture model (1986), in which I hypothesize that, confronted with heteronormative social structures—constructed along a gender binary and framed through patriarchal familial and social relationships—China's cyberspace has offered a new platform for marginalized individuals (both queer-identified and those heterosexual consumers who enjoy fantasizing about same-sex intimacies) to engage, navigate and negotiate space to tell their stories. In doing so, they find opportunities to renegotiate citizenship based on sexual identity. Therefore, this study creates a 'circuit of queer cyberculture' framework through which to analyse queer-themed microfiction. This framework proposes that, through an emerging form of 'cultural self-determination' rooted in sexual and gender identity and the declaration and negotiation of sexual citizenship, netizens who experience social marginalization in the real world through their attraction to representation of queer lives begin to indigenize circuits of popular culture observable in mainstream media platforms by creating and distributing their own works of art and fiction online.

Through a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis of 40 selected works of microfiction and applied thematic analysis of 39 interviews conducted with producers and consumers of the genre in Mainland China, this project therefore assesses the development of the Boys' Love genre into a microfiction format, distributed via a publicly visible online platform. Investigation of the defining characteristics of the genre, in combination with data gathered from interviews, allows this project to demonstrate how this new empirical data can expand our global and local knowledge of theoretical and conceptual debates regarding identity, gender, representation, queer sexualities, sexual citizenship and circuits of culture.

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Glossary

Selected English terms

Term	Definition
chirography	Handwriting, especially as distinct from typography.
Golden Shield Project	The Golden Shield Project (*jindun gongcheng*, 金盾工程) is a censorship and surveillance project operated by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, that blocks potentially unfavourable incoming data from foreign countries. A major part of this project is the Great Firewall of China (*fanghuo changcheng*, 防火长城), which refers to legislation and hardware/software initiated by the Chinese government to regulate the Internet in Mainland China
hashtag	A method of marking or tagging online text, consisting of the character # followed by a single unbroken item of text, e.g. #micronovel. This device assists Internet users to find specific content or themes within Internet forums.
heteropatriarchy	An overarching system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality (Yep, 2003).
microblog	A form of digital communication restricted to 140 characters.
microfiction	A literary genre comprising very short stories, standing as either individual works or as part of a series. Works from this genre are known as micronovels (see 1.2.3).
micronovel	A very short story (see 1.2.3).
netizen	A portmanteau neologism of Internet citizens; the online community.
podophilia	Sexual attraction to feet. The fetish thereof.
prosumer	A person who consumes and produces media artefacts. See *prosumption.*
prosumption	Production by consumption; a portmanteau neologism of producer and consumption. The term is attributed to the work of Alvin Toffler (1990).
queer	An umbrella term for non-heterosexual or non-cisgender. 'Queer' originated as an abusive term for designating non-heterosexual people from a heteronormative perspective (Motschenbacher, 2010), but has since been re-appropriated in political and academic Discourse (see footnote 9 at p.1).
reblog	To retransmit digital artefacts on a social network site.
selfie	A self-portrait taken with a camera phone, usually taken to be uploaded onto one's social media pages.
slash	Fan-produced homoerotic stories involving celebrities or characters from popular literature. See *danmei/tanbi* in *Non-English terms.*
smartphone	A category of mobile device that provides advanced computing capabilities beyond a typical mobile phone.
tablet	A small portable computer that accepts input directly on to its screen rather than via a keyboard or mouse.

Term	Definition
Unicode	An international encoding standard for use with different languages and scripts, by which each character is assigned a unique numeric value that applies across different platforms and programs.
username	A name (often self-selected) by which one is known or identified by the online community.

Non-English terms

Term	Script	Language	Definition
anime	アニメ	Japanese	Animation. In Japanese, the term refers to all forms of animation; however, in English language Discourse, the term is more restrictively used to denote a Japanese-style animated film or television entertainment.
bianshen	变身	Chinese	'Body swap'; a genre of BL fiction in which male characters exhibit female traits such as menstruation or pregnancy.
bishōnen	美少年	Japanese	'Beautiful youth'; a young man whose beauty (and sexual appeal) transcends boundaries of gender or sexual orientation.
boli	玻璃	Chinese	'Crystal'; contemporary term for 'gay'. A reference to the 1980 novel Crystal Boys by Pai Hsien-Yung [Bai Xianyong].
chengyu	成语	Chinese	An idiom; a set phrase, usually comprising four characters, many of which have historical significance.
danmei	耽美	Chinese	'Indulge in beauty'; commonly rendered in English as 'Slash' and comes directly from the Japanese term *tanbi* (Wei, 2014), referring to (originally) graphic novels featuring romantic relationships between men. The term is often used interchangeably with the term *BL* within China (Liu, 2009), although some scholars argue that the two types are distinct (Xu & Yang, 2013).
gong	攻	Chinese	'Attack'; colloquial term for the insertive partner in anal intercourse. Cf *seme* 攻め.
fujoshi	腐女子	Japanese	'Rotten girl'; a moniker applied to female fans of BL fiction.
funü	腐女	Chinese	'Rotten girl'; see Japanese term *fujoshi.*
hujyosi	후죠시	Korean	'Rotten girl'; a phonetic borrowing of Japanese term *fujoshi.*
izzat	इज़्ज़त/عزت	Hindi/Urdu	'Honour', 'respect'; prevalent in the culture of North India and Pakistan, *izzat* is shared equally by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (Patel *et al.*, 1998). Maintaining the reputation of oneself and one's family is part of the concept, as is the taking of revenge if one's *izzat* is violated (Pettigrew, 1975).

Term	Script	Language	Definition
ku'er	酷儿	Chinese	'Queer'; a phonetic approximation of English 'queer' (see below), used in contemporary Chinese.
lala	拉拉	Chinese	Same-sex attracted female; adapted from a Taiwanese localization of lesbian. The term first appeared as *lazi* (拉子, a transliteration of English les) in Taiwan, before becoming localized to *lala* in China (Kam, 2013).
lian	脸	Chinese	'Face'; linked to the concept of *mianzi* (see below), *lian* is something that everyone is entitled to by virtue of membership in a society, and can only be lost through unacceptable conduct (Ho, 1976).
manga	漫画	Japanese	Comics created in Japan, conforming to a style developed in the late 19th century.
mianzi	面子	Chinese	'Face'; a person's social standing and prestige within social spheres, including the workplace, the family, among friends and throughout society at large (Ho, 1976).
seme	攻め	Japanese	'Attack'; colloquial term for the insertive partner in anal intercourse. Cf *gong* 攻.
shôjo	处女	Japanese	'Girls' comics'; a distinctive genre of manga that first emerged in the early 20th century, which appeal to young female readers.
shou	收	Chinese	'Receive'; colloquial term for the receptive partner in anal intercourse. Cf *uke* 受け.
tanbi	耽美	Japanese	'Indulge in beauty'; a style of aestheticism that focuses on describing perfect images of the male figure.
tongxinglian	同性恋	Chinese	'Homosexuality'; literally 'same sex love', a complement term to *yixinglian* (异性恋, heterosexuality).
tongzhi	同志[1]	Chinese	'Comrade/Queer'; a common contemporary euphemism for homosexual/gay/queer.
uke	受け	Japanese	'Receive'; colloquial term for the receptive partner in anal intercourse. Cf *shou* 收.
wangluo wenhua	网络文化	Chinese	'Network culture'; cyberculture.
weibo	微博	Chinese	'Microblog'. Sina Weibo (新浪微博) is a popular microblogging SNS, hosted by the Sina Corporation.
weixiaoshuo	微小说	Chinese	'Micronovel'; a very short story told in fewer than 140 characters.

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[1] Appropriated from a common term of address in the Mao era meaning 'of the same mind-set' (Pan & Kádár, 2011, p.78), *tongzhi* has become a common identity label for LGBTQ individuals in China. Many scholars have elected to translate the Mandarin term *tongzhi* as 'queer' in English; whilst it is acknowledged that such a translation can only ever be an approximation, both terms are interchangeably within this thesis when referring to the Chinese context. Queer is also used here when referring to academic disciplines.

Term	Script	Language	Definition
Weixin	微信	Chinese	WeChat; a mobile social media platform operated by Tencent (腾讯). In terms of monthly active users, it is one of the largest standalone messaging applications in the world (Millward, 2014).
xiao	孝	Chinese	'Filial piety'; a traditional Chinese concept which outlines and regulates interactions between different genders and social strata.
yaoi	やおい	Japanese	A genre of fiction focusing on romantic or sexual relationships between male characters. The term is an acronym from *yamanashi, ochinashi, iminashi* (山なし、落ちなし、意味なし *no climax, no resolution, no significance*) (Ingulsrud & Allen, 2009, p.47) or (*no climax, no punch line, no meaning*((Galbraith, 2011, p.212). In a Western context, *yaoi* often refers to harder, more sexually explicit BL stories (Pagliassotti, 2008, p.60).
zhanghui xiaoshuo	章回小说	Chinese	'Serial Novel'; A type of Chinese novel (post-Ming dynasty) with each chapter headed by a couplet giving an indication of the content.

List of Abbreviations

Term	Definition
BL	'Boys' Love' or '*boli*' (see glossary).
CCP	Communist Party of China. (*Zhongguo Gongchandang*, 中国共产党)
CNNIC	China Information Network Information Centre. (*Zhongguo Hulian Wangluo Xinxi Zhongxin* 中国互联网络信息中心)
DA (CDA)	Discourse Analysis (Critical Discourse Analysis).
ISP	Internet service provider.
LGBT(Q) [2]	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (queer).
MSM	Men who have sex with men.
PRC	People's Republic of China.
RMB	Renminbi (人民币, *people's currency*]), common name for China's currency.
SNS	Social networking site.
TOI	Tool(s) of inquiry.
VoIP	Voice over Internet protocol.[3]

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[2] More contemporary renderings to increase inclusivity include LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual [+others]), MOGAI (Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments and Intersex) and QuILTBAG (queer or questioning, intersex, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, and gay) (Ellars, 2014; Killermann & Bolger, 2015).
[3] Any technology for transmitting voice, such as ordinary telephone calls, over packet-switched data networks, such as the Internet.

Notes on language use

This document uses simplified characters for Chinese text and the pinyin[4] Romanization system. Notable exceptions to this convention are personal names of authors from other Chinese societies such as Hong Kong or Taiwan, where different transcription systems may be used.

Excerpts from micronovels constitute a source of data for textual analysis, therefore examination has been conducted on the source language (rather than on an English translation of that source). Accordingly, all excerpts used in the body of the text are given in Chinese characters, with an English translation provided (*in italics*) for the reader. Full texts and translations of micronovels are provided in Appendix 9.1.

British English spelling and grammar (Oxford standards) are used throughout, except for where quotations from secondary literature use alternative conventions. In-text reference to Asian-language terms are given in Romanized form along with the original script upon first mention. Subsequent mentions of these terms are given solely in Romanized form. All translations are my own[5], unless noted otherwise.

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[4] In keeping with academic convention, pinyin in this project does not include tone markings.
[5] On occasions, assistance was sought from native Mandarin speakers for accuracy of translation.

1 Introduction

The acceptability of homosexuality in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as in many parts of the world, remains a contentious, sensitive and divisive issue. Although no longer criminalized or pathologized by China's authorities[6], social attitudes still place a primacy on heteronormative, child-bearing relationships and adherence to historically-rooted[7] Confucian notions of filial piety[8]. Therefore, this marginalizes China's queer[9] population, who find that they are unable to live open lives in accordance with their sexual desires. The Internet as a community facilitator for Chinese queer subjects has had an amazing impact in China. In a digitally enabled community (even one which is subject to censorship) there exists huge potential for reaching out to marginalized individuals, and queer individuals and activists in China have benefitted enormously from this new method of interconnectivity (Heinz *et al.*, 2002). Even as early as March of 2001, Time Magazine was claiming that the Internet had done as much in five years for Asia's gay community as the 25 years following Stonewall[10] had done in the West (Berry *et al.*, 2003). The importance of the Internet as an information tool for young queer individuals has been illustrated by Ho (2010), who also discusses the legal ambiguity of operating queer-oriented websites within China, where many sites are frequently shut down by the authorities.

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[6] Homosexuality is a subject that retains attitudes of prejudice and stigmatization within contemporary Chinese culture. Although homosexuality was removed from China's official list of mental illnesses in 2001, official attitude towards same-sex intimacies is believed to be one of "no approval, no disapproval and no promotion" (Engebretsen, 2009), and the subject receives limited open public debate or discussion.

[7] Historical attitudes towards same-sex sexual activity in China have been widely discussed in academic literature, ranging from studies revealing a degree of sexual freedom among the elite of pre-Song dynasty China (Hinsch, 1990; Ng & Lau, 1990), through to the more restricted view of sexual morality that appeared towards the end of the Qing dynasty (Chou, 2000). Contemporary societal attitudes in China and Hong Kong, and within the Chinese diaspora, have been examined by Kong (2011), and the psychological implications of Chinese notions of filial piety on gay Chinese individuals have been discussed in the work of Liu (2007).

[8] Filial piety is discussed at 5.3.2. See also *Glossary* entry under *xiao*.

[9] 'Queer' originated as an abusive term for designating non-heteronormative people from a heteronormative perspective, but has since been re-appropriated in political and academic discourse. Whilst I fully acknowledge the political and social conditions under which the word 'queer' has been appropriated in Western Anglophone societies —and of how these conditions are fundamentally different in the Chinese historical context—I am also keenly aware of the term's prominence in both English and Chinese-language academic writings and within the context of Chinese activism. Therefore, the use of the word 'queer' in my analysis, theoretical framework and discussion aligns my work with an existing and growing body of publications on China, and attempts to avoid some of the unwieldy and contextually inappropriate acronym-based terminology.

[10] The Stonewall Riots, which took place in New York in 1969, are generally credited as marking the start of the gay rights movement in Western society (Carter, 2013; Duberman, 2013).

In addition to its function as a carrier of medical and educational Discourse[11] on homosexuality, the Internet has become a site of queer-themed[12] recreation (Wakeford, 2002), with the representation of same-sex intimacies within online media becoming ever more noticeable. Yet, the presence of queer-themed material in cyberspace may not be all that it at first appears; around the globe, scholars and commentators have noted a growing trend towards the production of artistic literary works which represent sexual and emotional relationships between men, but which are primarily consumed by heterosexual women (Isola, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2009; Wang, 2011; McLelland & Welker, 2015). Gay fiction has usually been viewed as "a means of self-expression, within which gay men have written tales of their search for identity and community" (Edwards-Stout, 2012, para.2). Yet the advent of so-called Boys' Love fiction (*BL*[13] fiction)—romanticized tales of love between beautiful men, predominantly written for women by women, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter at 1.2.4—has resulted in the promotion of a form of 'queer' representation which is disassociated from the lived experiences of same-sex attracted men, but which rather has become a manifestation of female erotic desire and romantic fantasy[14]. Advances in information communication technology has facilitated the genre's popularity by effectively removing the costly physical aspects (and, to some degree, legal restrictions) of traditional print publication. Today, dedicated websites for the production and consumption of all types of fiction are available to anyone with an Internet connection. Yet, as technology's march continues to enhance and reshape the way in which information is shared around the globe, further evolution within the literature landscape is apparent. The development of the smartphone[15] has increased Internet penetration rates around the globe, with

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[11] Gee (2014, p.46) makes a distinction between 'discourse' (small 'd') and 'Discourse' (big 'D'), arguing that, while the former term refers to any instance of language-in-use, the latter term refers more specifically to "…ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity". I have chosen to adhere to this distinction, and therefore the term Discourse is capitalised throughout this document.
[12] See 3.4.1 for limitations of this term.
[13] See *List of Abbreviations*.
[14] See 1.2.4.
[15] For further details, see *Glossary*

studies showing smartphone ownership among adolescents in certain developed nations at over 90% (van Deursen *et al.*, 2015)[16]. This, in effect, means that a world of literature is now instantly available in the palm of one's hand, for the cost of the handset and an Internet subscription.

In China, 'web-literature' has been circulating since the birth of the Internet. According to Yang and Xu (2015), this style of publishing generally refers to original works, often as serialized novels, which bear relation to a traditional type of Chinese printed chaptered novel, known as *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (章回小说, serial novel)[17]. Throughout cyberspace, dedicated forums can be found for users to upload and share creative output. Among these forums, spaces devoted to literature depicting Chinese gay[18] male relationships have become increasingly popular. Yet, as Feng (2009) has demonstrated, the interactive dialogue between writers and readers—involving direct feedback, suggestions and the exchange of ideas—is much stronger in web literature than in print literature. Therefore, due to this consultative and collaborative process, a noted feature of the BL genre (globally, and especially true of the slash sub-genre) has become a shift towards end-user-generated content. Termed 'prosumers'[19], this category of user functions as both a consumer and producer of the distributed media. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) argue that the advent of Web 2.0[20] has facilitated the amalgamation of production and consumption acts, and that these new

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[16] Smartphone ownership in 2014 among 10-18 year olds in China stood at 40.6%, and at 55.7% in Hong Kong (Mak *et al.*, 2014), however a 2013 survey of 18-30 year olds in China put smartphone ownership at 92% (Feng, 2013).

[17] See description at *Glossary*.

[18] As a vast body of literature has attested, there are inherent problems of translation and application of labels to cultural phenomena if such labels have been derived from alternative cultural settings and frameworks. The use of the term 'LGBT' (see Glossary)—or any other of the contemporary acronyms signifying communities of sexual and/or gender non-normativity—when applied to same-sex persons in China provides one such problematic example; it can be argued that attempts to enforce Western-derived terminology such as homosexual, bisexual, LGBT and MSM (see *List of Abbreviations*) in practice erect barriers to understanding the myriad complex and localized ways in which individuals of differing cultures understand, enact and embody their own sexual desires (see Chou, 2000; Engebretsen, 2014). Nevertheless, it must be conceded that even within the Chinese domain, many of the terms of identification used by and towards Chinese same-sex attracted people take their reference from such 'Western' terminology. The English word 'gay' appears with increasing frequency in Chinese language discussions, as does the term *ku'er* (酷儿, *queer*) which is a direct borrowing (in both sound and conceptualization) of the English term 'queer'. Other contemporary terms appearing in English-language academic discourse on China include *tongzhi* (同志, *comrade*, often used untranslated, see *Glossary*), and *lala* (拉拉, *lesbian*, see *Glossary*). However, despite these misgivings, many media organizations and activist groups continue to speak of the 'LGBT' community in China.

[19] See *Glossary*.

[20] A contested term, but generally taken to mean a usage and technology paradigm, incorporating new technologies, business strategies, and social trends, which represent a more dynamic and interactive user experience than its predecessor, *Web 1.0* (Murugesan, 2007).

communicative technologies should therefore be "seen as crucial in the development of the 'means of prosumption'" (2010, p.19). The rise of (especially female[21]) prosumers in highly broadband-enabled Asian countries has also been noted (Yue, 2011). Microfiction[22], irrespective of genre, offers a rich bounty of opportunity for prosumers, as it speeds up both the production and distribution processes, and allows users to share the content of other users as if it were their own[23]. Within the realms of social networking sites like the US-based *Twitter* or China's *Sina Weibo*[24], prosumers of microfiction have (theoretically) vast audiences on tap, allowing the appeal of their works to transcend the virtual boundaries of community-focused forums and break out into the mainstream.

This project sets out to examine the discursive features of queer-themed micronovels[25], incorporating empirical research contributions from producers and consumers, in order to site the material within the social media landscape of Chinese cyberspace. This, in turn, locates these phenomena within broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks relating to queer sexualities, sexual citizenship and the circuit of cultural production and distribution. As shown in Chapter 7, this thesis will demonstrate an important contribution to our understanding of production and consumption of BL fiction in China through the micronovel format, highlighting the ubiquity of heteronormativity and patriarchy within the literary worlds, and the way in which these tales of male same-sex intimacy are used as tools of (primarily) female play and performance in the remediation of sexual identity and desire. This thesis will build upon existing scholarship on BL fiction in Chinese cyberspace by proposing a 'circuits of queer cyberculture' framework, in addition to developing existing

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[21] Yue attributes this to "the emergence of a global pop Asia market, featuring new audiences, aesthetics, and forms, and [creative industrialization] becoming a contested arena for the forces of culture, media, and feminism" (2011, p.131).
[22] See *Glossary.*
[23] Known as 'reblogging'. For further discussion on the issue of authorship, see 4.2.1.
[24] In China, this site is known as *Xinlang Weibo* (新浪微博), and is available at www.weibo.com.
[25] See *Glossary.*

Discourse analysis methods to demonstrate how rich textual data from queer-themed Chinese microfiction can be extracted and analysed.

This primary chapter provides a contextualization of the research questions through a review of relevant empirical and descriptive literature. This is followed in Chapter 2 by a review of the appropriate theoretical frameworks, along with a critique of existing scholarship in these disciplines.

1.1 Project rationale and research questions

This project aims to analyse and explicate the phenomenon of queer microfiction through a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis[26] of the micronovels themselves, along with an applied thematic analysis of consumer/producer interviews. In contrast to previous studies, which have focused primarily on investigation into the consumer groups of such fiction (Yang, 2006; Zheng & Wu, 2009), this project seeks to establish links between the linguistic and discursive features of queer Chinese-language microfiction and observable social phenomena or cultural frameworks. While it has been established that the primary readership of this style of fiction is both female and heterosexual[27], this study will unpick the fabric of these micronovels to see how social structures such as heteronormativity[28] have become embedded within both the micronovel frameworks and the general Discourse. The transmission medium of these stories shows a key development in both the distribution and readership of the genre, owing to the capacity for increased accessibility to the material. The inclusion of gay and bisexual males[29] (who have

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[26] Using elements of the Discourse-Historical approach. See 3.3.1.1 for details.
[27] See 1.2.4 and 1.2.4.1.
[28] See 2.4.
[29] Accuracy of terminology is important to prevent ambiguities and misunderstandings between writer and reader; yet, to find oneself bogged down by terminology can also serve as a barrier to communication, if a preoccupation with the *mot juste* begins to take precedence over the underlying message that is to be imparted. Many respondents refer to themselves as both 'gay' and '*tongzhi*', so to quibble over which term is the most 'suitable' for this study would in effect be to compromise their own agency to self-label. Therefore, within the bounds of this thesis, I use the both the terms 'gay/lesbian' and '*tongzhi*' interchangeably throughout the text, but this is in no way an attempt to obfuscate the complexities and local specificities of these identities, but is done rather to facilitate discussion throughout the chapters.

been generally overlooked as consumers in previous studies of BL fiction) in the sample is significant, as despite the previously attested grounds for appeal to women offered by the genre (including challenges to gender conformity, heteropatriarchy[30] and female sexual subjectivity), my data responses demonstrate that such literature does also hold an appeal for same-sex attracted males, as has been suggested by Feng (2009). In this project, therefore, one of the first objectives I wish to explore is the elements of tension regarding representation of same-sex intimacies between producers and consumers of differing genders and sexual orientations.

The overarching research question of this project seeks to establish to what extent social phenomena become manifest within queer microfiction, and to what extent the thematic content of such microfiction (which by general consensus is accepted to be unrepresentative of real-life Chinese queer lives) affects social Discourse on same-sex intimacies within China. This project therefore seeks to analyse the development of queer expression and representation in Chinese cyberspace through the rapidly evolving microblogging culture in China. This project will problematize existing theories on sexual citizenship, and demonstrate how the cycles of production and consumption of queer culture apply to the contemporary Chinese context.

This project builds on previous research into Chinese social attitudes towards same-sex intimacies, which have noted a gradual shift in tolerance (but not necessarily acceptance) towards queer subjects in China (Cao *et al.*, 2010; Yu *et al.*, 2011; Ma *et al.*, 2012; Tang *et al.*, 2012). Using a development of the 'circuits of culture' theoretical framework (refer to 2.6.4 and 2.6.5), this project will examine the ways in which consumers create, represent, disseminate, and consume queer stories through Discourse analysis of queer-themed micronovels. This is achieved through an adaptation of a Discourse Analysis model formulated by James Paul Gee

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[30] See *Glossary.*

(2014), which examines *situated meanings*[31], *figured worlds*[32] and *Discourses* embedded within texts (methodology is detailed in Chapter 3). In turn, data from this analysis, along with data collected from producers and consumers of the genre, will be used to assess how the presence of such material in Chinese cyberspace contributes to the greater cultural Discourse on homosexuality in China. Central research questions posed by this project are outlined below:

Micro-level Fields of Inquiry

1. **How are 'situated meanings' embodied within queer microfiction?** How do these meanings manifest significance, practice, identities, politics and imagery within the texts?

2. **How are 'figured worlds' embodied within queer microfiction?** How do these conceptual frameworks manifest significance, practice, identities, politics and imagery within the texts?

3. **How are 'Discourses' embodied within queer microfiction?** How do these Discourses manifest significance, practice, identities, politics and imagery within the texts?

Macro-level Fields of Inquiry

1. **How are queer sexualities represented in microfiction?** What are the key themes of such fiction? Do the stories represent a challenge to heteronormativity, or do they reinforce it?

2. **How does the 'circuits of culture' framework apply to queer microblog literature in Chinese cyberspace?** How

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[31] Situated meanings involve the analysis of the formulation of meaning that arises through specific contextual frameworks within an utterance or instance of text. See introduction of Chapter 4 for further details.
[32] A figured world represents a shared space of understanding between author and reader of cultural 'normality' against which people, practices (activities), things or interactions can be measured and appraised. See introduction of Chapter 5 for further details.

do representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation interface in the Chinese context, and what effect does this have on the negotiation of sexual citizenship?

This thesis proposes a development of Johnson's circuits of culture model (1986), in which I hypothesize that, confronted with heteronormative social structures—constructed along a gender binary and framed through patriarchal familial and social relationships—China's cyberspace has offered a new platform for marginalized individuals (both queer-identified and those heterosexual consumers who enjoy fantasizing about same-sex intimacies) to engage, navigate and negotiate space to tell their stories. In doing so, they find opportunities to renegotiate citizenship based on sexual identity. Therefore, blending the critiques of literature and theory, this study creates a 'circuit of queer cyberculture' framework, through which microfiction will be analysed. This framework proposes that, through an emerging form of 'cultural self-determination' rooted in sexual and gender identity and the declaration and negotiation of sexual citizenship, netizens [33] who experience social marginalization in the real world through their attraction to representation of queer lives begin to indigenize circuits of popular culture observable in mainstream media platforms by creating and distributing their own works of art and fiction online.

1.2 Background and context: review of descriptive and empirical literature

In order to prepare the reader for this investigation, this chapter began by outlining the project rationale, highlighting the gaps in knowledge that are being addressed and explaining the value of the study. Next, I will review descriptive and substantive literature on Chinese cyberspace to contextualize the research, outlining the regulatory framework and demographic composition of China's online spaces,

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[33] Internet citizens; Internet users.

which constitutes the site of my investigation. Discussion of the global impact of social networking sites and the development of microblogging as a communicative tool will follow, which foregrounds a review of the evolution of the micronovel as a distinct style of storytelling, and its subsequent popularity in China among users of social networking sites. The origins of Boys' Love as a literary genre and its global development are presented, along with an appraisal of previous scholarship on both the global landscape and on those studies which focus on China. The chapter concludes with an outline for the subsequent chapters.

1.2.1 Internet in China

Since China came 'online' in 1994 (Yang, 2003), there has been ceaseless debate over the political ramifications that Internet connectivity with the outside world will have on China's authoritarian government. Information communication technology is an essential tool for expanding the country's economy and achieving commercial competitiveness with the rest of the world (Atkins, 2003; Zhou, 2008; Chen & Ang, 2011; MacKinnon, 2011). However, such open forms of connection stand at odds with authoritarian styles of leadership, as they may also empower networks of communication that could threaten the political hegemony of China's ruling party (Chen & Ang, 2011; Esarey & Xiao, 2011) by creating an "alternative news agency" able to subvert state control over the flow of information (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Accordingly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has gone to great lengths to build a highly-regulated environment that works in cooperation with its political ethos of a harmonious society and social order. In doing so, it has constructed one of the most sophisticated Internet filtering and monitoring systems in the world (Cherry, 2005; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; King *et al.*, 2013). The advent of social networking sites has revolutionized the face of the Internet, and Chinese cyberspace has proved no exception. The capacity for instant communication and the

rapid promulgation of large volumes of information provides Chinese netizens with opportunities for discussion on social and political issues that for many years have been forbidden from other forms of media. Conversely, this presents an increasing challenge to China's Golden Shield project, which has sought to regulate Internet content. There is a general consensus that the Internet in China has both expanded and altered the discursive terrain, while allowing citizens to mobilize in new ways (Leibold, 2011; King *et al.*, 2013).

1.2.1.1   Demographics

China's Internet user-base is growing year on year. Figures as of December 2015 estimate China's online population to be 688 million, which amounts to an Internet penetration rate of 50.3% (CNNIC, 2016) [34]. This represents the largest netizen population by country in the world, although in terms of global Internet penetration rate, it occupies only 94th position[35] (Real Time Statistics Project, 2016). Social commentators have argued that, particularly because of the anonymity that the Internet affords, netizens are a social force worth examining, as they are one of the few categories of Chinese citizen who voice critical opinion (Lei, 2011; Nip & Fu, 2016). Demographics of China's Internet users at the end of 2015 (CNNIC, 2016) show the typical netizen to be male[36]; below the age of 39[37]; unmarried and educated to at least middle school level[38]; residing in the coastal and metropolitan areas in the north, east and south; and earning a monthly income of less than RMB3,000[39]. The mobile phone is the most popular device used for Internet access by new Internet users (71.5%). Chinese netizens are more politically opinionated, critical of the state,

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[34] See *List of Abbreviations*.
[35] For comparison, the UK ranks 13th, the US ranks 19th, and India ranks 134th for Internet penetration.
[36] The male to female ratio is 53.6:46.4.
[37] 71.5% of Chinese netizens are aged between 10 and 39. Compared to the previous year, Internet use is increasing among users aged below 10 and above 40.
[38] 37.4% of Chinese netizens have been educated to junior middle school level. A further 29.2% have graduated from high school. In the Chinese education system, pupils aged 6-12 attend primary school, followed by junior middle school from 12 to 15 (which is the last compulsory level of schooling). Only 11.2% have an undergraduate-level of education or higher.
[39] 60.1% of netizens have an income of less than RMB3,000 per month (£351 per month at time of publication [GBP £1=RMB ¥8.58]).

and supportive of democratic norms than users of traditional media (Lei, 2011). However, online expression in China is not equal across different demographic groups, and only one tenth of Internet users are active content contributors in online discussions (Shen *et al.*, 2009). This suggests that the majority of netizens are silent observers (Stockmann & Luo, 2015).

1.2.1.2   Regulations and legal framework

Since the emergence of the Internet in China, commentators have questioned how the creation of a digital highway will influence the political workings of the world's largest authoritarian state (B. Meng, 2011). In order to assess such questions, scholars have focused first on the regulatory framework that the CCP[40] has imposed in order to control and monitor the digital landscape. According to Zhao (2009), as many as 12 government agencies in China are involved in controlling and monitoring the content of the Internet, though their powers and responsibilities vary between organizations [41]. However, responsibility for content monitoring and restriction is also delegated to Internet Service Providers, and to the netizens themselves, who are expected to practice self-censorship (Liang & Lu, 2010; Ramzy, 2011).

Making reference to the nation's constitutional stance on freedom of speech, the State Council Information Office of China's white paper entitled 'Conditions of China's Internet' declares that "Chinese citizens enjoy full freedom of expression on the Internet in accordance with the law" (People's Daily, 2010). However, the exact

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[40] See *List of Abbreviations.*
[41] These agencies include the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT), the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the State Council Information Office (SCIO), the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), the State Secrecy Bureau (SBB) and China's judiciary.

nature of the kind of expression deemed to be "in accordance with the law" is not clearly defined:

> *Chinese Internet regulations contain vague and broad prohibitions on content that, for example, 'harms the honor or interests of the nation,' 'spreads rumors,' or 'disrupts national policies on religion'. Chinese law does not define these concepts. In China, the government places the burden on Internet service and content providers to monitor and remove content based on these vague standards and to maintain records of such activity and report it to the government.*

<div align="right">(Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2011)</div>

Internet regulations in China are subject to frequent change (Lum, 2006; Endeshaw, 2009). Upon the announcement of such revisions to Internet regulations, website operators in China are required to re-register in order to continue operating (Ho, 2010). The requirement to obtain registration of online materials with the Press and Publication Administration is purportedly to observe the ban on well-known forms of 'undesirable' content and protect minors from materials that can supposedly cause them harm (Endeshaw, 2009). It is while negotiating "the world's largest and oldest bureaucracy" (Lagerkvist, 2005, p.190) that many websites fall foul of the regulations and have their activities suspended.

The advent of social network sites and the popularity of blogging in China have resulted in a tightening of regulations relating to the dissemination of news and opinion. The 'Internet News Information Services Regulations', issued by the Information Office of the State Council on September 25th 2010, provide legal directives on three kinds of informational websites. The first type comprises authorized sites with a government licence to solely republish news and information already disseminated by the official media. They must be registered with the

authorities and, in agreement with Article 19 of the Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information Services are subject to restrictions on the type of content they can publish[42]. The second category consists of sites that carry not only reports from official sources but also gather information independently from non-print news sources. The directive states that these sites must only cover subjects for which they have been officially accredited, and must employ at least five full-time editors with at least three years' experience with an official news agency (Xinhua, 2005). This is significant for this study, as these restrictions concern Chinese web portals such as www.sina.com (which hosts *Weibo*, the site of this study) and www.sohu.com owing to the kind of information that is circulated thereon. The third category comprises all other sites. They are not only subject to the restrictions imposed on the first two categories, but are also banned from publishing articles based on information that they have gathered themselves. They must employ at least 10 editors, of whom five must have at least three years' experience with an official news agency, and they must be registered by an entity with at least RMB10 million[43] in capital (Xinhua, 2005).

The combined effect of these regulations makes it impossible to set up any sort of independent news website. Internet regulations in China are therefore broad enough in their scope as to be quite ambiguous, and as such, are intended to encourage netizens and Internet service providers (ISPs) to err on the side of caution regarding online expression. Anonymous use of the Internet is in theory prevented, as compliance with Chinese laws and regulations requires that all Internet users in China have to register before being able to access the Internet (Herold, 2011), and Internet Cafés are similarly regulated (Liang & Lu, 2010).

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[42] Such websites must not publish information that (amongst others) violates the basic principles of the Chinese constitution; poses a threat to national security; spreads rumours or disturbs social order; undermines social stability or state unity; spreads obscenity, violence or pornography; or infringes upon people's reputations or legal rights (Xinhua, 2005).
[43] £1.17 million at time of publication (GBP £1=RMB ¥8.58).

In recent years, social media has become the buzzword of the Internet, as massive communities of netizens have linked together across cyberspace. Social networks have revolutionized the way we interact. In today's media-saturated, consumer-focused world, social advertising has changed the face of global promotion. Today, every feasible consumable item or event comes with a barrage of social-networked based advertisements and media tie-ins. The first recognizable social network site emerged in 1997 (boyd & Ellison, 2007), and since then, the importance of such sites has increased exponentially.

1.2.2 Social networking sites (SNSs)

Social networking sites (SNSs) are defined by boyd and Ellison as:

> *…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.*

(boyd & Ellison, 2007, p.211)

Therefore, social networking is the sharing of online information within a defined online community. The explosion of social networking sites on the Internet over the past decade has been a global phenomenon, and 'social media' has become a mainstay of contemporary marketing. Globally, the popularity of sites such as Facebook and Twitter has changed the way in which people communicate and share information. China has proved no exception. With an online community estimated at 688 million (CNNIC, 2016), China has one of the biggest Internet presences in the world. However, it is a community that often finds itself locked away from the free

flow of information taking place outside its own borders. Consequently, competition among domestic SNSs has intensified.

1.2.2.1   Microblogging: a 'byte-size' communication revolution

Microblogging, whereby Internet users share small-size yet high-volume pieces of digital content with others through a social network environment, has taken the world by storm. By extension, the effects of this online method of communication also spill over into the offline world. This development has been facilitated by three factors: ubiquitous network connectivity; a critical mass of users; and the creation of new types of device that make it easy for people to capture content (Jain & Slaney, 2013). The popularity of microblogs can therefore be attributed to the resultant capacity for the spontaneous sharing of life experiences and personal opinions.

Along with revolutionizing basic online communication, the microblogging environment has led to the creation or adaptation of specific forms of cultural art to suit the medium. Microfiction, or the telling and reading of very short stories through the microblog format, has come to prominence over the last decade as an important development of the short literature genre. The brevity of microfiction relates to the philosophy of modern living. The world, it is often claimed, is getting smaller, as globalization of the economy, media and commerce continue their encroachment into all sectors of human existence. At the start of the 21st century, we live in a world of media saturation, where ever more products and services compete for our much-divided attention. Consequently, small size frequently leads to increased consumption and participation, as these items can be slotted into our busy schedules, or be consumed alongside other small 'bite-sized' nuggets of digital nourishment. Since the inception of the smartphone and of tablet[44] computers, the way in which we fill our down-time has changed. Whereas previously people carried books or

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[44] See *Glossary.*

newspapers to pass commuting time on the bus or subway, or to fill waiting time for appointments, one now sees an increasing (although globally uneven) trend towards consumption of digital media (Yourgrau, 2009; Dickey & Lewis, 2012). Online media streaming, microblogs, podcasts, adverts, pop songs/videos and social media represent small individual pieces of entertainment that can be pieced together to fill our available time (Berman *et al.*, 2011; Persaud & Azhar, 2012). This demonstrates the true potential of microblog fiction versus more traditional forms of literature, as a reader does not need to invest long periods of time into a particular text, nor has to fragment their reading enjoyment due to frequent interruptions to their leisure time. This data revolution, it can be argued, "now allows us to tell richer stories using an order of magnitude fewer taps [of the keyboard]" (Jain & Slaney, 2013, p.87)

1.2.3 Microfiction

Microfiction as a genre of literature has received an inconsistent degree of academic study. Perhaps the reason for this disparity lies in a lack of general consensus on what constitutes a work of 'microfiction' as opposed to a short story. Known variously as 'microfiction', 'flash fiction' or 'sudden fiction', these terms generally refer to any work of fiction comprising less than between 250 words (Stern, 1996) and 400 words (Zavala, 2005). Masih (2013) takes the delineation even further, explaining the development of sub-categories of microfiction:

> *We now have 50 word stories (dribbles), 55-word stories (sometimes termed nanofiction, and found, among other places, on an East Indian blog), 100-word stories (drabbles), quick fiction, fast fiction, microfiction, furious fiction, sudden and flash fiction, postcard fiction, napkin fiction (from Esquire online) minute-long stories, smoke-long stories, skinny stories, vest-pocket stories and pill-size stories (from the forties),*

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pocket-size stories, palm-size stories, and… I am sure there are

others, with more to come.

(Masih, 2013, loc. 665)

The focus of my inquiry is on what Nelles (2012) terms 'Twitter fiction'. As the name suggests, these stories are written and formatted to conform to the publishing requirements of microblog sites like Twitter. Such stories are restricted to 140 typographical characters, which cuts the length of a work down to less than approximately 30 words (if writing in English). Although I am analysing fiction published on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo instead of Twitter, the publishing requirement of 140 characters is the same for both sites. Chinese language scholarship on such works of fiction predominately use the term *weixiaoshuo* (微小说, *micronovel*), so Masih's categorization notwithstanding, I shall henceforth refer to 140-character social media-driven fictional works as 'micronovels' (for the works themselves) and 'microfiction' (for the genre).

1.2.3.1   Rising popularity of Chinese online micronovels

Although the contemporary transmission medium makes us think of microfiction as a modern phenomenon, there is evidence to suggest that very short works of literature have a long and rich history, particularly in Asia. According to Qi (2009), 'flash fiction' in China can be traced all the way back to the creation myths of *Nüwa*, *Fuxi* and *Pangu*, the former of which first appears in the work of Lie Yukou (列圄寇, circa 400BCE). The story of *Pangu*, which appeared some 500 years later during the Warring States period, comprised only 350 words (Qi, 2009). Certainly, 'short, short stories' are nothing new, as far as China is concerned, but according to Qi, "[i]t has taken over two full millennia for flash fiction to evolve to where it is today—as a *white-hot*, important literary genre" (2009, l.968, emphasis in original). While Qi's description may be somewhat exuberant, it is indisputable that the

popularity of microfiction has increased, in part owing to the rapid dissemination opportunities afforded by new technologies (Qi, 2009; W. Meng, 2011; Li, 2013; Wang & Liu, 2013; Zhong, 2013), which allow millions to try their hands at creative writing. Readers of web literature (of which microfiction is a subgenre) topped 274 million in 2013, according to information released by CNNIC (2014). In China, this rise of this style of *wangluo wenhua* (网络文化, *cyberculture*) has been particularly noticeable within social media networks. In October of 2010, Sina Weibo ran their first microfiction competition (W. Meng, 2011; Zhang, 2013), which saw over 230,000 entries and generated over 1.6 million associated posts in the following month (Wang & Liu, 2013). In 2011, the Yangzi Evening News organized a microfiction contest, in which a total of 90,000 people participated (W. Meng, 2011). Microblog fiction writers come from all sectors of society, and the medium serves "to provide everyone with a microphone; micro novels have become a tool for each individual to broadcast their own voice to limitless social groups" (Zhang, 2013, p.66).

Wang and Liu (2013) claim that literature has undergone a crisis in modern society, as people are showing less interest in reading and have less knowledge of traditional literature. This claim is debatable: while some scholars have begun to speak of a *hou wenxue shidai* (后文学时代, 'post-literature age') in contemporary China (Huang, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2012), this is primarily through the lens of the evolution of the distribution medium, rather than as evidence of the death of literature, per se (Huang, 2003; Wang & Liu, 2014). The reasons behind these changes are numerous, ranging from fundamental shifts in working patterns and the associated effect this exerts upon recreation time, through to advances in technology which have changed the way we interact with one another. Microfiction stands at the juncture between these two factors, representing a convenient and easily-consumable cultural literary artefact. Microfiction also appeals to aspects of youth cyber-culture, primarily the desire to share content and opinion through a readily

accessible medium. Reading and writing microfiction has thus become a fashionable entertainment activity, and is intrinsically linked with the way in which netizens promote and share their ideas within their own online social networks (Wang & Liu, 2013). The construction of online identity is an important factor for consideration in this regard, for which one must consider the type of material being shared, and the impact this has upon how a person is 'seen' by society at large. Conducting research into micronovels in 2011, Meng has identified the following seven characteristics shared by all works of the genre:

1. *Micronovels are completed online, and are published and distributed through the format of microblogs.*

2. *Micronovels are convenient to transmit and read, and should be less than 140 characters.*

3. *Micronovels must be purposive.*

4. *Micronovels must have a plot, and must emphasize an emotional trigger-point.*

5. *Micronovels must contain 1-3 key scenes. The relevance of these scenes will be disclosed at the end of the story. The order/form of the story should be clear cut.*

6. *Micronovels are an extension of microblogging, and place emphasis on interaction with the reader.*

7. *Micronovels have the possibility to be easily transferred in the same way as multimedia texts.*

(W. Meng, 2011, p.118)

As this study of queer online microfiction will demonstrate, Meng's 'recipe' for a micronovel is overly restrictive; although points 1, 2, 6 and 7 hold true in all cases,

many examples of microfiction tick only some of the remaining boxes in terms of construction.

1.2.4 Boys' Love as a literary genre

The popularity of *Boys' Love* (BL) stories/visual arts in China (and indeed around the world) owes its origin to a form of Japanese pop culture which emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. The development of BL fiction as a distinct genre of art and literature within Japanese culture has been traced through the works of Welker and McLelland (McLelland, 2000b, 2006; Welker, 2006; McLelland & Welker, 2015) who have concluded that the genre emerged as a subgenre of *shôjo* (处女, *Girls' comics*) manga cartoons of the early 1970s. Wang (2011), however, traces the origins of BL fiction back to the development of *tanbi (*耽美, *Indulge in beauty*[45]*)* comics focusing on male-male romance in the mid-1960s, and provides a detailed historical and cultural analysis of the depiction of same-sex intimacies in Japanese literature.

The narratives of early *shôjo manga* usually transcended Japan's borders, being set "in the borrowed psychic space of a romanticized Europe of the past, thus visually and narratively transporting *shôjo* readers to a world they can only fantasize about inhabiting" (Welker, 2006, p.841). According to Suter (2013), 'gender bending' and exoticism have always been central features of *shôjo manga*, whereby "both elements functioned in a similar way, to create a fantasy world that constituted an escape from reality and at the same time provided a space for critical reflection on gender and cultural norms" (Suter, 2013, p.546). This escapism element is also observed by Galbraith, who notes that consumers of this style of literature "experience intimacy as transgressive potential cordoned off from reality" (Galbraith, 2011, p.216). As a literary aesthetic, *shôjo* provides the reader with beautiful boy

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[45] See *Glossary* for further details.

characters (known as 美少年, *bishōnen*[46]) which are "visually and physically neither male nor female" (Welker, 2006, p.842), whose "erotic interests are directed at other beautiful boys, but [whose] tastes are not exclusively homosexual" (ibid., p.842). In the early 1990s, Japanese *tanbi manga* series began to spread via Taiwan into mainland China (Feng, 2009). Within Chinese discourse, BL and slash fiction[47] belong to the genre of erotic fiction, "in which online fiction sites are increasingly challenging the limits of state regulation" (Hockx, 2015, p.115). This style of fiction holds direct appeal to female readers who are tired of seeing women "presented as passive sex objects in traditional male-dominated literature" (Yang & Xu, 2015, p.136; see also Zheng & Wu, 2009). Accordingly, as non-participatory observers of erotic behaviour between males, female readers can immerse themselves both in detailed descriptions of sexual scenes and the beauty of the male body "without moral guilt or anxiety" (Yang & Xu, 2015, p.136).

The erasure of positive depictions of women within BL narratives has been highlighted in several studies (Blair, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008; Zhang, 2011). Feng (2009) reasons that popular gender-swap themes in certain works of BL fiction (where men menstruate and/or bear children, a style of fiction specifically known as *bianshen* [变身, body-swap) are illustrative of problematic relationships that female consumers' hold towards their own bodies. Further still, Yang and Xu (2015) conclude that BL fiction problematizes the fixed nature of sex, gender and sexuality, contesting long-established male/masculine versus female/feminine binaries, yet concede that tension exists between gay men and the hard-core BL fans (see 1.2.4.1 in this chapter) regarding fantasy versus reality when it comes to male homosexuality. In this project, I will further explore this element of tension through the inclusion in my sample of same-sex attracted males who are also fans of BL fiction, to understand the relationship between these differing social facets.

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[46] See *Glossary* for further details.
[47] See 1.2.4.2.

1.2.4.1   *Fujoshi/funü*: female fans of BL fiction

Female consumers of BL fiction in Japan have become known as *fujoshi* (腐女子), which is commonly translated into English as 'rotten girls'. This term, first appearing at the beginning of the 21ˢᵗ century, emerged as a humorous and self-deprecating moniker among fans of same-sex romantic fiction. According to McLelland and Welker (2015, pp.12–13), *fujoshi* (腐女子) is a homophone of the Japanese term *fujoshi* (婦女子), meaning 'girls and women', wherein BL fans have replaced the first kanji character to create the neologism 'rotten girls'. As BL literature has increased in popularity throughout the Asian region, so specific locales have rendered this term in their own languages, for example *hujyosi* (후죠시) in Korea, and *funü* (腐女)[48] in China. Most are somewhat proud to be different and a member of a "rotten family, as "such virtual kinships have given many Chinese youth the opportunity to develop alternative life-styles"[49] (Jacobs, 2012), as queer cultural practices are distinct from offline, more fixed lived identities. These queer fashions have become important instigators for reimagining the traditional nuclear family and its power and gender dynamics (ibid.).

1.2.4.2   Conflating genres: the BL spectrum in China

Within the broad spectrum of art forms celebrating male same-sex intimacies, several distinct yet interlinked sub-genres should be noted, particularly with reference to the multimedia nature of this project. My aim here is not necessarily to underscore the differences between each separate sub-genre—indeed, some scholars may argue that, from a purist perspective, this project conflates several styles within the collection. Yet, guided by a poststructuralist approach to Discourse analysis

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[48] Retains the character alteration observable in the original Japanese term, with a slight change in the tone of the first character from *fù* (妇) to *fǔ* (腐). Note that 妇 is the simplified version of the traditional Chinese character 婦, which remains observable in the Japanese term.
[49] The notion of 'queer' historically includes the experimentation with sexuality by heterosexually-identified people (see 2.2)

whereby the reader becomes the focus of inquiry (see 3.3.1 for distinctions between Discourse analysis and critical Discourse analysis and my use of terminology in this regard). I have sought to include texts which writers (and readers, usually through their function as prosumers) understand or recognize to be part of the BL genre[50]. From my own observations, readers of BL fiction within China, particularly within the microfiction realm, seem to observe little distinction between the differing forms of 'BL[51]' fiction; '*tongzhi*' fiction; '*yaoi* (やおい)[52]' fiction and '*danmei*' (耽美, *slash*[53]) fiction; therefore, scholarly insight into each genre should be considered as a whole in order to build a more comprehensive picture of consumption motivation. This is particularly useful in this project, as many of the previously stated theories which explain motivational factors behind female consumption of literature depicting sexual relationships between men can be seen to overlap between the genres, and are observable within many of the responses of my interviewees. Indeed, as Pagliassotti (2008) has concluded, despite some internal differences, both *yaoi* and slash fiction basically provide writers and readers with very similar pleasures; namely those of "shifting point[s] of view/multiple identifications, androgynous protagonist[s], egalitarian love relationships, and graphic depictions of sexual activities" (Pagliassotti, 2008, p.71).

The Japanese term '*yaoi*' refers to works of literature or comics depicting male same-sex intimacies, and is the genre from which the term *danmei* originates (Williams, 2015, sec.1). More recently, the term *yaoi* has attracted negative associations through its referral (primarily in Western contexts) to sexually explicit BL stories (Pagliassotti, 2008, p.60) or to pornographic animations. Galbraith (2011) has examined female motivation for *yaoi* consumption, claiming that readers are

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[50] Data selection criteria are fully explicated in 3.2.1.
[51] NB: although BL in English equates to Boys' Love, in Mandarin the expression can also equate to *boli* (玻璃, *crystal*). For further details, see *Glossary*.
[52] *Yaoi* is the Japanese literature genre from which the term *danmei* originates (Williams, 2015, sec.1).
[53] Slash commonly refers to fan-produced, homoerotic stories involving celebrities or characters from popular literature, although the precise meaning of this term around the globe appears to differ in its specificity. Wang (2011) argues that approximation of *danmei* with slash comes from link between the *tanbi* and *doujin* comics in Japan, the latter of which focused on recreating love stories between two pre-existing male characters.

deliberately seeking out fiction that offers a form of escapism to the female reader from the shackles of normative relationship paradigms, stating that "*yaoi* erases the female in fantasy because female-male or even female-female couples are too close to reality" (Galbraith, 2011, p.213).

Drawing on Fujimoto Yukari's assertion that gender-bending experimentation was essential for *shôjo* readers owing to their inability to "positively accept their own sexuality as women" (Fujimoto Yukari, 1998, in Welker, 2006, p.842), Welker goes on to conclude that BL manga has historically had the effect of "liberating readers not just from patriarchy, but from gender dualism and heteronormativity" (Welker, 2006, p.843). It is from this perspective that I begin my investigation of BL microfiction within Chinese cyberspace, to explore through Discourse analysis and respondent interviews how the original impetus of the genre has translated transnationally.

1.3 Thesis outline and overview

This chapter has provided the reader with an overview of the landscape of digital communication and publishing in Chinese cyberspace, demonstrating both the regulatory constraints and the development of alternative publishing media, allowing for the development of microfiction as a multimedia storytelling genre. The history and development of BL fiction has been detailed, through reference to a body of pre-existing scholarship, both on BL fiction in a global setting, and within the specific locale of China. Motivations and research aims of the study have been outlined, demonstrating gaps in present academic literature whilst highlighting the contribution to knowledge that this study will provide.

Chapter 2 provides explanation of the theoretical frameworks that underpin this interdisciplinary study, guiding the reader through existing literature on the

project's 'micro-level' concepts relating to sexuality, citizenship and cultural studies before demonstrating how these theories and approaches integrate into the project's 'macro-level' framework of 'circuits of cultures'. Finally, a theoretical proposition for an approach for the study of Chinese-language queer microfiction is presented.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed methodological approach for the project, explaining how data has been extracted and processed from the two distinct data sources, before demonstrating the approach to textual analysis that has been applied to the works of microfiction presented within the project. Discussion of research ethics and researcher positionality outlines the integrity of the project and its approach to data collection, and highlights considerations of potential researcher bias, along with the ways in which these have been overcome or addressed.

Following the textual analysis design outlined in Chapter 3, **Chapters 4 to 6** explore Chinese-language queer microfiction through the aspects of situated meanings (Chapter 4), figured worlds (Chapter 5), and Discourses (Chapter 6). Drawing on a range of data extracted from 40 individual works of queer microfiction in combination with 39 interviews with producers, consumers and prosumers[54] of queer microfiction in Mainland China, each chapter offers a differing element of Discourse analysis of the genre through five individual and distinct *tools of inquiry (TOI)* which arise from my adaptation of Gee's analytical framework (see 3.3.1.2 for in-depth discussion), exploring the complex relationships between the representation of queer online subjects and the (primarily) heterosexual cultural framework from which they originate, and into which they are received.

Finally**, Chapter 7** offers concluding remarks and observations to the project, highlighting the key findings and contributions to knowledge that have been demonstrated over the course of the thesis. Reflections on the project design are

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[54] See *Glossary*.

considered, along with proposals for ways in which the project can be developed for future research.

Several appendices are included at the end of the document for the reader's information and consultation, including full texts and translations of the microfiction pieces discussed in this project, along with a directory of images accompanying the texts, and selected biographical details of the research participants. An interview schedule, along with ethics forms relating to the collection of human subject data are also provided in this section.

2   Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Introduction

This is an interdisciplinary project, seeking to combine several distinct and interlinked theories, concepts and frameworks to build an effective tool for the analysis of online queer-themed microfiction and its Discourses. Chapter 1 has reviewed the existing literature on the BL phenomenon, both within the global setting, and within the localized Asian and Chinese realms. Building on this body of literature, this chapter will begin by reviewing the important theoretical literature on sexuality, heteronormativity, citizenship and culture, which I will ultimately interweave to construct a 'circuits of queer cyberculture' theoretical framework. This framework aims to provide a tool for analysis of queer-themed microfiction through contextualization of the manifestation of social attitudes and of aspects of social conditioning evident within both the literary genre itself, and within the prevailing Discourse evoked by its producers and consumers. I therefore argue that this phenomenon constitutes both an act of cultural self-determination and a declaration of sexual citizenship, albeit with discretely differing objectives based upon sexual and gender identity within the dominant sections of the production/consumption communities.

The theoretical themes presented here have been selected for the contribution that they offer in illuminating this project. Background literature will be introduced to illustrate or contest each of the theoretical frameworks. However, it is not practical to provide a full review of the academic literature for each topic or sub-topic here— the result would amount to a thesis by itself. I will therefore selectively engage with the salient details of each framework in this chapter as informed by the project aims and research questions, whilst referring the reader to key texts and scholars within each discipline, which can be consulted for a more general overview.

2.2 Sexuality

The term 'sexuality' carries with it many shades of meaning (Weeks, 2011). In the Western system of sexual classification, "the biological sex of the desired objects together with the sex of the desiring subject is taken as the main factor for defining sexual identities" (Motschenbacher, 2010, p.7). Yet matters concerning sexuality range from not just the biological divisions of the sexes, or sexual behaviour and reproduction, but also to our own conceptualization and construction of personal identity. Throughout the years, sexologists and sociologists have debated and often redefined the term; from Krafft-Ebing (1886) and Freud's (1905) early work in developing the idea of sexuality as something that delineated different categories of being, through to Foucault's (1976) later declaration of sexuality as a historical construct, and thus something that is discursively produced.

The idea of an individual sense of sexual identity became prominent during the 1970s, as a way of "affirming a positive sense of self by those whose sexualities had been rejected by an oppressive culture" (Weeks, 2011, p.186). Today, one could argue that our sexualities are more freely and visibly expressed than ever before, particularly within Western cultures. The forces of mass marketing and the inescapable reach of global media have created a barrage of sexualized imagery designed to motivate spending through mild titillation (Weeks, 2007; Plummer, 2015). Yet for those who do not identify with the normative images of gender and sexuality being presented to them, sexual identity and the reclamation of space in society become vitally important (Valentine, 1993; Bell & Valentine, 1995). This notion of space and sexuality will be expanded upon in 2.3.

The sexual revolution observed during the 1960s and 1970s in America and Europe represents both a huge leap forward in shaping the formation of distinct sexual identities, and a divergence of opinion as to what those created identities comprise. The most visible examples of LGBTQ culture often comprise specific

identities[55], which in recent decades have become held up as stereotypical examples by the media, and to which other LGBTQ individuals may struggle to relate. The issue of sexual diversity brings with it challenges to the notions of classification and belonging, which are underpinning psychological factors in human development (Hagerty *et al.*, 1996). Identity provides us with security; an affirmation of who we are, and of how society perceives us. According to Weeks, sexual identity is a concept that bridges the divide between public and private (2011; see also Richardson, 2000a, 2000b); however, this dichotomy creates issues of its own, highlighted through the way in which the post-1970s gay movement can be seen to have acted as a double-edged sword, as the politicizing of sexuality and the creation of a strongly visible gay community has also contributed to the perceived division between 'normal life' and 'gay life', thus pushing people to lead double lives (Weeks, 2007, p.148; see also Richardson, 2000b; Richardson & Monro, 2012). This politicizing results from— and in turn can exacerbate—practices of social discrimination towards individuals who do not conform to heteronormative codes of behaviour. Discussing Brown's (1995) work on 'wounded attachments' and the cultural politics of shame, Munt concludes that:

> *If gay rights = bourgeois rights, and queer activism is based on*
> *an antagonistic sense of inferiority, fuelling an acquisitive thrust*
> *for the purchase of norms, then it is not surprising that the poor*
> *and the 'other' excluded become consolidated by a double*
> *abjection, once over again, this time by a rancorous jury of*
> *peers.*

(Munt, 2008, p.26)

Recent scholarship from New Zealand has noted a shift once again, as increasingly more gay people appear to 'normalize' and 'routinize' their sexual orientation as a way of incorporating it into their everyday life, rather than making their sexuality

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[55] Such as drag performers, or participants in fetish cultures.

their primary identity (Adams *et al.*, 2014). Lisa Duggan's work (2002) on 'homonormativity'[56] is important in this regard. Whereas recent history has seen the struggle for a place within society as 'a gay man', for instance, now the challenge has shifted to be accepted as 'a man who is (amongst other things) gay'.

The title of this project may lead the reader to presume that only issues of male homosexualities are relevant to the study; however, the nature of this literary genre and of its consumers offers no such simple categorization. Many consumers of BL fiction have been identified by previous literature as heterosexual females (Wood, 2006; Akatsuka, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008; Wang & Liu, 2008; Feng, 2009; Zheng & Wu, 2009). Therefore, in addition to considering issues of sexuality through the lens of male same-sex attraction, one must also consider how heterosexual female sexuality is being discursively treated, and examine the underlying social structures of heteronormative patriarchy (see 2.4 in this chapter) and sexual oppression, which have been proposed as driving forces behind female consumption of male same-sex fiction (Isola, 2008). These issues are explored both through textual analysis of the microfiction, and through discussions with female consumers of the genre. It must also be acknowledged that, by definition, 'queer' historically includes the experimentation with sexuality by heterosexually-identified people, ranging from intellectual engagement with queer theory[57] to same-sex intimacy performed as commerce or for entertainment (Escoffier, 2003).

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[56] A complement term to heteronormativity (see 2.4 in this chapter), homonormativity refers to issues and problems of privilege observable within the queer community, particularly in respect to the way that white privilege, capitalism, sexism, transmysogyny and cissexism impact upon full social inclusivity for certain individuals.

[57] As Thomas (2016, p.19) notes, the straight intellectual "can be 'critically queer' to his own heart's content without ever having to suffer the heartbreaking and ass-kicking consequences of being really queer in a murderously homophobic world".

2.2.1 Cultural construction of sexuality and gender

In recent decades, many scholars have examined sexuality and gender as cultural constructions (Cucchiari, 1981; Caplan, 1987; Farrer, 2002; Tamale, 2011; El Feki, 2014; Plummer, 2015). Such an approach requires the treatment of gender and sexuality as "symbols, invested with meaning by the society in question, as all symbols are" (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981, p.1), rather than as concepts with universal and unvarying attributes. Ortner and Whitehead conclude that the threefold effects of this style of approach are to underscore diversity in the meanings of gender and sexuality between cultures, to highlight inter-cultural similarities where they do occur, and to demonstrate the social and cultural factors which exert the greatest effect upon the culture of gender (ibid.).

A person's embodiment[58], their sexuality, and their gender identity are never exclusively a matter of personal agency. As this review will establish, these notions have distinct and pervasive cultural underpinnings, and even for those who do not ascribe to the dominant localized normative behavioural standards, their construction of personal identity will always be fashioned in a way that bears some relation to these hegemonic structures, which will vary to greater or lesser degrees from culture to culture, but also across time and space, meaning that these constructions are not ahistorical. Dominant social Discourses on sexuality have the effect of controlling and regulating individual forms of sexual expression (Brickell, 2009; Gagnon & Simon, 2011; Weeks, 2014; Plummer, 2015)—not simply in a physical sense of restricting or forbidding specific sexual practices or activity, but also in the way that the act of transgressing normative behavioural standards requires the individual to mentally engage with the overarching Discourse as a conscious act of dissent. Simply put, queer individuals—regardless of their cultural setting—cannot engage in queer sexual activity without being conscious (at some level) of the surrounding Discourse on the acceptability and validity of such actions, as understood by the specific culture in

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[58] See 2.4.1 for further discussion and explication.

which they exist. Indeed, the formulation of a sexual 'identity' requires positionality within the spectrum of the cultural Discourse. How this positionality is achieved, and the extent to which it is regulated, depends upon the cultural framework in question[59]. Yet these frameworks are not fixed, nor do they exist in cultural isolation from each other. Over the past 50 years, social attitudes towards homosexuality in certain parts of the world have progressed from a state of almost universal intolerance and persecution through to (almost) full incorporation into the legal framework, with rights and protections for same–sex relationships now enshrined in law in many countries (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013). Recent years have arguably seen a 'domino effect' in the legal pursuit of marriage equality around Europe and the United States, with events in one location triggering or influencing debate in others (Ball, 2015; Time Out, 2015; Kirchgaessner, 2016), demonstrating the capacity for intercultural Discourse as a driver of social and regulatory change.

Intercultural dialogue notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that "sites of encounter across cultures are often spaces of ambivalence, negotiation and struggle for meaning and representation" (Malam, 2004, p.177). Therefore, care must be taken as researchers to avoid forcing one's own cultural and conceptual frameworks onto one's sites of analysis. As Plummer summarizes, the challenge in examining sexuality and gender in differing cultural settings is "to contextualize and not essentialize these 'other' worlds" (Plummer, 2015, p.109).

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[59] Emotions are ubiquitous phenomena, yet how emotions are manifested and regulated through culturally normative behaviour varies from society to society. Therefore, emotions are always influenced by culture. Writing from feminist, postcolonial and queer theory perspectives, Ahmed's (2004) work on emotion focuses on its relationship with language and bodies. Turning the study of the cultural politics of emotion towards the feeling of shame through queer lives and bodies, Munt (2008) inspects the ways in which shame is distributed and replicated; how it delineates certain groups from others, and how shame comes to be resisted, or even celebrated. To that end, Munt argues that shame has political potential because it can "provoke a separation between the social convention demarcated within hegemonic ideals, enabling the re-inscription of social intelligibility" (2008, p.4), as the effect of such provocation can be a "liberation from the approving/owning gaze" (Munt, 2007, p.57). However, within societies that have strong cultural frameworks of shame aversion, such as the notion of *lian* (脸, *face*) and *mianzi* (面子, *face*) in Chinese societies (see *Glossary*) or *izzat* (इज़्ज़त/عزت, *honour*) in Hindu, Muslim and Sikh societies (see *Glossary*), it is questionable as to how successfully this can act as a liberating force.

2.3 Geography of sexuality

The geography of sexuality as a field of academic study emerged in the 1980s, and has since broadened out across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, cultural theory, and cultural geography, to name but a few (Lauria & Knopp, 1985; Valentine, 1993; Bell & Binnie, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Caudwell & Browne, 2011; Johnston, 2015; Browne & Brown, 2016). This line of enquiry looks at how notions of sexuality pervade the social creation of physical spaces and realms, and at how human behaviour interacts with it. Space, therefore, "is not just a passive back-drop to human behaviour and social action, but is constantly produced and remade within complex relations of culture, power and difference" (Hubbard, 2001, p.51).

"Spaces are the places in which multiple, intersecting identities are lived out" (Yip & Page, 2013, p.11), yet the sexualization of space does not only happen in places where people might be expected to engage in explicit sexual activity. Rather, it permeates the structures of many of the more banal everyday spaces (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Places such as the home[60] or the workplace are sexualized (Valentine, 1993; Bell & Valentine, 1995), and often for many queer-identified people, such spaces can be both uncomfortable and alienating, "shaped by the assumptions of heterosexuality that are present in their social relations with parents, siblings, neighbours and others in and around the home" (Brown *et al.*, 2007, p.3). Such assumptions pervade all aspects of society, from direct political and social injunctions against queer citizens, to indirect means such as language. However, Brown also encourages us not to merely attempt to contextualize sexuality within a specific time-space (2012); instead, researchers need to "map the complex and often contradictory social dynamics that produce and are, in turn, reproduced within particular sexual cultures, practices and desires" (Weiss, 2011, p.7).

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[60] Indeed, Foucault's identification of the spatial containment of sexuality to the heterosexual, family home (and, more specifically, the bedroom) has proved a key element in understanding the relationship between space, sexuality and power (Foucault, 1976).

The sexual geography of China has received a moderate amount of academic scholarship, both from studies of heterosexual spaces (Zhang, 2005; Jeffreys, 2006; Farrer, 2007) and those focusing on queer contexts (Rofel, 1999; Brown, 2008; Engebretsen, 2009; Schroeder, 2012; Kong, 2011). Rofel (2007) demonstrates how sexuality has become part of the ongoing negotiations about what it means to be a Chinese cosmopolitan citizen and a benign consumer. Pointing to transnational associations and linkages for the emergence of queer identities in China, Rofel notes that "the presence of foreign gay men and lesbians in China who both create and participate in gay networks means that the transnational quality of gayness in China is both visible and visceral" (2007, pp.87–88). However, she denies that the emergence of such queer identities is representative or symptomatic of a wholly global culture, but rather that these identities "materialize in the articulation of transcultural practices with intense desires for cultural belonging, or cultural citizenship, in China" (2007, p.89).

Rofel (2007) remains critical of the Western developmental narrative which suggests that gay men in China will soon "catch up" with the level of liberation and politicization of gay men in the West. Similarly, Engebretsen (2014) criticizes a tendency in contemporary queer and gender studies oversimplify complex and culturally specific social processes by invoking Euro-American strategies of queer identity, which "validate and celebrate confrontational and public visibility, coming-out events, and a liberatory ethos centred on challenging categorical gender and sexuality as the stable and fixed (essential) basis for personal identity" (p.9). Primarily, these ethnographic studies are focused on sites of queer exclusivity, or examine the ways in which queer communities make space for themselves within a wider heteronormalized world. This project instead investigates the reverse: a phenomenon whereby a subculture of heterosexual women explores sexual desire through the creation and consumption of micronovels set in imagined worlds of queer male intimacy, in a non-exclusive online space. This study will therefore contribute

to knowledge from this perspective, through exploration of the intersection of these sexually-diverse subcultures.

2.3.1 Online spaces and sexuality

'Spaces' need not only refer to the physical; since the inception and explosion of the Internet around the globe, the 'virtual' spaces we have created have become as diverse as they are numerous. The online world is commonly referred to as 'cyberspace', and often treated as a generic singular entity or a specific location. Yet this simple term belies the complexity and ambiguity of virtual spaces. For example, this thesis concerns itself with the notion of 'Chinese cyberspace', but how might the reader interpret this term? Am I referring to websites hosted within China's geographical borders? Or do I instead refer to Chinese language websites located around the globe for the use of Chinese speaking netizens? Or perhaps I refer not to a location at all, but rather just to the specific collection of websites which are subject to China's Golden Shield surveillance project. Online spaces are frequently borderless and unquantifiable. The distinction between online and offline contexts and spaces is increasingly becoming contested and blurred, "as social interactions overlap between mediated and offline local spaces" (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011, p.290). Therefore, referring to any 'online community' as a homogenous group is problematic. As Fraiberg reasons, cyberspace "isn't so much a community of cutting edge, relatively wealthy and connected computer people as much as it's a dizzying array of small towns, some of which are more populated than others and others of which are easier or harder to get to and get around in" (Fraiberg, 2004, para.4).

The Internet as a realm of sexual expression and exploration has been much dissected, from the facets of identity construction (Phillips, 2002; Grisso & Weiss, 2005; Subrahmanyam *et al.*, 2006), online performativity (Kendall, 1998; Fraiberg, 2004; Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), digital intimacy (Gardner & Davis, 2013;

McGlotten, 2013), pornography (Waskul, 2004; Attwood, 2010), through to the Internet's use as a community building tool among marginalized subjects (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Mehra *et al.*, 2004; Hillier & Harrison, 2007). This thesis addresses elements of all of these facets. The site of this study is China, although this is more accurately defined as 'China, as represented by Chinese-speaking users of a website which is hosted within the PRC's physical borders'. This therefore provides an engaging discussion on the varying layers of Discourse which exist between the online and offline nexus.

China does have an increasing number of gay spaces, particularly in the bustling urban metropolises, yet such networks are "often short-lived, scattered and low-profile" (Ho, 2010, p.14). This, in part, reflects negative public attitudes towards homosexuality in Chinese culture. Chinese cyberspace has, however, provided some scope for queer expression, and is therefore a site of primary importance in the consideration of queer Discourse. Although still subject to censorship and surveillance, the labyrinth of China's Internet communities have become a haven for personal expression, with 77% of Chinese netizens utilizing social media websites or applications (CNNIC, 2016). However, although many commentators have expounded on the liberating potential of the Internet in China as a tool of empowerment and democratic change, others have argued that marginalized groups within Chinese society simply transfer their marginalized offline life/interests to cyberspace (Hindman, 2009; Leibold, 2011), thereby turning cyberspace into a platform for 'interest-based ghettos' (Leibold, 2011). Accordingly, I am keen to explore the extent to which this theory operates among the differing consumer groups of queer online microfiction.

Concerns over morality mean that overt discussion of certain aspects of sexuality and sexual activity in China are still regulated, particularly with regard to how sex is represented within cultural products. New media in the post-reform era within China has expanded the opportunities for engagement with sexual subjects

(Rofel, 2007). Discussing the development of Chinese Internet literature, Michel Hockx nevertheless contends that descriptions of sexuality and sexual behaviour have greater leeway in literature, even though such descriptions "might be considered pornographic when encountered in other contexts" (Hockx, 2015, p.11). Online authors have taken advantage of the relative freedom of web-based publishing to challenge long-standing moral boundaries for literary creation, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of sex in texts written by women (ibid.). Nevertheless, Hockx claims that the present situation in the PRC "appears to be that such work can have explicit sexual content as long as it stops short of employing graphic vocabulary or presenting detailed descriptions of intercourse" (Hockx, 2015, p.163). As such, sex features prominently in many recent works of fiction in China, and sex-related censorship is rare against work that has clearly articulated artistic aims, especially—according to Hockx—if such works have gone through the established system of editing and publishing (ibid. p.121). User-published BL fiction operates outside of this regulatory apparatus, yet many BL novels take existing offline publications as their inspiration. This therefore complicates their status with regard to censorship, and presents challenges to effective regulation by the Chinese authorities.

2.4 Heteronormativity and patriarchy

Foucault (1976) speaks of sexuality as a discursively constructed concept, resulting in differing discursive constitutions throughout differing spaces and times. This Discourse exists in a circular power relationship of replication and reinforcement, reflecting the specific social conditions from which they originate. Such power contests form the basis of our ideas of normativity, and of how normative behaviours within society are managed, encouraged, or enforced. Heteronormativity is generally understood to refer to a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or

preferred sexual orientation (Warner, 1991). By casting heterosexuality as normative, this concept reinstalls and reaffirms gender divisions within society (Yep, 2003). Sociologists have sought to extract 'gender' from a mere biological marker to a set of socially constructed conventions which divide 'men' from 'women'. Butler writes of the 'unity' of gender as "the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality" (1999, p.42), concluding that gender constitutes "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (ibid. p.43). This "highly rigid regulatory frame" includes patriarchy, which constitutes "a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1989, p.214). Through these frameworks, these repeated acts establish norms and conventions for both sexual acts and for gender identity, as "what it means to be a woman, man, gay, heterosexual, bisexual and so on is culturally, spatially and temporally contingent" (Yip & Page, 2013, p.6).

The following subsections examine the issues of embodiment, sexual regulation and legislation, before discussing how the sexuality of spaces previously discussed at 2.3 intersects with heteronormativity and patriarchy to shape the digital landscape of the cyberspace environment, upon which this study will focus.

2.4.1 Embodiment

Embodiment refers to the "physical and mental experience of existence" (Cregan, 2006, p.3). On a simple level, it involves how we perceive and regulate the bodies we have and the bodies that we desire. It is through our notions of embodiment that the sexed body and the gendered body are performed, and the social construction of the body has received much scholarly attention. Of particular concern has become the ways in which the body is valued and categorized in

accordance with (or in contestation with) dominant sexual and gender ideals. Social and legal regulation of these aspects is thus construed through the prevailing Discourse on embodiment. Such hegemonic Discourses, however, often leave little scope for embodiment outside of binary structures, as dividing human kind into binary oppositional categories (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, and so forth) negates a plethora of other valid and visible gender and sexual identities (e.g. transgender, genderqueer, pansexual) (Hines, 2007; Valentine, 2007; Edelman & Zimman, 2014).

Turner argues that "bodies may be governed, but embodiment is the phenomenological basis of individuality" (2008, p.212), suggesting an inextricable link between embodiment and the concept of self. Discussing the construction of female sexual identity in what has been termed the 'post-feminist' era, McRobbie (2009) argues that the development of "an overarching framework of capacity, freedom, change and gender equality" (p.51) has, in actuality, had the effect of shaping "a distinctive new modality of gender power" (ibid. pp.51-52) through which female sexuality is regulated.

Van Doorn (2011) argues that embodiment must also include a vital virtual component, since "the experience of one's material body depends on a multitude of incorporeal (e.g. psychological, cultural, artistic and spiritual) practices and thus cannot be located within a stable 'natural' body" (2011, p.534). This corresponds with Jackson and Scott's assertion that "a body can never be *just* a body abstracted from mind, self and context" (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p.146, emphasis in original). The ideas of embodiment illustrated through the work of these scholars and others (Yep, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Edelman & Zimman, 2014) offer an important theoretical lens for this project: how do consumers of differing genders and sexualities read and respond to 'embodiment' within the texts? And how does this interact with/influence/contest their notions of embodiment of their own gendered and sexual bodies? These issues, and their relationship with the new media

environment (see 2.6.3) will be explored throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis.

2.4.2 Regulation and legislation of sexuality

Chambers summarises that heteronormativity is "the assemblage of regulatory practices, which produces intelligible genders within a heterosexual matrix that insists upon the coherence of sex/gender/desire" (2007, p.667). From this, one understands that heteronormativity is a pervasive social force—given that heterosexuality is "everywhere and nowhere"[61] (Hockey *et al.*, 2007, p.4)—and one can readily observe the psychological effects this framework can exert upon individuals who either do not identify as heterosexual, or who locate themselves outside of the gender-binary (or both). Yep (2003, p.25) thus accuses heteronormativity as being a site of "unrelenting, harsh, unforgiving and continuous violence for queer individuals". Seidman (2001, p.322) refers to this process as "strategies of cultural pollution and censorship, criminalization and civic disenfranchisement, sequestration and violence" towards (and in respect of) non-normative sexualities. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, many of which involve visible tactics, such as the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, or denial of civil rights and political representation. Yet outright displays of discrimination may not, ironically, be the most salient markers of heteronormativity. Guided by the work of Dennis (2004) and Jackson (2006), Yip and Page (2013) argue that, despite its pervasiveness and entrenchment, it is heteronormativity's silence and invisibility that demonstrates its true power as a system and structure, hegemonizing heterosexuality and "by default, [rendering] variant sexualities wrong, even immoral; or at best, inferior" (ibid, p.7. See also Jackson, 1999; Ward, 2015).

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[61] Indeed, heteronormativity is a power-infused structure, and its power is often silent and invisible.

Alternatively, guarded tolerance of homosexuality (or of any other non-normative sexual identity) on the basis that 'what goes on behind closed doors does not concern me' can also be seen as a manifestation of heteronormativity and of latent homophobia. If a citizen's acceptance into society is only granted on the condition that part of their identity remain 'behind closed doors', then that person can never be seen as a full citizen. The creation of this kind of second-class citizenship reinforces the privileged status of heterosexuality and the hegemony of heteronormativity, and preserves the distinction between the 'pure' heterosexual and the 'polluted' homosexual by creating a moral hierarchy of good and bad sexual citizens (Rubin, 1993; Seidman, 2001; Richardson, 2000a, 2000b; Richardson & Monro, 2012).

2.4.3 Heteronormativity in cyberspace

If offline society is heteronormative, and online and offline worlds are interconnected (Wilson & Peterson, 2002; Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), then it would logically follow that heteronormativity will also pervade online spaces. Therefore, the implications of heteronormativity and its influence over queer identity and expression is vitally important for any study of Chinese cyberspace. The Internet, as a discussion medium, problematizes the issue of public versus private space, especially when one considers issues of anonymity and performance that are inherent in such a form of communication. The Internet allows people to redefine or edit aspects of their identity (Roberts & Parks, 2001; Fraser, 2010; Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). By creating an online persona (or personas), netizens can interact online with the security of disguise and anonymity. This in turn problematizes the issues of representation and consumption of online information. As stated at 1.2.4.1, research has found that the majority of online BL/Slash fiction is written by young self-declared heterosexual women for other young self-declared heterosexual

women. Referring to themselves as *funü*[62], these female fans of male homoerotic fiction also contribute to the complex issue of authorship and representation; as noted by Cristini (2005, p.9), "no one can tell you for sure whether behind a 'gay novel' there isn't a heterosexual Shanghai housewife." Therefore, the nuances of online identity and the construction thereof play a significant role in Discourse on queer issues in Chinese cyberspace. This concept interweaves tightly with the theoretical literature on the sexuality of online spaces, discussed at 2.3.1.

Online communities provide queer or sexually marginalized individuals with a relatively safe 'space' in which they can fulfil their need to belong, whilst sheltering such individuals from discrimination and stigmatization that they face in the offline world (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Baams *et al.*, 2011). Queer commentators and scholars from China have attested to the pervasive heteronormativity which exists within Chinese society (Fann, 2003; He, 2009; Ho, 2010; Jun, 2010). This study will therefore examine the way in which online respondents (whether queer-identified or not) construct and negotiate their lives from within this heteronormative patriarchal social framework. Although some studies of heteronormativity in Chinese society have been undertaken (He, 2009; Ho, 2010; Wei, 2010), only a few have looked specifically at the effect on online expression, and none have yet done so through the microblog medium. This study will therefore contribute to this research area through qualitative semi-structured interviews with producers and consumers of microfiction.

2.5 Citizenship

Citizenship refers to a status "entailing a set of rights both claimed by and bestowed upon all members of a political community" (Pakulski, 1997, p.73). While citizenship can generally be understood in these terms, citizenship as a theoretical

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[62] See 1.2.4.1.

concept is difficult to define, and much contested (Richardson, 2000b; Goldman & Perry, 2002; Richardson & Monro, 2012). In 1950, British sociologist Thomas Marshall analysed the development of citizenship as an evolution from civil, to political, then to social rights (Marshall, 1950). These were broadly assigned to the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries respectively. Marshall's defining contribution in this area was to introduce the concept of 'social rights', which are awarded not based on class or need, but rather on the status of citizenship.

Since the 1990s, debates over the inadequacies of Marshall's model have led to the formulation of new ideas about citizenship (Munro & Richardson, 2014), as theorists have begun to examine different categories and notions of belonging. In particular, the Marshallian view of citizenship was criticized for being too simplistic in its focus on class, to the detriment of examining other forms of inequality (Richardson & Monro, 2012). Feminist writers observed that, historically, citizenship has been constructed in a male image (Lister, 1997). The privileged position that is given to heterosexuality (see 2.4 in this chapter) is a function of the manner in which public policies seek to normalize reproduction as the desired outcome of marriage (Richardson & Turner, 2001). Christian churches have typically regarded reproduction as the principal justification for marriage as an institution that can harness the irrational force of sex to some rational purpose (Richardson & Turner, 2001). These observations led to "questions of how notions of citizenship are grounded in normative assumptions about sexuality" (Richardson & Monro, 2012, p.62). Citizenship, concludes Plummer (2001, p.241), "is now usually seen as a much more open concept than Marshall allowed for when he charted his classic development model of civil, legal and welfare rights emerging in Westernized societies", and citizenships form part of a 'differentiated universalism'[63], continuously

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[63] From the work of Lister (1997), this concept refers to "a universalism that stands in a creative tension to diversity and difference and that challenges the divisions and exclusionary inequalities which stem from this diversity" (ibid, p.66).

confronting the classic problem of moral boundaries, both within and across social worlds.

Fostering democratic citizenship in China stands at odds with the country's political regime. Andrew Nathan (1986) points out that, although a gradual emergence of new forms of citizenship has been observed in the post-Mao era (1976—), the state-centric view of citizenship has continued to inhibit would-be democrats from developing radical critique. Dorothy Solinger (1999) also discusses the state of citizenship among China's migrant worker population, concluding that "citizenship does not come easily to those outside the political community whose arrival coincides with deepening and unaccustomed marketization" (ibid., p.1).

Such theoretical formulations of the notion of citizenship offer broad scope for consideration within the framework of this project, as I examine how marginalized groups tell marginalized tales of marginalized subjects. Ideas of 'belonging' (see Hall, 2002) are at the forefront of this approach, along with the concept of citizenship based on intimate and sexual relationships and identities, which will be expanded in the following section.

2.5.1 Sexual and intimate citizenship

Gay and lesbian movements witnessed over the past few decades in the West have argued for sexual liberation—especially the right of individuals to be able to express their own sexual orientation and sexual pleasures, as a component of any civilized and democratic society. These arguments have therefore promoted the idea of 'sexual rights' as an important extension of Marshall's 1950 model of the three aspects of citizenship (Richardson & Turner, 2001). Thus, "the notion of citizenship now raises issues about a plurality of rights and obligations shaped through

participatory, differentiated social worlds (and communities), each with contested status and continuing tensions that need resolving" (Plummer, 2001, p.241).

Diane Richardson (2000b) argues that, while there had been much discussion of women and citizenship, there had been a relative neglect (at that time) of sexuality and citizenship. She claims that, up to the end of the 20th century, patriarchal heterosexuality has been constructed as a necessary condition for citizenship. In recent times, lesbians and gay men have been afforded certain rights and protections in many politically democratic countries; however, the terms on which they are granted (until recently) were the terms of partial citizenship, that is to say, on condition that they stayed in the private sphere and did not seek public recognition (Richardson, 2000b). Legal and social acceptance for LGBT citizens therefore has been largely fought through emphasis on the continuity of lesbian, gay and heterosexual lifestyles and values (Richardson, 2004), although as Richardson points out, such a standpoint has been heavily criticized by queer and feminist academics and activists.

Sexual citizenship promotes the idea of sexual intimacy as a right, but without making assumptions about the reproductive nature of sexual intimacy, thereby being more concerned with the idea of freedom of sexual expression and association (Richardson & Turner, 2001). In particular, the issue of homosexual parenting "has challenged conventional assumptions about the exclusive right of heterosexuals to reproduce" (Richardson & Turner, 2001, p.330).

The distinction between sexual citizenship and intimate citizenship is not hard and fast. The concept of intimate citizenship, according to Plummer (2001, 2003), suggests appropriate ways of living lives with others and to foster the civilizing of relations at a time when some people see only breakdown of civility in social life. It examines rights, obligations, recognitions and respect around the intimate spheres of life; matters over who to live with, how to raise children, how to handle one's

body, how to relate as a gendered being, and how to be an erotic person (Plummer, 2003). Richardson and Monro (2012, p.68) note that intimate citizenship allows "consideration of a broader array of arenas of personal life than merely what are designated as 'sexual' rights and obligations". However, Richardson (2000b) points out that the spheres Plummer discusses clearly cut across the terrain of sexual relations, and that "in contemporary Western societies notions of intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world are commonly interpreted through the frame of sexuality" (2000b, p.90). Weeks (1995, p.123) also refers to 'intimate citizenship' as being the domain where "the life experiments promoted by contemporary sexual movements and communities give rise to claims for the recognition of certain rights of everyday life, the necessary compliment of a politics of solidarity, respect and diversity". According to Plummer (2001) there are a multitude of hierarchical, layered and contested public spheres, thus the term intimate citizenship must denote a plurality of multiple public voices and positions. Unlike earlier models of citizenship which often floundered by marginalizing and excluding certain groups, intimate citizenship must operate as a plurality (Plummer, 2003); it cannot imply one model, one way or one voice. As Phelan states, "full citizenship requires that one be recognized not in spite of one's unusual or minority characteristics, but with those characteristics understood as a part of a valid possibility for the conduct of life" (2001, pp.15–16).

The validity of sexual and intimate citizenship is, however, a contested notion. Richardson (2000b) argues that contemporary theories of sexual citizenship tend to elide gay and lesbian rights Discourses and movements. This is a major failing, as rights movements have often been associated with the decriminalization of male homosexual acts; therefore, by making no distinction between lesbian and gay interests, such a perspective is not sensitive to the different experiences of gay men and lesbian women with respect to social inclusion and exclusion (ibid.). In addition, traditional language of sexual rights expresses a set of assumptions about

heterosexuality, and the challenge to notions of heteronormativity raises further issues regarding a wide range of rights within diverse social relationships (Richardson & Turner, 2001).

Within the spatial locale of this project, sexual and intimate citizenship have received academic attention and analysis (see Kong, 2011, 2016), but restrictions on expression within China (both official and cultural) mean that issues of sexuality have rarely featured in open Discourse. Claiming a non-normative sexual citizenship position requires one to make a public declaration of one's sexuality. This stands at odds with the cultural climate of closeted existence in which many Chinese queer individuals inhabit, and consequently many bow to familial pressure to settle into heteronormative childbearing lifestyles. Fundamentally problematic is the issue of defining one's sexuality in the first place. In the West, the gay rights movement has "pursued a politic of citizenship aimed at civic inclusion by means of gaining equal rights and normalizing or purifying gay identity" (Seidman, 2001, p.321). However, China's gay rights movement (if indeed one may term it so) has charted a non-confrontational path, far different to the Stonewall-fuelled movement of the West (Chou, 2000; Wei, 2007; Brown, 2008). As Ho states, "the politics of identity in China rejects the 'confrontational' idea of disrupting family and community ties as a result of coming out" (Ho, 2010, p.10; see also Kong, 2016). Therefore, I argue that there is resultantly less of a drive in Chinese culture to define one's citizenship based on one's sexual preference.

It is important when looking at queer expression within a given community to consider Diane Richardson's (2000b) analytical scheme of sexual rights in order to examine conceptions of sexual citizenship. Richardson separates sexual rights into three types, involving different agents:

1. *Seeking rights to various forms of sexual practice in personal relationships (e.g. campaigns for sexual freedom and safety),*

2. *Seeking rights through self-definition and the development of individual identities (e.g. the right to be lesbian and gay; female sexual autonomy),*

3. *Seeking rights within social institutions: public validation of various forms of sexual relations (e.g. interracial and same-sex marriages)*

(Richardson, 2000b, p.108)

For this project, self-definition is of intrinsic importance among these factors. My previous research in this area shows that some netizens do choose to define their online identity through their sexuality, choosing pro-active user names, or by allying themselves with gay activist groups in China. However, commentators have suggested that China's cultural heritage has led to a collectivist mind-set in its population, wherein individualist or non-normative attitudes are discouraged (Matthews, 2000; Furnham & Saito, 2009). Chinese society, like that of many nations, is a heteropatriarchy[64] (Lee, 2003). Judgement of a person's actions is based on 'social morals', which focus on uniformity instead of diversity (Fann, 2003). Familial pressures to marry and procreate have forced many queer Chinese citizens to lead double lives, whereby their public face conforms to the heteronormative standard, leaving their latent sexual desires marginalized to the private and the secretive. For this reason, it is difficult to speak about non-normative sexual identity in Chinese society in the same way as in Western cultures, as the issue of identity is contentious. In the West, sexual identity has been the foundation of sexual politics, and of rights-based movements led by (and for) people who have accepted, and in many cases openly declared through a recognized process of 'coming out', that their sexual preferences are an integral part of their personal identity, thus claiming citizenship rights based on these factors. This scenario is not the same in China. Although some citizens follow this model of internal acceptance and public

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[64] See *Glossary.*

acknowledgement of personal sexual identity, many people in China are unable, or unwilling, to make a claim of sexual citizenship. Kong (2011) argues that coming-out is still a big issue for Chinese gay men, and "their various tactics employed in dealing with their sexual identities are always worked out within the parameters of family biopolitics" (ibid, p.205).

One of the first stages in the process of coming out is admitting to oneself, and accepting, that one is attracted to persons of the same gender (Coleman, 1982). That is to say, allowing oneself to self-define based upon how one feels rather than how one acts—as Richardson puts is, "the right to identify with a specific sexual category defined in terms of a class of people, as distinct from the right to engage in specific sexual practices" (Richardson, 2000b, p.118). Critics argue that the emergence of expressive desire in China is "far beyond the rainbow—far beyond, that is, the validation of homosexuality in recognizably Western liberal and identitarian terms" (Eng, 2010, p.465). Therefore, to what extent can (or should) Western models of 'queerness', and of an ideal queer lifestyle/life direction apply to these individuals if they do not subscribe to these same definitions? If people do not define their sexual identity even to themselves, then the issue of sexual citizenship becomes problematic.

2.6 Cultural Studies approaches

As an academic discipline, Cultural Studies seeks to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated, produced and contested within a particular social formation. Frequently such meanings are bound up with systems of power and control. Culture can thus be described as "an apparatus within a large system of domination" (During, 1999, p.5). However, cultures are often viewed as series of constantly interacting and changing practices, rather than as fixed, bounded, stable, or discrete entities. The field of cultural studies therefore serves to offer critiques of

culture's hegemonic effects. Cultural studies frameworks provide a foundation for this project, because the purpose of this work of critical discourse analysis is to demonstrate how meaning is communicated between animator and reader within the realm of queer-themed microfiction. I therefore begin by addressing theories on audience reception, in order to address meaning as a negotiated process between producer and consumer.

2.6.1 Encoding and decoding meaning: communication in the digital age

The conceptualization of the communications process as a loop or 'circulation circuit', although traditionally prevalent in media and culture research, has been problematized through the work of Stuart Hall (1980). First developed in 1973, Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication offers a theoretical approach to understanding how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted, and offers this project a tool to unpack how meaning is construed between microfiction writers and readers of differing demographics and sexual/gender identities. Hall argues that, rather than a linear progression from sender to receiver, communicative processes should be viewed "in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments" (1980, p.163), namely the moments of production, circulation, distribution and reproduction[65].

Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory suggests that audiences are active readers of media texts. Therefore, audiences do not merely accept such texts in a passive manner. Structures of meaning on the 'encoding' stage (i.e. production) may not be the same as on the decoding stage (i.e. consumption), as they do not constitute an 'immediate identity': the extent to which the messages align depends upon the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry between the encoder and the decoder (see Figure

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[65] These are the factors highlighted in Johnson's (1986) model (see figure 2), which are explored at 2.6.4.

Programme as
"meaningful" discourse

encoding   *decoding*

meaning   meaning
structures 1   structures 2

frameworks of   frameworks of
knowledge   knowledge
- - - - - - - - - - - - -   - - - - - - - - - - - - -
relations of   relations of
production   production
- - - - - - - - - - - - -   - - - - - - - - - - - - -
technical   technical
infrastructure   infrastructure
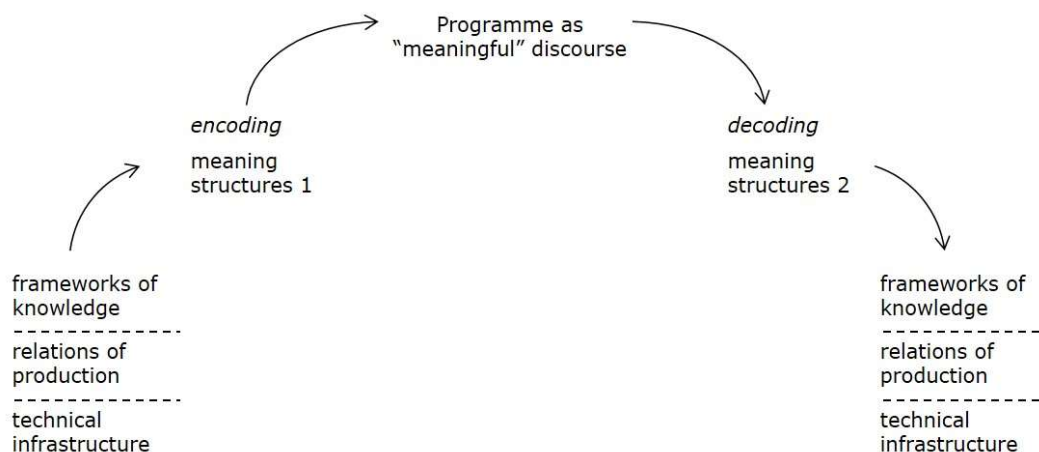
Figure 1: Encoding and decoding of broadcast structures

(Hall, 1980, p.165)

1, above), which in turn depends identity/non-identity between the codes that are being used. Interpretation of the media text is thus established in accordance with their own cultural background and experiences. Misunderstandings are clearly possible, and will arise owing to a lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. Eco uses the term 'aberrant decoding' to refer to such instances where a text has been decoded by means of a different code from that used to encode it (Eco, 1972).

The Internet as a basic environment for communication exhibits an inherently different value system to the communications technologies that preceded it (Sporton, 2009). However, Despite the inherent changes to production and consumption patterns that this new medium has caused, Sonia Livingstone argues that existing conceptual formulations relating to audience studies need not be discarded (2004, 2008; Livingstone & Das, 2013), but rather believes that these ideas are "only now finding sufficient scope, in the multimodal, converged digital environment, to reveal [their] full analytic power and potential" (Livingstone & Das, 2013, p.105). As "the new media environment crucially extends the scope and importance of arguments in 'active audience' theory by transforming hitherto marginal (and marginalized)

tendencies into the very mainstream of media use" (Livingstone, 2004, p.79), Livingstone's work suggests that audience reception studies need not be abandoned in the digital age, but instead should be integrated with work on digital literacy (2008) to re-establish their value.

Regarding this project, one of the sharpest critiques of the narratives of BL fiction in China comes from gay male readers, who claim that the representation of same-sex attraction is often trivialized within such fictional worlds, and that the female writers of such fiction have little (or no) experience of actual gay lives. As we can see from figure 1, such a scenario arises not only because of such a lack of equivalency between the two communicative sides, but also because of asymmetry between the consumer groups themselves. Yet, while Hall's model is useful in explicating sources of misunderstanding in the communications process, other cultural theorists have looked at how the everyday cultural practices of ordinary consumers work to resist inequalities of power, social control, and homogenisation. Fiske (2010, p.19) states that "popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry", as the culture industry can only "produce a repertoire of texts [...] for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture" (ibid.) Fiske also challenged Hall's model, claiming that such products do not need to have a fixed meaning waiting to be decoded, but rather that meaning is produced by consumers through interaction with the text. Online BL microfiction is a prosumer genre—similar to fan fiction, it is the individuals who consume that also create it—therefore, the processes of production and distribution are frequently imbedded within the act of consumption for many participants in the online environment. The excess of meaning (semiotic excess) that Fiske (1986, p.403) describes goes some way to explaining how singular texts can appeal to differing demographics (e.g. gay/straight, female/male) among the readership, whereas Hall's model allows us to locate the root cause of tension between consumer groups over the disputed meaning of those texts. In line with

Livingstone's defence of renewed use of classic studies in media theory in the digital age, I will accordingly deploy both Hall and Fiske's analytical strategies when examining how the readership receives and interprets messages within microfiction content in this project, which will be blended with approaches to gender and sexuality through play and performance (see 2.6.3), developed within '*critical cyberculture studies'* (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), which explore the remediation of identity and desire in the digital landscape.

2.6.2 Remediation of identity and the plasticity of popular culture

Queer theory suggests that people do not have a 'fixed essence' (Gauntlett, 2004), and that identity is a performance (Butler, 1999; Gauntlett, 2008). As individuals, we each represent a multiplicity of identities (Aslinger, 2010). These identities become important psychological factors, which are shaped by the society and cultures in which we inhabit, affecting both how we project ourselves to others, and how we interpret the social worlds around us. Virtual spaces allow for an extraordinary level of freedom and unparalleled control over the construction of identity (Roberts & Parks, 2001, p.209). Although online bodies are never truly disconnected from dominating discourses of gender and sexuality, nor disconnected from the material specificity of bodies (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), Gauntlett claims that it is the Internet's ability to break the connection between outward expression of identity and the physical body that qualifies it as "a space where queer theory's approach to identity can really come to life" (Gauntlett, 2004). However, when studying gender online, Bromseth and Sundén remind us that we must remain constantly mindful of how the "non-sexual bipolarity of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' [are] most concretely part of the hetero*sexual* matrix" (2011, p.282, italics in original).

2.6.2.1   **Play and playfulness**

Play and playfulness are key features in online cultures (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Bromseth & Sundén, 2011; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). Indeed, Shelly Turkle's work, which explores multi-user domains (MUDs) in cyberspace, concludes that virtual domains allow a person to "play a role as close to or as far away from your real self as you choose." (Turkle, 1995, p.183). Contribution to the emerging field of 'critical cyberculture studies', Bromseth and Sundén (2011) claim that, in online contexts, the possibilities of playfulness, passing [66] and identity experimentation have become the archetypical example of gender and sexuality as situated, flexible performances. Issues of embodiment online (which relate also to plasticity of culture, discussed at 2.6.2.2), therefore "highlight the many connections—and possible disconnections—between the body performing and the body being performed" (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011, p.275). Berman & Bruckman (2001) claim that an individual can adopt a range of online identities to 'play' at different subject positions, in order to experiment with and experience (even only if virtually) 'otherness'. This might also involve the engagement in virtual role-play that challenges one's own sense of sexuality as fixed, immutable and essential (ibid). Conceptualizing online embodiment through notions of play and performance therefore requires us to think "through the many ways in which the body is created, recreated, and evoked in online worlds through image, text and sound" (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011, p.275).

One of the more dramatic ways in which the unbounded nature of identity construction manifests is the case of gender-swapping in online environments, a situation where women present themselves as men within textual-based online worlds, and men present as women (Senft, 1996; Danet, 1998; Roberts & Parks, 2001; Savicki *et al.*, 2006). In these cases, Roberts and Parks (2001) conclude that this form of identity play is best understood as an experimental behaviour, rather

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[66] The ability of a person to be seen as a member of a differing identity group (see Renfrow, 2004).

than as an enduring expression of a person's sexuality or personality, particularly as "online presentations do not create automatic offline consequences" (2001, p.211), as "in most cases online identities remain separate from offline 'real' lives" (ibid).

Fictional literature and games constitute forms of entertainment, which Deterding argues, are:

> *"refined socio-cultural descendants of play as we find it in animals and children; with other practices descending from play (like sports or ritual), they share a pragmatic socio-psychological convention that lends their meaning and performance bounded freedom, renders their consequences void or 'negotiable' and their events into 'make-believe' events."*

> (Deterding, 2009, p.1)

As such, the microfiction selection in this thesis represents a form of play by young women using fictional narratives of male same-sex attraction. Although the development of this style of fiction does not necessarily involve female producers and consumers presenting themselves as male, they do project a stylized, eroticized version of male same-sex intimacy as an expression of their own sexual desire and identity. Nor should we forget that, in the online environment, authorship is difficult to ascertain, as all participants have autonomy over the construction of their online identity, and thus females could easily present as male in the online environment, and construct first-person narratives involving homosexual male characters. Therefore, such analysis of the interplay between discourse on sexuality, recreation, and the remediation of identity and desire demonstrates how the study of the newly-expanding genre of BL microfiction makes a vital and timely contribution to media and gender studies.

2.6.2.2   Plasticity

Linked to the flexibility of identity is the concept of plasticity. The human brain is a plastic entity, moulded by its environment. Such neural plasticity is the reason that people can adapt to different environments, and cultural plasticity is seen as the dominant explanation for geographic variation in human behaviour (Krützen *et al.*, 2011). In turn, elements of popular culture can also be moulded to fit our own interests or requirements. As an example of this phenomenon, Chidester (2015) discusses how the plasticity of American popular culture allows global religious groupings to mould it in the service of their own interests—in the process, negotiating local cultural formations by moulding them in an 'American' style, but not in a way that is controlled by any corporate headquarters in the USA. This process of taking specific cultural elements and using them to negotiate localized cultural formations is apparent in BL literature around the globe, wherein queer stories are used to critique both heterosexual relationships and gender dynamics. It is not the case that only queer authors can articulate queer characters; however, one must appreciate that the information encoded within such representations will be recognizably different depending on the epistemological standpoint of the author. In BL literature, the (primarily) female authors represent a highly stylized version of male homosexuality to discuss intimacy from a perspective outside of the cultural constraints of femininity. This can therefore lead to errors of miscommunication in the encoding/decoding process, as discussed at 2.6.1. For this reason, Hall (1980) believes that, with respect to communication research, a behaviourist approach is often misleading—explaining that, for example, "representations of violence on TV are not violence", but are rather "messages about violence" (Hall, 1980, p.166)[67]. Therefore, intimacy in microfiction represents messages about intimacy, rather than being realistic or factual depictions of queer lives.

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[67] Hall's research subject here was television, yet his formulations are true for other forms of communication, and their continued use in digital culture research is supported by Livingstone (2004, 2008) and Das (with Livingstone, 2013).

2.6.3 Youth culture

In addition to being a (primarily) gendered activity, production and consumption of BL fiction has been highlighted as an activity associated with adolescence and early adulthood (Wang & Liu, 2008; Feng, 2009). My own findings concur that BL microfiction in China attracts a primarily young, educated and middle-class[68] readership (see 3.2.2.1). Therefore, I must consider the way in which this topic intersects with theoretical frameworks from the fields of girls' studies and youth culture studies. As an interdisciplinary academic field, youth studies seeks to investigate the development, history, culture, psychology, and politics of youth. Emerging from this field in the late 1970s, girls' studies developed into a distinct genre of critical inquiry through the work of McRobbie and Garber (1976), who insisted on drawing attention to gender and sex in analysis of adolescence and youth cultures. This led to an increase in feminist and gender studies scholars focusing on intersectionality and subsequently on girls, particularly at a time where girls as consumers (and subsequently as a target for advertisers) was coming to prominence (Kearney, 2009). Kearney (1998, 2006) argues that a continued focus on young females' consumerist practices risks reproducing conservative ideologies of sex and gender that link females and femininity to practices of consumerism and males and masculinity to the practices of production. Therefore, examination of the cultural artefacts created by young women allows us to understand how traditional conceptions of cultural practice "are being troubled by those who resist the strict oppositions of production/consumption, labor/leisure, and work/play in their everyday practices." (Kearney, 2006, pp.4–5). This follows in the line of reasoning demonstrated by Hudson (1984), who summarizes that the forces of heterosexual patriarchy have framed 'adolescence' into a masculine construction, against which females have struggled to privilege their generational identity:

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[68] In the context of China, middle class refers to "the highly mobile, educated, and professional groups that constitute the backbone of the so-called 'advanced forces of production'" (Tomba, 2009, p.592).

> If adolescence is characterized by masculine constructs, then any attempts to by girls to satisfy society's demands of them *qua* adolescence, are bound to involve them in displaying not only a lack of maturity (since adolescence is dichotomized with maturity), but also a lack of femininity.

> (Hudson, 1984, p.35)

This concept is a vital component in the creation of BL fiction, as respondent interviews attest to a desire to transcend cultural prescription of femininity as a weakened or lesser state as being the impetus behind the genre (see 5.4.2).

Youth culture in China has become ever more commercialized as a result of cultural consumption (Fung, 2009), in line with the global trend. However, for the Chinese state, such liberalizing of values that are developing among young people are a source of concern, owing to their capacity to impinge upon China's socio-political framework. In recent decades, heterosexual Chinese youth have pursued the rights to engage in sexual relations before marriage (Farrier 2006). However, in the *gaige kaifang* (改革开放, *reform and opening up*) [69] period, discourse of 'premature love' in China has constructed adolescent sexuality as a social problem, which once identified, is found to be omnipresent (Bakken, 1992). According to Evans (1997), 'premature' love is a peculiar post-Mao term for dating during adolescence, when a burgeoning interest in sexuality and romance is believed to have outstripped emotional, physical and social maturity. This, together with socially repressive attitudes to homosexuality and traditionally-held notions of feminine virtue, accounts for the subversive nature of BL fiction in its many forms, as consumers—whether queer-aligned or queer-fascinated—seek to engage in discourse with other like-minded individuals. Yet, that is not to say that such a subculture would form a homogenous group. As Driver (2008) concludes in her research on the formation of

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[69] This refers to Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies from 1978 onwards.

subcultures, holding an assumption that queer youth constitute "bounded, unified and visible entities becomes questionable when considering intersectional and permeable identifications shaping sexual and gender variant youth affiliations" (2008, p.20).

2.6.4 Circuits of culture

The 'circuits of culture' model focuses on how the value and meaning of cultural phenomena are created, maintained and transformed throughout various sites, moments, and practices (Taylor *et al.*, 2002). This idea was developed from the Marxist roots of the 'circuit of capital'[70] (Dyer-Witheford, 1999) and has undergone many revisions in order to reflect advances in technology, most notably by Hall (1980) and Johnson (1986). Johnson's revision (1986) argues that, as a field, cultural studies was uniquely concerned with the 'life' of texts, and claims to preserve the impact of material conditions on textual productions. However, this revision was in turn critiqued, owing to problems of empirical application (Lewis, 1994). In response, Du Gay *et al* (1997) revised the model to show cultural circuits as totally interconnected spheres of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. Analysis thus focused on how the disparate elements of this circuit were temporarily joined to create functional phenomena. The model has since been applied to online environments, with Dyer-Witheford (1999) arguing that the Internet is now a principal site of struggle between capital and labour, because its ambivalent architecture accommodates both official control and commercialization, and the development of democratic and oppositional communities. This approach seems important to consider when looking at microfiction, especially given the regulatory framework in which Chinese cyberspace exists. Although previous studies have looked at circuits of culture in queer cyberspaces (O'Riordan, 2007), my review found

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[70] Dyer-Witherford's work proposes a modified version of Marx's circuit of capital, which includes four moments in the cycle: production; the reproduction of labour power; the reproduction of nature, and circulation.

no evidence of studies which have been published on Chinese queer textual artefacts using this theoretical framework.

This project will therefore adapt the 'circuits of culture' theoretical framework, using a text-based approach as originally outlined by Johnson (1986). Discussing how conventions and technical means within a particular medium structure representations, Johnson states that we must "work across genre and media, comparatively", owing to a need to "trace the differences as well as the similarities, for example, between literary romance, romantic love as public spectacle and love as a private form or narrative" (Johnson, 1986, p.61), as it is only through doing so that one can resolve important evaluative questions. The 'circuits of culture' theoretical structure constitutes a macro-level framework for this project, and is adopted in order to explain the different yet interconnected moments of the process into which the micro-level theoretical frameworks are embedded, as these stories are written or interpreted through the cultural lens of sexuality, heteronormativity and citizenship (outlined in Sections 2.2 to 2.5).
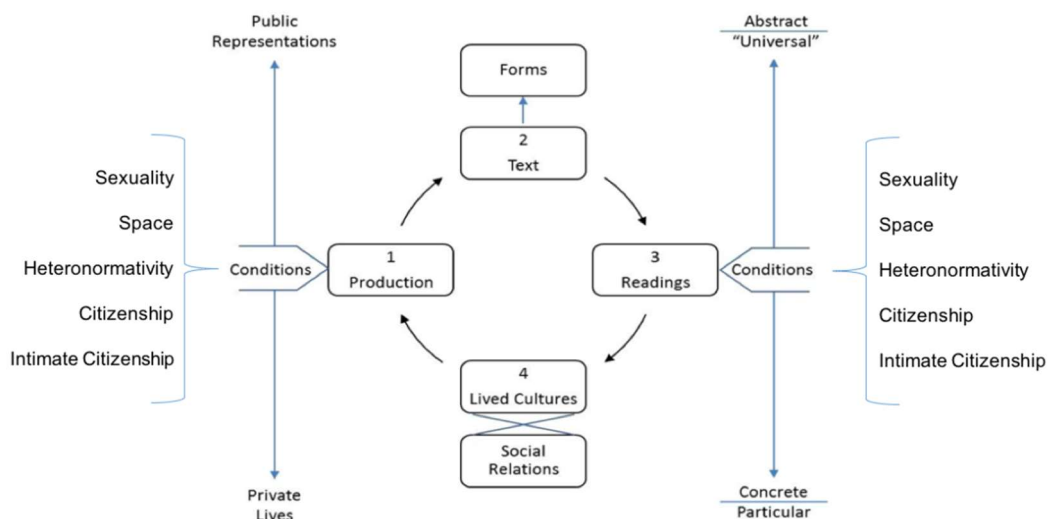
Figure 2: Adaptation of Johnson's Circuits of Culture

In order to understand transformations in the communication process, one must understand the specific conditions of consumption or reading (Johnson, 1986). For this reason, I have adapted the diagram in Figure 2 (previous page) to demonstrate where the micro-level frameworks discussed at 2.2 to 2.5 operate within the circuits of culture[71]. Accordingly, this project seeks to examine those who **consume** micronovels (point 3 on the above diagram), in addition to looking at those who write them (point 1), to see how user-led content creation in this environment is redefining the production process (see Hellmann, 2010; Woermann, 2010).

From this outline of the production and transmission of culture, I move to present a synopsis of the micro-level theoretical frameworks which become embedded within the cycle of cultural replication and communication in sections 2.2 to 2.5.

2.6.5 'Circuits of queer cyberculture' in China

From this review of theoretical frameworks of sexualities and models of citizenship at 2.2 to 2.5 and conceptual literature on culture and circuits of cultures at 2.6, I now bring together the project's macro- and micro-level frames of analysis to engage with theoretical formulations on the production and replication of the cultural phenomenon of queer-themed microfiction. I hypothesize that, confronted with heteronormative social structures—constructed along a gender binary and framed through patriarchal familial and social relationships—China's cyberspace has offered a new platform for marginalized individuals (both queer-identified and those heterosexual consumers who enjoy fantasizing about same-sex intimacies) to engage, navigate and negotiate space to tell their stories. In doing so, they find opportunities to renegotiate citizenship based on sexual identity. The inclusion of heterosexual female consumers in this formulation is significant, as my interviews

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[71] Johnson's original model (1986, p.47) does not list any of the 'conditions' which feed into elements 1 and 3 on the diagram, which are context-specific.

with respondents in China have demonstrated that heterosexual female consumers of queer-themed microfiction form an equally marginalized community—both online and offline (see discussion at 6.2.3)—and, although they do not share a sexual identity with the subjects of their interest, they too are exercising a form of sexual citizenship through the subversive publication and consumption of such material. Therefore, blending the critiques of literature and theory, this study creates a 'circuit of queer cyberculture' framework, through which microfiction will be analysed. This framework proposes that, through an emerging form of 'cultural self-determination' rooted in sexual and gender identity and the declaration and negotiation of sexual citizenship, netizens who experience social marginalization in the real world through their attraction to representation of queer lives begin to indigenize circuits of popular culture observable in mainstream media platforms by creating and distributing their own works of art and fiction online. Application of such a framework to a Chinese socio-political setting distinguishes this study from previous research undertaken on circuits of culture in queer online spaces (O'Riordan, 2007), because notions of sexual identity in China cannot be presumed to be formulated along Western models. Therefore, this framework can be used to explicate the specific, locally contextualized spheres of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation created by Chinese queer netizens.

2.7 Summary: theoretical frameworks

This chapter has reviewed and synthesized existing conceptual literature on the production and transmission of culture with theoretical literature on sexuality, , heteronormativity, citizenship and remediation of identity in online cultures in order to propose a framework for the analysis of queer-themed microfiction. Using an adaptation of Johnson's circuits of culture model in combination with Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication and a methodological approach derived

from critical Discourse analysis, this project will demonstrate the ways in which the micro level theories and concepts are embedded within cultural practices, and the ways in which they shape the production of queer-themed microfiction in Chinese cyberspace. From this theoretical framework, chapter 3 moves on to the explication of method, along with the limitations, assumptions and ethical considerations which underpin the project.

3 Methodological Approach

3.1 Introduction

This project utilizes two original data sets (one collection of 40 queer-themed micronovels[72], and 39 interviews[73] with respondents in China) in order to conduct a Discourse Analysis of the genre of online queer-themed microfiction in Chinese cyberspace. Discourse analysis has been chosen as a method to extract data from textual material in a way that will bring together the previous research outlined in chapter 1 with the theoretical frameworks developed in chapter 2. Building on this understanding, this chapter will outline the methodological considerations and frameworks upon which this project is constructed. This methodological exploration will therefore detail the research decisions made and provide a clear rationale for the combined use of textual and interview data in order to address the project's research questions outlined in chapter 1, ending with a reflexive account of my role as a researcher engaging with marginalized and hard-to-reach subjects.

I begin with a detailed discussion of these data sources, including the rationale and justification behind their inclusion and limits to their use within the scope of the investigation. This chapter then guides the reader through the various approaches to textual analysis, to highlight the differing methodological tools available to the researcher. This discussion will offer justification for my chosen method. The process of data coding and analysis will be outlined, along with a definition of key terms which will be used in the subsequent empirical chapters. Finally, the chapter closes with discussion of the relevant ethical considerations and issues of researcher positionality which have influenced the project's design.

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[72] See 3.2.1.
[73] See 3.2.2.

3.2 Data sources, collection and analysis

The data examined in this project comes from two distinct sources; queer-themed micronovels collected from one of China's largest microblogging websites, and interviews (both face-to-face and via online methods) with producers and consumers of queer-themed microfiction from China. These data sets are used both in isolation and comparatively to provide discussion and insight into the phenomena of queer-themed microfiction. The following subsection will outline the selection and recruitment criteria for the textual artefacts and respondents, before providing respondent demographic details to illustrate the nature of the sample.

3.2.1 Queer-themed micronovels

The first data source comprises a collection of online micronovels representing same-sex intimacies or attraction, which were selected in order to perform a detailed content and textual analysis. Micronovels, and their associated artwork if included, published between May 2013 to April 2014[74] (a twelve-month period) were collected from Sina Weibo. Within the microblogging forum, consumers of BL microfiction locate these stories either through visiting dedicated microblog pages, or by searching for hashtags[75], which micronovel animators attach to their stories (Hockx, 2015, p.91). By inserting an appropriate hashtag term into the search bar on the website, users are provided with a chronologically[76] sorted collection of entries relating to that term. This was the method used to locate microfiction examples in this project, in which only those micronovels containing the hashtag search strings of *tongzhi weixiaoshuo* (同志微小说, *comrade micronovel*), *BL weixiaoshuo* (BL 微小说, *BL micronovel*) or *danmei weixiaoshuo* (耽美微小说, *slash micronovel*) were collected.

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[74] This timeframe was informed by the constraints of the PhD programme, along with the requirement to conduct fieldwork following collection and analysis of the micronovels.
[75] Search strings are executed by locating certain textual elements within the online forum. On many social media websites, users can categorize their posts using hashtags (see *Glossary*). This makes it easier for users to find messages with specific content or themes.
[76] The most recent entry appears first.

Criteria for inclusion in the sample was therefore dictated by the hashtag search and the research medium (i.e. story must be less than 140 characters, and had to have been categorized as *tongzhi/BL/danmei weixiaoshuo*). Initially, 100 micronovels published throughout the time period of 12 months prior to April 2014 were collected. I chose the micronovels based on specific criteria which are informed by the richness of the story and their relevance to my research aims. Accordingly, following the initial collection process, I chose only those micronovels that contributed to my interpretation of Gee's methodological framework (i.e. contributed to analysis of situated meanings, figured worlds and Discourses), and discarded those which were unsuitable for such analysis. From this narrower selection, micronovels that were clear duplications or repetitions (of plot or format) were rejected for inclusion in the data analysis. Micronovels featuring very graphic sexual images were also rejected from the sample. This decision was taken because consent could not be obtained from the subject in the photograph, who in theory could be identifiable[77]. Ultimately, a collection of 40 unique micronovels was achieved. This figure was deemed to be a sufficient body of literature upon which to perform a comprehensive Discourse analysis, as the selected works contained features which were representative of the whole corpus. As a further defence, it should be noted that the methodological approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (see 3.3.1) frequently involves the analysis of only a small number of texts, which are presented as typical of a particular ideology or Discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). As micronovels are published without titles, the 40 selected micronovels have been assigned a catalogue number for ease of discussion, ranging from A001 to A040. A complete list of these works (with English translations) is provided in Appendix 9.1.

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[77] See also footnote 148 on p.225.

3.2.2 Consumer/producer/prosumer interviews and responses

The second data source comprises interviews and online conversations with consumers, producers and prosumers[78] of queer-themed microfiction from Mainland China. Fieldwork was conducted between October to December 2014. The primary aim in undertaking such fieldwork was to supplement the findings from preliminary analysis of the microfiction pieces, in order to contextualize my findings within the receiving culture—particularly as there was strong evidence from external scholarship that the primary consumer group of this material identifies as neither male nor homosexual (Akatsuka, 2008; Isola, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008; Feng, 2009). Given that such material constitutes a form of representation of 'queer' lives in contemporary China—regardless of who is producing or consuming it—I believe that it is vital to conduct supplementary research into how such material 'decoded', and to investigate how self-identified queer Chinese respondents feel about such representation. As I have adopted a poststructuralist textual analysis approach (see 3.3 for further explanation), I am not seeking to ascertain whether such portrayals are truthful, but rather to understand the relationship and interplay between the different lines of Discourse.

I based my fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai, and Ningbo, allowing for flexibility in my schedule to be able to interview as many people as possible in each location. My justification for selecting Beijing and Shanghai owes to their cultural and social importance as the two most populous cities in China. Previous ethnographic studies of Chinese LGBT communities have demonstrated similar rationalization in selecting densely populated urban centres for obtaining access to queer-identified subjects (Ho, 2010; Engebretsen, 2014). Ningbo, a sub-provincial level city in northeast Zhejiang province, was selected due to relative ease of academic access via the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC)[79], a strong existing personal contacts

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[78] See *Glossary*.
[79] A satellite campus of the University of Nottingham, of which I am an alumnus.

network in the area, and the presence at the University of a *dongman she* (动漫社, comic/cartoon appreciation society), in which I knew there to be many consumers of BL fiction.

I conducted 16 face-to-face interviews, with 23 other responses gathered from a combination of email or social media-based conversations and questionnaires, making a total of 39 individual instances of data collection[80]. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and/or English, at the respondent's preference. In cases where discussions took place in English[81], the subjects were encouraged to use their native language (code-switch) on occasions where they felt that their expression or intention might be limited by their command of the language. This resulted in several interviews being conducted bilingually, but the majority of the surveys/email exchanges were conducted in Chinese only. Email data samples comprised 19 open-ended questions, presented either in Chinese or bilingually in English and Chinese. In effect, this represents two ways of administering the same set of questions, which constitute the interview schedule (see Appendix 9.5). Inherent to face-to-face interaction is increased scope for discussion on other themes that arise from the conversation. For email-based responses, this was also possible, but sometimes multiple message exchanges would occur across a period of time in order to expand or clarify upon points raised by the respondent. An appraisal of email exchanges as a tool for qualitative data collection has been conducted by Murray and Sixsmith (1998), who argue that it is both a valuable and a viable medium of research, albeit one with its own limitations which must be duly factored into the research design. One data exchange took place using the *WeChat* messaging application, with my questions being responded to by the participant in real time, but via a textual medium rather than through an audio-visual interviewing method. Once data had been

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[80] Biographical details of all respondents are provided in Appendix 9.6.
[81] On occasions where interviews had to be conducted in public settings, this was sometimes a deliberate choice on the part of the interviewee in order to obfuscate our discussions from other non-English speakers in the vicinity.

gathered, it was processed in Nvivo (qualitative data analysis software) using an applied thematic analysis approach (Guest *et al.*, 2012).

The differences between these styles of data collection clearly result in data sets of arguably differing qualities, as face-to-face interviews offer a richer opportunity for information exchange (including interpretation of body language, or using vocal patterns and utterances/hesitations as a data tool for conversation analysis). However, as conversation analysis is beyond the scope of the project, and as I had ample opportunity (and consent) to go back to participants following the submission of their responses for clarification or expansion, combined with the need to speak to sufficient members of a geographically disparate, hard-to-reach population during my fieldwork trip, I deemed the potential difference in data quality to be of negligible importance to the project. Sampling strategies are discussed further in 3.5.2.

Figure 3: Respondent origins within China

The majority of respondents were identified through snowball sampling (see 3.5.3 of this chapter for my justification of this methodological approach), with *WeChat* being used as the primary method of contact between researcher and subject, following an initial personal referral from a prior contact of the subject. To maintain the integrity of my data, I was cautious not to overuse a respondent's contacts, as this might have led to a skewed sample or an overrepresentation of a particular social network in the data. Owing to the nature of data collection, contributors to the study originated from 20 of China's provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (highlighted in dark green above).

3.2.2.1   Respondent demographics and Profiles

The demographics of respondents featured in this project are illustrated in the following charts:
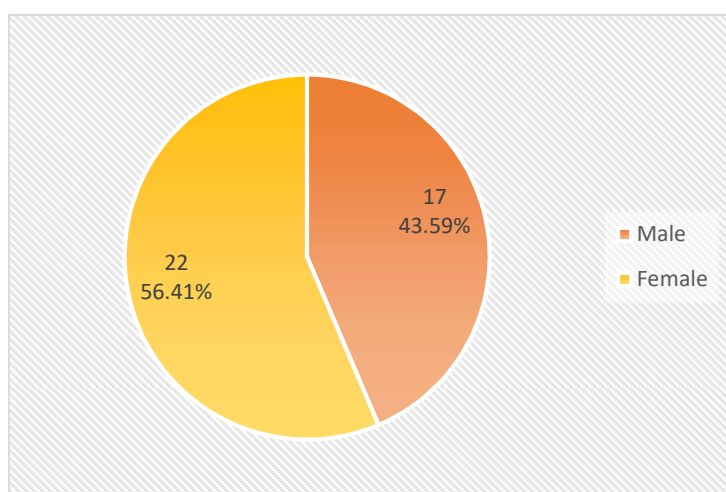
Figure 4: Self-declared gender identity of respondents

In all cases, gender was self-reported, or else confirmation was sought at the beginning of the interview. In line with the project's ethical approval, I did not attempt to establish the respondent's sexual identity; however, in all but seven cases, the respondents readily imparted this information to me, either at the point

of contact, or later during the course of their interview/survey. The seven respondents that did not disclose their sexual orientation all identified as female, and their responses would suggest that they are heterosexual, but this is not confirmed. This information is helpful to my overall analysis, as it further illustrates the demographic of the study:
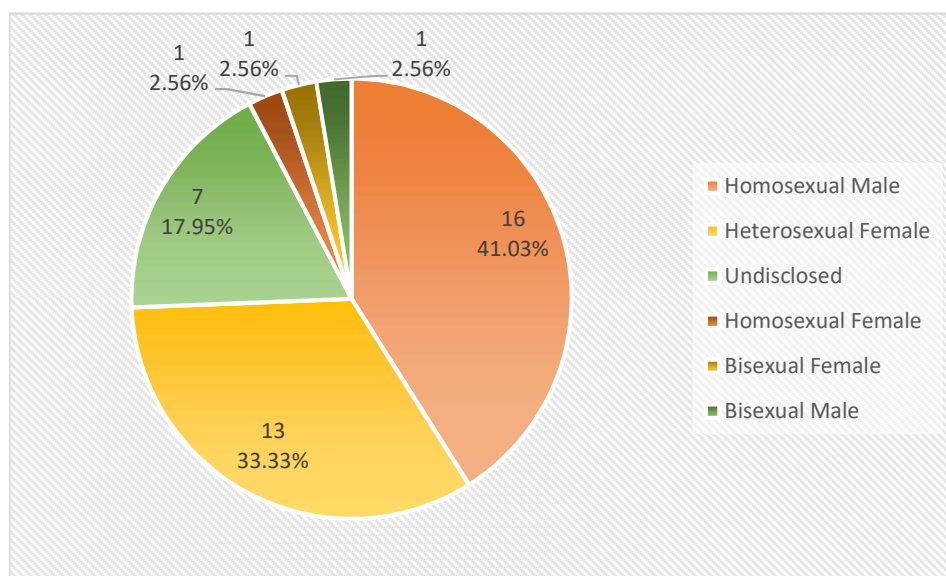
Figure 5: Respondents' sexual identities (self-reported)

By far the largest two groups represented in the sample were homosexual males (16 respondents) and heterosexual females (13 respondents, potentially 20 respondents if one presumes that the 7 undisclosed female participants were also heterosexual). The latter group is made up of individuals who have been referred to as *funü*[82]. Only two individuals in the sample openly identified as bisexual. The sample also contained one lesbian-identified woman. Heterosexual males were absent from the sample, and I was unable to find evidence of consumption or production of this genre of literature by self-identified heterosexual males.

Age was ascertained in all interviews, with only one respondent declining to provide this information. Respondent ages ranged from 18 years old to 39 years old, with the average therefore being 24.3 years. This was expected from previous

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[82] See 1.2.4.1*.*

research into netizen demographics, which state that Internet users in China tend to be young (Hockx, 2015), usually between the ages of 20 and 35 (Yang, 2003), and from China's newly-emerging middle class (Liu, 2011). Occupation was also asked in order to enhance the overview of the sample under investigation (see Figure 6, below), which confirms that the respondents belong primarily to the middle class[83]. My sample contained proportionally more women than men, although the difference in numbers between the genders is slight. Previous literature on the consumption of BL fiction in China suggests that this is a predominantly female activity (see 1.2.4), although interviews with the male respondents in my sample have challenged this notion to some extent.
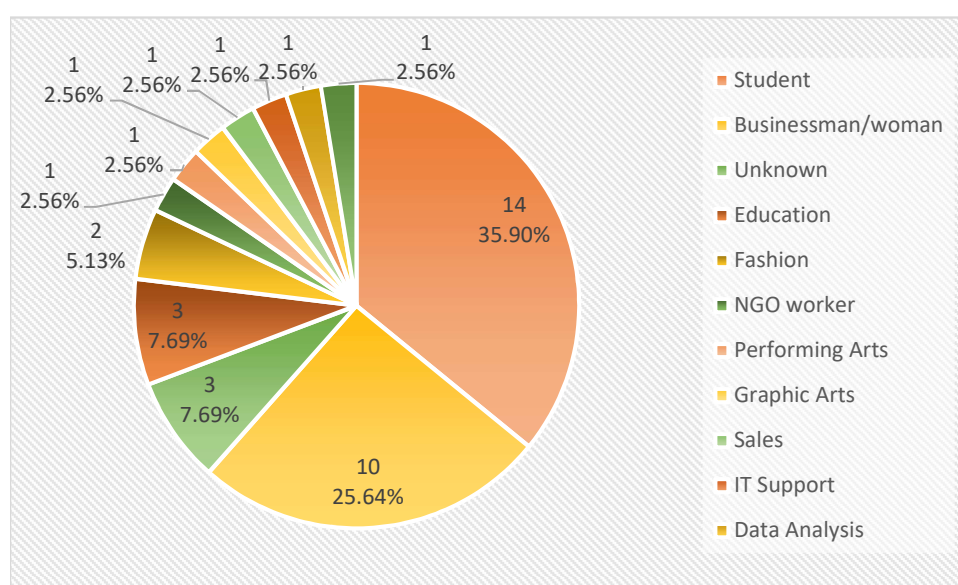
Figure 6: Respondents' professional demographics

As expected from previous BL studies (e.g. Feng, 2009), many respondents are currently in (or have received) higher education. Many respondents reported to have been particularly interested in this kind of literature while at high school.

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[83] See footnote 68 on p.57. Over 65% of China's netizens are classified as middle class (Barton *et al.*, 2013)

3.3 Textual analysis

Textual analysis concerns how a 'text' can be 'read'. It is part of a broader framework concerning the analysis of Discourse, with the relationship between text and Discourse being complex:

> *Text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis, but discourse analysis is not merely the linguistic analysis of texts. I see discourse analysis as 'oscillating' between a focus on specific texts and a focus on what I call the 'order of discourse', the relatively durable social structuring of language which is itself one element of the relatively durable structuring and networking of social practices.*

(Fairclough, 2003, p.3)

In this statement, Fairclough demonstrates that texts are situated or located within a web of power-infused social interactions/practices, manifested in part through language. Covered within this broad category of 'text analysis' are several methodological approaches, which all vary in both technique and result obtained. When selecting an approach, it is important to consider one's standpoint as a researcher, and to consider the purpose to which the research will ultimately contribute.

A poststructuralist approach[84] to textual analysis demonstrates a form of cultural relativism, as it looks for differences between texts without claiming that one of them is the most correct. In this approach, the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry and, without a central fixation on the author, the inquiry becomes the examination of other sources for meaning[85], which are therefore never authoritative. A reader's culture and society, then, share at least an equal part in the

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[84] This approach is inspired by poststructuralism due to the absence of the author. Poststructuralism is not a theory, but rather a set of theoretical positions, which are motivated by common understandings, yet which are not necessarily shared by every practitioner. Therefore, it is perhaps more accurate to state that my approach is underpinned by the poststructuralist spirit.
[85] For example, focus is placed on readers, cultural norms, other literature, etc.

interpretation of a piece as do the cultural and social circumstances of the author. Benefits to this approach include a fundamental acceptance of the fact that different cultures (even sub-cultures from within a dominant culture) perceive reality in differing ways; therefore, there is no single 'truth'. The focus shifts to how things can be read, rather than concerning ourselves over whether what is represented in text is 'truthful'.

In the case of queer microfiction, same-sex intimacies (or aspects of them) are being portrayed by people who do not, either publicly or privately, identify as homosexual, and are being consumed by both queer- and straight-identified readers. Therefore, understanding how these forms of representation are read becomes an important consideration. The consumers in my study share an overarching cultural framework (primarily that of a Chinese cultural identity), but reading can be influenced by membership of differing sub-cultures, as McKee has demonstrated:

> *Even within nations, various different identity subcultures can also have distinct enough sense-making strategies to produce quite different definitions of a text. One example is sexualised sense-making communities – straight and queer communities – in reviews that attempted to describe what the film 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert' was about. It was, on the most abstract level, a film about three people going across a desert in a bus. But how would we describe the people? For some reviewers, the film was about 'three drag queens' […]. For others, it was 'two drag queens and a transsexual […]. A reviewer who describes the three characters as 'three drag queens' is obviously not part of a queer community: any self-respecting member of the queer community would know that there are important differences between a drag queen and a transsexual.*

Normally, it is not possible to prove that a creator's interpretation of a text has been correctly understood, just as it is equally not possible to disprove it. Microfiction, owing to the publication medium, does not function in quite the same way—the distributor of the story has the opportunity (if so desired) to respond to comments and critique of the story directly on the original post (although I have not yet found compelling evidence that this is common practice). In this study, as I interview both 'consumers' and 'producers' of this fiction, there would have been a potential opportunity to ask which interpretation was intended. However, a disadvantage to adopting a poststructuralist approach from this perspective is that scholars of the methodology are often reluctant to consult with 'audiences' over interpretation of a text (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; McKee, 2003), explaining that to do so merely produces more 'texts' which themselves have multiple possibilities of reading. These do not measure 'reality', but rather generate further "representations of reality" (McKee, 2003, p.84). In this case, poststructuralist analysis throws into question the value of conducting interviews with people in China to see how they feel about the portrayal of same-sex intimacies in microfiction, as this seems more suited to a realist approach. However, on reflection, I do not believe that the value of my study lies in the measurement of these texts against 'reality' (which is itself an entirely subjective concept). Especially as prior research (Pagliassotti, 2008; Isola, 2008; Akatsuka, 2008; Yang & Xu, 2015) has demonstrated that such texts are produced and consumed (at least in part) by an audience 'external' to China's queer community, I believe that it is of more value to analyse the texts from a poststructuralist perspective, in order to see how the issues are being 'read' by consumers. Once a text is distributed, particularly in the way microfiction is disseminated, the story and author become detached, and the reading is subject to interpretation by the consumer. Something may be widely misunderstood, but if that becomes the dominant reading of the text, then it must be analysed as such. To my mind, this does not diminish the value of undertaking fieldwork with

producers/consumers in China, but merely sharpens the focus of *why* I conducted the interviews.

The project consists of two distinct (yet related) data sources; the main corpus of data for Discourse analysis will come from the microfiction examples, and interviews with producers and consumers in China will permit a focus on the production/consumption (or prosumption) cycle, upon which the project's theoretical framework is partly based—which is an aspect of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which I believe cannot be ignored. This secondary part of the research is clearly related to the textual corpus, but will not seek to establish truth or gauge audience reception of the specific texts under review. Therefore, I argue that it is not incompatible to combine poststructuralist textual analysis and CDA of the micronovel collection with semi-structured interviews with respondents in the field, in order to build a picture of the many ways in which this genre reflects, contests and influences the lived experiences of its readership.

3.3.1 Discourse analysis

The analysis of qualitative data takes myriad forms, among which is situated the discipline of Discourse analysis (DA). Abrams and Harpham state that, broadly speaking, DA:

> *concerns itself with the use of language in a running discourse,*
> *continued over a number of sentences and involving the*
> *interaction of speaker (or writer) and auditor (or reader) in a*
> *specific situational context, and within a framework of social*
> *and cultural conventions.*

(Abrams & Harpham, 2011, p.90).

In simpler terms, DA "attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause" (Stubbs, 1983, p.1). The importance of language in social research has been highlighted by Fairclough, who claims that "language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language" (Fairclough, 2003, p.2). Discourse is a system of statements which constructs an object (Parker, 2002). Some researchers make a distinction between 'discourse' (small 'd') and 'Discourse' (big 'D'), arguing that, while the former term refers to any instance of language-in-use, the latter term refers more specifically to:

> *…ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity*

(Gee, 2014, p.46).

I have chosen to adhere to this usage of discourse/Discourse, as Gee's explanation of this practice corresponds most closely to what I am seeking to achieve.

Within the framework of DA, there are numerous approaches to extracting data from text, all of which vary in their focus and method. For example, a Foucauldian approach to Discourse analysis will focus on the way in which language and practice manifest power relationships in society. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is a branch of DA which studies meaning, context and communication, focusing variously on deixis [86] (Bühler, 1934), presupposition (Karttunen, 1974), performativity (Butler, 1999) or implicature[87] (Grice, 1975), among others. What

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[86] Deixis refers to the use of expressions in which the meaning can be traced directly to features of the act of utterance—when and where it takes place, and who is involved as speaker and as addressee (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

[87] A conversational implicature is "generated by a speaker taking advantage of the fact that his audience will generally regard him as cooperative, e.g., aiming at speaking truthfully (by not saying what he believes to be false, etc.), being as informative as the conversation requires, being relevant, not speaking obscurely, etc., in order to mean or communicate something more than or different from the literal meaning of the words he uttered" (Borge, 2009, p.150).

all approaches to textual analysis share, however, is that they are an attempt to gather information about sense-making practices (Gee, 2014).

The following subsections expand upon the differing approaches to the analysis of Discourse and their role within this project: the relationship between Discourse analysis and critical Discourse analysis is explored in 3.3.1.1, followed by a discussion of my adaptation of the methodological framework of J.P Gee in 3.3.1.2, which will underpin the ensuing data chapters.

3.3.1.1 Differences between DA and CDA, and their application to this project

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a mode of Discourse analysis that "focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society" (van Dijk, 2001, p.352). There are numerous differences between DA approaches and those belonging to CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis), most of which boil down to a difference between deductive and inductive perspectives—inductive approaches usually stay at a 'meso-level', deductive ones usually start from a macro-level perspective. However, to claim that all CDA approaches are 'top-down' is incorrect, as Wodak and Reisigl's (2009) Discourse-Historical approach (DHA) problematizes this issue.

DHA is a more linguistically-focused approach than other methodologies shown in Figure 7 (overleaf), and "tries to establish a theory of discourse by establishing the connection between fields of action, genres, discourses and texts" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.26). This therefore represents a good choice for this project, based on the mandate for investigation.

Overall research strategy		Main theoretical attractor
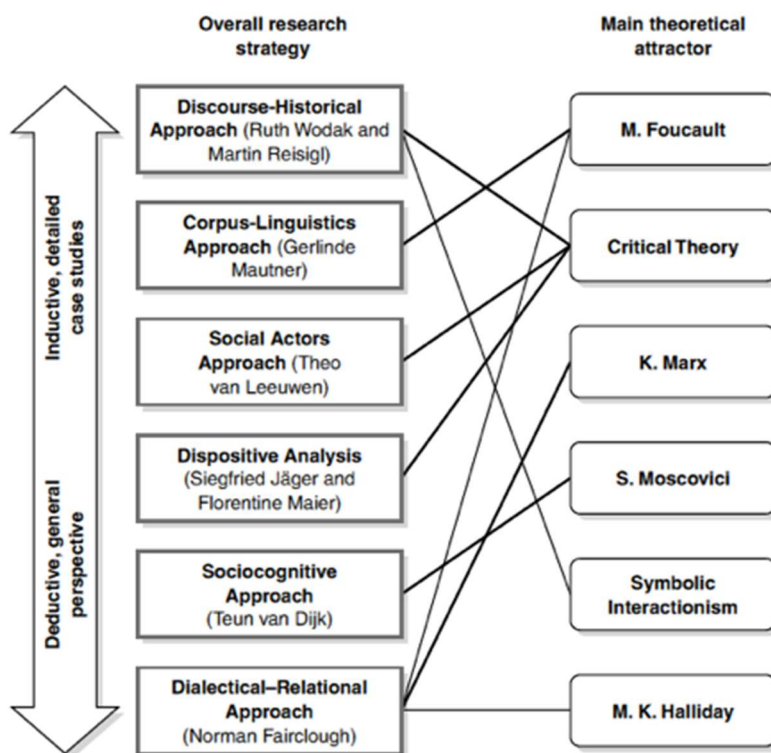
(Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.20)

Figure 7: CDA research strategies

Central to Fairclough's (2013) conceptualization of Critical Discourse Analysis is a three-dimensional framework involving attention to processes of text production, distribution and consumption, because analysis of texts should not be artificially isolated from analysis of institutional and discursive practices within which texts are embedded:

> *This principle would mean for instance that in analysing the text of a TV programme one should also have regard to the routines and processes of programme production, and the circumstances and practices of audience reception. Text analysis in isolation from audience reception has been widely criticized in media studies, and there has been a shift in*

attention from the former to the latter. This argument is very relevant to CDA, for part of the critique is directed at analysts who postulate ideological effects solely on the basis of analysis of texts without considering the diverse ways in which such texts may be interpreted and responded to.

(Fairclough, 2013, p.9)

I therefore adopt Fairclough's line of reasoning in support of my decision to include interview responses in this project along with textual analysis of the micronovel selection.

As for the differences between DA and CDA, some scholars see less overall distinction:

People who take a descriptive approach often think that a critical approach is "unscientific" because the critical discourses analyst is swayed by his or her interest or passion for intervening in some problem in the world. People who take a critical approach often think that a purely descriptive approach is an evasion of social and political responsibility. My view […] is that all discourse analysis needs to be critical, not because discourse analysts are or need to be political, but because language itself is […] political. I have argued that any use of language gains its meaning from the "game" or practice of which is a part and which it is enacting. I have argued, as well, that such "games" or practices inherently involve potential social goods and the distribution of social goods, which I have defined as central to the realm of "politics". Thus, any full description of any use of language would have to deal with "politics".

(Gee, 2014, pp.9–10)

I therefore summarize that, like the poststructuralist textual analysis approach within DA, CDA avoids evaluating accuracy of statements, but rather focuses on how they are constructed through language. The role of CDA in this project is clear, given that I am examining works concerning same-sex intimacy within a regulated cyberspace arena, itself contained within a cultural framework that is resistant to same-sex desire as a valid and exclusive way of life. Therefore, the very existence of such works makes this a 'political' issue, as the notion of such material being declarations of sexual citizenship pushes this project into the realms of power mediations and negotiations. Fairclough's (2013, p.9) three-dimensional framework[88] for CDA makes it clear that "the analysis of discourse practice involves attention to processes of text production, distribution and consumption". This ties in well on a theoretical level with Johnson's (1986) circuits of culture framework. In conclusion—for clarity—I acknowledge that my approach bears the hallmarks of critical Discourse analysis. However, like Gee—whose methodological framework I am adapting, and who routinely refers to his own approach as Discourse analysis—I see little merit in labouring the distinction between CDA and DA when analysis of any use of language must inherently engage with politics and power.

3.3.1.2   Tools of inquiry for Discourse analysis

In the poststructuralist approach, the reader replaces the author as the primary subject of inquiry and, without a central fixation on the author, the inquiry becomes an examination of other sources for meaning, which are never authoritative. In following this approach, I am guided by the work of J.P. Gee, whose schema for data analysis I have adapted following a pilot study conducted in early 2014. Gee's Discourse Analysis model (2014) categorizes data into 42 distinct classifications: beginning with the Building Tasks of *significance*, *practices*, *identities*, *relationships*,

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[88] Text and the study of 'texture'; discursive practices and the concept of 'orders of discourse'; and sociocultural practices and the concept of 'culture'.

connections, *politics (the distribution of social goods),* and *sign systems and knowledge*, Gee then analyses the workings of these building tasks in specific instances of language-in-use to form *tools of inquiry* (*TOI*), which cover *situated meanings*, *social languages*, *figured worlds*, *Discourses* and *Conversations*. However, given the limited data contained within each micronovel (each comprising 140 characters, maximum), analysis through all 42 categories in the pilot study proved excessive and often yielded extraneous results.

Building Tasks

	Significance	Practices	Identities	Relationships	Politics	Connections	Sign Systems
Situated Meanings	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Social Languages	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Figured Worlds	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Intertextuality	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Discourses	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Conversations	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

(Tools of Inquiry)

Figure 8: Selection of tools of inquiry

For this reason, I elected to focus on the three *TOI* that yielded the most relevant data during the pilot study (situated meanings, figured worlds and Discourses), and to use five of the seven *Building Tasks* (significance, practices, identities, politics and imagery [adapted from Gee's 'sign systems']. The following summaries are taken from Gee (2014, pp.32–36, 121):

1 Significance: How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not, and in what ways? *Sub questions:* How are (1) situated meanings, (2) social languages, (3) figured worlds, (4) intertextuality, (5) Discourses and (6) conversations being used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context?

2 Practices (Activities): What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e. get others to recognize as going on)? Sub questions: How are (1) situated meanings, (2) social languages, (3) figured worlds, (4) intertextuality, (5) Discourses and (6) conversations being used to enact a practice (activity) or practices (activities) in context?

3 Identities: What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e. get other to recognize as operative)? What identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity? Sub questions: How are (1) situated meanings, (2) social languages, (3) figured worlds, (4) intertextuality, (5) Discourses and (6) conversations being used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people)?

4 Politics (the distribution of social goods): What perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be 'normal,' 'right,' 'good,' 'correct,' proper,' 'appropriate,' 'valuable,' 'the way things are,' 'the way things ought to be,' 'high status or low status,' 'like me or not like me,' and so forth)? Sub questions How are (1) situated meanings, (2) social languages, (3) figured worlds, (4) intertextuality, (5) Discourses and (6) conversations being used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as 'good' or 'acceptable' or not?

5 Sign systems and ways of knowing: How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems (e.g. Spanish vs. English, technical language vs. everyday language, words vs.

images, words vs. equations, etc.) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief (e.g. science vs. the Humanities, science vs. 'common sense,' biology vs. 'creation science')? Sub questions: How are (1) situated meanings, (2) social languages, (3) figured worlds, (4) intertextuality, (5) Discourses and (6) conversations being used to privilege or disprivilege different sign systems (language, social languages, other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing?

The selection of these three *TOI* from Gee's model builds a logical progression of analysis of the ways in which stories of same-sex love and intimacy are created, distributed and consumed, which I believe also encapsulates Fairclough's conceptualization of a three-dimensional framework for CDA outlined in 3.3.1.1, comprising the layers of text, Discourse practice, sociocultural practice:

1. The *situated meanings TOI* gives us an insight into what is happening at the sentence level, showing how the specific use of language and vocabulary is being used to locate meaning within the clause. I refer to this as the '*What is happening?*' question.

2. The *figured world TOI* provides us with the '*How is it happening?*' question, as it demonstrates how the interpretations of situated meanings are governed by our understanding of underlying assumptions and judgements pertaining to the worlds in which the text exists.

3. Finally, the *Discourses TOI* poses the '*Why is it happening?*' question, as one focuses on the wider conduits of discussion and conversation that are both reflected within the text, and which are sparked from the messages the texts carry.

Gee's Discourse model has previously been applied to Chinese language textual material in the work of Guo[89] (2013). Precedent for selective application and inversion of Gee's original *Building Tasks* and *TOI* models can be found in Marsh and Lammer's work (2011) on the construction of masculinity within educational settings, in which the authors adapt Gee's methodological framework to explore how constructions of masculinity presented by a middle-class, Mexican American male student shaped his participation in school literacy activities (and the way that school literacy activities and class-room contexts, in turn, shaped his understandings of what it meant to be a boy in a literacy classroom). To achieve this, the authors used four of Gee's *TOI* (*Discourses, social languages, situated meanings* and *figured worlds*) to extract data from interview material, using *Discourses* to frame their study, and using *figured worlds* as their major analytical tool. Their successful adaptation of this model supports my rationale for selective use of Gee's *TOI* framework.

3.3.1.3   Definition of terms: speaker, author and animator

There is a certain degree of ambiguity and obscurity in terminology used when one talks about 'Discourse'. As I have established, DA looks at how language is used. These occurrences can be vocal (from a 'speaker' to a 'listener'), textual (from an 'author' to a 'reader') or even through non-verbal means (it is perfectly possible to conduct DA on imagery, or on non-spoken language events). However, it frequently occurs that the speaker of a text is not the actual author of those words. In this case, problems of analysis can arise when the terms 'author' and 'speaker' are used interchangeably. Writing in 1981, Goffman attempted to unravel terminology involved in speech acts at an analytical level. For him, the terms 'animator' (one who

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[89] Guo's research uses Gee's methodological approach in a case study analysis of textual data relating to the advertising and self-marketing of a Chinese university, exploring how the university builds its identity as a comprehensive teaching and research institution.

is actually making the sounds, or the marks on paper) and 'recipient' are terms belonging to the same level and mode of analysis (Goffman, 1981, p.144), but that the term 'speaker' contains loaded meanings as to ownership or positioning:

> *[…] the implied overlaying of roles has extensive institutionalized exceptions. Plainly, reciting a fully memorized text or reading aloud from a prepared script allows us to animate words we had no hand in formulation, and to express opinions, beliefs and sentiments we do not hold. We can openly speak for someone else and in someone else's words, as we do, say, in reading a deposition or providing a simultaneous translation of a speech—the latter an interesting example because so often the original speaker's words, although ones that person commits himself to, are ones that someone else wrote for him.*

> (Goffman, 1981, pp.145–146)

This research project examines occurrences of text; however, there exists a problem within the genre of online microfiction of ascribing true authorship to the person who appears to have 'written' the text. As an actor 'performs' a script, so too can publishers of microfiction 'perform' a pre-written act of speech, purely by sharing someone else's words through the 'mouthpiece' of their own microblog channel. The same liberties of artistic expression afforded to actors when they interpret a script can also apply to these microfiction publishers—they can improvise, reinterpret, rewrite, and embellish their performance of the original piece. The thorny issue regarding microfiction is that one can never be sure of the format the original work took before it wove its way through cyberspace. The works of fiction under review here may have passed through the hands of literally hundreds of others. Perhaps it remains intact, completely unaltered; yet one cannot disregard the likelihood that the words have been 'tweaked', with small revisions having been made along the

way. During the data collection process, limited evidence was seen of this practice—stories appear to remain generally intact, but one often finds certain words to have been altered, or an extra sentence added. This is fascinating from a DA perspective, as it allows for the examination of the underlying implications of such grammatical changes in meaning, no matter how slight. 'Meaning', as Gee establishes, is:

> *… not merely a matter of decoding grammar, it is also (and more importantly) a matter of knowing which of the many inferences that one can draw from an utterance are relevant. And "relevance" is a matter deeply tied to context, point of view, and culture.*

(2014, p.54).

Given the ambiguity of authorship regarding microfiction, I am therefore thenceforth proposing to disentangle the term 'author' when referring to distributors of microfiction in my analysis by using the term '*animator*' (as defined by Goffman, 1981; Fairclough, 2013).

3.3.2 Micronovels: data processing and coding

Following collection, each micronovel underwent a detailed process of analysis using the aforementioned 15 categories (five *Building Tasks*, examined through three *TOI*s). Using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis programme, the text-based analysis was coded using a series of key words or concepts which had emerged from the texts. For example, instances of heteronormative behaviour/convention were coded first under the heading of 'heteronormativity', then secondly as to whether this occurrence was relevant to *situated meanings*, *figured worlds* or *Discourses*. Accordingly, each element of analysis received at least two code allocations (illustrated in Figure 9: Data coding through Nvivo, overleaf), although some
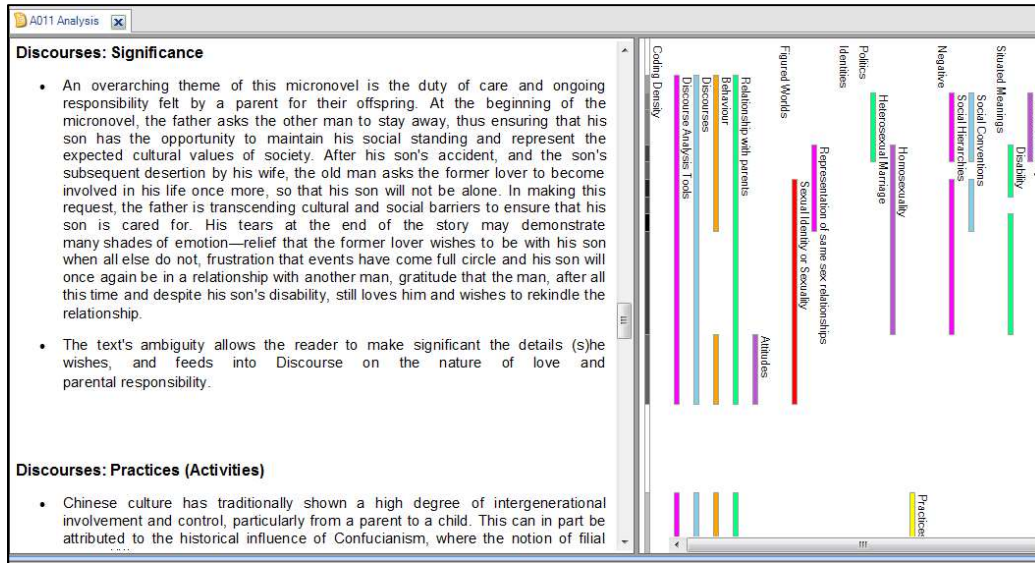
Figure 9: Data coding through Nvivo

instances received multiple coding assignations. This allowed for effective cross-referencing and thematic organization of the data. This process was entirely conducted by the project author, which reduced the opportunity for inconsistencies in the coding process, and the subsequent need for extensive coding comparison.
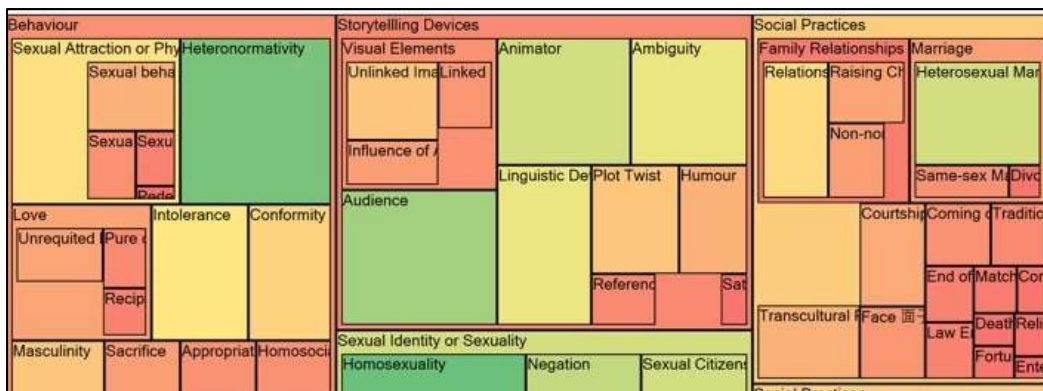
Figure 10: Coding density tree map [excerpt from microfiction dataset]

In total, the data was encoded through 188 separate coding 'nodes' through the Nvivo software. Once this process had been completed for all 40 micronovels, reports were generated showing the most densely coded items (Figure 10: Coding density tree map [excerpt from microfiction dataset], above).

This methodological approach was applied to each of the three *TOI* categories (*situated meanings*, *figured worlds*, and *Discourses*). Each of the three empirical chapters of this thesis are based upon these three *TOI*, with resultant discussion within each chapter being framed around the most highly occurring features within the microfiction texts. Some phenomena—such as heteronormativity—are pervasive throughout all *TOI* categories, and as such, care was taken when selecting specific aspects for discussion to avoid undue repetition throughout the chapters.

3.4 Limitations and assumptions

Limitations of the research design, along with assumptions affecting the interpretation of data within the project are outlined in the following subsections.

3.4.1 Limitations

Consistent with my definition of terms throughout the thesis, I have used the terms 'queer' and '*tongzhi*' to describe stories featuring same-sex intimacies. However, in the context of this project, the same-sex intimacies upon which I am focusing are exclusively male, rather than those between women. This is because literature focusing on same-sex intimacies between women is considered to be a separate genre, with a separate readership and different motivations behind its consumption. Therefore, conflating these two genres would be inappropriate, and is beyond the scope of this thesis.

As explained in 1.2.4.2 for the purposes of this study, I make little distinction between the three main sub-genres of queer-themed microfiction observable within the Weibo platform. This is because consumers within China make little distinction themselves between the three, and readily conflate the genres in discussion and

consumption, as was confirmed during my fieldwork research, and therefore delineation was deemed unnecessary for the purposes of analysing the discursive features of queer-themed microfiction.

3.4.2 Assumptions

To be considered in the context of limitations are the assumptions made within the project, particularly regarding the quality of data obtained from participants. Respondent truthfulness is a concern with any piece of research, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics or subjects which are likely to cause distress or offence. Although the topic of same-sex intimacy is considered sensitive within Chinese culture, this project did not seek to elicit responses from the general public, but rather from those with a personal interest in this form of literature, and who consented to take part in the project. Therefore, within this research target group, I have no evidence or reason to suggest that respondents were not being honest or truthful in their answers.

This project involved the close reading of a selection of microfiction representations of male same-sex intimacies. My selection criteria are outlined in 3.2. However, although I am confident that these 40 micronovels represent the range of features observable in the 100 micronovels collected during the specified timescale, I cannot assume that my findings can be generalized to all queer-themed microfiction available online in Chinese cyberspace. Instead, I state that the features analysed herein are representative of queer-themed microfiction in existence at a specific time (May 2013-April 2014), and on a specific platform (Sina Weibo). As with other qualitative methods such as phenomenology or heuristics, such an approach can have issues with replicability. However, input from consumers and producers of microfiction has allowed for a more generalized discussion on the overall features of the genre, as Sina Weibo is not the only forum available for distributing and reading

micronovels, and many producers/consumers subscribe to multiple platforms, or have an interest in queer-themed microfiction which spans a broader timescale than my original data sample.

As a final assumption of the project, I wish to make it clear that this genre is a highly stylised form of fiction, and as such it should not be interpreted as realism. My purpose in conducting this analysis is to understand and explicate the way that meaning is conveyed, negotiated and contested within the micronovel format. Interview responses collected for the project underscore that members of the BL community (both consumers and producers) do not consider this style of writing to be a realistic depiction of queer lived experience in China; concerns[90] raised by male consumers over the accuracy of such depictions relate to such depictions being misinterpreted as realistic by individuals outside of the community[91] (which is felt could have a detrimental effect on social activism, although it is conceded by all respondents who engaged with this issue that this is not the original function of such microfiction).

3.5 The effective management of ethical issues within the study

Ethical issues are a feature of any type of research (Orb *et al.*, 2001). Accordingly, projects involving the collection of human subject data contain with them elements of risk, both to the researcher and to the subjects of the research, the implications of which must be carefully considered within the design of the research project. This project is primarily a Discourse analysis of publicly[92] published instances of fictional textual artefacts, with data gathered from producers and/or consumers regarding the literary genre and contemporary attitudes to features which

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[90] See 5.3.1, 6.2.3, and 7.3.2 for further discussion.
[91] This is an inevitable consequence of Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication, discussed at 2.6.1.
[92] See 3.5.1 for justification of this term.

are identifiable within the works. Although the nature of the literary genre will mean that such discussions will broach upon potentially sensitive topics, the project is not seeking to collect personally sensitive data from the contributors (such as discussion of their own sexual experiences or preferences)[93]. Ethical approval for this project, specifically relating to the collection of interview and survey data, was granted by the Research Ethics Officer of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies[94] in August 2014. Plain language statements in both English and Chinese were provided to all participants (see Appendix 9.3) and consent was obtained from all participants to use their responses in the preparation of this project (see Appendix 9.4). As a further safeguard to protecting the identities of my contributors, each respondent's data was recorded under a code number, with finally a pseudonym[95] being attached for use within the project[96]. All contributors were informed of their rights to withdraw from the project at any time, and to have their personal contributions removed from the project in such a case.

The following subsections will discuss the ethical issues that were considered during the project's construction. Initially problematic was the question over whether the Internet can be considered a public or private domain, as research cannot be conducted in the same manner for both eventualities without addressing the issue of informed consent of the research subjects. My rationale for the standpoint I have taken is set out at 3.5.1. Participant access and ethical considerations for interviewing producers and consumers is discussed at 3.5.2, including discussion of access issues and the challenges of researching 'hard to reach' populations. The selection of my data access method is also defended here. Finally, 3.5.3 discusses

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[93] In cases where such information was given by the respondent, permission was obtained to use such data within the thesis.
[94] Owing to internal restructuring within the University of Nottingham, this project was transferred to the School of Sociology and Social Policy in July 2016.
[95] Pseudonyms were selected from common male and female Chinese forenames. As this project has been written for an English-speaking readership, only forenames have been used (Chinese custom dictates that names are written in the order of surname then forename, with often the surname used in isolation).
[96] On occasions where translation assistance was sought, the translator would receive only the code number.

researcher positionality and issues of self-reflexivity which must be considered, both in the research design and in the eliciting and treatment of data.

3.5.1 Public vs. private: using Internet forums for research

Although Internet-based methodological approaches (such as 'netnography' and social media monitoring) have been a relatively recent development (Kozinets, 2009), their inception has required research communities to quickly revise their existing ethical approaches in order to adjust to conducting ethnographic-style research online. In particular, these have centred over the issue of whether the Internet constitutes a public or private arena, and how online observation/interaction problematizes the issue of informed consent. It is important to point out here that no consensus to these matters has been reached within the academic community. Concerning Internet research ethics, Kitchin (2007) claims that the issue boils down to whether the Internet is being used as a research 'tool' or a research 'venue', with the according ethical approach being dependent upon whether the research constitutes 'engaged web-based research' or 'non-intrusive web-based research':

> *Non-intrusive analyses refer to techniques of data collection that do not interrupt the naturally occurring state of the site or cybercommunity, or interfere with premanufactured text. Conversely, engaged analyses reach into the site or community and thus engage the participants of the web source.*
>
> (ibid, p.15)

On the private vs. public debate, Walther (2002) states that:

> *[…] it is important to recognize that **any person who uses publicly-available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their***

> ***foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the***
>
> ***storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments.***
>
> (ibid, p.207, emphasis in original text).

Langer and Beckman (2005), however, suggest that the private nature of Internet communication should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Kozinets (2009) concludes that if access to the information in question is not restricted, and if anybody can participate in the communication without restriction, then this can be defined as a public place.

The data source for textual analysis in this project is Sina Weibo[97]. This microblog-hosting site does require user registration to interact within the forums. This, it can be argued, does not sit within Kozinets' parameters for a 'public' space. However, there are several factors which distort this simple reflection. Registration with Weibo is free, simple and available to all netizens. Unlike other interest-based websites, membership of Weibo does not require or imply an affiliation (political, cultural or behavioural) to any specific interest group. In addition, surveillance in Chinese cyberspace (and therefore within Weibo itself) is pervasive, and all users operate in an environment whereby they understand that content is subject to monitoring. There have been numerous studies, both qualitative and quantitative, which use Weibo as a data source (cf. Qu *et al.*, 2011; Gao *et al.*, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2012; Tse & Zhang, 2013). Based on these factors, I argue that Weibo cannot be considered a 'private' space.

In order to navigate this ethical issue with respect to my online data source, I have chosen to treat the instances of microfiction as examples of literary artefact, and to disengage with public online discussion of the material taking place within the microblog arena (this is in keeping with Kitchin's formulation of 'non-intrusive web-based research', as discussed above.) This is primarily due to the inherent problems of obtaining informed consent from individuals who are contributing to the online

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[97] See *Glossary*.

Discourse. However, for a project such as this, it is nevertheless important to engage with the consumption element of the Discourse. To this end, I elected instead to undertake separate interviews with consumers and producers, but in isolation from the forum posts themselves. As I can elicit fully informed consent from these participants, I am satisfied that this constitutes an ethical way of collecting the data.

3.5.2 Participant access and sampling

Access to participants proved initially challenging. As a project focusing on online literature and its consumers, I initially proposed using the Internet in order to conduct interviews, as opposed to physically making a fieldwork trip to China. Accordingly, I attempted to make direct contact with some of the animators of the micronovels examined in the pilot study. This was done using the direct messaging facility on Weibo—a form of closed end-to end communication, which would safeguard confidentiality as only the account holder would be able to see the message. However, the messages did not attract any response. I then posted a message from my own Weibo account appealing for participants, tagging the request with the same hashtags as the micronovels to ensure that it would appear in the same locations within the Weibo forums as the stories that I had collected. Again, no response was received to any message. On reflection, I should have realized that this approach was destined to fail, particularly within a culture that values personal connections as highly as China does; the forum readers and micronovel authors had no connection to me, and therefore had no reason to trust either me or my intentions.

An alternative (and much more successful) strategy became to draw upon my own personal networks of friends and acquaintances in China, who were often able to refer me through their own personal networks to potential participants. This contact-led approach worked well owing to the personal introduction and enhanced levels of trust afforded to me by the participant as an established contact of their

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own acquaintance. Faugier and Sargeant (1997, p.791) have argued that the "more sensitive or threatening the phenomenon under study, the greater potential for respondents to hide their involvement and the more difficult the sampling is likely to be". Accordingly, snowball sampling has been frequently used within the social sciences as a method of collecting data among hard-to-reach populations (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005; Noy, 2008; Sadler *et al.*, 2010). Snowball sampling increases the inclusion of hidden populations by getting members of the target population to assist in the recruitment of other members (Erickson, 1979; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), but naturally increases opportunities for accusations of sample bias in that it "lacks validity in representation because the composition of the sample is dependent upon the choice of seeds (initial recruits) and short recruitment chains (the recruits of seeds)" (Kendall *et al.*, 2008, p.98). Nevertheless, snowball sampling became the preferred method of selection for consumer/producer/prosumer interviews for this project. As a researcher, I justify this choice due to the lack of engagement with unsolicited online appeals for participants that I have outlined above, and due to the method's proven success in targeting hidden populations (as, although participants in the forums have 'online' markers of identity, the activity can remain hidden and secretive from participants' daily lives.)

I conducted all interviews with participants, with all respondents being given a plain language statement in both Chinese and English (see Appendix 9.4) prior to the commencement of the interview. Interviews took place in a variety of settings, both public and private, to suit the participant's convenience. In all cases, personal safety of both researcher and subject was considered. On completion of the interview, all participants were required to sign a participant consent form (see Appendix 9.4). In cases where there was no face-to-face contact, consent was obtained via email. All respondents were made aware, both verbally and in writing, of their right to withdraw their participation from the project at any time.

3.5.3 Positionality of the researcher: self-reflexivity

Before moving on to the empirical chapters of this research project, I wish to take a moment to reflect upon the influence of my own positionality on the research design and outcomes. Researcher self-reflexivity has received much attention in recent years, particularly within social sciences research. The concept refers to a process whereby the researcher "engages in an explicit, self-aware meta-analysis of the research" (Finlay, 2002a, p.531), which demonstrates a "commitment to producing situated, unalienated, and reflexive knowledge that is sensitive to her/his own ideology and partial location" (Yip, 2008, para.2.2). While this is undoubtedly an important consideration in the production of knowledge, some scholars have advised against its overuse, claiming that excessive reflexivity can be self-indulgent on the part of the researcher (Finlay, 2002b; Ateljevic *et al.*, 2005). I engage with this critique of positionality not, therefore, as a deliberate attempt at self-narration or, as Skeggs has criticized, "as a technique for seducing the reader into [my] authorial power" (2002, p.369), but rather to declare the biases to which I am subject, in the spirit of Weber's formulations on value-neutrality (Weber, 1949), in order to ensure that my conduct as a researcher is "sensitive before, during and after the research process" (Yip, 2008, para.2.4) . In this fashion, I hope to remain mindful of the difference between 'doing reflexivity' and 'being reflexive'.

This research project has grown out of my undergraduate and Master's levels studies, for which I completed dissertations in 2011 and 2012 respectively, focusing on differing aspects of media-based representation of same-sex intimacies in new millennial China. Indeed, at least one of the micronovels featured in this project was first encountered while conducting research for my undergraduate dissertation in 2011, and this story has been regularly republished within Weibo ever since. Having lived and studied in Zhejiang province, and having been a part of a network of domestic and international LGBTQ/*tongzhi* friends and activists within China, I felt well placed to offer a contribution to this area of study. However, aspects of

community inclusivity and insight must not be trivialized. As a self-identified gay male, I consider myself to be part of the community being represented within the works of microfiction (and, at the time that I was developing the project, I presumed that this community would also be the primary consumer of such fiction). Indeed, access to certain participants was achieved only because of their perception of me as a part of their own community: thanks to a personal referral, I was able to contact the administrator of an online literature forum for gay men, based in Beijing, who—after a personal introduction and lengthy explanation and assurances of the academic nature of my project—consented to post an advertisement on the site to attract interview participants (See *Appendix 9.7*). During this process, divulgence of my own sexuality was an important way of establishing trust within the group; the administrator insisted on highlighting the fact that this research was being conducted by a fellow gay male, as he believed that without making such a disclosure (and including my photograph on the noticeboard), I would receive little response from the group members. Ultimately, this strategy proved correct, and I received responses from the group. However, my extensive academic study and personal experience of China notwithstanding, I am not a Chinese national, nor did I develop my own sexual identity from within China's specific cultural and social environments. Additionally, I have become very conscious that, as my project has developed, I—a gay, white, middle-class man—am representing the voices of straight, Chinese women through my research. Therefore, owing to existing structural frameworks, differing aspects of my identity privilege (and disprivilege) my voice in specific social settings, and I am consequently constantly mindful of how to manage this in an ethical and appropriate way. Finally, my academic and personal experience of sexuality has been primarily grounded in Western theories and frameworks, and while it may be prudent keep such theories in mind when analysing the development of sexual identity within China, one must exercise extreme caution to avoid blithely apportioning and attributing phenomena observed in differing societies to one's own cultural frameworks.

3.6 Summary: methodological approach

This chapter has summarized my methodological approach to the collection and treatment of data, outlining my collection strategy and selection criteria for the microfiction data, and explaining the importance of incorporating consumer/producer/prosumer interview responses into the project, both as an enhancement to the textual data, and as a strategy for maintaining ethical integrity regarding informed consent of online materials. I have offered justification and rationale for the methods chosen, along with a discussion of the process of negotiating access to participants in hard-to-reach populations. Additionally, I have sought to reflect upon my own positionality, and upon the potential influence of my own personal ideological bias as a researcher. Such explicitness about the research process, and providing validation for the decisions made in the research design, is necessary in order that others may evaluate the integrity of the research in question.

With this methodological framework in mind, and bringing together the aforementioned findings from previous academic work on both sexualities in China and the literary genre of microfiction, the following three chapters will proceed to unravel the *situated meanings*, *figured worlds* and *Discourses* of micro-tales of same-sex intimacy

4   Situated Meanings in Queer Microfiction

4.1   Introduction

In order to communicate with the world around us, we utilize a plethora of forms of expression. Frequently, this communication exchange will occur through a spoken or written language, often supplemented through additional methods of information transmission, such as gestures or other visual signals. Each of these forms rely upon a sense of mutual intelligibility between the parties who are involved in the conversation. Within Discourse analysis frameworks, Gee's *situated meanings tool of inquiry (TOI)* looks at the formulation of meaning that arises through specific contextual frameworks within an utterance or instance of text (Gee, 2014). Meaning is not constructed in isolation, but rather is a negotiated task involving the tools of context and inference. Therefore, the production of mutual understanding between speaker and listener will be driven by the interconnection of the words being used with the cultural/contextual framework of the *figured world* (see chapter 5) of the speech or text. This is of particular importance when it comes to a spoken language like Chinese, which has a high degree of homophony and contextualization (Li & Yip, 1998). Therefore, words spoken in isolation may convey differences (subtle or otherwise) in meaning to those spoken within the environment of a sentence. Yet, even with context, meaning can be differently inferred by different parties depending on their own cultural, social or educational backgrounds. This is referred to as the *frame problem* within Discourse analysis, wherein it is acknowledged that context is indefinitely large, and that:

> *[n]o matter how much of the context we have considered in offering an interpretation of an utterance, there is always the possibility of considering other and additional aspects of the context, and these new considerations may change how we interpret the utterance*

(Gee & Handford, 2012, p.4)

The thematic framework for this chapter (and for the further two empirical chapters) relate to my adaptation of Gee's *TOI* scheme, as illustrated in Figure 8 (see p.82). Therefore, each chapter begins with Gee's building task of *significance* within the macro level *TOI*, followed by the remaining four building tasks of *practices*, *identities*, *politics* and finally the adapted building task of *imagery*:

Gee's TOI	Gee's Building Task (Adapted)	My Thematic Analysis (emerging from the data)
Situated Meanings	**Significance**	» Authorship and publication constraints » Linguistic devices and syntax » Chengyu
	Practices	» Homo-narratives within hetero-worlds » Traditional cultural practices
	Identities	» Microfiction in the 1st person » Identity through implication and omission » Identity labels
	Politics	» Universal truths and shared assumptions » Markers of cultural value and material wealth » Power and Agency
	Imagery	» Influence of Japanese manga » Appropriation of domestic artwork » Sexualised photographic imagery

Figure 11: Situated meanings—building tasks and themes

Together, these building tasks (Figure 11, above) allow for a thematic analysis of the material, which contributes to an understanding of the way in which meaning is situated within the micronovel. Within each building task subsection, the sub-headings derive directly from evidence gleaned from close reading of the microfiction selection, arranged thematically in order to construct a narrative throughout the analysis.

This first empirical chapter uses the micronovel collection as its primary data source, without reference at this stage to the consumer/prosumer[98] interviews. This is because the analysis of situated meaning relies heavily upon the specific texts

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[98] See *Glossary*.

under discussion—upon how the information is presented in its raw form—which is beyond the scope of the interview discussions (which focused primarily on consumption, production and the cultural landscape, without reference to the specific micronovels under investigation in this project).

4.2 Situated meanings and significance

The *significance* building task from Gee's (2014) framework seeks to examine the ways in which information is presented within a text to accord or reduce significance (see 3.3.1.2). When one combines this task with the *situated meanings TOI*, one is able to analyse a text or utterance to observe how particular linguistic tools are being deployed in order to make features of the text significant or otherwise. In its application to my microfiction data collection, this building task will seek to investigate how animators have attempted to construct meaning through their choice of specific words and grammatical features, or through the use of extra-textual context and prototypical simulation[99] as a way of privileging or disprivileging significance within the texts.

4.2.1 Authorship and publication constraints

According to Gee, situated meanings "don't simply reside ready-made in individual minds; very often they are *negotiated* between people in and through communicative social interaction" (Gee, 2014, p.104 emphasis in original). Therefore, an important aspect of studying situated meanings in a text is to consider the surrounding context in which the utterance occurs, or to which it leads (ibid., p.66). Ordinarily, this will include analysis of the previous and subsequent parts of a

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[99] Prototypical simulations are the mental images or ideas one has of concepts weddings, marriages, meetings, romance, etc., when one takes the situation to be "typical" (Gee, 2014).

text; however, in the context of microfiction, this is problematic. The crafting of a piece of microfiction requires the development of a specific style of writing, as the publication restrictions of Sina Weibo (permitting a maximum of 140 characters per microblog entry) do not indulge the creator with space for verbosity. Rather, texts are often stripped down to the essentials. The Chinese writing system appears particularly suited to this type of restricted medium; being able to convey units of semantic meaning in individual, identically-sized Unicode characters in print or on screen means that, unlike alphabetical writing systems, such a divorce between a writing system and its verbal rendering can be especially successful for conveying maximum information in minimal space (Nip & Fu, 2016). Indeed, English translations of some of the micronovels in this collection run to 500+ characters, clearly demonstrating the Chinese language's logographical efficiency. However, when it comes to microfiction, length is no indicator of literary richness or emotional resonance. Microfiction's unique artistic style is considered by some scholars to be one of the driving reasons behind the popularity of the genre (Wang & Liu, 2013). Yet, notwithstanding this capacity, extraneous details of characters must still be omitted, which requires imagination on behalf of the reader to mentally fill in the literary gaps. Explicit detail regarding identity is often side-lined, with many of the micronovels omitting names or descriptive elements in favour of personal pronouns. In some cases, this can lead to considerable ambiguity regarding exactly who is doing what in the text:

> 7 岁他打碎了邻居家的玻璃他替他背罪 15 岁他翘课逃学他每晚登门为他辅导…
>
> *[At] 7 years old, he broke a neighbour's [window] glass, he took the blame for his crime. [At] 15 years old he skipped class and played truant, every evening he called round in order to tutor him.*

This excerpt from Micronovel A001[100] (see p.295) recounts childhood experiences between two male characters, but does not provide any linguistic differentiation between the two characters, referring to them both with the third person singular pronoun *ta* (他, *he*), relying upon the reader to understand which action corresponds to which boy. This corresponds therefore to a *situated meaning* constructed through use of the single personal pronoun.

4.2.2 Linguistic devices and syntax

Prior research on Chinese microblog fiction has drawn attention to the genre's succinctness, revealing a tendency among authors to squeeze out words and punctuation, and to give only brief descriptions of characters and back stories (Wang & Liu, 2013). Snapshots of conversations between unnamed characters appear in 45% of this project's collection, which demonstrates the popularity of this literary device to enable the creator to jump straight into the crux of the story, without having to dwell on formulating an exposition. The use of repetition, or of specific temporal markers, is significant as it allows for plot development within the restrictive bounds of the publishing medium;

[A001] (see p.295)   7 岁他… 15 岁他… 18 岁他…

At 7 years old, he… at 15 years old, he… at 18 years old, he…

[A002] (see p.295)   1994 年，我 9 岁… 2005 年，我 20 岁… 2008 年，我 23 岁…

In 1994, I was 9 years old… In 2005, I was 20 years old… In 2008, I was 23 years old…

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[100]As most micronovels are published without titles, the forty micronovels examined in this project have been assigned a catalogue number for ease of discussion, as outlined in subsection 3.2.1.

[A019] (see p.304) 五岁那年… 十五岁那年… 二十五岁那年…

When [he] was five… when [he] was ten… when [he] was twenty-five…

The above examples show how micronovels A001, A002 and A019 make repeated use of phrases referring to the age of characters at specific points in the story to convey the passage of time, and by extension to illustrate the depth of emotional investment in the relationships they describe. Similar use of repetition is found in micronovel A020 (see p.304), but instead of using phrases of age to indicate the passage of time, habitual actions in the past are shown through the use of *yi* (以, *according to*) (以他的习惯刷牙，以他的弧度微笑，以他的方式吃饭 *[From then on,] he brushes his teeth like he did, smiles like he did, eats like he did*), demonstrating the way in which the subject of the story is replicating the actions of the other man as a way of keeping his memory of the relationship alive.

Micronovel A011 (see p.300) takes a different approach to a standard narrative. It comprises a string of direct speech, broken on two occasions by brief narrative detail. Micronovel A015 (see p.302) takes a comparable approach by using direct conversational exchanges between the characters, but differs from A011 in that it first sets the scene with a sentence of narrative exposition. Through the construction of these stories in this manner, the animators are making the interaction between the parties significant, giving the reader direct access to their speech and their emotions, rather than having such dialogue related through a narrative voice.

The brevity required for microblog-based novels lends the genre especially suited to one particular Chinese literary device: the *chengyu* (成语, set phrase). These idiomatic sayings are usually made up of four characters, or two couplets of four characters each, which are often considered a "refined expression in Chinese, since many of them are derived from the rich Chinese literary tradition" (Ding, 1997,

p.319), taking their inspiration from famous historical and classic stories. Wang and Liu (2013) attribute this concise style of writing to ancient Chinese works, where every word was considered precious; consequently, in several examples of microblog fiction, every word is deeply infused with meaning (ibid.). Therefore, the use of these set phrases will contribute much extra-textual information and cultural context on the occasions where creators see fit to use them.

Turning to micronovel A016 (see p.302), one observes a bittersweet tale of opportunity and regret. Owing to the brevity of this story, much is left unsaid or ambiguous, leaving the onus on the reader to muse upon the greater significance of the narrative. In the story, the two fathers are revealed to be former lovers, forced apart by the requirement to marry and procreate. Years later, they find that their sons have fallen in love with each other, and are escaping to a foreign land— specifically one associated in popular imagination with high levels of tolerance—to achieve the dream that the two fathers were not brave enough to realize. Although brief, the story is both tragic and hopeful; one sees that the two sons have chosen to renege on their filial duty to enter sham marriages, instead accepting only their true love as their life partner. On the other hand, one sees the regret felt by the fathers for the life that they were not able to share together. The reader also gets an impression of the guilt felt by the older men for the fact that their own sons have also turned out to be same-sex attracted, as if their homosexuality were an inherited condition. Being honest about one's identity or intentions is represented here as a courageous trait. The father's final thought is rendered in the original text by the four-character idiom *qing chuyu lan* (青出于蓝, *indigo blue*). This *chengyu* is a contraction of the expression *qing chuyu lan er shengyu lan* (青出于蓝而胜于蓝), which conveys that the blue dye extracted from the indigo plant is of a far richer hue than the plant itself. This metaphor is used to indicate that something superior can evolve from an inferior thing, or that a student may ultimately surpass a master. In this micronovel example, it shows that the sons in the story have not only outdone their

fathers, but also that society has evolved to the point where such behaviour is possible. The use of this chengyu in the story is also significant from a situated meanings perspective, as it is used as the dénouement to the plot; if the reader does not understand the cultural meaning of the phrase, then the full impact of the story cannot be truly appreciated.

Chengyu are a common feature of spoken and written Chinese (Zhou *et al.*, 2004); therefore, I highlight their use in the micronovels selection not to mark their uniqueness within this style of literature (although it must be conceded that their conciseness makes them particularly suited to a medium where length is restricted), but rather foreground them as a method used by animators to situate meaning extra-textually within their writing. These four-character expressions can be understood according to their lexical value alone, but the whole is more than the sum of its parts; without access to knowledge of the often-complex history or back-stories behind the expressions (which represents a form of cultural capital through education from a Bourdieusian perspective), a reader may not be able to fully participate in the act of communication.

4.3 Situated meanings and practices (activities)

The description of practice and the repetition of activity within social settings are paramount to the storytelling process. They are the markers of normativity, for it is against such description that one understands, evaluates and contests adherence to the innate social rules and frameworks of our own cultures. Within Gee's *TOI*, *practices (activities)* form a building task designed to discover "how language is used within a text to enact specific practices (activities) alone or with others" (Gee, 2014, p.231). In the context of my analysis of microfiction, this subsection will investigate the selection of words by the creators of these stories to enact and replicate instances of social practice within the worlds of the stories, and to illustrate how these practices

influence the way in which the stories are told. All sub-themes have emerged from the microfiction data, beginning with the ways in which the situated meanings of heteronormative rituals are infused within the representation of practice at the sentence level within the micronovel selection, then discussing how the meaning of traditional cultural practices is situated within the texts.

4.3.1 Homo-narratives within hetero-worlds: situating ritual and practice

Heteronormativity[101], as a concept and theoretical framework popularized by Michael Warner in the early 1990s, refers to a worldview which gives primacy to heterosexual relationships within society (Warner, 1991). Without doubt, global human society is heterosexualized (Ward & Schneider, 2009); our social conventions and institutions have been constructed around the notion of sexual attraction and subsequent relationship (usually of a monogamous nature) between members of two opposing sexes for the purpose of procreation (Folgerø, 2008). By casting heterosexuality as normative, this concept reinstalls and reaffirms gender and sexual divisions within society (Yep, 2003). Less tangible acts of heteronormativity include the absence of consideration or discussion of same-sex intimate relationships (see Fullmer *et al.*, 1999; Makadon, 2011), or the tolerance of non-normative sexualities on the proviso that they remain marginalized and contained within the expectations of the majority (Kite & Whitley, 1996). By this, I am arguing that homosexuality is often accepted provided its manifestation conforms to a heteronormalized view of same-sex intimacy, whereby same-sex partners conform to male/female dichotomous gender roles. Yet it is equally valid to argue that the rejection of homosexuality by heterosexuals is precisely owing to the perceived threat that such erroneous gendered constructions are deemed to pose to hegemonic masculinity or

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[101] See 2.4 for further details.

femininity, where the blurring of distinctions between socially prescribed gender roles is seen as a source of shame or discomfort. Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity offers a conceptual framework for this phenomenon, which seeks to explain how (and to what end) men maintain dominant social roles over women, and over other gender identities perceived as 'feminine' within a given society (Connell, 2005). To this end, the linguistic tools with which micronovel writers and animators craft their works will reflect (or in some cases contest) links between gendered language and social practice. Although Standard Mandarin is not a gendered language in the way one speaks of, for example, many Indo-European languages, whereby every noun takes a gender which governs its grammatical functionality, there is still ample evidence contained within Chinese's orthographical system to indicate heteronormative conceptual constructions. Arguably the basic unit of social structure within Chinese cultural frameworks is that of the family (Pimentel, 2000), whose structure has traditionally been regulated through marriage. Within the examples of microfiction presented in this study, over one-third of the stories involve mention of or participation in heterosexual marriage. The most frequently used term in standard mandarin for marriage is *jiehun* (结婚), which is comprised of the semantic units of *jie* (结, *to knot or tie together*) and *hun* (婚, *to wed*). Focusing on the latter character, one sees that it is composed of a semantic radical *nü* (女, *woman*) and the phonetic component *hun* (昏, meaning *dusk, nightfall* or *twilight*[102]). It is the specific addition of the radical *nü* to the phonetic compound that changes the meaning of the composite character to 'marriage'—cf *hun* (惛, *slow-witted*) and *hun* (殙, *to die by taking poison*), both of which are pronounced identically to *hun* (婚, *to wed*). Within the collection of micronovels, three novels make direct reference to men marrying other men, yet still use verbs which contain the *nü* radical: micronovel A011 (see p.300) contains an exchange between two fathers, whereby one admits to the other that he has consented to their children going to The Netherlands to get married (我

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[102] It is thought by some historians that this alludes to the traditional time for a wedding ceremony being at dusk, and also a historical restriction upon clan members intermarrying, which resulted in a custom of 'bride snatching', which also took place at dusk (Wu 1984, in Yang, 2001).

儿子刚才说，要和你儿子去荷兰结婚，我答应了 *My son said he was going with your son to The Netherlands to get married. I have consented*); micronovel A021 (see p.304) shows a proposal between a speeding driver and his arresting officer, who uses the phrase *qiuhun* (求婚, *proposal*), and conversation in micronovel A024 (see p.306), during which an older woman makes the suggestion to her son's friend that her son marries him (那我儿子娶你可以了吧！). In the latter of these examples, the woman uses the verb *qu* (娶), which specifically means 'to take a wife', and again contains the same female radical *nü* element to the character's construction as observed in *hun* (婚), this time added to the verb *qu* (取, to take/fetch). Even within the context of same-sex fiction, these are the words selected for use in the construction of the story (other characters do exist, although they differ somewhat in their contextual meaning). Therefore, I argue that continued use of these characters allude, on a fundamental orthographical level, to the involvement of women in a marriage, and thus represent not only the form of social injustice and historical discrimination against women as described by Yang (2001)[103], but also a linguistic element of heteronormativity which is subconscious yet pervasive within Mandarin-speaking Chinese society.

Micronovel A002 (see p.295) offers abundant examples of recognisable cultural and social practice, each located within prototypical simulation frameworks (see below). Making friends at a young age; the process of a friendship turning into love with the passage of time; the practice of moving away from the parental home and moving in with a lover, and the practice of marriage, which here is shown to be the result of heteronormative compunction. The narrative establishes that the two men have fallen in love with each other (我 20 岁，和他相爱 *When I was 20, I fell in love with him*), yet they cannot remain together. The convention and practice of marriage are essential to this story, and provides the 'twist' at the end, which is so

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[103] Yang claims that the Chinese language displays bias towards women, both in the structure of words and in their connotations, remarking that "it is difficult to hide [the Chinese language's] historical humiliating marks toward women in its written form" (Yang, 2001, p.27).

often a feature of this kind of microblog story. The act of heteronormative marriage demonstrates the sadness felt by the animator/speaker (story is told from the speaker's perspective), but shows conformity for social expectation that he (the speaker), as the best friend of the other man, would serve as his 'best man'. The custom of *banlang* （伴郎, best man, groomsman) at Chinese weddings is not a new or imported tradition—evidence can be found for their presence in the Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial [104] (Lian, 2008)—but the role as it is now understood is a more recent transcultural adoption, with which the readership is assumed to be familiar. For the reader, the final sentence is striking owing to the use of the character *lang* (郎) in both *xinlang* (新郎, bridegroom) and *banlang* (伴郎, best man); a feature which cannot be rendered adequately in English, but which again shows the intrinsic connection between the two characters that has been created throughout the story with the repetition of 我⋯岁，和／与他 (*when I was …, I … with him*).

4.3.2 Traditional cultural practices

In addition to the act of marriage itself, other courtship elements are demonstrated throughout the texts, many of which rely upon a mutual cultural insight between creator and consumer. Two of the micronovel examples make specific reference to the practice of matchmaking and fortune-telling as preludes to betrothal:

[A007] (see p.298)　　　婚前一星期女孩拿着他的照片找到了那个命理师，命理师说… *A week before the wedding, the girl went to find the fortune teller holding his photograph. The fortune teller said…*

[A013] (see p.301)　　　他听着媒婆聒噪额角隐隐作痛… *He listens to the babbling matchmaker with his forehead aching …*

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[104] A collection of Chinese rituals probably compiled during the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–8 AD).

Matchmaking has been a cultural practice in China since ancient times. Although there is far greater autonomy for choosing a husband or wife in China today, elements of the practice remain, with parents often seeking to involve themselves in finding their offspring an appropriate mate if they haven't done so independently by an age deemed socially appropriate (Ji, 2015). Invoking these elements within the micronovels forges strong links with China's history and can therefore be seen as a form of culture replication in the cultivation of shared cultural identity between producer and consumer.

In micronovel A007 (see p.298), the practice of fortune-telling as a cultural tradition is made significant, and credence is given to its application, as the prophecy does ultimately come true, albeit with a twist (as the fortune teller does not seem able to see the true identity of the bridegroom's 'dearest person' [最亲近的人], passing the warning on to the bride, instead of the best man.) Although China is officially an atheist state, religion is thriving in China (including so-called folk religion) (Yang & Hu, 2012). Belief in some sort of afterlife remains common, and ancestor worship retains elements of importance in contemporary Chinese culture. The fact that the bride has chosen to consult with a fortune teller before the wedding[105] shows how elements of folk religions persists in even urban cultures (the text does not state that the couple live in a city, but the wedding is taking place in a hotel, which implies a degree of urbanity), and situates meaning in the mutual comprehension of this practice between producer and consumer.

4.4 Situated meanings and identities

As a *tool of inquiry*, the *identities* building task aims to analyse the way in which language is used to enact particular identities, whether that be to the speaker of the text, or in attribution to others (Gee, 2014, p.33). In combination with the

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[105] This remains a relatively common practice in China today (Abkowitz, 2015).

situated meanings TOI, this section seeks to demonstrate how and through what linguistic devices identity is being constructed within the works of fiction. From this, one can glean vital information on social positioning and underlying cultural values that contribute to the figured world of the piece (these effects of these contributions are discussed in chapter 5). Drawing upon data extracted from the microfiction selection and focusing again at language at the level of the sentence, I begin with an analysis of how identity is constructed through first person narratives, before turning my attention to the way in which Chinese routinely ascribes identity through context, and the implications of identity through omission in respect of sexuality, building a picture of how animators use language to enact facets of their own identities, or to attribute identity to others.

4.4.1 Microfiction in the 1st Person

In terms of their construction, the micronovels within the collection fall broadly into either first person or third person narratives (achieved either through direct speech or narrative description), with direct first-person narratives accounting for 12.5% of the sample. Micronovel A002 (see p.295) provides us with the chronology of a life-long relationship between two individuals which is ultimately ended (or at least interrupted) by social compunction to marry someone of the opposing gender. As the story has been tagged as *danmei* (耽微, *slash*) within the Weibo forums, so a reader might be expected to deduce that *wo* (我, *I*) refers to a male voice—however, if the piece is presented in isolation from this contextual setting, then the gender to which the first-person pronoun refers is less clear. The piece comprises a first-person narrative of a personal history. A secondary male character is discussed, but this person's opinion and/or voice is not portrayed, either by the animator or by the narrator. As such, there are no real 'truths' to contest within the piece, as the reader is presented with an unverifiable account of a

relationship. It is only at the end of the piece that the reader becomes certain that *wo* refers to a male-identified character, with the revelation of his role as the bridegroom. However, an important implication in having the story specifically tagged as *danmei* on Weibo is that one can expect the story to share similarities with that genre, and therefore to have been written with a particular audience in mind. As a conversation progresses, Gee (2011 p. 104) states that participants continually revise their situated meanings; however, in a brief piece such as this, there is limited scope to observe this. It is therefore left to the consumer to muse upon the identity of the narrative voice, into which several factors come into play. Does, for instance, the consumer consider the narrative voice to be that of the animator of the piece? If so, does the consumer presume that the animator is male? Given the body of previous research into the consumption of BL fiction, there is a high probability that both producer and consumer may be female (Akatsuka, 2008; Isola, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2008; Feng, 2009), so does this have any bearing on how a consumer would relate to narratives told in the first person? These issues influence not only on the situated meanings within the text, but also the figured world in which the text resides. These issues, along with the issue of female representation within queer-themed microfiction, will be developed further in chapters 5 and 6.

4.4.2 Identity through implication and omission

In contrast to my previously cited examples, micronovel A023 (see p.306) achieves a first-person narrative through omission of the pronoun *wo* (我, I), choosing instead to give reference to the identity of the speaking voice solely through opposition to the explicit identity of the other party—marked with a third person singular pronoun, *ta* (他, *he*). Thus, the identity of the speaker is implicit, yet is not a barrier to an understanding of the text. A similar construction is observed at the opening of Micronovel A029 (see p.308), which begins 喜欢他五年了 *[I liked him for 5*

years], without giving direct reference to the person who is doing the liking. Later in the story, the reader can deduce that the missing pronoun is *wo*, as the story continues in a first-person narrative. This policy of omitting personal pronouns is also seen in the brief conversational exchange that constitutes micronovel A027 (see p.308):

"哥，听说大学里有很多男男相恋的例子啊。" "是的啊，每天晚上都被上铺那 两个摇得睡不着觉。" *"Brother, [I] heard there are many instances of love between men in universities." "Yeah, every night [I] couldn't sleep due to the shaking from those two on the upper bunk."*

Here again, both parties omit first person pronoun markers referring to their own identity. These constructions are contextually acceptable and occur frequently in Mandarin, yet cannot be translated into English without introducing a personal pronoun or another identifier. Therefore, the situated meaning in these cases is located outside of the sentence's constituent words.

4.4.3 Identity labels: the situated meaning of *tongzhi*

Some examples of microfiction contain further markers of identity which require a degree of cultural and social understanding. In micronovel A023 (see p.306), the narrator makes reference to finding a 'comrade novel' in his friend's bag (那天偶然从他包里翻出了一本同志小说 *That day, by chance, [I] found a gay novel in his bag*). To understand the significance of this discovery, the reader must here not take the words to mean simply 'comrade', but must appreciate the re-appropriation of the word *tongzhi* that has taken place over recent years as a common slang term for 'gay' (Wong, 2005), Whereas in the Maoist era (1949-1976), *tongzhi* was a politicized form of address used to replace honorific titles (Pan & Kádár, 2011, p.78), to a Post-

Reform[106] audience, the word has gained a quite different shade of meaning, the use of which must be inferred from the contextual framework of the sentence in which the word appears. Such inference can be made also from the omission of a word; within the same text, the narrator says that he can't be sure if his friend "is or not" (但不知他是不是), avoiding vocalization of any word for gay or homosexual, but leaving its meaning clear through contextual implication. This omission also reinforces issues of power, agency and distribution of privilege—continued in 4.5 on p.116—as the narrator does not wish, either through embarrassment or his own internalized homophobia to give a name to their shared state of being. The reader of the story is thus presumed by the animator to appreciate that same-sex intimacy within this context is politically and culturally problematic. These examples therefore demonstrate how the rendering of identity within these stories is dependent upon the *situated meaning* of the words (or silences) used in their construction, as without such contextual clues, meaning becomes obfuscated.

4.5 Situated meanings and politics (distribution of social goods)

The way in which social goods are distributed within any given society is a direct reflection of how value is attributed to certain ways of being or standards of behaviour (Sen, 1979). It is thus responsible for the creation of normative standards within social frameworks, against which deviance is measured and evaluated. A society that privileges education, for example, may look unfavourably upon those who do not possess it, and provision of education will be made per the satisfaction of certain social criteria (e.g. wealth, class). How social goods are distributed within society can be directly gleaned from the way in which language is used to privilege and disprivilege particular entities (Gee, 2014). From the perspective of the *situated*

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[106] Post-Reform China refers the PRC since 1978. Following the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping became the paramount leader of China in 1978, and in 1979 embarked on a series of national economic reforms which marked the beginning of China's *gaige kaifang* (改革开放, 'opening up') to the West after decades of isolation.

meanings TOI, this involves the analysis of text to understand the linguistic ways in which the writer/animator is showing advantage or disadvantage, and to whom. I begin by engaging with notions of universality and common assumptions held between animator and reader that are used to situate meaning within the text, before exploring the ways in which cultural value and wealth are demonstrated within the text selections.

4.5.1 Universal 'truths' and shared assumptions

Within the context of the stories, certain facts or cultural ways of seeing the world are—if not taken for granted—presumed to be widely understood and recognized by the consuming readership. This is achieved in the first instance through the *situated meaning* of the words that the writer has chosen, which in turn construct a *figured world* in which the story inhabits. *Figured worlds* as a *TOI* will be explored thoroughly in Chapter 5, but at this point in the investigation if one accepts that, fundamentally, a *figured world* is a representation of a "theory, story, model or image of a simplified world which captures what is taken to be typical or normal about people, practices (activities), things or interactions" (Gee, 2014, p.226), then the way in which one comes to understand these theories, stories or models is dictated directly by the *situated meaning* of the words employed, as understood through a process of negotiation between animator and consumer:

> *Figured worlds 'explain,' relative to the standards of some*
> *group, why words have the various situated meanings they do*
> *and fuel their ability to grow more.*

(Gee, 2014, p.123)

Therefore, one can deduce that certain worldviews are considered universal to the social environment of both producers and consumers, and specific terms relating to

practice and ritual become imbued with specific and restrictive contextual meaning. Many of the micronovels, for instance, refer to 'marriage', often within the context of the developing relationship between the two men in the story. Yet, within the contemporary Chinese cultural sphere, marriage between two persons of the same sex is not (yet) legally possible; therefore, the idea or possibility of a marriage existing between two men is—in essence—a fantasy. The texts deal with this in various ways, ranging from the tragic—such as micronovel A002 (see p.295), where the reader builds up the illusion of an eventual marriage between the loving pair, only to realize that the object of the narrator's affections will be his best man, not his spouse—to a scenario which allows such an eventuality only by moving away from a Chinese cultural framework, as shown in A016 (see p.302), where the two men flee to a distant and liberal foreign land, where such legal unions between men are permitted. Such cultural markers of normativity exercise considerable power in the attribution and allocation of social goods. Marriage has—globally, and for many centuries—been a legal and cultural institution which has been denied to relationships between members of the same sex, with many religious and cultural frameworks insisting that marriage can only be a union between a man and a woman (Sarana, 1968; Eskridge, 1993; Bereket & Adam, 2008). Those who qualify for the institution of marriage have "been afforded numerous economic and social protections through the civil recognition of their unions" (Feigenbaum, 2007), resulting in a demonstrable form of heterosexual privilege. With the exception of a few early liberal countries, it is only in the past few years that states and countries around the globe have made strives to expand marriage rights to LGBTQ relationships. Several countries in the developed world now have marriage equality enshrined in their legal frameworks, yet marriage between members of the same sex continues to be a controversial issue even within those lands, with tension sparking between those who value their own cultural and religious freedom of expression and those who see marriage as a fundamental human right. Language is a key marker of power in these debates; in the English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic, reference has constantly

been made during these conversations to the acceptance of 'gay marriage' (see NBC News, 2015; BBC News, 2015) or 'same-sex marriage' (see Washington Post, 2016; The Guardian, 2016)—yet it can be argued that the constant addition of these adjectival modifiers to the word 'marriage' in the framing of these debates shifts the focus away from equality and back onto difference; *gay* marriage, if it must be described that way, must logically be of a different quality or value to *straight* marriage (the hitherto accepted understanding), or else there would be no requirement to distinguish between the two. Within the context of my investigation, *hunyin* (婚姻) and *jiehun* (结婚) are the words used to describe the institution of marriage within the micronovels, which are terms that I have argued are already steeped in heteronormative bias (see 4.3.1). One does not find use of the phrase *tongzhi hunyin* (同性婚姻, *gay marriage*) in the texts, which is the term through which same-sex marriage has been framed through Chinese-language media (see Tianjin Web, 2015; Guangdong News, 2015). In micronovel A002 (see p.295), when the narrator states that he is finally accompanying his partner into the wedding hall (终于和他一起步入结婚礼堂 *[I] finally walked together with him into the wedding hall*), the statement is significant because it appears that normative social order is about to be transgressed in a way which would be less noteworthy to a society where same-sex couples enjoy marriage equality. Therefore, I deduce that the impact of this story is predicated upon an understanding of the unequal distribution of social goods and privilege between heterosexuals and homosexuals within the society of the figured world, achieved through the *situated meaning* of language employed by the animator of the text.

4.5.2 Markers of cultural value and material wealth

Throughout the selection of micronovels, the reader is presented with features, aspects or possessions which are deemed to be valuable by society at large.

Such indicators of cultural and material value are representative of social goods, and therefore their distribution within society is a clear indication of how social hierarchies (and by extension, class systems) are delineated. Financial security as a precursor to commitment to a relationship appears to be universally important from the works within the selection, with many of the micronovels demonstrating explicit examples of material wealth as an indicator of social standing. In micronovel A004 (see p.296), the presence of the sports car encodes the idea of wealth (... 有个帅哥倚着跑车对她笑 *...there is a handsome guy leaning on a sports car smiling at her*), and thus signals to the reader that the second suitor is a man of financial means. This, in turn, is decoded as an attractive quality and an indication to the woman that the second man may be a better prospect for her than her current boyfriend. Although no details are given as to the financial position of the boyfriend, the fact that they are using the subway every day could imply that he does not own his own car (although with effective and cheap transportation in modern Chinese cities, this scenario is not uncommon). The readership is expected to infer all of this information from the presence of the sports car, which has become seen as a symbol of status and luxury, as "[i]n China, owning a car is still recognized primarily as a status symbol" (Stevenson, 2012, p.159)[107]. Towards the end of the micronovel, the suitor appears holding flowers (直到一天帅哥捧着玫瑰问她 *until one day the handsome boy holding a bunch of roses asks her*), which the woman mistakenly believes are intended as a gift for her. Roses have been traditionally associated with love and romance in many cultures around the world, and the practise of giving gifts of flowers as part of a courtship ritual is well-established (Camerer, 1988), and the meaning of the inclusion of such a token of love is presumed by the writer to be subsequently understood by the consuming readership.

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[107] Although owning a car is a status symbol in China, there is clearly still a system of hierarchy in the symbolic value of such status symbols, as in this example, a sports car is more coveted than another vehicle.

4.6 Situated meanings and imagery

The *imagery TOI* in this project is based upon Gee's *sign system and ways of knowing* (2014) building task. Owing to the publishing medium, many micronovels are accompanied by an image of the animator's choosing. These can range from hand-drawn illustrations and computer-generated artwork to photographs of human subjects. This allows the story to 'go beyond the words', by adding an additional visual dimension to the published piece. "[A] photograph's quality usually lies in its representational or symbolic meaning" (Lang *et al.*, 1993, p.262), which in the case of my investigation becomes intrinsically linked with the situated meanings present within the text, either through conformation, agreement, or even contradiction, as in many cases the choice of accompanying artwork does not seem initially to have any direct link to the plot of the micronovel. In these cases, it is important to examine the dichotomy and the tension that such juxtaposition creates within the piece. Half of the micronovel selection in this project has accompanying pictures. Imagery is a strong emotive stimulus, as:

> *[i]magery processing has several qualities that distinguish it from discursive processing. Most fundamentally, imagery processes are evoked as sensory experiences in working memory. Imagery processing included perceptual or sensory representations in working memory that are used in much the same way as perceptions of external stimuli. Thus, imagery involves concrete sensory representation of ideas, feelings, and memories, and it permits a direct recovery of past experiences.*
>
> (MacInnis & Price, 1987, p.474)

Building on this concept, Lang et al. state that "[p]ictorial information can match the stimulus properties of real object or event referents, activating cognitive representations associated with strong emotional responses" (1993, p.262). I must

state that, although these instances of theoretical literature on imagery predate the spread of the world wide web, the salient points remain valid, even if the proliferation of multimedia saturation in daily life has increased exponentially. Today, visual imagery is omnipresent, and the images that saturate the fast-moving media age are often fleetingly encountered and rarely contextualized (Laughey, 2009). Thus, "depending on the imagery, of the writer, this experience of (post)modernity produces a critical, invaded, distracted, or mobile spectator" (Staiger, 2005, p.68). These images provided with these micronovels therefore constitute extra-textual information provided by the animator intended for consumption at the same time as the story. As such, this building task seeks to analyse the ways in which the images situate meaning*,* both within the image as a self-contained unit, and in their contribution to and explication of the micronovels to which they have been attached. Emerging from the dataset, my first thematic exploration assesses the impact of the adoption of transnational elements as carriers of meaning within the context of both image and text, along with the use of recognisable domestic and international forms of visual art as complement (or contrast) to the textual elements. Assessments of the appearance of sexualized photographic imagery, the depiction of hyper-masculinity, and the manifestation of female sexual within pictorial elements of the micronovels desire complete the analysis of *situated meanings*.

4.6.1 Influence of Japanese *manga* and *anime*

Many of the images included with the micronovels in this selection show clear influence of the Japanese illustration styles of *manga* (漫画, *comics*) and *anime* (アニメ, *animated films or programmes*). Originating from within the Japanese publishing industry, *manga* began to appear outside of Japan in the 1970s, and came

to prominence in the West through the growing popularity of *anime*[108] (Johnson-Woods, 2010). Writing in 2000, Kinsella claims that "until the mid-1990s *manga* represented one of the extensive forms of culture in post-war Japan. It is a contemporary medium and it is pop culture" (2000, p.3). Often utilizing highly stylized renderings of the human form (although these are not universal to all *manga*), visual aspects of the genre have become instantly recognisable around the world, and both *manga* and *anime* have amassed global followings. It therefore constitutes a valuable cultural artefact, whose influence has spread beyond Japan's borders. Indeed, "[d]uring the past twenty to thirty years, manga culture has inundated parts of East and Southeast Asia" (Lent, 2010, p.297). It is of little surprise, therefore, that certain *manga* and *anime* characters, or their imagery, have become appropriated within the world of slash fiction, and—by natural extension—the world of queer microfiction.

The micronovel selection contains several examples of direct borrowings of artwork from *manga* artists. The not-for-profit and amateur publication medium of queer micronovels on Sina Weibo (and a generally weak rule of law in China in this regard) means that copyright issues in the replication of these forms of visual art are not considered to be problematic, and it appears that little regard is given to assign credit for the artwork to the original artist. It is thus impossible to differentiate with any degree of certainly between original artist and animator within the forum. Consequently, this project assumes no link or shared identity between the animator of the micronovel and the artist of the accompanying pictures, but rather presumes that the artwork is used merely as a second-hand communicative tool by the animator, selected for either its perceived relevance to the subject matter of the story, or for its aesthetic appeal. To this end, images accompanying the micronovels may or may not be linked thematically to the micronovel to which they are attached,

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[108] Although the terms manga and anime are often used interchangeably in Western contexts, some scholarship maintains that the two styles are different and the terms should not be used synonymously (Johnson-Woods, 2010, p.1).

but their inclusion with the works form an extra-textual dimension of connectivity and communication between producer and consumer, and as such become an integral component to be evaluated in the study of situated meanings.

The embrace of the *manga* and *anime* genres is not restricted to just borrowing images from popular characters, but can also involve the production of 'slash fiction' in a queer reimagining of established characters, through either direct or indirect means. An example of indirect association is provided with micronovel A006 (see p.297), the plot of which describes an interaction between a bride and groom. This micronovel is accompanied by an illustration featuring two drawings placed vertically, forming a chronological progression, in the style of a comic book (see 9.2*, image 2*). The first set of images show two seated male characters, one with his arms and legs folded into his body, with his head tucked in and looking at the floor—an image of introversion or sadness. The second male sits cross-legged, clearly in animated conversation with another person [out of frame]. Neither man is interacting with the other at this stage. The second set of images show the introverted man reaching across and grabbing the hem of the other man's shirt. The second man looks at him in surprise. These two characters are named Masaomi Kida (紀田正臣) [seated right] and Mikado Ryūgamine (竜ヶ峰帝人) [left], and are the two central characters from a Japanese anime named *Durarara!!* (デュラララ!!), based on the light novel series of the same name by Ryohgo Narita. In the world of this *anime* series, these two are best friends—there is no indication of a sexual relationship between the two in the original text. The inclusion of this image with a story of a developing relationship between two men therefore represents a *queering*[109] of popular cultural references, in the same way as the BBC's *Sherlock* (2010—present) television series has inspired a lot of homoerotic fan-fiction

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[109] *Queering* refers to "a discursive strategy involving the displacement or the placing of doubt of foundational assumptions (e.g. about the subject, knowledge, society, and history) for the purpose of opening up new possibilities for critical social analysis and political practice" (Seidman, 1997, p.x).

surrounding the central characters, particularly in China (BBC News, 2014; Abad-Santos, 2014).

Using a similar appropriation scenario, micronovel A030 (see p.309) uses imagery from the Japanese *manga*， *Blue Exorcist* (青の祓魔師), showing the characters of Rin Okumura and his twin brother Yukio (see 9.2*, image 16*). In the plot of the *manga*, the brothers are the sons of Satan, but only Rin possesses demonic features such as fangs, pointed ears and a tail (evident in the right-hand character in the illustration). The picture shows intimacy between the two in the form of a kiss on the cheek, with the image accompanied by lines of vertical text in Japanese hiragana script reading "ゆき、おやすみ" (*Yuki, oyasumi, [Yuki*, *goodnight]*) and "おやすみ、兄さん" (Oyasumi, nīsan, [*Goodnight, my brother]*). The text has not been translated from Japanese before its distribution into the Chinese microblog environment. It cannot be presumed that all Chinese-speaking consumers of this genre of microfiction will have a working knowledge of Japanese, therefore it can be argued that either the animator is similarly unaware of the meaning of the text, or does not consider its meaning (which, for consumers unfamiliar with these manga characters, is the only indication that they are actually brothers rather than lovers) to be significant or pertinent to the appreciation of the image. This graphic is included with a micronovel which is tagged as *danmei*, yet appears to contain no thematic link between the text and the image. I therefore conclude that the presence of this image with the text is a form of self-expression by the animator for the purpose of: a) projecting the animator's own artistic interests; b) appealing to like-minded consumers who are fans of the characters from *Blue Exorcist*; c) using the image to draw the attention of general *manga* fans to the content of the micronovel; or d) reinforcing a link between *manga* artwork and BL/*danmei* fiction. Therefore, its inclusion with the text must be considered from these extra-textual, discursive perspectives. The phenomenon of micronovels being accompanied by unrelated

imagery, and their contribution to Discourse, will be investigated further in chapter 6.

4.6.2 Inclusion of domestic artwork

In addition to the borrowing of transnational graphic art pieces, some texts within the selection opt to include or adapt images that represent elements of Chinese history or contemporary culture. As with the use of *manga* imagery, the link between the image and the micronovel plot is often tenuous at best, and therefore the reason for the images' inclusion can be deduced to follow a similar pattern as outlined in 4.6.1. Micronovel A017 (see p.303) features a collection of four cartoon images, the latter two of which show an interpretation of characters from the popular Chinese cartoon *Xi Yangyang yu Hui Tailang (*喜羊羊与灰太狼 Pleasant Goat and Big Bad Wolf), drawn as human/animal hybrids in the distinctive *anime* style of illustration (see 9.2*, images 11 c & d*, plus accompanying notes). The four images included with this micronovel, despite all featuring differing subject matters and despite having no apparent thematic link to the content of the micronovel (which concerns a son coming out to his mother, and her subsequent reaction), do however share a 'macro' concept in that they all feature 'human' (or at least anthropomorphized) versions of non-human objects or characters. Image one shows a human rendering of the American cartoon characters *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Patrick Star* (see 9.2*, image 11a*).; the second image makes a comparison between a young male and a rice cracker[110] (see 9.2*, image 11b); and* the third and fourth images appropriate one of China's most popular children's animated television series. The borrowing of these characters and their pairing with BL literature therefore represents a queering of contemporary Chinese (and transnational) cultural artefacts, and adds to the appeal and reach of the micronovel within the online

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[110] *Wangwang Xuebing* (旺旺雪饼), a brand of cellophane-wrapped rice cracker from Taiwan. For further discussion on imagery and *figured worlds*, see 5.6.1*.*

publishing environment, attracting attention and provoking thought from consumers who are left to muse over the situated meanings, significance and interrelation of the images, which in effect form a story of their own.

Drawing upon the country's imperial history is a popular literary and artistic device within China. Historical TV dramas remain popular with contemporary audiences (Guo, 2015), "as the process of historical rewriting allows the respective social forces to construct a contemporary history that obviates the uncertainties and doubts associated with the past" (Yin, 2002, p.34). The micronovel selection contains several stories and illustrations alluding to China's imperial past, evoking romanticized notions of emperors and princes, masters and servants, and of social hierarchy. Drawing on historical tales of same-sex love as their inspiration, these illustrations add gravitas to their accompanied micronovels through expanding the situated meanings of the text and through acting as a lure to draw readers in. Micronovel A013 (see p.301) features four separate illustrations of scenes from China's imperial history featuring relationships between men (see 9.2*, image 8).* The bottom left-hand image represents Emperor Ai of Han and his lover Dong Xian, whose relationship has left its mark upon the Chinese language through the expression *duanxiuzhipi* (断袖之癖, *cut sleeve addiction),* a well-known euphemism for homosexuality (Hinsch, 1990). By drawing on these styles of imagery, the animators of the texts are indigenizing queer lives and relationships within both Chinese history and Chinese culture, thereby increasing visibility of both contemporary literatures on queer relationships and of historical same-sex desire and intimacy.

4.6.3 Sexualized photographic imagery

The inclusion of photographic imagery with the micronovels offers an arguably less abstract form of contribution to the work than hand- or computer-generated illustrations. Although often as seemingly as irrelevant to the plot of the associated

micronovel as the examples of illustration and graphic art discussed at 4.6.1 and 4.6.2, nevertheless the addition of real-life imagery adds a human element, and in the case of several of the micronovels under discussion in this project, add a dimension of sexual eroticism that is not so overtly provided by non-photographic artworks.

Micronovel A021 (see p.304) recounts an interaction between a motorist and a police officer. The accompanying image shows a young man of indeterminate Asian heritage wearing a military-style uniform (see 9.2*, image 13*). Although the image of a uniformed officer is loosely connected to image of traffic enforcement in the story, the man in the photograph not a policeman; he is wearing a uniform belonging to the Thai Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School. Uniforms are seen in most societies to represent authority, order, discipline and protection (Craik, 2003). Additionally, "uniforms […] are normatively masculine, that is to say, they connote consensual attributes of manliness and masculinity and hence sexual allure" (Craik, 2007, p.37). At face value, Craik's statement offers a very gendered perspective, as females can (and do) wear uniforms that cannot be argued to conform to any typical construction or projection of masculinity. Yet people display attraction to uniforms as part of fetishistic behaviour and fantasy (Bhugra & Silva, 1996). As such, the image supplied with the micronovel embodies a popular sexual fantasy—often used as a literary trope in romantic and erotic writing, or a visual theme in video-based pornography—of a hyper-masculine man in uniform as an object of desire, and thus makes a thematic link with the uniformed police officer within the story.

Micronovel A011 (see p.300) also supplies imagery linked to eroticism and sexual attraction, but in this case, the link between the text and the image is much weaker. Despite the subject material of the micronovel dealing with a physically disabled man, the accompanying image shows youth, vitality and a projection of masculinity strongly tied to sexual attraction and desire (see 9.2*, image 6).* The

photo comprises a 'selfie'[111]; in this case, it is a single self-portrait shot of a muscular shirtless male of indeterminate East Asian heritage, taken with a camera phone in a bathroom. The identity of this person is unknown, and his link to the animator of the story is equally indeterminate. This could potentially be a self-portrait of the animator (the self-selected gender indicator on Weibo indicates that this animator is male, although parameters for identifying as such are non-specified and non-regulated). Alternatively, this could be a projection of masculinity that the animator finds sexually appealing, and wishes to share with the readership. Or perhaps the animator is seeking to make a statement about typical standards of physical beauty by combining this image with the story of a disabled man. Certainly, without direct interaction with the animator (which did not prove to be possible within the boundaries of this project, despite attempts), the reader can only speculate as to the *intended* meaning that the animator was seeking to evoke with of the placement of this image alongside such a story. Yet, "all meaning is local" (Gee, 2014, p.101), and the intention of the animator is only one element of the *situated meaning* contained within the conversational exchange.

Therefore, as Barthes reasoned when questioning the role of the author of a text as the sole origin and source of authentic meaning (the Author-God), "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1977, p.148), as "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of the original, blend and clash" (ibid, p.146). These arguments, although originally formulated for the printed word, are equally valid for any visual imagery appended to these stories—or indeed to images in general—once the artist releases an original work, its meaning is interpreted and shaped by the experiences, education and cultural frameworks governing the lives of the multifaceted viewer group (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 2010). Notwithstanding this notion, some speculations can be made as to how

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[111] See *Glossary*.

works of art may be generally appreciated or interpreted. In the case of this image, given that both previous research and my own study have identified the primary prosumer group for this style of fiction to be heterosexual females, it can be reasoned that such an image of masculinity would be theoretically appealing to the majority of the readership, who would recognize the nude musculature on display as inviting a degree of sexual objectification and fantasy.

More explicit still, micronovels A009 (see p.299) and A012 (see p.300) offer a visual manifestation of podophilic sexual fetishes. Both micronovels are accompanied by images of feet; A009—a tale of a dying woman's final request to her same-sex attracted husband—is accompanied by an image of the sexual act of toe-sucking (see 9.2*, image 4*), whereas A012—a story featuring an outing to a park by a non-heteronormative family unit—shows a male reclining on a bed with his feet prominently displayed in the foreground (see 9.2*, image 7*). These images clearly show a thematic disassociation from the plots of their respective micronovel. Podophilia is reported to be the most prevalent form of sexual fetishism for otherwise non-sexual objects or body parts (Scorolli *et al.*, 2007), yet an animator cannot presume, in an open non-sexuality-specific environment such as Sina Weibo, that such an image will hold unanimous appeal to anyone who may read the story, particularly given its juxtaposition with the textual subject matter. In this case, I would argue that *situated meaning* of the placement of such imagery alongside the microfiction arises from an act of sexual self-expression and defiance, with the image constituting a manifestation of animators' own sexual interests and arousals. Further discussion of the greater impact of such acts on the Discursive space will continue in chapter 6, but regarding the meaning situated within these photographs, the reader is left to negotiate their own positioning regarding both the activities depicted and their association with the accompanying micronovel.

4.7 Conclusions on situated meanings

This chapter has unpicked the situated meanings embedded in works of queer-themed microfiction through close analysis of the linguistic, stylistic, and artistic tools utilized by animators in the act of communication. As the starting point of my empirical investigations, the *situated meanings TOI* has allowed us to establish how meaning is formulated within the micronovels through specific contextual frameworks embodied within instances of text. Associations with China's cultural legacy and historical traditions are evident in the way situated meanings are constructed within the texts, both from the lexically-embedded idiomatic phraseology, and in significance of practice highlighted within the micronovels. The efficacy demonstrated by the Chinese writing system in communicating information in a concise manner is beneficial to animators of microfiction, with extra-textual contextualization and prototypical simulations forming intrinsic elements of the communicative act. Within the genre, the ambiguity in meaning resulting from such linguistic brevity allows the reader a degree of flexibility in interpretation of the micronovel, enabling the reader to find nuances in the meanings situated within the texts.

Discussion of linguistic practices has allowed us to understand how messages of social positioning and underlying cultural values are constructed, replicated, challenged and transmitted within the production cycle of queer microfiction. Issues of universality and shared cultural assumptions within the production/consumption cycle demonstrates evidence of the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and the incompatibility of erotic/romantic relationships between men with a Chinese cultural framework, with micronovels framing marriage as an arrangement only available to opposite sex couples, or as an option to same-sex couples only in a transnational context. Therefore, within these prototypical simulations, heteronormativity and notions of gendered behaviour constitute pervasive influences on the way in which meaning is situated within sentences, right down to the construction and evolution

of specific Chinese characters, which contribute to a subconscious association between opposite-sex couplings and normativity.

Situated meanings are the nuts and bolts of a sentence; they are the ways in which animators elucidate the worlds of their stories. I frame this as the *'what is happening?'* question. The way in which these elements are brought together are dependent upon the wider underlying cultural assumptions and normative frameworks, which constitute a shared space of understanding between producer and consumer of cultural 'normality', against which people, practices, things or interactions can be gauged. These are known as 'figured worlds', which I frame as the '*how is it happening?' question*, and this conceptual framework builds on the individual situated meanings that I have illustrated in this chapter into recognisable sociocultural structures and frameworks. It is to the construction of these figured worlds that I turn my attention in the next chapter.

5   Figured Worlds of Queer Microfiction

5.1 Introduction

When one starts to analyse a piece of 'text', no matter whether one is looking at a newspaper report, a political speech, a romantic novel or an instruction manual, one of the first places to begin is by considering the *figured worlds* enacted within the piece. Figured worlds, as a *TOI* for textual analysis, refer to a "theory, story, model or image of a simplified world which captures what is taken to be typical or normal about people, practices (activities), things or interactions" (Gee, 2014, p.226). In most cases, these will relate to underlying assumptions and judgements about the world around us, through which the author of the piece constructs and negotiates meanings. A figured world represents a shared space of understanding between author and reader of cultural 'normality' against which people, practices (activities), things or interactions can be measured and appraised. For instance, a news report of a crime will generally not labour over explaining to the reader what the notions of 'crime' or 'justice' are; they are deemed to be understood by everyone who may consume the text. In the case of a political speech, the orator's worldview (and their perception of the worldview of their constituents) will craft the way in which they seek to negotiate meaning with their audience, relying upon social conventions and cultural understandings to underpin and position their argument[112].

But what about a scenario where one deals not with a 'factual' text or scientific report, but rather looks at an artistic work of literary fiction? When an author's mind is given the freedom to roam, to construct fantastical scenarios or imaginary worlds, where then might the mind eventually settle? How might this change one's understanding and analysis of figured worlds? In reality, even the notion of what one considers to be 'fact' and 'fiction' is contentious, as a poststructuralist approach would

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[112] That said, such shared understandings are not fixed, but are rather temporally and spatially-specific. Therefore, it can be argued that no matter how 'shared' such understandings may be, there is always room for contradiction, and therefore contestation.

argue that even seemingly 'objective' texts are still constructions of a particular standpoint, and are therefore highly implicit. How often one sees conflicting media coverage of world events that challenge how one measures 'truth', because to greater or lesser degrees, 'truth' is subjective, and an author's figured world will invariably come to bear upon how they construct their text. As Gee states, "all meaning is local" (2014, p.101), and figured worlds are directly linked to prototypical simulations, which vary from culture to culture, and across space and time. "As society changes, what people take as typical can and does change. Figured worlds are not static" (Gee, 2014, p.89). Nor are particular figured worlds necessarily held as universal to a culture as a whole. Contrasting and conflicting figured worlds are ever-present, and often manifest power and struggle between social groups. Nevertheless, communication is, in whatever form, a negotiated medium, relying on varying degrees of mutual extra-textual understanding in order to shape the meaning of the words or images being transmitted. Thus, figured worlds in written pieces will be evident both intra-textually and extra-textually; from intra-textual figured worlds, one will be able to deduce through comparison and juxtaposition an extra-textual figured world by identifying what the creator of the text presents as normative, and through the language devices that the author used to negotiate meaning. Such scenarios in fiction may be idealized fantasies of real-world situations, or may be other-worldly flights of fancy, but all will be constructed with reference to a figured world inhabited by both producer and consumer.

The case of microfiction sharpens one's lens of analysis even more keenly; with so little text available, the extra-textual negotiation of meaning becomes ever more crucial. Throughout this chapter, I shall consider the figured worlds presented in my collection of 40 micronovels in order to analyse the ways in which animators[113] construct meaning in the scenarios and interactions of their stories. Using the same selection of data inquiry methods from Gee's (2014) *tools of inquiry* that were used

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[113] Producers or distributers of the texts, as outlined in 3.3.1.3.

in the previous chapter, I begin by looking at *significance*, to discuss the ways in which the figured worlds of the texts lend significance to particular social constructs and/or attitudes (Figure 12, below).

Gee's TOI	Gee's Building Task (Adapted)	My Thematic Analysis (emerging from the data)
Figured Worlds	**Significance**	» Heteronormativity » Language
	Practices	» Love » Heterosexual marriage
	Identities	» Sexual attraction, sexuality and coming out » Female identity
	Politics	» Power and agency » Sex, power and masculinity » Conflict and competition » Material wealth and social capital
	Imagery	» Transnational influences » Sexualised imagery

Figure 12: Figured worlds—building tasks and themes

Secondly, I examine figured worlds through the lens of *practices*, which here refers to a "socially recognized and institutionally or culturally supported endeavour that usually involved sequencing or combining actions in certain specified ways" (Gee, 2014, p.32). Thirdly, discussion will move to the analysis of *Identities* presented within the texts, to investigate how animators of the texts attribute identity to others or to other social groups, and the implications and ramifications of such attribution within the figured world. Fourthly, I look at the distribution of social goods (*Politics*) as evident within the figured worlds of the texts, highlighting notions of normativity which are used as markers of social distinction, and the enactment of power and agency between characters in the story. Notions of privilege and disadvantage within and between social groups will also be unpacked in this section. Finally, I analyse the figured worlds of the *imagery* that accompany the micronovels (if they are present) to demonstrate how figured worlds are constructed and manifested extra-textually, showing how the specific publishing medium of these stories allows for additional visual elements. Together, these building tasks (Figure 12, above) allow for a

thematic analysis of the material, which contributes to an understanding of the way in which figured worlds are manifested within the micronovel. Within each building task section, the sub-headings derive directly from evidence from the close reading of the microfiction selection, arranged thematically in order to construct a narrative throughout the analysis. Each section closes with a summary of the salient findings of the thematic analysis for each building task, and finally these findings are synthesized in a conclusion at the end of the chapter.

Micronovels and interview data are used throughout this project's data chapters, both in isolation and comparatively, to provide discussion and insight into the phenomena of queer-themed microfiction. Therefore, in this chapter, data from interviews conducted with consumers and producers of queer-themed microfiction in China will be introduced, where appropriate, to compliment or contest the findings from the Discourse analysis of the 40 texts.

5.2 Figured worlds and significance

The *significance* building task from Gee's (2011) *TOI* model seeks to examine the ways in which certain information is presented within a text to accord or reduce significance. When unified with the *Figured Worlds* tool of inquiry, the resultant data seeks to demonstrate and examine how the text highlights certain people, practices, things or interactions as being significant (or insignificant) to the world where the story resides. In terms of this line of inquiry, the microfiction data selection demonstrates that heteronormativity (and its resultant social practices and constraints) exert an almost universal force on the ways in which stories are crafted, developed and executed. As this section is investigating the way in which the animator accords significance within the figured world, data from consumer interviews is not pertinent to the analysis. I begin by returning to the concept of heteronormativity broached in the previous chapter, but this time I examine how this

concept underpins (and itself is underpinned by) the *figured worlds* shared by animator and reader by attributing (or denying) significance to particular elements, before analysing the role language and vocabulary play in the accordance of significance within the figured world, as a tool for demonstrating relationships and the contestation of power between differing sections of society.

5.2.1 The figured world of heteronormativity

Heteronormativity[114], as a concept and theoretical framework popularized by Michael Warner in the early 1990s, refers to a worldview which gives primacy to heterosexual relationships within society (Warner, 1991). Without doubt, global human society is heterosexualized; our social conventions and institutions have been constructed around the notion of sexual attraction and subsequent relationship between members of two opposite physical genders for the purpose of procreation. By casting heterosexuality as normative, this concept reinstalls and reaffirms gender and sexual divisions within society (Yep, 2003). Less tangible acts of heteronormativity include the absence of consideration of or discussion of same-sex intimate relationships, or the tolerance of non-normative sexualities on the proviso that they remain marginalized and contained within the expectations of the majority. By this, I am arguing that homosexuality is often accepted provided its manifestation conforms to a heteronormalized view of same-sex intimacy, whereby same-sex partners conform to male/female dichotomous gender roles. Yet it is equally valid to argue that the rejection of homosexuality (particularly male) by heterosexuals is precisely owing to the perceived threat that such erroneous gendered constructions are deemed to pose to hegemonic masculinity or femininity, where the blurring of distinctions between socially prescribed gender roles is treated as a source of shame or discomfort.

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[114] See 2.4 for more in-depth discussion on this topic.

The significance of this heteronormative framework is demonstrated through nearly every example in the corpus. The ways in which the animators choose to manifest this is as varied as the stories they seek to tell, yet even those stories which apparently seek to challenge the primacy of heterosexual relationships can only do so by reflecting the existing status quo. Whether these stories are fact-based accounts or literary inventions is, I argue, insignificant to the figured world of the micronovel, as cultural models and social conventions of the dominant culture are fully evident and assumed to be normative. Examples of heteronormative behaviours, cultural norms and institutional practices emerging from the corpus range from the framework of marriage within Chinese culture, which gives legal and social matrimonial recognition solely to heterosexual couples, through to the gendering of social and sexual roles between same-sex partners. The concept of heteronormativity as a social practice and marker of social privilege in the figured worlds of these micronovels will be developed and explored later in this chapter, but first I am concerned with the significance of the presence of this social framework within queer themed Chinese microfiction. By making such a framework an integral part of this fiction, animators demonstrate the importance of this concept in the wider Chinese society, and use deviations from this norm to shock or excite their audience. Micronovel A004 (see p.296) demonstrates how the animator uses the presumption of a heteronormative framework as a plot twist, catching both a central character and the audience in the joke. The female character has presumed that the man holding the flowers is engaging in a courtship ritual towards her, an assumption which is shared by the audience (女孩看着眼前手捧鲜花的男孩说道："我已经有男朋友了，你为什么还要缠着我？" *The girl looks at the boy in front of her holding a bunch of fresh flowers, and says, "I have a boyfriend ready. Why do you keep on bothering me?"*). The animator needs make no mention of this heteronormative framework, nor make any comment on the fact that normative behaviour involves courtship between members of opposite sexes; these points are universally understood within the culture of both the real world and the figured world of the story. Consequently, it is

only at the *dénouement* of the story that the challenge to normative behaviour is made obvious (因为只有这样他才能注意到我啊！ *"Because this is the only way he can notice me!"*), as the woman realizes her misunderstanding, thereby explicitly demonstrating her heteronormative assumption. By constructing the figured world thus, the animator makes transgression of—or adherence to—normativity a significant factor in the story.

Gender roles, or their transgression, are afforded significance in many works among the corpus. However, while some stories appear to challenge traditional social gender roles, it is often the case that heteronormativity is reinforced by the attribution of normative heterosexual gender roles onto same-sex couples. Where both characters are of the same gender, they are often required to perform dichotomous male-female gender roles within the partnership. Micronovel A012 (see p.300) describes a man playing with a child in a park. The child is asked by an old lady if he prefers his father or his mother. When the child answers that his father is the favourite, the man asks him to reconsider. As the people around him praise his respect for his wife, the twist in the tale comes from the child's reaction; he shouts to his father (an unseen character) that his mother (now clearly the man in the story) is bullying him (or her, the gender of the child is not revealed). Therefore, this story concerns a family unit made up of two men and a child. While this tale shows a divergence from the normal heteronormative setting in terms of the composition of the family, it effectively reinforces gendered notions of parenting, wherein each parent is expected to perform either the social role of a father, or that of the mother. The animator makes this significant, as without such a framework the humour of misidentification is lost. However, by terming one man as *baba* (爸爸, *father*) and the other as *mama* (妈妈, *mother*), the story is therefore told through heteronormative terms. Thus, while on the one hand, the story is transgressive, on the other it also simultaneously reinforces traditional (heteronormative) norms of the gendered

construction of division of labour within a family[115]. Similar demonstrations of heteronormative terminology being ascribed to same-sex relations are presented in micronovels A015 (see p.302) and A018 (see p.303). On the one hand, one cannot deny that these two micronovels challenge to a certain extent the established heteronormative convention by introducing the possibility of homosexual family units; yet on the other hand, one again sees two same-sex partners referred to through the gendered vocabulary of *xifu* (媳妇, *wife*), *erxifu* (儿媳妇[116], *daughter-in-law*), and *bama* (爸妈, *parents*), demonstrating how the transgression of one dominant norm may often take place simultaneously with the (often indirect and unconscious) re-inscription of another. This therefore highlights the intrinsic significance of heteronormative frameworks in contextualizing the formation of same-sex intimacy within the figured worlds of these stories.

Notions of sacrifice and sadness are present in many of the micronovels, often presented in relationship to heteronormative convention and expectation, and accordingly become significant features of the figured worlds of those stories exploring these themes. Micronovel A017 (see p.303) constructs such a figured world through its presentation of a revelation of a son's same-sex desire to his mother. Reading behind the intended humour of the micronovel's punchline, the plot constructs a burden of expectation being challenged through transgression of social convention. The belief by the mother that her son will not be fulfilling his obligation[117] becomes highly significant in driving the story, making a direct negative link between the perception of same-sex intimacies with the possibility of enduring happiness. The son himself, although taking steps to remove himself from a heteronormative framework, demonstrates deep feelings of guilt and sadness, genuflecting before his mother as an act of contrition. The construction of the scenario is identifiable to people who have grown up in a world of heteronormative privilege. To this end, the

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[115] See Mahmood (2012) for demonstration of this idea within an Islamic cultural framework.
[116] The retroflex consonantal sound *er* (儿) which appears at the end of there words in the micronovels is a dialectical addition.
[117] Both to the mother and towards society. Discussion of filial piety will continue in 5.3.2*.*

animator displays a figured world in which same-sex intimacies are considered to be significantly problematic, causing rifts between parents and children, and upsetting conventional social normativity.

5.2.2 Language and the figured world

The way in which animators use language is an important part of the construction of a figured world, relying primarily upon extra-textual associations on behalf of the reader. The *situated meanings* of these words are reviewed thoroughly in Chapter 4; however, one must not ignore the importance of vocabulary in the accordance of significance within the figured world, particularly when it comes to demonstrating relationships and the contestation of power between differing sections of society. These examples of microfiction deal with individuals who are same-sex attracted, or who at least demonstrate this capacity. Therefore, the words used to refer to this state of being (or this kind of behaviour) are significant in both their selection and in their implied meaning. In A011 (see p.300)—a tragic story of abandonment and physical hardship—the disabled man's father uses the word *tongxinglian* (同性恋, *homosexual*) to refer to same-sex intimacy between men, rather than more contemporary terms such as *tongzhi* or *gaoji* (搞基, *to engage in gay sex*). The use of this word carries significance; it is an institutional word, originating from medical setting and used in legal language, and retains some clinical and negative overtones for some self-identified gay and lesbian individuals in China[118]. It is the term used in the Chinese Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders (CCMD-2) of 1989, where homosexuality was listed as a *xingxinli zhang'ai* (性心理障碍, *psychosexual disorder*) and was officially pathologized (Kang, 2000, p.242). Its use may also be indicative of a divide existing in Chinese society

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[118] At the Visuality and Politics: Queer Media in China conference at Nottingham Trent University (26 March 2012), Chinese film director Cui Zi'en stated that it was for this reason that the slogan "*women yao kan tongxinglian dianying*" (我们要看同性恋电影 *we want to watch homosexual films*) was chosen as a promotional slogan by China Queer Independent Film as a form of re-appropriation.

between the younger and older generations, the latter for whom the use of *tongzhi* as a contemporary term for homosexuality has not supplanted the word's previous Maoist connotations.

Occasionally, an animator chooses not to make direct reference to the heteronormative standard, but rather constructs a figured world in which same-sex intimacies are presented as both possible and unremarkable. Example A028 (see p.308) demonstrates such a construction. Here, it is the absence of heteronormative markers within the text which becomes significant; that such a world can be portrayed without explicit reference to social markers of acceptable behaviour in relation to sexual attraction or the formation of romantic relationships becomes a remarkable feature of the story. The story is simply presented as a declaration of love from one man to another, albeit one which was not understood at the time. Yet clearly the significance of such a figured world relies upon the audience's extra-textual notions of social conformity and heteronormativity to achieve this; in effect, it is the comparison between reality and fantasy which confers significance to this textual figured world.

5.3 Figured worlds and practices (activities)

Practices, or activities, are an integral part of a figured world, because it is through the establishment of repetitive cycles of action that one builds a concept of normativity[119]. It is through these habitual actions that society comes to regulate behaviour, and against which transgressive behaviour is measured and evaluated. Within Gee's *TOI*, *practices (activities)* form a building task designed to discover "how language is used within a text to enact specific practices (activities) alone or with others" (Gee, 2014, p.231). In the context of my analysis of microfiction, this section

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[119] This resonates with Butler's argument (1999) that gender is performative i.e. it is the outcome of repetitious bodily performances.

will investigate how the figured worlds of the stories are shaped by the description of practice and activity, and how these practices influence the way in which the stories are told. As with each of the five sections on figured worlds presented in this chapter, themes of data analysis have been determined by taking the most heavily coded items resulting from my close examination of the forty stories using the qualitative data analysis programme Nvivo (see chapter 3 for a detailed methodological process). Given that 'practices' in this context cover myriad social actions (e.g. eating, sleeping, relaxing), I seek only to discuss those which contribute directly to the way in which same-sex intimacies are represented, and which create, reinforce or contest those aspects of the figured world. This section therefore investigates the ways in which love and courtship rituals are presented within the figured worlds of the micronovels, and ways in which the stories challenge or support the ubiquitous nature of heterosexual marriage within Chinese society.

5.3.1 Love

The figured worlds of the texts demonstrate the social parameters in which the characters can acceptably fall in love. But, what are we dealing with when we speak of *love* in this contextual framework? What about desire, intimacy, lust? Are these all facets of the same cube? While scholars have pointed out that love, as a dimension of intimacy, has taken on different meanings over time (Jamieson, 1998, 2011), conceptualizations of love are culturally bounded, geographically differentiated, and temporally specific (Lutz, 1986; Jackson, 1993; Doherty *et al.*, 1994). Even though romantic love has been observed in nearly every culture (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992), its nature is culturally specific (Giddens, 2013), and it is therefore vital to consider the ethnocentric nature of scholarship on love in my appraisal of love in queer microfiction. In the Western historical context, love promoted individualism and "freed individuals from the weight of tradition, especially

when it took the form of passion" (Kaufmann, 2011, p.159). Yet, in more collectivistic societies, such as China, love and intimacy were traditionally less important than other factors as a basis for marriage (Dion & Dion, 1993, 2006; Jackson *et al.*, 2006). Accordingly, the Western ideal of romantic love characterized by "intense feelings, disregard of others' views of one's lover, and complete mutual absorption would be regarded as disruptive" in Chinese culture (ibid, p.59). Indeed, the term *lian ai* (恋爱, *romantic love*) in Chinese "is strictly a modern linguistic creation reflecting the need of an expression for its Western equivalent" (Hsu, 1981, p.49). This is a point of note for this study, as even though Western understandings of love do not necessarily align with Chinese ones, several of the micronovels—emerging from and speaking to Chinese cultural audiences—do indeed feature such 'disruptive', passionate relationships. In this regard, I believe it is therefore important to consider the transnational influences to which such literature and audiences are subject, and to consider whether the juxtaposition of romantic, individualistic narratives with the burden of familial and social responsibility demonstrates a way of reconciling transnational narratives on intimacy, romance and modernity with more traditional conceptualization of love and family.

Discussing the construction of 'romance' as a literary art form in English-language fiction, Cawelti states that "[t]he moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (2014, pp.41–42). The enduring nature of love is therefore considered a key feature of romance novels in the Western tradition, yet audiences have become discerning in what this constitutes. Specifically, for readers of the BL genre (even in Western contexts), the notion of "happy ever after" does not appear to be of primary importance. An online survey conducted by Pagliasotti in 2005 of readers of English-language BL *manga* from primarily English-speaking countries reported that having a "happy ending" was selected by only 6% of respondents, the least popular of the

response options inquiring as to the most important aspect of a BL romance[120] (Pagliassotti, 2008, p.66).

Micronovel A002 (see p.295) offers an example of a long-standing love affair between two men, which is interrupted through the obligation of one of the men to enter a heterosexual marriage arrangement. The narrator of the story identifies periods of his life only by his age at certain events, e.g. the characters' first meeting at the age of nine (1994 年，我 9 岁，与他相识 *In 1994, when I was 9, I got to know him)*, although no indication is made of the age of the other character, or in which social setting the characters affected this first contact. It can be assumed, given the timeline of the story, that both characters are of a similar age, and that perhaps the first meeting occurred at school, or in the playground, although no such information is provided. This could be seen as an alternative to a different sort of life-history narrative, which may construct events around such formative locations (particularly institutional ones) as a basis for shared experience. By indicating age in this manner, the animator seeks to show how the love between these two characters has developed since childhood, through their teenage years, into the present. The story is left open to interpretation, as to whether their love will endure beyond the social conditions that they must now live in [终于和他一起步入结婚礼堂，他是新郎，我是伴郎 *[I] finally walked together with him into the wedding hall. He was the bridegroom. I was the best man*], but it brings to light the issue of 'true love', which shows a high degree of penetration in queer-themed microfiction. Speaking to Chinese producers and consumers of BL/*danmei* microfiction for this project, several respondents claimed that, given the cultural requirement for social conformity, to behave in such a sexually transgressive (through desire or compulsion) manner must be a manifestation of 'true love', as nothing else could compel a person to violate social norms. This confirms McLelland's findings from his analysis of Japanese BL *manga*, who states that "as a fantasy trope for women, male homosexuality is understood to

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[120] The most popular responses to Pagliassotti's survey were "detailed sexual descriptions" and "love scenes".

be a beautiful and pure form of romance" (McLelland, 2000b, p.287) despite such real life same-sex intimacies being not markedly more acceptable in Japanese society than in Western contexts (McLelland, 2000a). This viewpoint therefore simultaneously demonstrates similar attitudes towards social conformity in the Chinese context, and the prevailing attitudes towards same sex attraction within contemporary Chinese culture:

> *[What I enjoy is] pure love without any purpose that encourages these protagonists to carry on, and their persistence towards each other no matter how much misunderstanding and prejudice they will encounter.*
>
> —Sheng[121], 25-year-old heterosexual female
> Businesswoman from Anhui.
> Microfiction consumer

> *Homosexual love tends to face bigger obstacles than heterosexual love. Love stories that depict how a homosexual couple overcomes these obstacles to be together can better illustrate the pureness, value and beauty of love, compared to general heterosexual love stories.*
>
> —Lili, 25-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed
> Businesswoman from Chongqing
> Microfiction prosumer

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[121] All respondent names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

> *Some women are aware of the unfairness in heterosexual relationships in China, women are usually in the inferior position, so they turn to gay relationships to fulfil their fantasy and realize their idea about real love.*

—Jinhua, 32-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed
Businesswoman from Beijing
Microfiction consumer, author of BL novels

Jinhua's response is interesting to appraise, because her worldview seems to delineate between two differing types of privilege; that born of gender, and that of sexuality. In this regard, she is asserting that in China's heteropatriarchy, women are appropriating stories of gay relationships in order to redress a power-imbalance between males and females. Yet it is widely acknowledged that same-sex intimacies portrayed in BL and *danmei* fiction are romanticized facsimiles of heterosexual relationships, which even *funü* themselves concede are not accurate reflections of real-life homosexual unions. That such relationships in China bear no legal recognition and remain socially marginalized is not seen as the key issue. It cannot be denied that undertows of this train of thought can be observed in the collection of microfiction; seldom do issues of gay rights become evident within the texts themselves. This, then, is consistent with the idea of *danmei* as a form of what Williams calls 'queer stylization', where "[t]hrough the creation and consumption of media featuring speculative male-male kinship, fans re-imagine in unique ways hegemonic gender roles in the realms of sex, marriage, family, career and public life" (Williams, 2015, sec.2) .

As previous studies have primarily focused on female consumption of BL fiction, I was eager to see how male consumers of this style of fiction react to the idea of gay relationship constituting 'true love' within the figured world of queer-themed microfiction:

It [being in a gay relationship] is quite different from marriage between a man and woman, and it's quite a set belief that gay relationships are more 'pure' than marriage between a man and woman, because gay couples are not legally accepted in Mainland China, so most of the gays… the reason that they are with the other guy is not because he is wealthy. It's a union based on love, that's the only reason.

—Zhaozhuo, 28-year-old gay male
Technical support worker from Fujian
Microfiction consumer

Sometimes people joke that only the love between the same sex is a 'true love'.

—Xuan, 23-year-old gay male
Businessman from Liaoning
Microfiction prosumer and author

In general, it seems that male respondents were familiar with the conceptualization of homosexual relationships as 'true love' within the literary genre, but were also sceptical about the general level of knowledge about gay existence by *funü* readers of BL/*danmei* fiction:

I would say it [BL microfiction] is mostly written by non-gay publishers, and for some reason…I can't really understand why… they somehow glorify and beautify all of these same-sex settings, especially the boys and the relationship between the boys, so sometimes you feel it's very artificial. It's quite unreal. You'd have to be too lucky to be in that situation […] I think

they're just projecting their own fantasies and using their own imagination about these things.

—Zhongyu, 27-year-old gay male
Student from Hubei
Microfiction prosumer

It's all about the beauty. These are known as Rotten Girls, and one of the features is that it's all about the fantasy, not about what really goes on in a real gay couple.

—Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
Student from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

Several male respondents were openly critical of the *funü* consumers, who they see as having little to no knowledge of *tongzhi* lived experience. Tieying, during his interview, accused *funü* of "ventriloquizing gay identity to achieve their own means". Indeed, given the majority consumer demographic of Chinese BL/*danmei* microfiction, the idealization of love seen here is consistent with findings from female BL consumers in other areas of the world (Pagliassotti, 2008), and feeds into the preoccupation of many consumers with the notion of 'true love'. This then becomes a goal that is only achievable through transgression of social obligation: precisely because such love is marginalized and stigmatized, it becomes a reflection of the fruit of hard-earned and counter-cultural efforts. Therefore, homosexuality, or at least relationships between two men of undeclared sexual orientation, is appropriated as a vehicle to achieve such a result.

5.3.2 Heterosexual marriage

The way in which customs and traditions have evolved in society differs around the globe, yet some practices are deemed to be almost universal. Although the accompanying rituals and significance attached to it may differ, marriage can be argued to be one such universal social practice. Despite efforts, anthropologists have struggled with a catch-all definition of marriage (Bell, 1997), owing to the myriad differing rights, privileges, structures and values accorded to this institution around the globe. Until the latter part of the 20th century, discussion of marriage referred almost exclusively to legal unions between members of the opposite sex. In the context of China, this remains the only legal possibility, although proposals have been made several times to the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference for legitimacy to be granted to same-sex relationships (Xinhua, 2006).

If one therefore assumes universality of experience among the reading audience, then it must be presumed that the cultural setting of contemporary China dictates that even queer readers will have exposure to conventional social practices and institutions such as courtship and marriage. Many of the micronovels establish world settings whereby monogamous long-term relationships between opposite genders are the conventional norm. Turning to A005 (see p.297) as an example, this concept is established by the presumption made by the female character that the man is holding the flowers as a way of attracting her attention (rather than that of her unnamed male partner). The readers of this story are expected to understand why the woman believes the man is attracted to her, and to understand or at least acknowledge the heteronormative setting. The woman admonishes the man for his attention (你为什么还要缠着我？ *why are you still pestering me?*) when he knows that she already has a boyfriend. In contrast to micronovel A004 (see p.296), here the potential suitor bears only flowers as an incentive to entice the other man (…手捧鲜花的男孩… *…the boy holding flowers…*); there is no mention of increased material

wealth or social positioning, yet again this can be seen as a gendered activity, as the presenting of flowers as a courtship ritual is traditionally and culturally undertaken by a man to a female recipient (Camerer, 1988). By extending this ritual to a courtship arrangement between two men, this could either imply an attempt to gender the individuals concerned into a dichotomous arrangement (the presenter of the flowers being seen as the masculine element, and the recipient occupying a feminine role, consistent with the notions of *seme* and *uke*[122], discussed further in 4.5.1). Alternatively, this could be seen merely as the adoption of standard courtship rituals by queer identified individuals, as a way of normalizing their relationships and establishing the value of their union through a recognized form of cultural sign-marking.

Heterosexual marriage is mentioned in 35% of the sample texts. It constitutes, therefore, a clear example of a form of prototypical simulation against which the plots of the stories are negotiated. Such practices are considered to be universal among the production/consumption circuit, as speaker and audience are presumed to share the same social group or collective. For example, even if one assumes that the readers of the story identify with the central character in A008 (see p.298) in terms of sexual attraction or identity, it must still be presumed that such readers are familiar with conventional social practices and customary behaviour, such as the belief expressed by many members of China's queer population that they must marry a member of the opposite sex and procreate in order to satisfy a burden of social duty towards their parents. Readers who have been raised in the world in which this text situates itself will be (irrespective of their own sexual identity) familiar with this situation.

Closely tied with the notion of continuing the family bloodline, marriage is an integral part of the Confucian value of *xiao* (孝, filial piety[123]). Thus, under this

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[122] Colloquial terms used in Japanese manga for 'top' and 'bottom' in anal intercourse.
[123] See *Glossary.*

framework, marriage is much more than an individualized rite of passage within one's life course, but it is also a social marker of one's place in society. Among the many practices governed by filial piety, producing an heir—particularly a male heir—is considered to be the principle responsibility of the son in the family (Zhao, 2011, p.24). Therefore, to refuse to do so (or to be incapable of), is considered an act of disrespect towards one's parents. Under this traditional framework, it is thus considered a social duty to procreate. Sexual orientation does not appear to exempt a person from this requirement, and the regulation of sexual behaviour is closely tied to the notion of heterosexual sex for the purpose of procreation:

> *Any culture with collectivist social pressures and concerns for social hierarchy will tend to suppress sexual behavior. Like aggression, sexual attraction must be carefully suppressed and channeled. For a freer sexuality may create potent jealousies within groups and lead people to defy their parents' choice of a suitable mate.*

> (Bond, 1991, p.16)

Practice of this concept is clearly demonstrated in selected examples from the micronovel collection. Example A017 (see p.303) demonstrates a mother's dismay at her son's transgression of heteronormatively prescribed behaviour, and example A037 (see p.312) which, although far more jocular in tone than A017, highlights the fact that those who defy social convention are subject to scrutiny and rumour by society at large, which in many cases becomes an issue of 'face'[124] for the person's parents.

The idea of same-sex attracted individuals entering into marriages with members of the opposite sex through feelings of social compulsion is by no means

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[124] The concept of face refers to "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61). However, in the Chinese context, the application of this definition has been contested, as "such a self-oriented characterization of face [...] can be problematic in a non-Western context" (Mao, 1994, p.455). In Chinese, the idea of face is denoted by two terms, *mianzi* (面子) and *lian* (脸).

unique to China, nor unique to this point in Chinese history; however, it seems that a cumulative effect of traditionally held regional values, the legacy of Confucianism, and a socio-political sphere ill-disposed to individual freedom of expression have resulted in a view of marriage as a social obligation (marriage as a social obligation is mirrored throughout other South and Southeast Asian cultures in the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu conceptualizations of 'Izzat', see Yip, 2004; Jaspal, 2012). The micronovels under review here divide themselves between three distinct types of heterosexual matrimonial scenario: a same-sex relationship ended through obligation of one of the parties to marry a woman; tales of unrequited love dashed through the heterosexual marriage of the object of the same-sex attracted person's affections; and discussions between parents and their offspring about obligations to marry. Example A002 (see p.295) displays a prototypical simulation of a world where men marry women as the element that drives the narrative in this story. Although it is established that the affection between the two characters is both mutual and long-standing, neither character expresses outward remorse or presents a challenge to the eventual turn of events. In fact, both are complicit. This can be seen as confirmation of the supremacy of cultural and societal norms over personal happiness, echoing the utilitarian ethical position that "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (Bentham, 1776, p.ii).

An important consideration when analysing the way in which marriage is formulated within these stories is the relationship between animator, consumer and story subject. Previous research onto the phenomenon of both BL and *danmei* literature has established that the primary consumer group for these genres of literature is heterosexual females (Fei, 2009; Yang, 2006; Zheng & Wu, 2009). This, therefore, constitutes a similar consumer demographic to fans of 'slash fiction' (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006; Salmon & Symons, 2004) and BL fiction (Wood, 2006; Akatsuka, 2008; Pagliassotti, 2009) in other regions of the globe. From this perspective, I believe it is important to consider how authorship may have an impact

on the manifestation of cultural practice within the figured world of the micronovel. In the case of micronovel A005 (see p.297), the animator self-identifies on the Weibo forum as female. As has been established in Chapter 1, it is impossible to know whether the animator of the story is actually the author of the story, or whether the gender marker that the animator has chosen to display on Weibo is a reflection of their physical gender. However, if one presumes that the person who created this particular story is a heterosexual female, then one must ask oneself whether the author is writing from a position of knowledge about typical courtship practice among same-sex attracted males, or whether it is possible that elements of normalized heterosexual courtship practice are being (fancifully, and therefore artificially) projected onto the men in the story. Evidence of acknowledgment of female readership is even apparent within the plot of some of the micronovels under review in this project; demonstrating a cyclical relationship between production, consumption and representation, animators of some stories refer to the fact that women are the primary consumers of queer-themed microfiction as part of the exposition or *dénouement* of the micronovel. In micronovel A006 (see p.297), the bride claims to understand the unfolding situation because she is familiar with microfiction. Micronovel A022 (see p.305), although not mentioning BL or *danmei* literature directly, describes a scenario where the man's living arrangements are met with excitement by the women with whom he speaks, with the implication being that they suspect his relationship with his friend to be more than just homosocial flat-sharing arrangement. This idea is echoed in micronovel A027 (see p.308), which also conflates the common social practice of young male cohabitation with suspicion of physical intimacy. Therefore, although the subject of these micronovels is love and intimacy between male characters, the stories are arguably primarily written for, and consumed by, women. This factor must be duly taken into account when examining the figured world of the stories, as even if one claims the institution of marriage to be ubiquitous, male and female experience of it will be markedly different. When male characters are being constructed through a female experience of marriage, this

will have a bearing on the way in which marriage is formulated, figured and represented.

5.4 Figured worlds and identities

Identities, from the perspective of Gee's *TOI*, represent a building task which aims to analyse the way in which language is used to enact particular identities, whether that be to the speaker of the text, or in attribution to others (Gee, 2014, p.33). In this section, I shall explore how the animators of the microfiction novels have constructed figured worlds of personal, sexual, social and cultural identity, how these identities are interwoven, and how the presentation of identity contributes to one's understanding of how such issues are being reinforced and negotiated in the offline world. Analysis begins with situating the concepts of sexual attraction, sexuality and coming out within the figured worlds of the micronovels, exploring the ways in which animators engage with (or even in some cases avoid reference to) these frameworks in the construction of the worlds of their stories. Given the importance of women in the production cycle of this style of fiction, the construction of female identity within the figured world provides a crucial insight into the way in which women are positioned within the patriarchal framework of Chinese society, and illustrates strategies for challenging traditional male dominance over Discourse on sexuality and sexual behaviour.

5.4.1 Sexual attraction, sexuality and coming out

A striking feature of many of the microfiction pieces selected in this project is a lack of direct use of linguistic markers of sexual identity. Despite depicting tales of sexual relationships between men, rarely do any of the characters in the micronovels use vocabulary of sexual self-identification, such as gay, *tongzhi*, or indeed speak of

sexuality as an identity to be claimed. Micronovels frequently acknowledge sexual intimacy between characters of the same gender, but do not seek to label such behaviour. For example, in micronovel A023 (see p.306), a boy contemplates his attraction to his friend, but omits any word of sexual identity (但不知他是不是 *but [I] don't know if he is or not*). Later, upon finding the comic book, he seeks confirmation of his suspicions by asking "you…are you?" (你...是吗？), again omitting seemingly key vocabulary of identity (although by asking 'are you', rather than something like 'do you also like…', he is making a tacit indication of a state of sexual 'being' rather than just 'doing'). In example A037 (see p.312), the manager's subordinate speaks of the 'affairs' of the manager's sons as being common knowledge (其实少爷们的事，早就闻名 *in fact, the things those two get up to are quite well-known*). The manager's response, rather than mentioning his sons' sexuality, laments instead the fact that they are both the passive partner in their relationships (可我俩儿子怎么都是被压的那个 *"but why are they both bottoms?"*[125]).

These examples construct a figured world where direct mention of sexuality or sexual identity is problematic, and is usually avoided. The use of this device in queer-themed microfiction can serve several purposes; given the publication restrictions of the medium, omissions like the one displayed in A023 saves space. Euphemisms used in example A037 can be argued in part to contribute to the humour of the story, highlighting the delicate nature of the conversation between the two men, and creating playfulness in the formulation and performance of identity within the texts, which forces the reader to consider the ways in which gendered bodies are created in online worlds (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011). However, these assertions notwithstanding, the silence and avoidance tactics demonstrated here point to a figured world where homosexual identity is not a viable or socially acceptable option for the characters in the micronovel. It demonstrates shame, uncomfortableness and

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[125] The text here uses the euphemism *bei ya* (被压, *forced down*) to refer to the receptive partner in anal sex, demonstrating again both a heteronormative framework and the reduction of homosexual identity to exclusively sexual acts.

embarrassment. This has a direct link to reported perceptions of homosexuality within Chinese culture, which appears to place a greater burden upon non-normative social identity than on unconventional sexual behaviour:

> *Heteronormativity is the standard and discretion is the expectation. If everything is done underground or furtively, there is no public response; if anything brings the gay issue to public attention, it provokes recrimination and condemnation.*

(Fann, 2003, p.38)

This is not to say that acknowledgement of sexual identity is completely absent from the collection. Micronovel example A015 (see p.302) shows a character who does choose to come out to his parents. This therefore presents a figured world where coming out to one's parents is a possibility. Although one does not learn much about the parents' reaction following the son's revelation, the fact that the mother uses the word 'finally' (儿子他终于出柜了 *son has finally come out*) could be taken as a sign that she has long held suspicions. Her vocalization before her final statement is ambiguous, as 呜 can indicate the sound of humming or of sobbing. Therefore, whether her statement is that of sadness (that the day she has long-feared has arrived) depends upon how the reader decodes the meaning behind that utterence. A more tacit example can be seen in micronovel A005 (see p.297). There are only two characters in the story – the object of the man's affections does not appear directly; indeed, the audience do not know that this is a story about same-sex attraction until the closing statement (因为只有这样他才能注意到我啊！ *"Because this is the only way he can notice me!"*). This revelation is then supposed to inspire a reaction in the reader. However, the first man is explicit about his intentions and desires in his exchange with the female character. He does not identify with a sexuality explicitly, yet readers of the story may find the openness of his words unusual and possibly combative towards social norms.

The seeming lack of recognition of sexual identity within the majority of the micronovels has obvious parallels with the purported identities of the producers and consumers of the genre. Given that one knows most fiction of this style is written by women for women, added to the specific nature of *danmei* fiction, which focuses on romantic affairs between highly-attractive male characters, it may not be so surprising that the complexities of managing and representing homosexual identity are treated scantly. Written from an aesthetic of beauty and romantic fantasy by and for heterosexual females, the claiming of a form of sexual citizenship through sexual identity for the protagonists of the stories becomes of less importance to both producer and consumer. Writing on the issue of identity and self-identity within the *yaoi* genre, Williams makes the following assertion:

> *As an observation of yaoi's 'post/modern' form, consider how a common utterance in the genre—when a character claims that he is 'not gay, but just in love with a man'—has both homophobic (or modern) temporal undertones but also non-identitarian (postmodern) ones. Consider too how yaoi fans often identify as 'straight/gay/lesbian' and so on, due to the preponderance of such labels in their societies, but also have an attraction to yaoi that crosses identitarian borders.*

(Williams, 2015, sec.13)

Here, Williams highlights an issue that is readily visible within the microfiction collection, wherein notions of sexual identity of the characters seem (deliberately or otherwise) unfixed or flexible. Consider micronovel A004 (see p.296), which shows an interaction between a heterosexual couple and the man who the reader initially believes to be trying to win the affections of the female character. Owing to the brevity of the micronovel, one is not provided with any clues as to the nature of the relationship shared by the opposite-sex couple, other than use of the term *nüyou* (女友, *girlfriend*). The figures world setting leads the reader to presume a romantic

relationship between these two, yet there is no depiction of physical signs of intimacy between them, and the reader does not know anything about their history. Likewise, one does not know in what way, if at all, sexual identity is being constructed within the minds of the male characters. Clearly the second man is physically attracted to the female character's partner, but one cannot know if his rejection of the female character is indicative of his rejection of all females.

Likewise, micronovel A009 (see p.299) appears to show a conflict between the man's identity as the husband or partner of the woman and his proclaimed identity (by the woman) as a same-sex attracted male. Sexual identity is never mentioned in this micronovel; therefore, one does not know the man's sexual feelings towards the woman (by logical extension he could be bisexual). The validity of bisexuality as a recognized and stable sexual identity has historically been challenged (Clarke *et al.*, 2010, p.86), and the existence of bisexuality appears not to be explicitly discussed in Chinese BL microfiction. Discussing English-language fiction, Blair comments that "the main characters in BL are frequently characterized as not-homosexual, even when they are clearly engaged in a homosexual relationship" (Blair, 2008, p.119). As this also holds true for the Chinese language micronovels, it is therefore problematic to automatically presume to categorize the relationship on display in these micronovels as 'homosexual' and, owing to the underdeveloped nature of the storylines presented in these stories, one cannot see whether clear lines are being drawn regarding sexuality and/or sexual identity. Consequently, one has no information as to whether the boyfriend character in A004 has any history of same-sex attraction, nor is one given any justification for this acceptance of the male suitor's proposition (he merely responds with *hao ba* [好吧, OK]). This in turn demonstrates a figured world where relationships are contested and won on grounds of personal or material merits, where an individual's previously demonstrated heterosexuality is not considered as a barrier to the pursuit of a same-sex relationship. As Salmon and Symons note, "slash fans must suspend disbelief that

two heterosexual men could fall in love with each other and sexually desire each other because of that love. Women who cannot do this do not become slash fans" (Salmon & Symons, 2004, p.99).

5.4.2 Female identity in the figured world of queer microfiction

Despite the focus by the majority of the micronovels on male same-sex intimacies, many of the examples include occurrences of female characters. Sometimes such characters are intended as a foil to the development of the male characters' relationship, acting as saboteurs (consciously or otherwise) to their long-term happiness. Other times, they are included as a representation of a figured world consisting of a gender binary, and their interaction with the male characters is not directly detrimental to the development of their same-sex relationship, but may cast judgements upon it through direct comment or silent assumption (as is the case in example A012 (see p.300), where the female character's line of questioning [更喜欢爸还是妈？ *Is your favourite, daddy or mummy?*] shows the presumption that the child will have gender-dichotomous parents). I believe it is especially important to analyse the portrayal and positioning of women in the figured worlds of these stories, as they comprise the largest reader demographic for this literary genre, and are the primary producers of *yaoi*, BL and *danmei*, therefore one can learn much about how women are choosing to represent themselves socially within the texts, and to observe how these representations disrupt (or reinforce) patriarchy and heteronormativity.

One might presume, being a literature medium by women for women, that the portrayal of women within the figured worlds of this genre of fiction would tend to be both positive and progressive. However, this appears not to be the case. Writing about English-language BL *manga*, Blair has observed that female characters are usually portrayed negatively:

> *One of the more common uses for female characters is as a*
> *barrier to the male characters' developing relationship. A typical*
> *character could be a woman with whom the characters' family*
> *wants him to develop a relationship, either because*
> *homosexuality is not considered socially acceptable and they*
> *want they character to be accepted, or because they do not*
> *know that he is gay and are pushing him toward a relationship*
> *in general*

(Blair, 2008, p.113)

Despite its seemingly transgressive nature, Martin (2012) concludes that, in the context of Chinese-language BL fiction in Taiwan, significant elements of the genre "reproduce ambivalences around both homosexuality and feminine gender from the broader culture" (2012, p.374). These phenomena are also evident within the selection of Chinese-language micronovels under investigation. From the presumptive arrogance of the female character in micronovels A004 (see p.296) and A005 (see p.297) who presume the male suitor is pursuing them rather than their boyfriends, to the orders of the unseen noblewoman in micronovel A014 (see p.301) who commands her son to visit his spouse, despite the ongoing relationship between the man and his attendant, women in this genre of fiction are generally portrayed as invasive or combative to the 'pure love' which exists between the male characters. Speaking to consumers of queer-themed microfiction in China, several of the female respondents were clear on their dislike for female characters in this type of story:

> *Some girls may hate that her favourite male character is with*
> *another girl character. She likes the male character very much,*
> *so she has great hostility to the female character; she may*
> *think that the female character is not good enough—why would*
> *he be with her?! However, she knows that the male character*
> *is not real, but even he was, she couldn't be with him, so she*

might think: "I would rather him being in love with another guy"

[…] Some girls maybe just think female characters represent weakness, stupidity, and annoyance, while male characters always represent the brave, smart and charming. In fact, in most novels or films or TV episodes, the female characters do represent the features I mentioned, which make the novel or film or TV really boring. When girls read, or watch them, this kind of boring state may cause her to feel uncomfortable and humiliated because the girl characters are terrible. Unlike boys, when boys read or watch this, they won't be offended because they think that is how girls should be. So girls may like gay fiction because there are less female characters and stories inside, which may make them feel more comfortable.

—Luli, 23-year-old female, sexuality undeclared

Businesswoman from Inner Mongolia

Microfiction consumer

Most of these fictions would have handsome male protagonists and these fictions would not have female protagonists, so female readers are unlikely to be jealous. It is an enjoyment to picture two handsome men being together, just as men enjoy watching two beautiful women getting together.

—Paihong, 25-year-old female, sexuality undeclared

Data analyst from Hubei

Microfiction prosumer and author of BL novels

From these two responses, one can see that—at least for these two consumers—the issue of jealousy is a strong motivational factor in both their desire to see two men in a romantic relationship together, and their dislike of the female characters within

this type of fiction. Character exposition within microfiction has sparse room for development, therefore portrayals of both sexes seem to be simplified.

5.5 Figured worlds and politics (distribution of social goods)

How an animator chooses to show the distribution of social goods within a story is a vital part of the figured world construction. As figured worlds constitute an implicit framework of agreed behavioural norms, so the distribution of social goods makes explicit how those rules have been adhered to, and shows under what conditions they can be challenged or transgressed. Outlining this concept, Gee states that "[s]ocial goods are at stake any time we speak or write in a way that states or implies that something or someone is 'adequate,' 'normal,' 'good,' or 'acceptable (or the opposite) in some fashion important to some group in society or society as a whole" (Gee, 2014, p.34). Therefore, as a *TOI*, *distribution of social goods* (also termed *politics*) will here be combined with the *figured worlds* tool to provide us with a methodological approach to unpicking the way language has been used to oppose various social and cultural phenomena as appropriate, valuable, proper etc. to construct the figured world of the micronovel. As with previous sections, all themes under discussion have been derived from data coding of the forty micronovels, beginning with an exploration of the conceptualization of masculinity and sexual behaviour within the figured worlds, before uncovering the ways in which animators display conflict and competition within the realms of their stories. Finally, analysis turns to the demonstration of material wealth and social capitalism, showing how animators weave underlying social structures into the figured worlds of the micronovels to demonstrate the apportioning of social goods, benefits and privilege.

5.5.1 Sex, power and masculinity in the figured worlds

Twenty-five percent of the selection contains mention (directly or through euphemism) of sexual contact or anal intercourse between men. This becomes an important aspect of the figured worlds of these stories, because of the way in which animators use sexual contact to contest power between the characters concerned. Several of the examples show transgression of heteronormative sexual behaviour through intoxication, thereby allowing usual social rules to be renegotiated, even if only temporarily. Micronovel example A026 (see p.307) takes a similar approach, but is more explicit in its description of power relations. The micronovel describes a change in sexual roles performed by the characters Zhang Qiling[126] and Wu Xie, owing to the fact that Zhang Qiling has lost his memory. It is suggested in this micronovel that being the active partner in homosexual sexual intercourse is the preferred option, as Wu Xie seems unconcerned that his partner has lost his memory, as this will enable him to swap power roles. The roles performed during sexual intercourse can be interpreted as the negotiation of a power dynamic. In some cases, this can be domination and submission, or "where there is liberty between people there are 'strategic games'" (Kippax & Smith, 2001, p.416). Discussion of power and anal intercourse has invariably become linked to conceptual formations of masculinity in many societies, and by logical extension to power distribution between the sexes. Kippax and Smith observe that "[t]he formalization of anal intercourse between men in western and many other cultures follows a binary logic: the receptive partner is passive and feminine and the insertive partner active and masculine" (2001, p.418). Many stories within the collection use gendered terms to refer to one of the partners in a same-sex relationship (e.g. A012 (see p.300) and A018 (see p.303) see male parental characters referred to as *mama* (妈妈, *mother*); in A015 (see p.302), the son refers to his male partner as *xifu* (媳妇, wife); and in A019 (see p.304) the young

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[126] Zhang Qiling (张起灵) is referred to in the micronovel as *Xiaoge* (小哥, *little brother*). These are both characters from *Daomu Biji* (盗墓笔记, Grave Robbers' Chronicles), a novel series about the grave-robbing adventures of Wu Xie (吴邪), a young man hailing from a family that had been tomb-raiders for centuries (Xu, 2007). This micronovel is a piece of slash fiction, as there is no suggestion of a relationship between the characters in the original source material.

man asks if, following intercourse with the other male character, he should call him *niangzi* (娘子, *a dialectal form of address for one's wife*), thereby replicating a figured world in which same-sex partners must conform to a gendered role attributed to them by their sexual behaviour, and are subsequently subject to the power relationships of a patriarchal, heteronormative environment.

5.5.2 Conflict and competition in the figured worlds

The distribution of power between majority and minority groups often can place those groups in direct contest over a particular social good. Through many of the micronovels in the collection, one sees heterosexual women and same-sex attracted men in direct competition over the objects of their affection. Descriptions of these negotiations or confrontations reveal how power is distributed within the figured world. Beginning with micronovel A005 (see p.297), one sees a direct claim from the man standing with the bunch of flowers that this is the *only* way to attract the attention of the other man (因为只有这样他才能注意到我啊！*Because this is the only way he can notice me!*). In stating this, the man reveals that he considers himself to be in a position of social inequality compared to others (particularly the woman in the story), who may have other methods of attraction at their disposal. Logically, this is unlikely to be true in a real-world scenario, and indeed it may be nothing more than a plot device to set up the micronovel's *dénouement*, but it can also be perceived as a manifestation of the social disadvantage felt by queer individuals who cannot discuss or display their attraction through other means owing to pervasive codes of heteronormative behaviour. By appropriating a recognisable display of heterosexual courtship, the man is able to reclaim power over the female character. However, this is one of several micronovels within the selection which show a heterosexual relationship being disrupted by the arrival of a same-sex attracted male. This can be interpreted in several ways, ranging from positive readings of the claiming of sexual

citizenship rights (whereby a male is liberated from a compulsion to enter a socially-mandated and regulated opposite-sex relationship) through to a negative casting of same-sex intimacies as potentially predatory (in this case and the case of micronovel A004 (see p.296), the male character has 'stolen' the girlfriend's partner through duplicity, as she believed that his advances were directed towards her). When viewed through this lens, it is hard to make a claim that this story constitutes an empowering declaration of sexual citizenship, as it sets same-sex intimacies in direct competition with opposite-sex ones.

Micronovel A010 (see p.299) shows a more vocal manifestation of intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality on behalf of the characters in the micronovel. Set in an educational building, a heterosexual couple's display of intimacy is challenged by a man and his male friend (although the friend appears non-complicit in this action). The micronovel displays a heteronormative figured world which is intolerant of displays of same-sex intimacy, as the physical contact between the men is shown to be badly received (瞬间桌子板凳撞击声迭起，男女收拾东西走人。*Immediately, there is a knocking sound from the table and bench, the couple quickly stands up and starts to collect their stuff to leave*). The plot relies on the reader understanding that physical intimacy between men is something socially and publicly unacceptable, as spaces have traditionally been (and often continue to be) heteronormatively sexualized (Hubbard, 2008; Caudwell & Browne, 2011) through Discourses and practices of 'common sense' power dynamics that create and recreate the heterosexual space through processes of mutual surveillance (Gregson & Rose, 2000; Browne, 2007). This demonstrates differing levels of power in action; the men reclaim power from the heterosexual couple's discourteous actions by replicating their privilege in a way that forces them out of the room, yet the story reminds the reader of the social positioning of homosexuality in comparison to heterosexuality.

Tellingly, several respondents to my inquiries regarding the conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality as manifested in microfiction believe it primarily to be a storytelling device:

> *I think in this context, authors are not using this conflict to set off the love between same sex, they just using it to create an interesting topic. In a normal situation, the conflict would be some other man want the girl, or some other women want the boy, and people will assume that the boy won't betray the girl because he loves her. However, when people see that the boy left the girl for another man, there will be a very interesting contrast and twist […]. So, I think this conflict is not there to reflect homosexual relationships, but to make people think of this as an interesting story.*
>
> —Ling, 20-year-old heterosexual female
> Student from Heilongjiang
> Microfiction consumer

> *It reflects the writers' exploration of relationships. However, sometimes it might just be an instrument to attract attention. I don't agree with this method, but it really exists.*
>
> —Tienong, 21-year-old gay male
> Fashion writer from Hubei
> Microfiction prosumer and author

In this regard, they believe it is used both as a dramatic feature and to entice female readers who enjoy the way this is often used to demonstrate 'true love' within the story.

5.5.3 Material wealth and social capital

The importance of wealth and material possessions is demonstrated when selecting a suitable mate within the figured worlds presented by these micronovels, but seems to be correlated with the negative portrayal of women discussed at 5.4.2. Within the selection, stories where no female character is mentioned do not give mention to material possessions. The female character in micronovel A004 (see p.296) is shown to lose interest in her current partner as the story progresses, attributable to the guy who she sees every day leaning on the sports car (总有个帅哥倚着跑车对她笑 *a handsome guy would always be there, leaning on a sports car smiling at her*), deeming that his obvious increased wealth makes him a better suitor. The male contestant featured in micronovel A031 (see p.309) is deemed desirable by the female contestants based on his earnings level and his physical appearance.

The real-world connection between marriage and personal wealth was made clear by several interview respondents:

> *Material wealth is the guarantee of a marriage. A statement like*
> *"How can you get married when you can't afford a house?" is a*
> *very common attitude in China.*

> —Fanchun, 24-year-old female, sexuality undeclared
> Businesswoman from Shandong
> Consumer of microfiction

Micronovel A011 (see p.300) depicts a father's struggle to improve the life of his disabled son, who has been abandoned by his wife, and who is now seeking out the son's previous male lover to rekindle the relationship so that he will not spend the rest of his life alone. Although the fact that the former lover wishes to return to the son can be viewed as a manifestation of 'true love' and/or compassion, the father's request is made because he believes that no one will want him now (现在谁还要他... *now who still wants him?*), implying that a man's attractiveness towards women is

based exclusively on what he can provide. This also makes a comment on how disability is viewed in this figured world[127].

5.6 Figured worlds and imagery

The *imagery TOI* in this project is based upon Gee's *sign system and ways of knowing* (2014) building task. Owing to the multimedia nature of the microblogging publication platform, it is very easy for animators to incorporate images with their micronovels. Often this will take the form of a photograph, picture, or video clip. Half of the micronovel selection in this project have accompanying imagery. These images constitute extra-textual information provided by the animator intended for consumption at the same time as the micronovel; therefore, this building task seeks to analyse the ways in which the images contribute, contrast, contest or explicate the figured worlds of the micronovels. Owing to the focus on analysing specific images, the microfiction collection is the primary data source used this section. Having explored the situated meanings within microfiction of transnational influences and sexualized imagery in chapter 4, these concepts are revisited to explore how underlying social assumptions and conventions are illustrated by their contribution to the construction of the figured world.

5.6.1 Transnational influences on imagery

Many of the works display the roots of the literary genre by referring to or replicating Japanese manga imagery, showing characters with the exaggerated

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[127] Lam, Tsang, Chan, *et al.* (2006) report that many Chinese people lack a clear understanding of a particular disability, with lay beliefs about disabilities being vague and stereotypical. Accordingly, "people with disabilities are severely stigmatized in China" (ibid., p.274). Discussing attitudes towards disability through representation in Chinese cinema, Dauncey (2007) argues that social, political, economic, and cultural factors have all conspired to reduce visibility of disability throughout most of China's modern history, although the situation has improved with the post-1976 relaxation of cinematic strictures, which has "allowed the inclusion of characters that did not necessarily conform to the socialist ideals of physical fitness and permitted exploration of personal experiences as opposed to collective goals" (Dauncey, 2007, p.498).

angular features distinctive of the style. Consistent with depictions of same-sex intimacies within the manga world, several of the images and their texts reflect the concepts of *seme* and *uke*, Japanese terms which generally correspond a dominant 'top' and the passive 'bottom' respectively, although Pagliassotti (2009) notes that this convention can be manipulated to provide character motivation and humour. These are usually tied into stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity.

The images presented with this collection of microfiction are broad-ranging, comprising; contemporary photographs, featuring both Western and Asian models; comic book illustrations of varying styles, including manga illustrations and artwork depicting classical Chinese scenes; and photographic images featuring erotic (or fetishized) imagery. Often, the images seem to bear little relation to the plot of the micronovel with which they are posted. Some examples contain multiple images, presented in a block following the text. Micronovel A017 (see p.303) contains such an example, comprising four separate images featuring characters at first seemingly unrelated to the plot of the story, but containing an internal correspondence within the images, which have paired subjects showing likeness, similarity and/or metaphorical comparison. The first image features two renderings of characters from the American children's cartoon, SpongeBob SquarePants (see 9.2*, image 11(a)*, plus accompanying notes). The original characters (the titular yellow Spongebob Squarepants and his pink friend Patrick Star) appear on the right, and the characters on the left are a human rendering of the cartoon characters created by a *yaoi* fan artist[128]. Although the original characters are unrelated, in the human rendering the artist has portrayed them in a parental relationship, mirroring the posturing from the original artwork, but with a marked difference between the characters' ages. The second image accompanying the micronovel also shows a visual symmetry between the two subjects (see 9.2*, image 11(b)*, plus accompanying notes). The second image is a powerful comparison of a young man to a small food item, arguably lacking in

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[128] Internet sources attribute the drawing to DeviantArt user *Tochiru*, but this has not been independently verified.

substance and mass produced. The plastic seal is torn open around the man, suggesting loss of protection from the outside world, indicating that he is soon to be 'consumed' or 'spoiled'. In both cases, the images bear signs of influence of transnational cultural artistry, either in the subject matter or the illustration style. Reflecting on the pairing of these images with micronovel A017, in which a son kneels before his mother confessing his love for another man, there now appears to be some form of cohesion between the figured worlds of the text and the images, as all show aspects of innocence and protection from the outside world, either in the arms of a close friend or parent, or by literally 'sealing' oneself off from the environment. From this perspective, the comparison between the seemingly abstract imagery and characters of the story becomes more tangible.

5.6.2 Sexualized imagery

Micronovel A001 (see p.295) depicts a chaste unrequited love for a friend, whereas the accompanying picture shows a clearly consensual and visible relationship between two males (see 9.2*, image 1*), therefore the animator cannot be intending to depict the two characters from the story. Similarly, the picture of masculinity, virility and physicality (see 9.2*, image 6*) presented with A011 (see p.300) stands at complete odds with the represented image of the disabled son in the micronovel. This latter image invokes a vision of masculine physicality, and reaffirms the primacy given to body image in the construction of masculinity. The man's naked torso in the photograph invokes feelings of sexual attraction and desire. The target audience for this genre of fiction is assumed to be heterosexual females and queer-identified males, for whom the image may have equal appeal. Therefore, both photographs present a figured world of masculine beauty, and contribute to a Discourse on beauty and desire, which will be explored further in chapter 6.

More explicitly sexualized imagery is presented with micronovels A009 (see p.299), A012 (see p.300) and A024 (see p.306). The first two images depict instances of podophilia (see 9.2*, images 4 and 7*), and the third image displays a naked torso covered by a wet cloth (see 9.2*, image 14*). These images are entirely inconsistent with the micronovels that they accompany. In terms of the figured worlds of the stories, it is entirely feasible that the animators of each of these stories have not sought to make a direct link between the words and the images, but have merely used the functionality of Weibo to attach a provocative image as an expression of the animator's own sexual identity and/or desires, using the images as an extra-textual reflection of their own figured world by promoting their own ideals of beauty, or by deliberately using provocative imagery as a way of commenting on pervasive heteronormative standards. However, as Fiske (2010) reminds us, such cultural products do not necessarily have to have a fixed meaning, but rather have their meaning produced by consumer interaction with texts (or, as here, images). Therefore, audience perception of the way that these images interact with the text is the key component. Photographs can be used as a tool to draw readers towards the material, as before they read the story they are alerted to its likely contents, although here it is more likely to be used as 'clickbait'[129], given the lack of consistency between textual and visual content, although some consumers that I spoke to expressed surprise or even repulsion at some animator's marriage of images and words, particularly where such sexualized imagery bears no relationship to the content of the micronovel. A further function of such a photo is to move the story from a fantasy or literary dimension into something physical and tangible. Undoubtedly, however, the inclusion of such imagery increases visibility of queer bodies and relationships, and can be seen as an act of exercising sexual citizenship.

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[129] Internet term for an online item or article which contains provocative text or images in the headline or thumbnail, designed to lure viewers or readers, thereby increasing the hit-rate on a particular article or item. Often such items contain only a tenuous link to the heading/image.

5.7 Conclusions on figured worlds

The *TOI* offer us a method through which to analyse instances of textual communication. In chapter 4, I examined the linguistic features of queer-themed Chinese language micronovels, demonstrating how animators use the negotiated medium of language to craft their stories, how they tell us what is happening in the worlds that they have constructed. If these *situated meanings* constituted the 'what?', then analysis of *figured worlds* has shown us the 'how?'; by exploring how significance is accorded, how practices are described, how identities are expressed and negotiated, how social goods are distributed, and how imagery is used, one is able to analyse the figured world of each of the micronovels to understand the underlying assumptions and judgements about the worlds in which the characters exist. An overarching framework of heteronormative patriarchy influences the construction of each one of these figured worlds (to a greater or lesser extent), with the social framework and regulatory system of opposite-gender relationships shown to bear a stark influence on the way in which same-sex intimacies are viewed, negotiated, contested and regulated. I have noted how same-sex intimacies in most cases are expressed using gendered language, where each half of the couple is heterosexualized into socially normative and conformist pairings (e.g. husband and wife; mother and father), which problematizes queer readings of these texts in terms of the negotiation of sexual identity and declarations of sexual citizenship. Previous scholarship (Pagliassotti, 2008; Williams, 2015) has suggested that, given the large heterosexual female consumer base for this genre of literature, such stories often have less to do with social commentary upon same-sex intimacies, and more to do with issues of female sexual expression, liberation and feminist-queer social critique. Writing about Japanese and American *yaoi* and slash fiction, Isola (2008, p.84) claims that "since the 1970s, the male body has proved to be a productive site in the imagination of […] females for what has been varyingly theorized as the projection

of their sexual fantasies and/or social anxieties", and it is clear that this has parallels with the more recent development of Chinese BL and *danmei* fiction.

On the flip side, I have also demonstrated the often negative construction of female characters within the texts, a feature shared by global BL fiction (Blair, 2008), which my interview respondents attributed to the personification of weakness and oppression, preferring stories where female characters do not cause the reader feelings of jealousy or envy, or otherwise do not obstruct their gaze of the handsome male protagonists. This is then tied inextricably to the issue of power and agency which pervades the representation of same-sex intimacies within the figured world. Power struggles between majorities vying for hegemony and minorities vying for recognition and/or liberation form the backbone of many of the structural frameworks evident in these micronovels. Heteronormativity, itself the largest and most pervasive of these frameworks, is a site of contestation for the men in these tales, who either seek to reject the normative social order in their continued pursuit of relationships with a person of the same sex, or who instead try to conform to the dominating social structures, particularly those of marriage and procreation. Underpinning these social structures are generational conflicts and interdependencies, which exert a tangible influence on the plot development of many of the micronovels. The real-world influence of traditional Chinese moral compasses is evident within the tales through the protocols of filial piety, the implications of adherence to or rejection of which are deemed to be universally understood by the consuming readership.

With the technological facility to accompany each micronovel with photographs and/or illustrations comes an increased opportunity to explore the figured worlds of both the micronovels and of the animators' imaginations. While many images seem to be unrelated to the texts that they accompany, all bring with them a form of extra-textual commentary on representation of same-sex intimacy or on the expression of sexual identity. Given the publishing environment of these

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micronovels, imagery is frequently used by animators as a lure to attract readers, or as an expression of the animators' own sexual tastes or desires. In doing so, the images contribute to the figured worlds of the micronovels, even if they bear no relevance to the plot, because they offer ways of making knowledge claims about the world. In doing so, extra-textual factors contribute to the formulation of the figured worlds in which the micronovels exist.

Overall, my analysis of the figured worlds of these micronovels gives a specific insight into what it means to each of the fictional characters to live within bounds of their own existence, within the particular frameworks of social normativity that govern every aspect of the world around them. It highlights what the animator, and by extension the reader, considers to be the unwritten codes of social behaviour, and demonstrates the ways in which such conventions can be potentially challenged and negotiated. As I move into analysing Discourses in the subsequent chapter, these social frameworks and understandings that I have unpacked here will become the building blocks upon which I construct my investigation.

6   Discourses in Queer Microfiction

6.1   Introduction

Over the course of the past two chapters, this project has examined a wealth of stylistic and linguistic features present in contemporary queer-themed microfiction, demonstrating the various tools available to an animator in order to *situate meaning* within the negotiated act of communicative performance (the '*what is happening?*' question, for the purposes of my analysis). Using these literary devices, the animator creates a *figured world*, which shows the underlying assumptions understandings of the social setting in which the fiction situates itself (the '*how does it happen?'* question). Finally, in this chapter, I turn my attention to analysing the patterns and conduits of discussion and conversation that are both inherent within the microfiction structure, and which result from the messages they carry (the '*why is it happening?'* question). Discourse relating to the acceptability of same-sex intimacies, on parental relationships, on how to be a sexual citizen within the regulatory framework of contemporary China, and so on—all these overarching social conversations, discussions and negotiations will be somehow reflected within the production and consumption process, and it is these social interactions and contestations that this chapter is seeking to unpick. As per my review of Discourse analysis in 3.3.1, I have chosen to adhere to Gee's distinction between the use of discourse/Discourse, as his explanation of this practise corresponds most closely to what I am seeking to achieve.

In this chapter, excerpts from the microfiction data selection will be analysed to demonstrate the ways in which Discourses are engaged and challenged within the realm of queer-themed microfiction. As before, I use a thematic approach to data analysis, working through the categories of *significance*, *practices*, *identities*, *politics* and *imagery*:

Gee's TOI	Gee's Building Task (Adapted)	My Thematic Analysis (emerging from the data)
Discourses	Significance	» Social conformity and conversations » Visibility of same-sex relationships » Terminology
	Practices	» The Discourse cycle of heteronormativity » Same-sex marriage and parenting » Education as cultural value
	Identities	» Sexual behaviour versus sexual identity » Sexual citizenship and queer microfiction
	Politics	» Sacrifice and public duty » Heterosexual marriage as an act of filial piety
	Imagery	» Imagery within queer microfiction Discourse » Provocative imagery and challenges to Internet censorship

Figure 13: Discourses—building tasks and themes

Together, these building tasks (Figure 13, above) allow for a thematic analysis of the material, which contributes to an understanding of the way in which Discourses are embedded within the micronovels. Within each building task subsection, the sub-headings derive directly from evidence from the close reading of the microfiction selection, arranged thematically in order to construct a narrative throughout the analysis. Each section closes with a summary of the salient findings of the thematic analysis for each building task, and finally these findings are synthesized in the conclusion at the end of the chapter.

Micronovels and interview data are used throughout this project's data chapters, both in isolation and comparatively, to provide discussion and insight into the phenomena of queer-themed microfiction. Excerpts from interviews with consumers and producers/prosumers of such fiction in China will therefore be interwoven to illustrate, explicate and challenge data emerging from the microfiction content analysis. In keeping with the chapters on *situated meanings* and *figured worlds*, themes of data analysis (Figure 13, above) have been established by taking the most heavily coded items resulting from close examination of the 40 stories using the qualitative data analysis programme *Nvivo* (see 3.3.2 for a detailed methodological description).

6.2 Discourses and significance

The *significance* building task from Gee's (2014) *TOI* seeks to examine the ways in which certain information is presented within a text to accord or reduce significance. The words that a writer chooses (or chooses to omit) work in tandem with contextual and cultural frames of interpretation on the part of the listener/reader to form a hierarchy of value in terms of privileging or disprivileging certain elements within the text. When combined with the *Discourses TOI*, this methodological device seeks to understand which social Discourses are being engaged within the text, and the ways in which these Discourses are granted or denied significance. Themes for analysis have emerged from the microfiction coding analysis as supported by respondent interviews, beginning with the concept of social conformity which runs as a narrative conversation throughout both data sets. As the purpose of this section is to examine how Discourses are being used to build relevance or significance for things and people in context, important emerging themes for discussion include the visibility of same-sex intimacies within contemporary Chinese society, both online and offline, and to examine the contribution made to this conversation by this style of microfiction. Another important thematic line of inquiry concerns the terms of reference attributed to groups within society as markers of inclusivity or marginality, as although these features have been discussed from a linguistic perspective in chapters 4 and 5, it is imperative now to go beyond the limit of the printed word to uncover the ways in which these practices are shaping (or are being shaped by) wider social Discourses.

6.2.1 Significance, social conformity and conversations

As established in chapters three and four, the burden of pressure to achieve social conformity exerts a pervasive and tangible influence on the way we as individuals present ourselves within society. The degree to which this effect manifests

itself varies from person to person and from culture to culture, yet the effect of wider social opinion can often be perceived, either in the way one deliberately distances oneself from normative standards, or through the ways in which one modifies one's own behaviour through social coercion to comply with normative models of conduct. Heteronormativity has been demonstrated to be precisely such a pervasive force within most societies, whereby deviations from the behaviour of the majority is judged from moral and legal perspectives, and punished accordingly, be it through loss of privilege, lack of recognition, enforced social invisibility or even socially-sanctioned violence towards sexual minorities. These form part of a Discourse on the acceptability of same-sex intimacies, and therefore through analysing content of both queer-themed micronovels and interviews with consumers/prosumers of the genre, one can establish the strains of Discourse and social conversation being enacted in the wider cultural setting.

The sacrifices made for unrequited love through the burden of social pressure to conform is a key element of the plot of micronovel A001 (see p.295). Significance is attached to social conformity by the speaker's apparent acceptance of his fate (他苦笑不语 *his silent wry smile*), and the fact that he states that he will attend his beloved's wedding (你的婚礼, 我会参加). Admittedly, in such a short passage there is sparse room for plot development, and no opportunity for the story to be continued. However, the story's revelation can and will be developed mentally by the reader, and feeds into ongoing social Discourse on homosexuality within the social setting of production and consumption. Significance is therefore given in the story, through its chronological progression outlining the emotion investment in the relationship (at least from the second person's perspective), to challenging a widely-held notion (and the opinion often initially voiced by parents of queer-identified children) that such feelings are experimental, transitory or capricious (Sullivan & Schneider, 1987; Bohan, 1996; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998; Wang *et al.*, 2009), or can be corrected in time (Harrison, 2003; Wang *et al.*, 2009). These attitudes can be seen in

micronovel A032 (see p.310), where same-sex attraction is presented as youthful experimentation, which must ultimately yield to normative forms of social conduct (随着时间的流逝渐渐失去了联系，多年之后两人都有了各自幸福美满的家庭 *As time flew by, they gradually lost contact, many years later they formed their own happy families*).

A key component that contributes to the Discourses of any particular text or utterance are *conversations*, which, from a sociolinguistic perspective, comprise exchanges in communication that "are founded on the establishment of a base of common knowledge and necessarily involve the creation of more shared understanding" (Mercer, 2004, pp.140–141). From this context, when analysing such conversations, one is looking extra-textually—as with Discourses—at the various sides of a debate as if they comprise one big conversation, wherein crucially "people know what the different 'sides' or 'poles' are in such Conversations[130], even if they only agree with one side" (Gee, 2014, p.131). Accordingly, micronovels such as A001 (see p.295) may inspire a range of reactions from readers, depending on which side of the debate they position themselves. The unrequited love plot line is the key element in this story, with little significance attributed during the exposition to the fact that the two characters are both men. Although the story is dealing with same-sex desire and relationships, falling in love with someone who does not reciprocate those feelings is a human experience with which a much larger audience can identify. In this respect, it can be argued that it normalises queer desire by presenting it in a comparable framework to heterosexuality, in effect humanizing same-sex attracted people by diminishing the sexual element. This is comparable to the development of Discourse on rights in the West, i.e. from 'gay' rights to 'human' rights (Katchen, 2015; Patel, 2015). How a reader feels about this will depend on where they align themselves politically.

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[130] Deliberately capitalized to distinguish from the more generalized meaning of 'conversations' (compare usage of 'discourses' and 'Discourses'. See 3.3.1 for further explanation.)

Formation, sustainability and legitimacy of interpersonal relationships are also central discursive issues in several of the micronovels. In micronovel A001 (see p.295), the central character acts in a manner which is only too recognisable to readers of the story, and his friend responds in a way that is equally recognisable. A Chinese audience, particularly one who is familiar with Discourse on homosexuality within Chinese culture, will recognize the tragedy of the story, but will not find the *dénouement* of the story surprising, as marriage (specifically that between a man and a woman) remains very much a central cultural convention. It is significant here that the central character does not attempt to disrupt the plans for his friend to marry, but instead seems to accept his fate, whilst 'keeping face' in the eyes of society (see 6.5.1 in this chapter). In doing so, he allows the other man to uphold cultural convention regarding heterosexual marriage.

Micronovel A032 (see p.310), in stark contrast, tells a tale of juvenile love and infatuation which gives way to normative standards of behaviour in later life, with the ring made of grass acting as a metaphor for the dying relationship between the two characters, and the insignificance attributed to it by society at large (可没人注意到草丛间有枚泛黄的草戒指 *and no one ever noticed the yellowing grass ring in the underbrush*). The animator of the micronovel presents the idea of 'reason/logic' as grounds for discontinuing the relationship (到了一定的年纪，他也明白了一些事理 *When [they] reached a certain age, he understood certain matters*), clearly demonstrating how socially constructed and learned models of behaviour have adjusted the way one boy feels about the other, and stating that both went on to marry and have children (多年之后两人都有了各自幸福美满的家庭 *As time flew by, they lost contact with each other, many years later they formed their own happy families*) in the fullness of time. Yet, the apparent lack of significance attributed to the value of same-sex intimacies in this micronovel should not be taken as a blanket dismissal of their worth, but rather can be seen as illustrative of the ongoing conversation and resultant Discourse on homosexuality within Chinese society, where many people

consider such relationships invalid (see Fann, 2003), or as a mere effusion of adolescent experimentation with gender non-conforming behaviour (Chow & Cheng, 2010), particularly at a time in people's lives where privacy and access to the opposite sex may be limited, such as living in single-sex communal dormitories in educational establishments. Such a scenario is the setting for micronovel A027 (see p.308), a very brief tale—even by microfiction standards—which pokes fun at single-sex living arrangements at universities as a catalyst for sexual intercourse between men:

> "哥，听说大学里有很多男男相恋的例子啊。" "是的啊，每天晚上都被上铺那两个摇得睡不着觉。" *"Brother, [I] heard there are many instances of love between men in universities." "Yeah, every night [I] couldn't sleep due to the shaking from those two on the upper bunk."*

In these situations, whilst not normative behaviour per se, such conduct is seemingly justified through the aforementioned mitigating factors, and owing to the perception that such behaviour will be temporary and not form a barrier to the formation of opposite-sex relationships outside of the particular situation, which is consistent with findings from research into homosexual behaviour in same-sex situational settings[131] (Schlegel, 1995; Eigenberg, 2000; Kunzel, 2002).

6.2.2 Visibility of same-sex intimacies

Through their mere existence on a widely-used social media platform in Chinese cyberspace, one can argue that gay-themed microfiction increases the visibility of same-sex intimacies. After all, Weibo is not a website created exclusively

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[131] The term situational homosexuality, which came to prominence in academic discussion in the early 20th century, has been widely contested in more recent years, as Katz claims that "[t]he term is fallacious if it implies that there is some 'true' homosexuality which is not situated. All homosexuality is situational, influenced and given meaning and character by its location in time and social space" (Katz, 1976, p.7).

for the queer community, such as boysky.com or pybk.com, and as such, all netizens have an equal opportunity of viewing these micronovels online:

> *I think this kind of story is not just designed for gay people. Because now—this kind of technology, like WeChat—I think for sure this kind of story will come to some straight people's eyes, and then they maybe think: "Wow this is interesting", and they will forward it to their other friends, so I think it's good… it could also represent in a bad way, I suppose, if they don't like gay people, but I think once they have seen them… because these stories float around society, I think it will help to let more people know about gay stuff, and then they can become more accepting, even if they personally are not accepting, I still think it's a trend. It will become more acceptable, and I think this kind of thing is part of that acceptance procedure.*

> —Lichen, 32-year-old gay male from Zhejiang
> University Administrator
> Microfiction consumer

Issues of visibility within the micronovel plots are explored in micronovel A037 (see p.312), where the company director's sons are reported to be blatant in their behaviour (其实少爷们的事，早就闻名 *in fact, the things those two get up to are quite well-known*). The narrator of the text is keen to elicit the opinion of the boys' father, but frames his questioning in such a way that highlights that the narrator finds their behaviour either curious or unacceptable. The father's reply goes against his expectations (预料之外的话，我下意识的恩[132]了一声表示肯定 *This being outside of my expectations. I replied with a grunt of affirmation*), which demonstrates a value judgement from the narrator, which in turn reflects ongoing Discourse on the acceptability of increased visibility of same-sex intimacies within this social setting.

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[132] Sic; the animator presumably meant to use the character *en* (嗯, *an interjection indicating approval or agreement*）which is phonetically identical, but different in meaning to *en* (恩, *kindness*).

I think they are making same-sex relationships more visible,

but only among certain groups of people, like young people who

use the Internet frequently.

—Fangchun, 24-year-old heterosexual female from Shandong

Businesswoman

Microfiction consumer

Fangchun has perhaps highlighted a key misgiving when it comes to claiming queer-themed micronovels to be a harbinger of social change; as an exclusively online activity, its influence can only extend to those sections of society that have the resources to access the Internet. China's netizen population has exploded in recent years, hitting 688 million at the end of 2015 (CNNIC, 2016), meaning an Internet penetration rate of around 50%. However, although this represents the largest online population of any world nation, China ranks only 7th out of the top 10 largest Internet populations by country in terms of Internet penetration (Real Time Statistics Project, 2016), the country's user profile is still skewed towards the young, urban and educated (China Internet Watch, 2016). It should also not be overlooked that China's extensive Internet regulations leave large areas of cyberspace inaccessible to Chinese netizens, which means that greater penetration rates do not necessarily correlate to greater access to information for China's citizens. While the presence of queer-themed microfiction will undoubtedly offer a contribution to shaping Discourse on *tongzhi* representation and visibility online, there is limited scope to measure its exact influence in a qualitative study.

6.2.3 Terminology and significance

The way in which certain groups or practices are termed can have a strong impact on how particular issues are framed within a social setting, and in turn becomes a creator of lines of Discourse. The issue of terminology has been briefly

discussed in its relevance to the creation of *figured worlds* at 5.2.2. Here, I wish to demonstrate how the language used in those figured worlds becomes a carrier of underlying social Discourse on homosexual relationships, reflecting not only the views of the consumer base, but also the overarching social conversations and discussions relating to issues that transgress normative sexual behaviour or relationships structures.

The appearance of gendered terms of address for male partners in same-sex intimacies (see examples at 5.2.1) reflects a social tendency to express new concepts by mapping them onto prevailing heteronormative ideas and customs. While for some queer-identified individuals such misgendering may be inherently problematic, the prevailing Discourse among the BL consumer community here is presumably not meant to be one that carries shame or moral judgement, but rather stems from the ignorance of inexperience expressed by many of my female respondents, who are fascinated by the idea of same-sex love, but who by their own admission do not have any openly-gay friends with whom to talk about such matters. As a result of the social attitudes that have shaped Discourse on homosexuality within Chinese culture, many of the female consumers of BL fiction are also 'in the closet', with several respondents admitting that they hide their interest from their offline friends as they suspect that they will be judged negatively for it:

> *At first, I will read this story by myself, because in my school it's not so well-known and it's not normal. And I am afraid if my parents know I read this kind of story they will think I am strange.*
>
> —Yiping, 20-year-old heterosexual female
> Student from Zhejiang
> Microfiction consumer

In our lives… people like me are called funü, and some people will think this is not so good. A friend of mine… when I told her about this kind of story, she said "No, don't talk to me about this!" She doesn't like it. She just thinks men should get together with women.

—Ling, 20-year-old heterosexual female
Student from Heilongjiang
Microfiction consumer

For these consumers, their interest remains personal and clandestine, owing to a fear of being marked out as strange for professing support or interest in same-sex intimacies, which forms an intriguing parallel with the lives of the queer-identified characters about whom they enjoy reading.

Micronovel A006 (see p.297) contains a humorous exchange between a bride and groom, as the groom stops the ceremony and his jilted bride claims she knows he's in love with the best man because she is familiar with how things work in microfiction (我知道，你真正喜欢的是伴郎吧。我看过微小说的 *I know, the one you really love is the best man, right? I've read microfiction*). This is clearly an 'in-joke', referencing both the primacy of marriage within the genre, and the way in which many microfiction plot lines are built around the development of close male relationships that give way to sexual activity between the pair. Yet the bride uses the term *weixiaoshuo*, (微小说, micronovel) not *tongzhi xiaoshuo* or *BL xiaoshuo*, (同志小说/ BL 小说, comrade / BL novels). Given that the entire story is only 82 characters (well below the 140-character limit), this cannot be considered a space-saving requirement, so instead this demonstrates the significance of the role of microfiction as a carrier of such stories.

Female consumers of same-sex fiction are known in China as *funü* (腐女), which is frequently translated as 'rotten girls'. The character *fu*(腐) contains with it the idea of decay or impurity, and accordingly it is included in the words *fubai*

(腐败，*corruption*), *fuhua* (腐化, *degenerate*) and *furu* (腐儒, *pedant*). As recently as 2014, *danmei* fiction websites in China bore the brunt of an official crack-down, with authors arrested and websites closed down, ostensibly through the association in official Discourse between homosexuality, pornography and moral degradation (Ren, 2014; Tang, 2014; Wei, 2014). Although much consumption by these women is conducted online and remains hidden from their friends and family, the term is actively used by many respondents to refer to themselves, and none of the respondents objected to the term, which is consistent with findings that "most BL fans in China and Hong Kong are happy to adopt the identity of a 'rotten girl'" (Jacobs, 2012, p.161) . This, therefore, represents two trains of Discourse in relation to the term *funü*: as a moralistic label of judgement applied to females who enjoy material which is deemed to be socially unacceptable for women to actively pursue; or as a label of transgression, reclaimed by a community to highlight their lack of conformity and rejection of heteropatriarchal restrictions.

## 6.3 Discourses and practices (activities)

As chapters 4 and 5 have established, the analysis of *practices* is a vital part of social enquiry because it is through the establishment of repetitive cycles of action that a society builds a concept of normativity. Naturally, the understanding of normative behaviour will vary from society to society, as experience becomes shaped by the influences of history and culture. From such established patterns emerge social Discourses, as concepts of normativity become reinforced or challenged over time. How one feels about certain practices and modes of behaviour must, invariably, take account of the wider social discussions that are taking place, which are frequently referred to in DA as *Conversations*. Behaviour within a society is a manifestation of the distribution of power and agency; our actions are regulated, governed and contested within social spheres of Discourse in how they conform to—

or transgress—the social norm, and thus non-compliance with socially-accepted codes of conduct often results in marginalization of the individual or individuals concerned. To this end, it is imperative to examine the practices being demonstrated within the micronovels in order to understand the underlying *Discourses* shaping the social structures, and to establish why certain patterns have become dominant over others. Revisiting the theoretical framework of heteronormativity, which can be seen to run throughout all levels of analysis in this project, in this section I turn my attention to evidence of same-sex marriage and queer parenting in the microfiction selection, examining how this sits within the pervasive heteronormative framework that govern social attitudes towards same-sex intimacies, as attested by interview respondents and drawing on previous scholarship in support of the data that emerges. Finally, the importance of social ritual and the cultural value of education are presented through their inclusion within the micronovels, and are assessed for their reflection of social Discourse on cultural capital.

6.3.1 The Discourse cycle of heteronormativity

As has been demonstrated through the analysis of *situated meanings* and *figured worlds* in the preceding chapters, heteronormativity is a key factor in the shaping of levels of Discourse within Chinese society, both offline and online. Its effects and influence are evident throughout the micronovel data selection. Yet the production of heteronormativity is not a linear progression. As Fairclough and Wodak (2009, p.258) have established, "the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them". Accordingly, in addition to Discourse

reflecting the heteronormativity of society, heteronormativity is also *created* and *reinforced* through social Discourse, which I illustrate through Figure 14[133] (below):
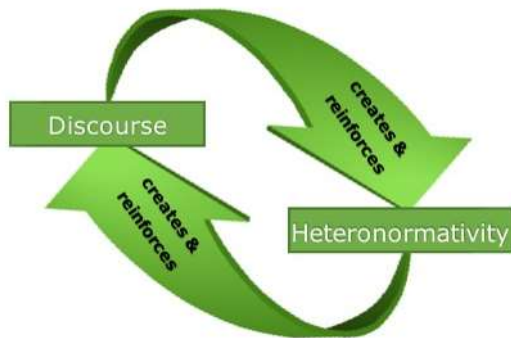
**Figure 14: Social cycle of heteronormativity**

To speak of 'sexual *minorities*' implies that the remaining majority of the world's population is both heterosexual and cisgendered[134] (although scholars such as Butler (1999) and Hird (2000) would argue that such binary definitions of sex and gender are inherently flawed), and certainly many social institutions have been shaped around the needs and requirements of opposite-sex couples, resulting in social environments where heterosexuality is a (often unspoken) presumption and expectation. It is against this social Discourse which LGBTQ individuals have had to contest and negotiate spaces for recognition, protection and inclusion (Valentine, 1996; Browne, 2007).

Social attitudes towards non-normative sexual relationships vary from group to group, and even within groups themselves, with Discourses ranging from the macrosocial to the microsocial. Within each social group, different dynamics and

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[133] My own diagram.
[134] Cisgender refers to a condition where a person's experience of gender identity corresponds with their sex as assigned at birth. It is the complement term of transgender.

conversations contribute to the Discourse. Therefore, when analysing queer microfiction in Chinese cyberspace, there are several levels of Discourse to evaluate:
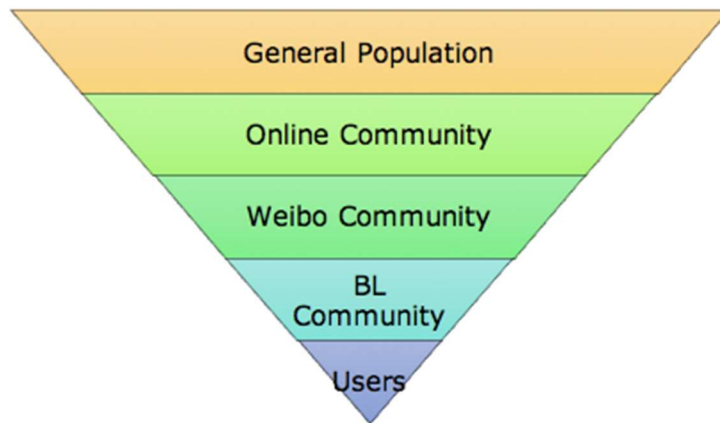
Figure 15: Social strata of Discourse regarding same-sex intimacies

In Figure 15[135] (above), I provide a visual representation of the cross-sectional nature of Internet Discourse, showing that each hierarchical Discourse realm (here comprising a certain population of netizens) shrinks as it becomes more specific. For example, the whole Weibo community is part of the online community, but the whole online community is not part of the Weibo community. Using attitudes towards same-sex intimacies as my example, I have established that there are many features of Chinese society and culture which make the acceptance of homosexuality problematic. Without access to information and with differing education levels both between generations and between rural and urban areas, homosexuality as a phenomenon stands as an alien concept to many, who have had no experience or interaction with homosexual individuals. Those with access to the Internet as a tool of information promulgation may arguably have more experience or exposure to notions of relationships between members of the same sex, yet increased exposure does not automatically equate to increased levels of tolerance, as the way in which homosexual relationships are framed in official and online Discourses may contribute to—or reinforce—existing prejudice. On the narrower end of the social strata of Figure

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[135] My own diagram.

15 (above), one may presume that consumers and producers of BL fiction will have positive and/or progressive attitudes towards same-sex intimacies, yet it has been established that the primary consumer group for this style of writing *is not* the group that the fiction is purporting to depict. Whilst nearly all respondents in this project agreed that the fiction was unrealistic in its depiction of gay men, the problems that this causes in terms of *tongzhi* representation and visibility are differently reported by differing consumer groups:

> *I don't think they [women] can write about male same-sex relationships very well without having personal experiences. For example, the 'heterosexual model' is too obvious in BL novels, as is the fixation on 'top' and 'bottom'. I admit that in order to construct character, some consistency is necessary, but it is not the same in real life gay relationship. Two men are familiar with each other's bodies because they are both male, biologically speaking, it's easier for them to satisfy each other's sexual needs. It is not necessary that one plays the 'husband' and the other plays the 'wife' all the time. It depends on different couples to decide what suits them.*

<div align="right">

—Kehui, gay male[136]
Profession unknown
Microfiction consumer

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> *The audience is female—it's basically a female activity for females. So, it doesn't matter if the gay sex is not accurate, because they don't know about gay sex. As females, they know what other females want to read, so there's no problem for them.*

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[136] This respondent declined to give his age.

—Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
Student from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

The relationships described in these novels are unrealistic, like fairy tales, because looking at someone's life from outside is totally different from experiencing it oneself or being personally on the scene. The reason why these novels are not widely consumed by gay people might be because of this unrealistic fantasy about their lives. The descriptions are too far away from reality.

—Xiulian, 25-year-old heterosexual female
Businesswoman from Anhui
Microfiction consumer

Usually these kinds of stories are really beautiful, and it might show that same-sex relationships are not very different from heterosexual ones, so most people might accept homosexuals more easily.

—Luli, 23-year-old female, sexuality undeclared
Businesswoman from Inner Mongolia
Microfiction consumer

These four responses demonstrate the crux of the representation problem within queer-themed microfiction; the conceptualization of same-sex intimacies in this type of fiction is being driven by the heterosexual female animators and consumers, and through repeated framing of same-sex intimacies through heterosexual terminology and structures, the relationships on display are constructed primarily for the female gaze. For Tieying, it is of little consequence, as he acknowledges the female producer's agency to create fantasy that resonates well with other female consumers.

Luli's comment, however, does not seem to share Tieying's insight, as her claim that the fiction shows that gay relationships are not very different from straight ones is fundamentally flawed if one accepts that such relationships are unrealistic constructions intended to mirror heterosexual relationship dynamics for a readership who have no practical experience of same-sex intimacies outside the realm of fiction. As such, I agree in part with Yang and Xu (2015) that the presence of such material in Chinese cyberspace becomes more of a statement on female sexuality and of grass-roots feminism than of a simple manifestation of increased acceptance of same-sex intimacies; although, it is clear from my own research that elements of this style of fiction resonate with its gay male readership too, particularly early on in their own journey of self-discovery, as online fiction (of all lengths) constitutes an easily-accessible form of play, performance, escapism and stimulation for some same-sex attracted young men. Given the regulatory constraints on publishing gay-themed material, both literary and audio-visual, then online user-created content becomes one of the few options available, and increased privacy afforded through the use of Internet-enabled mobile phones allows a *tongzhi*-identified reader to access such material without the risk of compromising their outward identity. Yet for female writers of BL fiction, empowerment of sexual minorities is seemingly neither the priority nor the goal:

> *I don't think [BL fiction/microfiction] is empowering for gay people. Ten years ago, when the first generation of rotten girls was still pretty young and few in number, they had a tendency to think that BL novel characters were the same as gay lives in reality. That is why there was a trend to think 'gay people are cool' and they would go to gay bars just to see them. Now, rotten girls can distinguish between fiction and reality very well. They know that what they like is not the 'gay reality' at all, and they know there are many problems in real same sex*

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relationships. So, the gay community, lesbian community, and rotten girl community are basically at a stage of isolation and separation. Now, although rotten girls will never discriminate against gay people, they are not interested in fighting for equal rights for gay people anymore.

—Jinhua, 32-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed

Businesswoman from Beijing

Microfiction consumer, author of BL novels

It must be acknowledged that not all the respondents agree with Jinhua in this regard, with some seeing the increased visibility afforded to same-sex intimacies through this style of literature—especially on a website that is not a dedicated space for *tongzhi* users—as being a positive step towards greater social acceptance:

To some extent, I think it does help. As these fictions are becoming much more popular, the mass media starts to notice them. Similar homosexual plots, or plots that have a slight gay orientation will start to appear in mainstream audio-visual programming. Thus, it helps the general public, who are not in this circle, to know something about homosexual relationships.

—Lili, 25-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed

Businesswoman from Chongqing

Microfiction prosumer

Others offered a more guarded perspective on how visible the material on Weibo really is:

I think it [BL fiction] is only visible if you want to find it. For a lot of people, if they have psychological barriers towards gay people, or towards gay love, then even if they come across these stories online, they won't necessarily look at it, or follow it.

—Huirong, 29-year-old heterosexual female

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Academic from Guangdong

Microfiction consumer

From each of these responses, even within each group stratum, it is clear that opinions are not united, and differing and competing strains of Discourse are emerging. Together, these build a complex discussion around normative values, and around the representation of same-sex intimacies.

6.3.2 Enacting social rituals: same-sex marriage and parenting

The importance afforded to established social rituals and conventions is illustrated throughout many of the examples from the selection, and by analysing the way in which animators construct, replicate and challenge such social institutions and cultural practices, one begins to understand the ways in which social Discourse shapes both the *situated meanings* of the words, and the *figured worlds* in which the micronovels operate. As explained in the previous section, many of these rituals have been shaped through heteronormative behaviour and social organization, such as marriage, child rearing and intergenerational family relationships. Micronovel A016 (see p.302) presents marriage as a social institution to which all citizens can (and should) aspire. However, rather than being forced into a prescriptive heterosexual marriage, the sons in this micronovel demonstrate that they have the agency to exercise intimate citizenship rights to marry the person of their choice (突然他开口说：

"我儿子刚才说，要和你儿子去荷兰结婚，我答应了。" 他微愣了一下，点点头 *Suddenly he says, 'My son said he is going with your son to The Netherlands to get married. I have consented.' Slightly stunned for a moment, he nods his head*). The concept of intimate citizenship stems from the work of British sociologist Ken Plummer. Beginning with largely political conflicts over gay and lesbian lives, through research into women's lives and sexual violence, Plummer's theoretical frameworks have expanded to include all matters of intimacy (Plummer, 2003). Conceptually, intimate citizenship "examines rights, obligations, recognitions and respect around the most

intimate spheres of life—who to live with, how to raise children, how to handle one's body, how to relate as gendered being, how to be an erotic person." (Plummer, 2001, p.238). Accordingly, there are a multitude of hierarchical, layered and contested public spheres, thus the term intimate citizenship must denote a plurality of multiple public voices and positions (Plummer, 2001). Micronovel A016 deals with elements of nearly all of the aforementioned aspects; the choice of the two sons to marry and live together in spite of social rules denying such freedoms to same-sex couples in their home country; the relationship and distribution of power between the sons and their parents; and ultimately, the revelation that the parents themselves were once a couple, but were forced apart by the very social rules that their sons are now transgressing (当初我们要是勇敢一点，也就没这俩小子什么事了。*If we had been a little braver back then, there would not be a problem with these two guys*).

The issue of same-sex attraction among parents of gay children is also present in micronovels A018 (see p.303) and A035 (see p.311). Micronovel A018 recounts a first meeting between a man's lover and his parents, with a plot twist at the end occurring as the lover discovers that the two parents are both men. Although other interpretations are possible, it seems most likely that the son in this story is the result of a previous heterosexual relationship by one of his parents, as given the cultural and historical framework (the story occurs in a recognizable real-world setting, and the son is clearly now an adult, meaning his birth occurred decades ago), other conception options available for homosexual couples seem to be unlikely. It would therefore seem probable that one of his parents was in a relationship with a woman. This reading paints a hopeful perspective of a life after enforced heteronormativity for older generations of queer-identified citizens, as the men in question have formed a long-term relationship together and have a good relationship with their shared son[137]. Micronovel A035 (see p.311), on the contrary, shows a same-sex parental couple's exasperation that their son keeps marrying and divorcing

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[137] Many queer parents fear losing the relationship with their children if their sexuality is revealed (Bozett, 1981; Benson *et al.*, 2005).

different women, telling him it would be much less hassle if he'd just come out like they did (小子折腾个什么劲，像我们一样大大方方出柜不就得了！ *Son, going around in circles is such effort. Be like us and come out of the closet!*). Tales such as these place a primacy of importance upon long-lasting relationships between men, to which the possibility of childrearing is not seen as mutually exclusive. This stands in opposition to prevailing social attitudes and current legal frameworks in China's offline world, which offer no regulatory protections or legal acknowledgement of same-sex intimacies, even though proposals for gay marriage have been submitted to the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) no less than three times (Xinhua, 2006), and as early as 2003 (Xing, 2013). Yet, once again these stories are showcasing same-sex intimacies which otherwise conform to normative heterosexual models of coupledom and childrearing. Whether a reader sees this as problematic or progressive will depend upon their own conceptualization of how gay relationships can and should operate. Indications from respondents hint at this not being thought of as especially problematic, particularly by female consumers, which can be attributed to the primacy afforded to marriage within the cultural framework (see 6.5.2 of this chapter for further details.)

6.3.3 Education as cultural value

Discourse on the role and value of education is highlighted in six of the forty micronovels. It forms a key part of the exposition of micronovel A001 (see p.295), with mention that one of the men tutored the other every evening in order to keep his grades up at school (他每晚登门为他辅导 *every evening he called round in order to tutor him*). This is followed by the revelation that one of the men has ultimately chosen to attend a lower-ranking university in order to remain in close proximity to his less academically-gifted friend for whom he nurtures an unspoken love (18 岁他高考刚够三本线他以全市第一的成绩和他进了同一所大学 *[At] 18 years old he got just enough*

in the college entrance examination for the 3rd tier [university], he got the top result in the whole city but he enters the same university with him). Academic achievement is highly prized in Chinese cultural contexts (Chen *et al.*, 2003), yet "[a]chieving academic excellence is more than a personal matter and the motives to achieve involve *fulfilling obligations* to oneself as well as to the family and society" (Hau & Ho, 2010, p.196 , emphasis in original). Therefore, in a social environment where succeeding in one's studies is considered a vital part of one's social and familial obligations, the man's actions represent a significant personal sacrifice, and taps into a strand of Discourse with which the consumer of the text will be keenly attuned.

6.4 Discourses and identities

Identities, from the perspective of Gee's *TOI*, constitute a building task aimed at analysing the way in which language is used to enact particular identities, whether that be to the speaker of the text, or in attribution to others (Gee, 2014, p.33). When combined with the *Discourses TOI*, the result is an analysis of language as the medium of negotiation and contestation of social Discourse(s) among the relevant parties. Drawing on consumer/prosumers interviews and examples from the micronovel selection, this section demonstrates how social Discourses are manifest in the microfiction collection, and how such social conversations are being challenged or reinforced through this artistic medium. Beginning with a conundrum of sexual behaviour versus sexual identity, I unpick a complex discursive relationship in Chinese society between 'being' and 'doing' regarding issues of sexual identity, which is manifest in many novels in the microfiction selection. Critiquing the formulation of sexual identity within Chinese queer-themed microfiction leads naturally to the appraisal of sexual citizenship, both as demonstrated within the bounds of the stories, and in the wider social Discourse. The representation of same-sex sexual behaviour and identity by differing social groups with dissimilar empirical knowledge

frameworks adds to the complexity of Discourse on identity within queer-themed microfiction, which is addressed within this section.

6.4.1 Sexual behaviour versus sexual identity

A conspicuous feature of this selection of queer-themed microfiction is a consistent avoidance—or reluctance—on the part of the animator to address same-sex attraction and same-sex intimacy in terms of a declared sexual identity. While many of the tales speak of men falling in love with each other, most do so in terms of individual romantic attractions between people, where no mention of previous same-sex attraction is made or implied—the distinction being that these declarations are along the lines of 'this is how he behaves', rather than 'this is how he is'. Scholarship on Japanese BL literature refers to the *performativity of disavowal and ignorance* (Akatsuka, 2008), whereby characters will openly deny any form of queer identity, despite their behaviour. Aspects of this can be seen in micronovel A003 (see p.296), where a man is determined to blame his act of intercourse with his friend on intoxication, despite all evidence to the contrary (第三次，澡后准备离开，床上的男人说：我们昨晚好像喝的是茶吧。老子醉茶！他狠狠的吼了回去。*The third time, when he was about to leave after bathing, the man in the bed said: "didn't we drink tea last night?" "I get drunk on tea too!" he yelled back at him*). This shows evidence of a scenario in which sexual congress between males is not socially acceptable, and can only be justified if the parties involved can claim they were not responsible for their actions. Although this micronovel is intended to be humorous, behind the joke lies evidence of the heteronormative framework in which the micronovel exists, as such behaviour always needs a justification for its 'deviation' from normal codes of conduct. Neither men in this micronovel give the impression of this being a permanent or open arrangement, but rather their relationship is conducted opportunistically and at a time when their senses are compromised—or so the first man would like to believe,

as he reacts angrily when reminded that the third time the men engaged in sexual intercourse he was not under the influence of alcohol. This is similar behaviour to that exhibited in micronovel A008 (see p.298), where drunkenness is directly linked to the two occasions of sexual contact between the two male characters. Again, this is a story where the relationship between the two characters justify their behaviour through the consumption of alcohol, which relieves them from questions of identity that may violate social prescription. The central character in A008 states that he has had illicit sexual relations with his friend twice, but this revelation comes directly after mentioning that they also got drunk twice (醉过两次，乱性两次 *Got drunk two times, had illicit sexual relations two* times). This creates a link between the events, suggesting that the two were only able to reveal their true feelings towards each other through their drunken state. In doing so, they have broken a cultural taboo. However, the narrator implies that these events have not ultimately changed the course of their relationship or friendship. The object of his affections is still getting married (the text does not specify to whom, but current social practice within the figured world of the story would dictate that this cannot be another man). This part of the story shows how behaviour is treated separately from notions of innate identity.

Further evidence of behaviour over identity can be seen in micronovel A004 (see p.296), where the boyfriend character accepts the man's courtship advances, despite being previously established in a heterosexual relationship, and to whom no other identity is ascribed other than that of a consenting party. Homosexuality as a label of political identity—or bisexual or pansexual identity, which could easily be evidenced here—is not mentioned, and appears to be beyond the remit of the work. For the reasoning behind this, one must consider the environment of production and consumption of this genre of fiction. Although my own research (along with limited others) has established that this type of writing does attract a limited gay male readership, the primary consumer group is heterosexual females. Therefore,

although I argue that such stories do carry a political message or sorts, as a form of recreational identity performance, queer-themed microfiction is primarily concerned with the political and social conditions of the women who read and write it, rather than as a tool of advocacy for gay-identified males. Although increased visibility doubtless contributes to a greater level of public awareness of the existence of non-normative sexual behaviours, the purpose of the literature is not to construct or describe gay identity. Indeed, as attested by many of the consumers interviewed for this project, many readers have little or no experience of what it means to live as a same-sex attracted male in contemporary China:

> *[The stories are] kind of idealized, because most of the work I read—even though the work seems very realistic for me—it's not… struggling… because it's more like a love story, it's not like two gay people fighting against society.*
>
> —Yandong, 24-year-old heterosexual female
> Student from Zhejiang
> Microfiction consumer

> *Do they think this is what happens in gay relationships in real life? Definitely not. I think a lot of people that write this stuff don't even know what gay life is like.*
>
> —Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
> Student from Zhejiang
> Microfiction consumer

Jianxiu, a female writer of longer BL fiction novels and consumer of BL microfiction, shared her creative process with me:

> *If I am writing about two characters, two men, I would at first assume them to be a normal couple—a man and a woman—but then I would change the gender, making the woman into a*

man… I would write like this. I think love is the same, regardless

of gender. No matter how you write, the emergence of love

would be more or less the same.

—Jianxiu, 21-year-old heterosexual female

Student from Anhui

Microfiction consumer and BL novel writer

So, from this statement, Jianxiu is clearly starting from an experience-base of heterosexual relationships and dichotomous male/female gender identities, then simply changing the sex of one of the protagonists. This, in many ways, seems consistent with some of the visual elements of Japanese *manga*, which frequently casts one of the character pairs as a *bishōnen uke* (美少年受け, *beautiful sexually-passive youth*), drawn with traditionally feminine features (see 4.6.1 for more details). Jianxiu rationalises this in her belief that all love is the same regardless of gender, but construction in this manner stands to be accused of representing an assimilationist heteronormative approach to the depiction of same-sex intimacies. Yet, given that the majority of this style of fiction is created by women for women, this is both potentially unavoidable and arguably unproblematic from the perspective of the majority of the readership, as the fiction represents a performative act in its embodiment of gender and desire. In chapter 4, I discussed the gendered language that some of the male characters use when referring to their male lovers/partners/parents, choosing female identified terms such as mother, daughter-in-law and wife (see 5.2.1), which mirrors the gendered conceptualization of same-sex couples in the eyes of certain consumer groups, reinforcing notions of heteronormativity by enforcing male/female roles upon the two same-sex partners.

If male consumers of BL fiction are a minority group among the readership, then male authors/animators seem to be even fewer and far between. Nearly every respondent interviewed for this project believed that this style of fiction is written by women, yet I was able to interview one male author (as opposed to an animator,

who may or may not have written the text that is shared), even though his preferred style of writing was for longer BL novels. I asked him about this issue of putting a primacy upon instances of sexual behaviour between men, rather than a more general notion of ascribing sexual identity to the characters:

> *I think it is reasonable that writers would emphasis 'the individual' over 'sexuality', it is a process of discovery. Like in normal heterosexual novels, there is also 'love' besides 'sex'. We just want to prove that there is a thing called 'love'.*

> —Tienong, 21-year-old gay male
> Fashion writer from Hubei
> Microfiction prosumer & BL novel author

Particularly as many of the texts involve the slow development of feelings between the characters (or, often, the intensification of one character's feelings for another), then perhaps this focus on 'a process of discovery' can be rationalized from a gay male perspective. Accordingly, what one sees here are 'coming-of-age' stories where the key development becomes a process of mutual behavioural and sexual discovery, without an ensuing 'coming out' process being made explicit. Again, that it to be expected from the sexuality and gender are being performed within the works, and from the primacy that is given in this style of literature to romantic love between equals. That is not to say that there are no examples of microfiction which deal with coming out to one's family and/or friends—as micronovels A015, A016, A017 and A018 all deal with this topic:

[A015] 我说的是真的。这辈子我非他不要！(*What I'm saying is true. I don't want this lifetime without him*).

[A016] 我儿子刚才说，要和你儿子去荷兰结婚，我答应了 (*My son said he is going with your son to the Netherlands to get married. I have consented*).

[A017] (see p.303)　　"妈，对不起，爱的是他。。。"他拉着身边男人的手。("*Mother, I'm sorry, but I love him." He takes the hand of the man beside him*).

[A018] (see p.303)　　"我们这样会不会太突然了？万一伯父伯母…"("*Will we be too sudden like this? If uncle and aunt…"*).

However, all four of these texts are constructed from the situation of having (or wishing) to reveal an existing relationship that happens to be with a member of the same sex, as distinct from making a declaration of one's own sexual nature or identity. Without such relationships as a catalyst, the question as to whether these characters would reveal their same-sex attraction to others remains doubtful.

6.4.2 Sexual citizenship and queer microfiction

Even in cases where female characters recognize that their male partners are attracted to other men, issues of identity as a form of sexual citizenship remain obfuscated. Micronovel A009 (see p.299) takes as its focus the problematization of heteronormative marriage for same-sex attracted individuals, demonstrating that a long period of separation between the male lovers (through one character's marriage to the female character) has not diminished their love. From a Discourse perspective, it is of note that all characters in the story are fully aware of each other's feelings. Despite only one active voice being heard in the micro story, one learns that the woman knows that the other man loves her partner, and that she is clearly aware of her partner's relationship history with the other man (但当你们分开，他却对我说'请好好照顾他 '时，我知道，他真的很爱你. *However, when you split up, when he told me 'please take good care of him', I knew that he truly loved you*). This is reminiscent of discussions initiated by Chinese sociologist Li Yinhe, who has revealed the phenomenon of heterosexual female spouses of male homosexual or bisexual men in China, terming them *tongqi* (同妻，*'homowives'*) (Li, 2010). Yet, these women are

often completely unaware of their partners' sexual orientation. The central character in this micronovel does not, therefore, conform to this identity, as she is fully aware of a relationship between her partner his lover.

Very few micronovels make outright declarations of queer sexual citizenship. Limited examples in this study come from tales such as micronovel A005 (see p.297), where the suitor explains that holding the bunch of flowers is the only way to attract the other man's attention (因为只有这样他才能注意到我啊！ *"Because this is the only way he can notice me!"*). Yet, this behaviour still exhibits hallmarks of heteronormative courtship practice, and is not a direct claim of sexual identity— again, with behaviour taking precedence over declarations of identity. Micronovel A012 (see p.300) shows a same-sex couple in a childrearing arrangement, but is constructed from a perspective of humour through misidentification, rather than as a political statement itself. While fictional accounts such as these are clearly acts of storytelling and invention by animators for recreational consumption, their inclusion within the online Discourse, and the Conversation to which they contribute, gives us a demonstration of how the attitudes on display are being evaluated.

Declaring a sexual identity and 'coming out of the closet', as Wang *et al* note, "reflects Western individualistic conceptions of selfhood but fails to recognize the importance of relational selfhood, which is important in Chinese culture." (2009, p.287). This framing issue is compounded by prevailing Eurocentric global Discourses. Travis Kong discusses the problems with translating between Chinese cultural meanings and those supplied by globalized, hierarchic academia, in cases:

> *[…] when Chinese queer identities and politics do not follow the same path as those of the West, when human rights and notions of sexual citizenship seem to be understood differently in the Chinese context, when sexual identity does not necessarily prescribe an individualistic*

> *notion of identity, when sexual identity does not necessarily contradict*
>
> *heterosexual marriage […]*

(Kong, 2011, p.9)

While Kong's dilemma here is certainly a valid one when investigating the representation of queer culture in China, queer-themed microfiction offers an additional challenge, in that its production and consumption by people who are neither queer-identified nor necessarily queer-aligned distorts the conversation into one not only of *tongzhi* representation, but one which also encompasses the expression of female sexuality, and the influence of China's heteropatriarchal social structure upon contemporary urban women. Gender is in many ways dismantled in this style of fiction, as Yang and Xu have proven, through the way in which "BL breaks up the neat alignment of gender and sexuality via a deft detour to male homosexuality and tactically replaces the binary of male/female with a more fluid dyad of *seme/uke*" (2015, p.147). When it comes to notions of sexual citizenship, it is arguably not the intention of the people who write such fiction, nor of the people who consume it, to explicate the complexities of human sexuality, and given microfiction's brevity, some may argue that it is a format ill-disposed to such ends. As discussed at 6.3.1 and 6.5.1, I argue that animators seem more concerned with showing depictions of 'true love' (through which female and male identities are contested and renegotiated) than in making in-roads into queer-identity social activism.

6.5 Discourses and politics (distribution of social goods)

When one begins an act of speech, the way in which one selects one's words to construct meaning will naturally become shaped by specific trains of Discourse, reflecting or contesting the underlying debates and opinions of the social framework in which one positions oneself. Choosing one word over another may, in this regard,

carry an implicit or explicit value-judgement, or demonstrate a certain way of understanding the world (as demonstrated in chapter 4)

How an animator chooses to show the distribution of social goods within a story is a vital part of the figured world construction. As figured worlds constitute an implicit framework of agreed behavioural norms, so the distribution of social goods makes explicit how those rules have been adhered to, and shows under what conditions they can be challenged or transgressed. Outlining this concept, Gee states that "[s]ocial goods are at stake any time we speak or write in a way that states or implies that something or someone is 'adequate,' 'normal,' 'good,' or 'acceptable' (or the opposite) in some fashion important some group in society or society as a whole" (Gee, 2014, p.34). Therefore, as a *TOI*, *distribution of social goods* (also termed *politics*) will here be combined with the figured world tool to provide us with a methodological approach to unpicking the way language has been used to oppose various social and cultural phenomena as appropriate, valuable, proper etc. to construct the figured world of the micronovel.

As before, all themes under discussion have been derived from data coding of the forty micronovels in combination with extracts from respondent interviews. The section begins by analysing the manifestation within the micronovel selection of sacrifice and public duty, bound together in the social customs of respect, honour and moral integrity known as *face*[138], which—though common to many cultures around the globe—continues to exert a particularly strong influence on shaping of social conduct within China (Bond, 1991). Linked to this concept is the historical and cultural framework of filial piety (see 5.3.2), which prescribes modes of behaviour between hierarchic social groups. Assessing heterosexual marriage as a manifestation of filial piety, this section uncovers social Discourse on

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[138] See footnote 124 at p.152 for explanation of the concept of face in Chinese culture.

intergenerational relationships and the regulation of behaviour within Chinese society by analysing the appearance of such factors within the selected works of microfiction.

6.5.1 Sacrifice and public duty

Several of the plots of the microfiction pieces centre around issues of personal sacrifice; either in the literal sense of putting one's life on the line for the sake of their love, or by purposefully restricting their own life options in order to remain in the company of the person they love. A clear example of literal sacrifice is exhibited in micronovel A007 (see p.298), both on the part of the bride, who proceeds with the wedding despite her dire warning (不可能，即便是死我也要成为他的新娘 *Not possible. Even if I am to die, I will become his bride*), and on behalf of the best man, who makes the ultimate sacrifice of his life to save the man he loves (酒店的吊灯松落下来——伴郎用力推开了身边的新郎 *the hotel's chandelier fell from the ceiling of the hotel—the best man pushed the bridegroom beside him*). A less literal, but no less poignant form of personal sacrifice is demonstrated in micronovel A008 (see p.298), with the revelation at the very end of the story that the narrator's friend once declared his love to him, albeit when he presumed the narrator could not hear him (我敬酒一杯，为了偿还六年前他趁我装睡时说过的那一次我爱你 *I raised a glass to him, to repay him for the one occasion six years ago when he said 'I love you' while I pretended to sleep*). It is important because it is the first clue made without the influence of alcohol that the other man may return the narrating character's feelings. In the story, the narrator makes a clear link between inebriation and sex, but here the other man was not under the influence of alcohol when he made his declaration of love, but rather chose to voice his true feelings at a time when the other man was seemingly incapacitated through sleep. In the same way as their drunken state may have meant that they did not remember their behaviour the following morning, the other man is here able to give voice to his feelings without fear of repercussions. The

tragedy of the story, from the reader's perspective, is that the narrator is in possession of this knowledge but does nothing about it. Knowing his friend's desires mirror his own in the sober light of day gives him the potential for open discussion about their relationship, yet this opportunity is squandered. The potential for happiness is therefore sacrificed to heteronormative conformity and the burden of social opinion on the legitimacy of same-sex intimacies.

The tragic nature of putting the happiness of others before one's own is a theme that resonates with other instances of this genre of microfiction, where often one partner chooses to give up on a shared life together in order to safeguard the other person's happiness or social standing. In micronovel A001 (see p.295), one of the men deliberately downplays his own educational abilities and attends a 3rd tier university so as not to be separated from the other man (18 岁他高考刚够三本线他以全市第一的成绩和他进了同一所大学 *[At] 18 years old he got just enough in the college entrance examination for the 3rd tier [university], he got the top result in the whole city but he enters the same university with him*); micronovel A002 (see p.295) shows a man who is willing not only to watch, but to actively participate in the marriage ceremony of his lover to a woman (我 25 岁，终于和他一起步入结婚礼堂，他是新郎，我是伴郎 *[When] I was 25, [I] finally walked together with him into the wedding hall. He was the bridegroom. I was the best man)*; the man who agrees to the request of his lover's father to end the relationship so that the son can get married in micronovel A011 (see p.300) ("我儿子不是同性恋，他要结婚了请你离开他。""…我知道了伯父，我答应您" *"My son isn't homosexual. He wants to get married, please leave him". "I understand, uncle, I promise you."*) These examples show a seeming lack of agency on the part of the actors in the story, who must allow events to take their course around them as they watch, silently complicit in the replication of normative behaviour.

Notions of duty and responsibility are closely tied to the distribution of social goods, and to a person's sense of individual agency. The twist at the end of the plot

of micronovel A007 (see p.298), where it is revealed that the best man is the groom's lover, is the key element in this micronovel, and shows elements of such a social conversation about duty. Many queer individuals in China get married to members of the opposite sex (either through compulsion or of their own volition, as discussed at 6.5.2), and marriage (in the historical sense of one man and one woman) remains of high cultural importance. Much can be read into the fact that the groom's lover ultimately perishes, and emotional positioning for the reader may depend upon the extent to which they consider same-sex intimacies as valid. The fact that the best man makes such a sacrifice for this lover may be interpreted as a supreme act of love, which ties into reported perceptions of BL literature by female consumers as representing 'true love':

> *True love is about the spiritual rather than the sexual—sexual behaviour is not only a means of pleasure, but also a way to reproduce the next generation, which is not…spiritual. In some traditional Chinese cultural thinking, some people believe that the friendship between men is more important than the relationship between men and women. There is saying 'Brothers are like arms and legs, while women are like clothes', which means you can always change your clothes, but you cannot cut off your arms or legs—in other words, a relationship between two men is a higher form of feeling.*

> —Luli, 23-year-old female, sexuality undeclared
> Businesswoman from Inner Mongolia
> Microfiction consumer

For other readers, the untimely end of the groom and the best man's relationship may confirm a belief that same-sex marriages are doomed to failure, or even are cursed.

Extending the notion of duty and care beyond the bounds of an intimate sexual relationship, an overarching theme of micronovel A011 (see p.300) is the issue of care and ongoing responsibility felt by a parent for their offspring. At the beginning of the micronovel, the father asks the other man to leave his son (请你离开他 *please leave him*), thus ensuring that his offspring has the opportunity to maintain his social standing and represent the expected cultural values of society. After his son's accident, and the son's subsequent desertion by his wife, the old man asks the former lover to become involved in his life once more, so that his son will not be alone. In making this request, the father is transcending normative cultural and social barriers to ensure that his son is cared for. His tears at the end of the story (老人泪如雨下 *the old man's tears fall like rain* [139]) may demonstrate many shades of emotion: relief that the former lover wishes to be with his son when all others have rejected him, frustration that events have come full circle and his son will once again be in a relationship with another man; disappointment at the loss of social 'face' [140] in the eyes of those around him; or gratitude that the man—after all this time and despite his son's disability—still loves him and wishes to rekindle the relationship. The text's ambiguity in this regard allows the reader to make their own interpretation, and to engage with the underlying Discourse on the nature of love, disability[141] and parental responsibility.

6.5.2 Heterosexual marriage as an act of filial piety

The practice of same-sex attracted individuals entering into heterosexual marriage as a specific form of respect and obligation towards one's parents, or at the insistence of one's family, is a relatively common thematic device among the microfiction examples, and as such, is an indication of the Discourses surrounding

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[139] This is a *chengyu* (idiom). See 4.2.2.
[140] See footnote 124 at p.152. Face is linked to the concept of *xiao* (孝, filial piety), as discussed at 5.3.2.
[141] A 2004 study of parents of disabled children reported feelings of stigmatization and shame experienced by parents, along with unrealistic expectations of the child's potential rehabilitation (Wong *et al.*, 2004).

the contestation of power and agency between both 'society' at large and the individual, and between parents and their children. Historically, Chinese culture has exhibited a high degree of intergenerational involvement and control, particularly from a parent to a child. This can in part be attributed to the traditional influence of Confucianism, where the notion of filial piety[142] specifies how a son or daughter should behave towards their parents. As in other societies around the globe, personal attraction as a basis for marriage was not considered necessary in traditional Chinese society, and marriage was seen as a contract between families, rather than between individuals (Engel, 1984, p.956). The function of marriage in Chinese society goes "beyond the traditional ones of forming families, producing children, and the continuation of the patriarchal family line. Marriage is closely related to family welfare" (Zhang, 2000, p.60) Accordingly, the services of a matchmakers and fortune tellers were often employed in selecting an appropriate spouse[143], and a parent's wishes could not be challenged (Croll, 1981). Although certain elements of these cultural practices have become consigned to the history books, the high level of parental involvement and interest in their offspring's matrimonial prospects remains evident from the responses given in the interviews with producers and consumers of queer-themed micronovels:

> *Marriage is an important thing in every society that respects traditions. Throughout human survival, we learned to share resources, with the 'family' as the smallest unit. In contrast with the Western 'independent' ideology, Chinese people are more dependent on each other, and more traditional […] Chinese parents surely are more eager to see their children get married—we call this 'the family happiness'. This is a normalized sense of happiness; many parents work hard their whole life just for their family and seldom consider*

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[142] See 5.3.2.
[143] As demonstrated in micronovels A007 (see p.308) and A013 (see p.311).

themselves—the 'family happiness' is their object and motivation.

—Mengfu, 25-year-old gay male
Fashion designer from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

Mengfu here makes a distinction between ways of thinking in China and what he sees as 'Western' notions of individuality, citing the legacy of the traditional organizational structure of the family as the reason behind continuing influence of intergenerational power dynamics. This theme is echoed in part by three other respondents: Chunmei, who believes that it is the child's happiness and future security which are most important factors for parents, but that such concepts are only normalized in Chinese society through marriage; Xiuli, who speaks of her parents' exasperation at her reluctance to enter into marriage; and Lichen, who states that his parents desire for him to marry is fuelled in part by public opinion in his home village:

I think parents are not necessarily desiring to see their children get married, but rather want to see them 'happy'. Because in many people's minds, their children can finally find someone to depend on only when they are married. They just don't want to think that no one will look after their children when they are old.

—Chunmei, 20-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed
Student from Heilongjiang
Microfiction consumer

It's difficult, because I don't really want to get married, but when I told my parents this, they couldn't understand me at all, they think I should be married. I think that's a common thing in China—parents think that marriage is compulsory for their children.

—Xuili, 20-year-old heterosexual female

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Student from Hebei
Microfiction consumer

I asked my parents: 'Why do you really want me to get married?' And my mum told me, without any hesitation: 'Because a lot of people are asking'. And I can understand that, once you're in a position where a lot of people are throwing words at you, when most other people are doing the same, then you ask yourself why isn't your son acting in the same way? So, there is a lot of pressure, so I can understand it.

—Lichen, 32-year-old gay male from Zhejiang
University Administrator
Microfiction consumer

The notion of a person's happiness as something achievable only through socially conformist forms of marriage is evident in my microfiction selection, demonstrated most clearly in micronovel A011 (see p.300), where a father warns off his son's male lover by declaring his son's desire to get married (他要结婚了请你离开他 *He wants to get married, please leave him*)—noting again from this context that, although a woman is not directly mentioned, it is clear that no other type of marriage is feasible or valid in the father's eyes. In A017 (see p.303), where a mother laments her son's revelation of his sexuality, stating that as the two men are both 'bottoms'[144] then the two men will not be happy together (孩子，两个受在一起是不会幸福的啊 *Children, two bottoms can't be happy together!*), which although intended to be comedic, again reflects a gendered perception of sexual roles within same-sex intimacies, and their perceived importance for happy unions. Together, these factors demonstrate how, despite the fictional nature of the source material, Discourses on the primacy of marriage and of the importance of intergenerational relationships are clearly intertwined between the micronovel plots and the real-life situations faced by

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[144] Receptive partners in anal sex.

consumers in contemporary Chinese society, notwithstanding the generally-held belief of respondents that the micronovels are not realistic in their depiction of same-sex intimacies.

It is not only the drive of heteronormative compunction which shapes courtship practice in China, but also a requirement for timely satisfaction of one's social obligations. There seems to be an unwritten rule that men and women should have found their spouse by their mid to late twenties at the latest, and failure to do so may be taken as indication of a problem of personality with the individual concerned. Unmarried women beyond this age are often dubbed as *shengnü* [145] (剩女, '*leftover women*'), a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in urban China, and for which the Ministry of Education has in the past attributed blame squarely to such women's own "overly high expectations for marriage partners," (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2007), which—as To (2013) describes—illustrates the patriarchal structure of importance of men over women in Chinese culture and society through the implication that these women "are the ones to blame for their own competence and independence" (To, 2013, p.2; see also Hong Fincher, 2014). Accordingly, great importance is attached to finding a suitable partner by a suitable age, and parents will involve themselves in the search if their own offspring is deemed to be lacking in human social capital (Huang *et al.*, 2012):

> *My parents still think marriage is important, and every time I go back home they will tell me: "OK, it's time to find a boyfriend".*

<div align="right">

—Yiping, 20-year-old heterosexual female

Student from Zhejiang

Microfiction consumer

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[145] Typically, a successful career woman who has remained single.

> *Most people of my parents' generation think men and women should get married when they reach a certain age. If they don't, it will make them look weird. Marriage and giving birth to children are really important in Chinese families.*

> —Jin, 25-year-old gay male from Guangxi
> Profession unknown
> Microfiction consumer

These two responses demonstrate the urgency attributed to finding a timely mate in China, but are offered from two different perspectives; as a self-identified gay man, Jin finds himself under a different set of pressures to those experienced by Yiping, who is younger, female and heterosexual. Although during her interview she expressed a reticence to eventually marry, Yiping is still completing her university education, and as such, is not yet feeling the degree of parental pressure to marry described by the 25-year old Jin. Indeed, another respondent, Guoming, is already a married father (without his wife or child being aware of anything non-normative regarding his sexuality, which he specifically describes as gay rather than bisexual). His opinion on marriage and social pressure was consistent with the other respondents:

> *In traditional Chinese ideology, there is an old saying: "There are three ways to be unfilial, and the worst is to not produce offspring." Not having children is considered a shame on the whole family, it is the worst situation for them. […] Marriage in the traditional Chinese view is for a whole lifetime, you should never leave each other. Marriage functions as the decisive element in terms of same-sex relationships. Many gay people cannot separate themselves from it because of the pressure from their own family, pressure from society… pressure from all sides.*

> —Guoming, 39-year-old gay male from Shanghai

Graphic designer

Microfiction consumer

Rather than fight against such a system, Guoming had chosen to see his extra-marital affairs with men as a form of recreational release, which he told me allows him to be a good husband and father to his wife and daughter. Similar mental compartmentalization of sexual behaviour among heteronormatively married gay men has been previously recorded by Wei (2007). Several of the other gay male respondents expressed an intention to marry women at some point in the future, even in cases where they planned to make their sexuality known:

I will not marry a heterosexual girl, but there is a possibility for

me to enter into a superficial marriage just to have a child, but

I will admit my identity to my parents someday

—Zhaoguo, 21-year-old gay male from Zhejiang

Student

Microfiction consumer

Such a marriage of convenience had already been undertaken by Zhongyu, a 28-year-old male from Hubei, who had married a lesbian friend of a similar age—an arrangement which has become known as a *xinghun*[146] (形婚, *contract marriage*)—in order to diffuse parental pressures. Zhaozhuo, who is the same age as Zhongyu, is planning to enter into a similar arrangement in order to have a baby:

My mother and father have pressured me [to get married]. I

came out to them, they have accepted that I'm gay, but they

still want me to have a baby. So, that means I have to marry a

woman. But I decided that I don't want to get married to a

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[146] A term coined to describe a cooperative marriage between gay men and lesbians (Lim, 2013; Engebretsen, 2014; Minstreanu & Wang, 2015; Kam, 2015).

straight woman because I don't think that's fair, so I may get

married to a lesbian.

—Zhaozhuo, 28-year-old gay male from Fujian

Technical Support Worker

Microfiction consumer

Reasoning for this pressure can be attributed to the legacy of Confucian ideology; not simply from the conceptualization of filial piety between the generations, but also in its relevance to the construction of the nation state through family harmony:

[The pressure to marry] is a major problem for young people

nowadays, they always complain that even though it's a

different generation, the symbolic order inherited from

Confucian society prevails… the notion of family and nation—I

think one of the essays I read recently was talking about this—

about how the family becomes the regulatory space for this

nation and for the state, because the nation needs the family

to be operatively stable in order for the nation to be stable, and

it also ties into the Confucian preference for stability, because

Confucian ideology also talks a lot about building 'family

harmony', and tying that back into the prosperity of the nation.

I think in Chinese society—even in democracies like Taiwan—

they still retain aspects of this. Even in Korea. That is why even

though the gay movement is getting more and more vocal, they

are not successful enough. There is no Asian country that has

legalized same-sex marriage yet. So, marriage for them is

always a very heterosexual, reproductive institution, and that's

a continuation. Also, the notion of patrilineal continuation of the

family line is still there, even though China is facing modernity

from the West through multiple negotiations, but still that

ideology persists. The Spring Festival arrives, when you go back home, family always try to urge you to get a girlfriend or boyfriend. I think that American people—in comparison to Chinese people—are more individualistic in that regard, you're in the family domain while they raise you, then you can develop your personality and find your own interests and have your own life, you are the one who is responsible for that, you get less pressure. But in China, for example, if the whole of the family are lawyers, then if you don't become better than a lawyer—a government official, for instance—then you're despised within the family… they think of you as something lesser.

—Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
Student from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

Tieying's words are very revealing, not just of the predicament of gay men in China that this way of thinking engenders, but also of the sentiment of a generation of young people for whom the burden of family expectation has become suffocating, and who are trying to reconcile the social and cultural legacies of traditional Confucian ideology with transnational modernity. Within the regulatory structure of the family, I asked Tieying whether he believes that China's 'One Child Policy' (which at the time of his interview was still operative) has compounded these effects:

I've read some fiction featuring the One Child Policy problem… for example, if you have two siblings in one family, and one is gay and the other is not, then that is more acceptable, because you still have the chance to continue the family line. Definitely, the One Child Policy puts on a lot of expectations upon people, so they are supposed to get married and enter into a heteronormative family arrangement. But then again, the One

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Child Policy can be liberating—for example in my case I haven't yet come out to my family, but still I think if you only have one child then you are more tolerant towards them. You love them much more, and if they are gay, maybe you won't say much.

—Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
Student from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

At best, it seems, Tieying is speaking of guarded—and mute—tolerance of a child's non-normative sexual behaviour/identity rather than acceptance, yet for him, as the sole offspring of parents who are sufficiently affluent to fund his current postgraduate education in one of the world's top English-speaking universities, and who could therefore arguably be considered as a member of China's generation of so-called *xiaohuangdi* (小皇帝, *little emperors*[147]), this concept is framed in terms of 'liberation'. Indeed, anecdotal attitudes of tolerance by Chinese parents of a child's homosexual activity provided discretion is maintained and such activities do not serve as a barrier to normative marital relationships have been recorded by Fann (2003). Such an idea of freedom through silence forms a curious paradox if compared to the way in which the struggle for LGBTQ rights and acceptance have been contested through open and visible expression in other global (often Western-driven) settings. Yet this is consistent with how expression of individual non-normative sexual orientation and the concept of 'coming out' has been constructed within East Asian cultures, whereby the more confrontational Eurocentric identity politics—the 'politics of provocation' as Plummer (2015, p.121) calls them—have been rejected in favour of conceptualization through localized cultural participation and social/familial inclusivity (see Laurent, 2005; Tan, 2011).

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[147] A product of China's One Child policy and its resultant '4-2-1' reshaping of Chinese family structure, this term refers to the phenomenon of only children who become the sole focus of attention and excessive indulgence from their two parents and four grandparents, often with corresponding amounts of pressure to succeed academically and financially.

6.6 Discourses and imagery

The *imagery TOI* in this project is based upon Gee's *sign system and ways of knowing* (2014) building task. Microblogging is a multimedia activity, and accordingly, it is very easy for animators of micronovels to incorporate images with their words. Photographs, pictures, and video clips can be embedded in the microblog entry, thereby allowing the animator the opportunity to provide extra-textual information which is intended for consumption at the same time as the micronovel. Therefore, this building task seeks to analyse the ways in which the images contribute, contrast, contest or explicate the prevailing Discourses invoked by the micronovels. Half of the micronovel selection in this project have accompanying imagery, ranging from those which have clear thematic links to the text to those which are seemingly divorced in meaning from their accompanying micronovel. Discussion therefore begins with the siting of imagery within the discursive space of queer-themed microfiction, demonstrating the differing uses of imagery within the context of the stories. The provocative nature of many of the images has been discussed from both *situated meanings* and *figured worlds* perspectives in the preceding chapters; therefore, this chapter will engage with the wider social Discourse surrounding erotic and sexualized imagery within a cultural framework that engages in extensive censorship in all forms of print and digital media, to establish whether such imagery constitutes a challenge to existing regulatory prescriptions on Internet content.

6.6.1 Situating imagery within queer microfiction Discourse

Much of my analysis of *situated meanings* and *figured worlds* has highlighted the fact that there often exists a contradiction between the subject matter of a micronovel and its accompanying imagery. Throughout the previous chapters, I have argued that any imagery provided with the micronovel has been deliberately selected

by the animator for consumption at the same time as the micronovel, and I stand by that view. Yet, from analysis of the twenty instances of imagery among the micronovel selection, it must be acknowledged that in many cases, the image does not seem to be intended to enhance the story, but rather to form a communicative act of its own. It is as if we are looking at two separate 'stories', occupying a shared online 'space', which may engage with each other on some thematic level, but more frequently partake in differing acts of storytelling. These dual performances, therefore, offer rich pickings for the study of Discourse, as one can not only analyse the subjects' relationship to each other (or lack thereof), but also engage with broader themes of identity, sexuality, inclusivity and the underlying social commentary on normativity, convention and the tension between public and private acts of expression that are evoked by the animators' choice of visual material. For some consumers, there is little expectation of a link between text and image, with the animators' primary focus assumed to be 'catching eyeballs':

> *I think it's a method to draw attention to the story, like an advertisement. If there's just a story, then people might not notice it, but if you have an attractive picture, then it stands out more.*

> —Zhaozhuo, 28-year-old gay male from Fujian
> Technical Support Worker
> Microfiction consumer

One must, then, ask oneself what is it about an image that makes it 'attractive'? And attractive to whom? Even if an image is selected purely in order to draw attention, then the reason why the image is considered so enticing or provocative is both a reflection of, and a contribution to, the surrounding Discourse, along with a marker of play and performance, in the way that bodily images are constructed and presented (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011), on behalf of the animator.

The image provided in accompaniment to micronovel A031 (see p.309), although not so far removed from the thematic content of the text as other examples in the selection, is nevertheless a depiction of consensual same-sex love and attraction (see 9.2*, image 17*), which does not conform to the plot of the micronovel, in which one sees a TV dating show contestant's chances of being selected by the participating females deliberately sabotaged by his male friend, who wants his affection for himself. Accordingly, the picture could be seen as a manifestation of the man's hopes and dreams for his future relationship with his friend, yet perhaps more plausible is the deliberate choice of this image (which itself has been taken from another source) by the animator as a lure to make the micronovel entry stand out within the newsfeed. The image is not sexually explicit, yet shows intimacy between the young pair as they stand face-to-face with a dandelion clot pressed between their lips. This, I believe, reflects the preoccupation with physical beauty demonstrated in works of the *danmei* genre, but does not make an explicit play on blurring gender roles in the way that many BL novels have been shown to do (the story—and by extension, the image—have been tagged as both *danmei* and *BL* in the forum). The image features men of Asian heritage, thus localizing this representation of same-sex intimacy within the context of Chinese cyberspace, and an image of this kind could be considered attractive to both *funü* consumers and gay male consumers equally. Therefore, the appeal of the work as a whole is enhanced through the addition of this image.

Micronovel A035 (see p.311) is accompanied by a composite set of four images (see 9.2*, image 18, and accompanying notes),* consisting of photographs of four Caucasian fashion models from the UK and USA. The images are reminiscent of the photographic style of *haute couture* magazines and range from full colour, through sepia tones to black and white. In this instance, there is no clear link between text and imagery, as the text concerns neither fashion nor photography, nor does it contain any transnational elements. Therefore, the images must be functioning either

as a lure to readers, or as an expression of the animator's own interests or opinions. Several lines of Discourse can stem from the presentation of this collection of images. Statements or inferences on standards of masculine beauty can be taken from the inclusion of images of high fashion models, which can also intersect with opinions of racial hierarchy when it comes to prevailing beauty standards within Chinese society, where Eurocentric paradigms of beauty are hegemonic, "illustrated by the global appeal of Hollywood stars and the use of Western models in Chinese advertising" (Yang, 2011). Such proffering of a personal interpretation of beauty and sexuality by this animator (a self-identified gay male, according to his Weibo page) could constitute a statement of sexual citizenship, as the animator here is defining himself "both in terms of personal and collective identities by [his] sexual attributes, and [seeks] to claim recognition, rights and respect as a consequence" (Weeks, 1998). If one were to follow that line of argument, then it could be reasoned that the image is the more important element of the whole microblog entry, given that the image can be consumed far more readily than the written words. Accordingly, the possibility that this represents a gay male animator's claim of sexual citizenship through replication of images of same-sex intimacy becomes a reasonable assumption. Yet, as I have already established, one cannot independently verify an animator's gender identity, and so such an argument can be purely speculative.

6.6.2 Provocative imagery and challenges to Internet censorship

The issue of provocative and sexualized imagery being included with instances of micronovels, and the claims towards sexual citizenship that such images may infer, has been examined in both chapters 4 and 5, so here I wish to turn attention to the ways in which the inclusion of these images challenge existing Discourse within the regulatory framework of Chinese cyberspace. Officially, all depictions of pornography are banned and are subject to removal. However, Chinese netizens are certainly no

strangers to adult content, as even the most cursory search on Chinese search engine *Baidu* (百度) will reveal. So, there is clearly a grey area in Chinese cyberspace between regulatory theory and practice. Microblogging sites such as Sina Weibo are expected to adhere to anti-obscenity regulations, and posts are routinely deleted if they are found to be in violation of the rules, yet from my own experience in the initial stages of collecting data for this project, sexually explicit images can be found within the microblog environment [148], often in the form of user-generated photographs taken on camera-phones. Therefore, in order to understand the online Discourses, I was keen to speak to producers and consumers about this matter to see how they evaluate the presence of such material on Weibo in relation to censorship issues, and whether they consider the inclusion of sexual images to be a challenge to online censorship regulations:

> *I do not approve of such sexually suggestive content, obviously sexual content is not there to challenge censorship, they use this to attract attention. However, I think sex is a necessary element in both BL literature and romantic fictions, it should not be totally censored.*
>
> —Jingzhen, 20-year-old female, sexuality undisclosed
> Student from Hunan
> Microfiction consumer

> *Of course, I do acknowledge their [the animators'] agency to do that [post explicit images], but from my point of view, I wouldn't want people to do that, because maybe the stories… I perceive they do have some literary power to show people the*

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[148] As discussed at 3.2.1, micronovels featuring very graphic sexual images were not selected for inclusion in this project. This decision was taken because consent could not be obtained from the subject in the photograph, who in theory could be identifiable. Therefore, only non-graphic images, or images where the subject's identity is protected have been included. This did not affect the data included in the micronovel selection, as in one case, an alternate version of the text without the image has been published by another animator, and in all other cases, the micronovel itself did not meet the selection criteria.

beautiful side of possible gay relationships. But if you put these

sexually explicit images there, it's going to repel even the rotten

girls, so I wouldn't do that if it was me.

—Tieying, 22-year-old gay male
Student from Zhejiang
Microfiction consumer

Of course, pornography is checked online, but it takes a long

time to be taken down. I've encountered all these explicit

images many times, but they were deleted after a few days.

—Zhongyu, 27-year-old gay male
Student from Hubei
Microfiction prosumer

This reflects a somewhat patchy conceptualization of how and why these images are

being used in the eyes of consumers. For Jingzhen, the images are just there to 'grab

eyeballs' and have little—she feels—to do with any political notion of challenging

censorship. While this may hold true, their presence in a forum which is subject to

active internal censorship does naturally contribute to a conversation on eroticism,

on the prevailing social morality and on resistance to authority. Jingzhen states that

she is not desirous of seeing that kind of imagery included with the micronovels, and

as such, her opinion is reflected in Tieying's observation about such material repelling

the *funü*, which statistically comprise the genre's largest consumer base, which in

the context of communication theory would represent a contradiction between the

encoded and decoded messages (Hall, 1980). Zhongyu speaks of being exposed to

pornographic imagery online, albeit material which is subsequently removed after a

few days, which illustrates a post-publication approach to the censorship of imagery

on Weibo. China's zeal for censorship of its own cyberspace is globally renowned, yet

approaches to censorship within the PRC have been described as "deeply fragmented

and decentralized" (Bamman *et al.*, 2012, sec.2). For China's authorities, it is

generally not solely an issue of censoring information published online; it is a question of dissuading people from putting contentious material there the first place (Zhang & Shaw, 2012). Yet pornography in Chinese cyberspace persists, and a recent study by Jacobs (2012) has noted a tend towards production and consumption of DIY pornography in China over circulation of 'imported' images and models[149] and, most importantly, reveals the way in which Chinese young women interact with pornography as a means of constructing sexual subjectivity (Jacobs, 2012), which has parallels with both Pagliassoti (2008) and Yang and Xu's (2015) lines of reasoning behind female consumption of same-sex fiction. For Jacobs, consumption of erotic imagery is contextualized as a form of "social rebellion and will to knowledge" among Chinese young adults (2012, p.125).

6.7 Conclusions on Discourses

This final empirical chapter has explored and dissected the layers of Discourse surrounding queer-themed microfiction, not only as is manifest within the worlds of the stories themselves, but also concerning the Discourse that results from the conversations and debates that the works inspire. To achieve this, I have interwoven textual examples from queer-themed micronovels with comments and insight from consumers and producers of the genre in order to engage with the overarching social conversations, discussions and negotiations that are embedded within the prosumption cycle. Beginning with *significance*, I have illustrated the ways in which social conformity is reflected within queer-themed microfiction, and how these issues feed into contemporary Discourse on homosexuality within Chinese culture. While some respondents believe that this style of literature has a positive impact upon queer visibility, others contest that a lack of authenticity in such representation—due to the replication of heterosexualized behaviour and gender roles between the male

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[149] Although by no means all the images accompanying microfiction are pornographic in nature, those that do fall into this category appear to conform to this trend.

characters—compromises any such beneficent effects. This represents the challenges of encoding and decoding the text between the different facets of the communications audience, as it can be argued that, as stylized works of fiction written by women, leanings towards social activism for LGBT representation is not within the remit of the genre. However, the negative effects of heteronormativity on social inclusivity for queer-identified individuals are visible through examination of the ways in which practices and activities are represented within the micronovels; while these micronovels give prominence to same-sex intimacies, it is often by comparison of how far such intimacies deviate from the heteronormative standard, or by setting them against culturally non-accommodative frameworks of marriage or procreation.

Discourse on identity underscores the competing agendas within the consumer base of queer-themed microfiction. Despite having a largely female-identified consumer group, there is an interest in queer-themed microfiction by gay males, who, through interview responses, have shown at times scornful attitudes towards the female consumers for their lack of engagement with real-life issues of tongzhi identity and existence within contemporary society, again demonstrating how differently the texts are being decoded between these two readership groups. However, within the local context of tongzhi experience, same-sex attraction as identity construction is often subsumed into other social identities linked to one's family and social positioning. Accordingly, discussion of the interrelation between Discourses and politics underlines the notion of filial piety as driver of compunction into heterosexual forms of conduct for same-sex attracted individuals, with the importance of marriage and procreation featuring prominently among the selected micronovels. This focus on marriage highlights not only issues of social duty in tongzhi males, but also reveals its position as a source of anxiety among female consumers, who themselves exist within a heteropatriarchal social framework. This value structure means that failure to enter into marriage carries with it elements of

social judgement and discrimination, not only for individuals, but also for their families.

Finally, this chapter has examined micronovel imagery from a Discourses perspective, concluding that many images are functioning as a vehicle for distribution of the micronovel, either by occupying more physical space on the screen resulting in the micronovel becoming more prominent within the forum, or through the inclusion of eroticized content—ostensibly declarations of sexual citizenship—as a lure. Often there is little perceivable link between micronovel and image subject matter, with the image forming an independent communicative act of its own. The presence of explicit imagery within the microfiction realm is acknowledged, and responses as to whether this forms a conscious form of censorship resistance are inconclusive from the data available. Certainly, such photographs promote images of the male body and of sexuality which can be considered as declarations of sexual and intimate citizenships, consistent with Plummer's (2001, 2003) conceptualization of how we relate as gendered beings and erotic persons. Moreover, the ways in which identities are embodied within of such images raises important debates about power, play and sexuality (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011) within the microfiction genre.

7   Conclusions

7.1   Introduction

This project undertook an in-depth qualitative investigation into queer-themed microfiction within the realm of Chinese cyberspace, with the aim of further understanding both the features of the genre and the motivation for production and consumption. Through a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis of 40 selected works of microfiction and applied thematic analysis of 39 interviews conducted with producers and consumers of the genre in Mainland China, I have illustrated and explicated the defining characteristics of the genre, and explored the ways in which this empirical data informs us on theoretical and conceptual debates regarding queer sexualities, sexual citizenship and circuits of culture.

My methodical analysis of the empirical data has organized the project into three data chapters, in accordance with my adaptation of Gee's *tools of inquiry* (2014) for Discourse analysis. I applied the *situated meanings TOI* to unpick the fabric of the micronovels at the sentence level, illustrating how an animator attributes specific meanings to objects, entities and phenomena through his or her choice of vocabulary or syntax (chapter 4). Gee's *figured worlds TOI* has been utilized to reveal the prototypical simulations that underpin the conceptualization of the worlds represented in queer-themed microfiction, examining how these 'taken-for-granted' scenarios are negotiated, reinforced or challenged in the communication process between animator and reader (chapter 5). Finally, the *Discourses TOI* enabled us to break free of the bounds of the micronovel to understand the social and cultural conversations which arise from—and are reflected in—representations of queer relationships, siting these works within the wider context of social Discourse (chapter 6). Throughout this process, several conceptual themes have emerged which permeate the three different foci of analysis. Heteronormativity, and its relationship with patriarchy, prevails throughout the *situated meanings* (chapter 4), *figured*

worlds (chapter 5), and *Discourses* (chapter 6) of the data selection as a pervasive social force which shapes the creation and consumption of queer-themed micronovels by heterosexual women. Linked to these two concepts, the way in which female animators and consumers remediate their identities and desires through articulation of male bodies and intimacies have proved areas rich in narrative potential, which demonstrate both the figured worlds through which the micronovels are formulated, and illustrate the competing agendas that exist within contemporary China's lines of social Discourse.

This body of online literature represents an articulation of female sexual desire and lived experience as articulated through a stylistic interpretation of queer male same-sex intimacies. Nevertheless, the genre does attract a gay male readership. Therefore, issues of representation and of competing social agendas within the text are of keen importance, especially in the context of China's prevailing attitudes (and regulatory framework) on the legitimacy and acceptability of same-sex intimacies. This speaks broadly to issues of personal and sexual identity, which in turn are shaped into debates on sexual citizenship. In a country that has historically invested highly in the cultivation of collectivist values, the intersection of individuality and citizenship results in areas of contention and the possibility for social discord.

Finally, this project has offered a theoretical conceptualization of a circuits of queer cyberculture, which proposes that, confronted with heteronormative social structures—constructed along a gender binary and framed through patriarchal familial and social relationships—China's cyberspace has offered a new platform for marginalized individuals (both queer-identified and those heterosexual consumers who feel an affinity with or attraction to male homosexual relationships) to engage, navigate and negotiate space to tell their stories.

This concluding chapter will therefore utilize the empirical themes emerging from the data chapters to discuss a variety of theoretical and conceptual issues. I

will engage with the four themes of heteronormativity, play, performativity and desire, along with theoretical contributions to knowledge that have resulted from this project. These themes and theories have intertwined and underpinned the previous three data chapters, and I will now take this evidence forward to make wider assertions on how this research contributes to the wider sociological literature. In doing so, I will make specific reference to how this research links with established literature on heteronormativity and citizenship. My methodological contributions will follow, before I close with recommendations for future research.

7.2   The ubiquity of heteronormative patriarchy

Heteronormativity abounds. From the literary worlds of the micronovels to the lived experience of the writers and consumers, an overarching framework of heteronormative patriarchy[150] influences the encoding and decoding of every *figured world* (to a greater or lesser extent), with the social framework and regulatory system of opposite-gender relationships bearing a stark influence on the way in which same-sex intimacies are viewed, negotiated, contested and regulated. The relationship between queer-themed microfiction and heteronormativity is complex. Even though the appearance of same-sex attracted characters within these stories might be presumed to present a clear challenge to heteronormative social standards, once one delves into the underlying mechanics of the social constructions, then it becomes increasingly obvious that this situation resists such easy categorization. If one accepts that such stories are primarily created and consumed by heterosexual females, then one must consider why male same-sex attracted subjects are being used as a vehicle for storytelling. These are not, after all, stories which represent female sexuality or female bodies in any tangible way. Therefore, the importance of this study lies not in its confirmation that heteronormativity exists—either within

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[150] See 2.5.1, 5.3.1 and 5.4.2 for discussion on the links between heteronormativity and patriarchy.

microfiction or in the wider world—but rather to establish how this use of queer narratives by straight women uncovers new ways of comprehending how the male body is "created, recreated and evoked" (Bromseth & Sundén, 2011, p.275) in order to remediate female sexual identities and erotic desires, within strict yet unwritten codes of acceptable social conduct. To achieve this, one must look to how the construction of these male characters within the micronovels serves to mirror, critique, and challenge contemporary female experience within Chinese society.

The following subsections therefore offer conclusions gathered from this study on two interconnected elements, which either build, sustain or challenge heteronormative patriarchy. I begin by discussing the shaping of female sexual expression through historical precedent and cultural regulation and its manifestation within the texts. This demonstrates how heteronormative patriarchy has been built and sustained. Next, I discuss how heteronormative patriarchy has been challenged through the formulation of sexual citizenship within the micronovels, and offer conclusions on the extent to which this study's findings confirm or challenge existing understandings of sexual citizenship within contemporary Chinese society.

7.2.1 Play and performance: female sexual identity and expression

China can—and does—talk about sex. Erwin (2000) and Hershatter (1996) have reasoned that, due to the emergence of new academic disciplines relating to sexuality in combination with a rapid spread of new media technology, public Discourses on sex and sexuality are more prevalent in the PRC than ever before. Certainly, China has moved on from the sexual repression of the Maoist era, where ideological, structural and moral forces converged to create a concept of sovereign ownership of the body by the state (Zhang, 2005), owing to a structural need to control the flow of desire in order to maintain the stability of the *danwei* (单位, work

unit[151]) system (ibid.). China has shifted to what is usually called a post-socialist society since the beginning of the 21st century (Won, 2004), which has resulted in a further lessening of state monitoring of private life, and in the burgeoning of more social spaces for sexual and romantic interactions (Jeffreys, 2006; Rofel, 2007). In addition, China's ongoing commercialization and marketization have "contributed to an increasingly consumerist attitude towards the exchange between sex and money" (B. Meng, 2011, p.42). This has resulted in a proliferation of commercial gay recreational spaces. However, these new sexual spaces have always been under surveillance, and are frequently subject to interference or closure by the authorities. (Ho, 2010; Kong, 2011). Despite the emergence of an apparent 'sexual revolution' (Pan, 2006) in post-reform China, both Erwin and Hershatter warn against presuming that this relative freedom of Discourse represents greater liberty than the imposed silence of the Maoist era, because Discourses on sexuality since the late 1970s have continued to be primarily linked to government-led efforts in the promotion of social stability and modernization as a basis for prosperity.

As the "subordinate group in the gender hierarchy" (Kam, 2013, p.5), Chinese culture has traditionally demonstrated a predominant dismissal and repression of female sexuality (Jackson *et al.*, 2008). As time as progressed, the advent of the Internet has allowed some women in China the space to play with ideas of identity and performance of gender in ways that are not possible in the offline world. However, through consumption of BL microfiction, Chinese women do not necessarily need to swap genders—or to present as male, in ways frequently seen in online gaming environments— in order to enjoy the performance of masculinity. In many respects, I believe we are witnessing an expansion of Roberts and Parks' notion of online identity play and performativity (2001), which claims that online identities usually remain separate from offline lives, and do not present automatic offline

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[151] A work unit refers to a place of employment, particularly as a form of social organization in Maoist China (1949-1976). Although still in existence, their primacy as the first step of a multi-tiered hierarchy between the individual and the Communist Party infrastructure has lessened since the economic reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s.

consequences. Through the creation and consumption of imagined versions of male same-sex intimacy, these women are not manifesting a desire to 'become male', but rather are playing with identity, sexuality and gender by claiming a *funü* identity. However, it cannot be said in this context that such identity is automatically unproblematic—the creation of sexual stories by Chinese women still stands in defiance of cultural prescriptions of acceptable female conduct. Transgression of these unwritten rules is acknowledged by several respondents, who readily admit that they keep their reading activities to themselves (or within the relative safety of the online BL community) for fear of what others—especially their parents—might think of them. With public attitudes towards non-heterosexual behaviour still predominantly negative, the idea of representing male homosexual intimacies for a female gaze is seen as both transgressive and subversive within Chinese society, as little is understood by the general population as to why straight females would actively seek out representations of gay male intimacies as a source of sensual pleasure and/or erotic gratification.

What we are witnessing, Weber (2002) claims, is a social commentary on Chinese youth's ongoing negotiation of self-identity in a complex and rapidly changing social structure. Weber's critique of reaction to Zhou Weihui's novel *Shanghai Baby*[152] (2001) offers an insight into the contradictory mechanics of rapid economic development against widely-held traditional conventions of social behaviour, claiming that it is China's youth who are most affected by this disparity:

> *This type of duality affects youth the most because of their willingness to embrace functional individualistic values, which provide them with the basic survival skills in a materialistic*

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[152] Semi-autobiographical in nature, Shanghai Baby tells the story of an aspiring writer, who having achieved success and notoriety through her publication of sexually explicit short stories, embarks upon a relationship with a drug-addicted artist and an affair with a married foreign businessman. As a result of claims by Zhou to speak for the new generation, the book was banned in China, with tens of thousands of copies burned and instructions given to State-run media to never mention the author or the book again because of its sexually charged content (Weber, 2002).

> *world, and their underlying collectivist values, which defines*
> *how they should act. As a result, youth have no clear model to*
> *follow with the Government encouraging them to be*
> *individualistic in some aspects (entrepreneurial and*
> *competitive) but not others (self-expression and*
> *empowerment).*

(Weber, 2002, p.347)

I believe this statement also has enormous relevance to the world inhabited by the (primarily young) consumers and producers of queer-themed microfiction. Weber's assessment of China's conflicted youth is reflected both in the plot construction of the individual micronovels, and in the dynamics of production of culture that this project has described, especially in the representation of romantic love between the protagonists (see discussion at 5.3.1). Heteronormativity is pervasive in the traditional values to which Chinese youth are exposed, even if as individuals, they choose to publicly reject them. The world around them continues to be a construction of heteronormative, patriarchal privilege in which individualistic expression of any non-sanctioned or non-normative behaviour is met with social (and sometimes legal) repercussions.

In addition to assessing how creators of microfiction encode representations of same-sex intimacy within micronovels, this project has examined the ways in which sexual identity can be remediated in online environments. Berman and Bruckman (2001) posit that individuals can adopt a range of online identities to 'play' at different subjectivities, and that in doing so, they can experiment with 'otherness'. This notion of 'playing' with alternative identities is demonstrated through female engagement with male same-sex intimacy and romance in Chinese queer-themed microfiction. Although, in this case, the women are not projecting male identities within the online environment—as was observed in the studies of online gaming by Turkle (1995) and Roberts and Parks (2001), and of online discussion groups by

Danet (1998) and Savicki et al (2006)—it is clear that engagement with fantasies about male same-sex intimacies for heterosexually-aligned females constitutes a form of identity play through which women are able to remediate aspects of sexual and gender identity through recreational prosumtion of queer-themed microfiction. Crucially, from within the context of China's cyberspaces—which are subject to censorship at both the local scale (through regulation of web providors) and the national scale (through the Golden Shield Project)—it is clear that such remediation of identity and sexuality exists and is continuing to develop, despite the challenges to autonomy of online identity construction that these factors may otherwise present.

Accordingly, I must agree that such stories have less to do with social commentary upon same-sex intimacies, but rather more to do with issues of feminist-queer social critique of female sexual expression and liberation, as originally proposed by Yang & Xu (2015). As for why young women should enjoy writing and reading stories about *tongzhi* men—rather than constructing sexual fantasies between men and women—some scholars have pointed to a combination of a lack of sexual education in China (particularly that aimed at female sexual development or sexuality) along with an inherent curiosity about sex in young women which is socially restrained by traditional Confucian notions of female modesty in sexual matters (Yang, 2006; Zhang, 2016). When these women are attracted to romance stories, Yang (2006) argues, it is easy for young women to identify with the female characters in the text. Consumers of BL fiction are unwilling to be drawn into the literature in this way, but instead project this fantasy onto two male characters, which—because it does not involve them, so they don't have to take responsibility for their subconsciousness—provides immunity from harm for the *funü* reader (Yang, 2006; Zheng & Wu, 2009). Elements of this theory are borne out in my data, as female interview respondents reported a dislike for projecting themselves onto female protagonists, as I will discuss below. However, I find Yang's conclusion overly simplistic, as it offers no explanation as to why such women are drawn to *romantic*

stories between socially-ostracized characters, rather than stories of a purely sexual nature, which should be the case if curiosity about sexuality were the driver of this scenario. My research suggests that the romantic element is indeed of primary concern in BL fiction. I argue that queer-themed microfiction represents the crafting of 'deviant' narratives as projection of an idealized 'pure love'[153]. I believe, therefore, that the association—conscious or otherwise—with characters at the margins of society becomes a manifestation of the ostracism of the female sexual self. This is attested through my interviews with female animators and consumers, most of whom see the production of such fiction as a form of literary escapism, which frees them from historical patriarchal associations of women as the weaker sex. I have also demonstrated the often-negative construction of female characters within the texts, which my interview respondents again attributed to the personification of weakness and oppression, whilst also stating a preference for stories where female characters do not elicit feelings of jealousy or envy in the reader through their interactions with the male characters, nor otherwise obstruct their gaze upon the handsome idealized male protagonists. I believe that this represents a form of internalized misogyny among female Chinese BL consumers, which is not directed at females per se, but rather at the social condition of 'woman' as constructed and viewed by a patriarchal society, with all the historical and cultural associations and restrictions embodied therein[154]. I believe this echoes Fujimoto Yukari's findings from Japanese culture (1998, in Welker, 2006), that readers of *shôjo* manga are unable to positively accept their own sexuality as women. This therefore becomes inextricably tied to the issues of power and agency, which pervade the representation and enactment of female desire within the figured worlds of these stories.

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[153] Taking account of transnational influences on the conceptualization of love and romance (see 5.3.1).
[154] This follows de Beauvoir's view that gender is something we become, rather than a fundamental that we are, and that huge societal pressures on women deny freedoms and frame female experience through its contribution to other agents (1949).

7.2.2 Sexual citizenship

The concept of sexual citizenship has promoted sexual intimacy as a right, but without making assumptions about the reproductive nature of such intimacy (Richardson & Turner, 2001). Intimate citizenship (which as a term is often used interchangeably with sexual citizenship) expands upon this by examining rights, obligations, recognitions and respect around intimate spheres of life:

> *Intimate citizenship provides a conceptual framing for transgressive discursive re-articulations and practices that challenge the private containment of intimacy and provide the tools for remodelling intimacy as a public discourse and practice, beyond private structures.*

(Reynolds, 2010, p.35)

Both concepts therefore challenge hegemonic heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions of citizenship. Furthermore, in support of framing citizenship through sexuality, Weeks (1998) has claimed that such formulations embody not only the articulation of new claims to rights and the achievement of equality for lesbian and gay citizens[155], but also offer sharp critique of traditional Discourses on citizenship. Of course, these traditional Discourses are broadly Western in origin (the Marshallian model of citizenship, for instance, is specifically British), and such bias must be critiqued when attempts are made to apply such theories wholesale to cultural settings outside of this framework, particularly in relation to intersectionality and increasing levels of globalization. In his landmark text exploring masculinities and homosexualities amongst Chinese gay men in Hong Kong, Mainland China and the UK, Kong (2011) argues that, in contrast to Western Discourse on sexual citizenship which presumes heterosexuals are in possession of full citizenship, in Hong Kong, only partial citizenship is achievable regardless of sexual orientation, owing to the history of politics within the region (see also Chan, 2013). This theory applies equally

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[155] This is termed 'sexual justice' by Kaplan (1997).

to Mainland China, where the 'social citizenship' of the Maoist era (1949-1976) has given way to Post-Reform 'market citizenship', in which the state has both enabled and limited the development of sexual cultures[156] (Kong, 2011). Evidence of the enabling/limiting dichotomy of the Chinese state is abundant within the realm of Chinese cyberspace: market forces have been one of the principle driving factors behind the lightning-fast pace of Internet development within China, yet state-led resistance to the promotion or depiction of non-normative sexual behaviours serves as an ever-present threat to online spaces for queer subjects. Respondents have attested to the rhetoric of deviance which is attached to the consumption of queer-themed material in official and public Discourse. As a result, I concur with Kong that the Chinese State has defined the rights of sexual citizens according to its own controls and regulations, notably through the censorship of queer visibility in popular culture in China (Kong, 2011).

While the representation of queer lives through micronovels would ordinarily constitute a declarative act of sexual citizenship, in this case—owing to the demographic of the primary group behind representation and consumption of this style of literature—the sexual citizenship being attested here speaks more of heterosexual female sexuality than of male homosexuality. This style of literature has arisen a result of heteronormative and patriarchal social structures, which have traditionally offered—and continue to offer—limited scope for sexual expression and exploration for women. My interviewees (in confirmation of the findings of previous studies on the genre) speak of gay male intimacy in microfiction as representation of the kind of idealized, pure love that goes beyond entrenched notions of gender and sexuality, even though paradoxically such depictions seem to reinforce elements of gendered hierarchies in the way the stories are constructed. For Chinese women drawn to this style of fiction, such imaginary frameworks embody desires which

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[156] The decriminalization of homosexuality has helped in this regard, but the fast process of urbanization—thus the transformation of urban cultures—has also played a key role. For more on the impact of urbanization on the emergence of modern gay identities (primarily from Western perspectives), see Ross and Rapp (1981), Altman (1996), Bravmann (1996) and Richardson and Seidman (2002).

remain unsated in their daily lives and in their habitual relationships with the opposite sex. By removing women from the equation and by projecting an idealized, female-constructed vision of romanticized affection through beautiful male protagonists, the queer lives represented in these stories serve as a manifestation of female desire, and therefore of female heterosexual sexual citizenship.

7.3   'Queer' as identity

This project concerns the performance of fictionalized gay male intimacies by primarily female heterosexual writers. As such, there is a notable disparity between the idealized or romanticized accounts of 'pure love' between men (Zheng & Wu, 2009) attested in these micronovels and the reality of being *tongzhi* in contemporary China. These disparities are both a point of contention and of celebration for producers and consumers of queer microfiction. On the one hand, it allows for the projection of intimacy beyond traditionally held notions of gender and sexuality, which provides female writers and consumers with a form of literary escapism, free from normative associations and presumptions of female sexuality. On the other, such fictionalized accounts have limited capacity for increasing social awareness of real-life *tongzhi* experience, and the stylized replication of male homosexual identity by heterosexual females reinforces cultural stereotypes of gender and sexuality.

This section turns the spotlight onto the object of desire in queer-themed microfiction: the *tongzhi* males around whom the plotlines revolve. The prominence of same-sex attracted males, both as narrative subjects and as a distinct sub-group of consumers of this style of literature, forces us to problematize the issue of identity representation, particularly regarding the constitutive value of this material in the development of sexual citizenship within Chinese society. First, I discuss male participation in queer microfiction, illustrating reported links between patterns of consumption with the individual's own journey of sexual self-discovery. Second, I

offer conclusions on the nature of queer identity portrayal within the genre and its ramifications in wider society, linking conceptual literature on gender and identity to responses and reactions from my male respondents regarding *tongzhi* representation in queer-themed microfiction.

7.3.1 Male participation in queer-themed microfiction

Male consumers of queer-themed microfiction report reading such material because it offers a form of representation of queer relationships—however factually inaccurate they believe such representations to be—in a heterosexually-dominated media landscape where depictions of intimacy and sexual behaviour between men are infrequent and subject to censorship. Several respondents alluded to having started consuming such material as part of their own adolescent explorations of sexuality (although given the ages of said participants, such fiction was primarily of a longer, dedicated-forum based nature rather than in microfiction format), primarily because such was the most readily available representations of sexual and emotional relationships between men. As the development of microfiction—particularly the way in which it is transmitted—makes it ever easier to access such information, I believe this represents an important resource for queer-identified males who are seeking representation or validation of their sexual identity. That said, the male consumers interviewed for this project remain sceptical as to the inherent social value of such representation owing to its heteronormative bias (see further discussion in 7.3.2), and maintain at best an 'arms-length' relationship with the *funü*, with whom they feel little connection. But this is perhaps not surprising; this factor can be explained through the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980), by seeing the message decoded by the gay male readers as an aberrant decoding (Eco, 1972). Although this fiction is written from the perspective of resisting patriarchy, the women who write it are not resisting heterosexuality or heteronormativity per se, but rather are formulating

worlds in which female desire can be explored and articulated without being subject to the structures of oppression present in their real lives. As Hall (1980) noted in the case of televisual portrayals of violence, intimacy in queer-themed microfiction represents messages about intimacy, not queer reality. This is the crux of why gay male readers struggle to identify with the figured worlds of these stories; they were never created with the intention of representing them. That is not to say that gay male readers cannot read and derive satisfaction from them, but the purpose behind this decoded message is different. For gay men, the issue becomes one of representation in a media landscape saturated with heterosexual imagery, and a subsequent concern over how such representation is in turn decoded by others. Based on such a requirement, such fiction is found wanting.

7.3.2 Articulating desire: decoding queer representation

Analysis of *situated meanings* (see chapter 4) has demonstrated that gendered language is prominent in the expression of same-sex intimacies, with each half of the couple being essentially heterosexualized into socially normative and conformist pairings (e.g. husband and wife; mother and father). Conceptualizations of gender bear influence on many of the social phenomena displayed within the data selection and are, I believe, evidence of structural domination and oppression. Drawing upon insights from feminist and critical race theory, Haslanger (2012) offers a focal analysis of gender, according to which the core of gender is "the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate" (ibid., p.228), in relation to which other concepts (e.g. identities, symbols, etc.) are gendered. Many gay male readers find the presentation of queer lives in this manner disobliging, with the pervasive use of gendered language within the microfiction selection therefore results in problems for some gay male readers in terms of the negotiation of sexual identity and declarations of sexual citizenship. Of

course, much of this resentment is based on a different decoding of the information encoded within the stories; rather than seeing the characters as stylistic interpretations of female desire, they instead take the representation at face value, and argue—justly—that real-life male same-sex intimacy and desire do not conform to these models. Yet, even with this kind of gendered reading, other research on Chinese male *tongzhi* has cited frequent examples of individuals who conceptualize their identity and sexual relationships in terms of male-female binaries of behaviour (Zheng, 2015). Despite notions of 'same-mindedness' conjured by the term *tongzhi*, LGBTQ identity is locally negotiated in China. As Hildebrandt (2012) highlights, although the Chinese LGBTQ movement owes much of its development to global civil society, linkages with the international community are not as strong as might be expected. In addition, gendered notions of sexual identity and behaviour that have become stereotyped and contested in Western Discourse (e.g. 'bottoms' as the 'woman/wife/passive partner' in the relationship, 'tops' as the 'man/husband/dominant partner') are often cited anecdotally in interviews with Chinese *tongzhi* (see Zheng, 2015; Yeo & Fung, 2016). As such, universality of opinion is lacking in views expressed by my *tongzhi* respondents, as their standpoint depends on how they have negotiated between domestic and transnational approaches to sexuality in the formulation of their sense of sexual identity[157].

The linguistic conception of performativity in online communities is thus a significant consideration in this highly-gendered environment. Researching the

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[157] As a result of globalization, identities have also become global. Sexual identities are imbued with power relations, which are connected to inequalities resulting from earlier forms of globalization, but which also generate new inequalities (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). In recent years, postcolonial nations have seen the emergence of sex-based social movements "whose political rhetoric and tactics seemed to mimic or reproduce Euro-American forms of sexual identity, subjectivity, and citizenship and, at the same time, to challenge fundamental Western notions of the erotic, the individual, and the universal rights attached to this fictive 'subject'" (Povinelli & Chauncey, 1999, p.439). The term 'transnational' is so ubiquitous that its meaning has been diluted, however, Grewal and Kaplan argue for its continued use, as ignoring transnational formations would leave studies of sexuality "without the tools to address questions of globalization, race, political economy, immigration, migration and geopolitics" (2001, p.666). Instead, they argue that transnationalism must be combined with the feminist study of sexuality in order to better understand why matters have historically been studied and described as such (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). The study of transnational sexualities requires us to understand that particular genders and sexualities are shaped by processes implicated in globalization, such as capitalism, diasporic movements, political economies of state, and the disjunctive flow of meanings produced across these sites (Blackwood, 2005). In this academic framework, "locality has remained a contentious but important site to disrupt the universalizing tendencies of queer academic and activist discourses" (ibid., p.221).

construction of lesbian identity online, Munt *et al.* (2002) problematize the notion of identity as a pre-existing social relation through critique of Butler's (1997) model of performativity, finding that for some of their participants, "sexuality is constructed as a relational, rather than inherent quality" (Munt *et al.*, 2002, p.132; see also Phillips, 2002 and van Doorn, 2011 for discussion on sexual identity, performativity and pseudonymity in online environments). In online queer microfiction communities, where straight women represent gendered fantasies of male same-sex intimacy, I believe performativity is similarly problematized.

Moreover, the representation of male queer sexuality as an embodiment of female sexual desire attests to the plasticity of popular culture discussed at 2.6.2.2, which shows how specific cultural elements can be adapted and moulded to fit alternative, localized requirements (Chidester, 2015). In the case of queer microfiction, queer identity is used to critique both heterosexual relationships and hegemonic dynamics of gender through highly stylized renderings of queer male identities. Accordingly, respondent interviews have attested to a desire to transcend culturally-regulated notions of femininity as weaker (or lesser) than that of masculinity. Previous scholarship (Kearney, 1998, 2009) into the interplay between feminism and youth culture has suggested that an understanding of the cultural artefacts created by young women allows for understanding into the ways in which traditional practices are "troubled by those who resist strict binaries of production/consumption, labour/leisure, and work/play in their everyday practices" (Kearney, 2006, pp.4–5). Through microfiction, this project has demonstrated that the such boundaries between production and consumption in the digital arena are blurred, with prosumption being embedded into the process, as discussed further in section 7.4.1. For young Chinese women, queer-themed microfiction provides a release from traditional patriarchal notions of adolescence as a 'masculine construction' (Hudson, 1984) by allowing themselves—as Galbraith noted for

Japanese consumers of *shôjo manga*—to "experience intimacy as transgressive potential cordoned off from reality" (Galbraith, 2011, p.216).

Discourse on identity underscores the competing agendas within the consumer base of queer-themed microfiction. Interview responses have shown at times scornful attitudes from gay male readers towards female consumers for their lack of engagement with real-life issues of *tongzhi* identity and struggle within contemporary society. However, it is also clear that within the local context of *tongzhi* experience, same-sex attraction as an identity construction is often subsumed into other social identities linked to one's family and social positioning (Kong, 2011). As Kong illustrates, the Western coming-out model "seems to clash with the notion of the relational self embedded within the Chinese family" (2011, p.199). Frequently, *tongzhi* individuals do not come out to their families, choosing instead to relocate towards bigger cities where their lives are less scrutinized. Alternatively, in cases where a homosexual individual does not seek to hide a same-sex relationship, a *ruan chugui* (软出柜, *'soft coming-out'*) strategy might be deployed (Kam, 2013; see also Tan, 2011), involving gradual introduction of the partner into the family setting as a friend, relying on the development of an implicit understanding between the family as to the ongoing nature of the relationship. In either of these scenarios, the pressure towards heterosexual marriage and having a child remains strong. Therefore, *tongzhi* existence becomes a balancing act between public face and private modes of intimacy, in which identity continues to be negotiated "within the parameters of family biopolitics" (Kong, 2011, p.205).

7.4   Circuits of queer cyberculture

This project proposed a development of Johnson's circuit of culture (1986) model, which applies the circuit to queer literary artefacts in a digital environment. China's cyberspace has offered a new platform for marginalized individuals (both

queer-identified and those heterosexual consumers who feel an affinity with male homosexual relationships) to engage, navigate and negotiate space to tell their stories. In doing so, producers and consumers replicate, critique and challenge heteronormative social structures, constructed along a gender binary and framed through patriarchal familial and social relationships.

The following subsections bring together reflections on the interplay between structure and the promotion of online communications within the circuits of culture framework, before demonstrating how transnational influences are indigenized to appeal to a Chinese readership. Finally, reflections are given on the inclusion of visual elements as an enhancement to the act of communication within a multimedia environment.

7.4.1 Circuits of culture and structural interaction

A major drive for producers to write any style of fiction is the desire to have people read what you have written. Although the more traditional commercial interaction between product and market is not the goal in the case of microfiction distribution and consumption via Weibo, there remains a clear relationship of supply and demand. Stewart and Pavlou (2002) have suggested that Giddens' structuration theory offers a viable framework for the assessment of the effectiveness of online interactive marketing communications, because it addresses both the consumer-marketer interaction and the structural context of the interaction, thus establishing the basic elements for accurately conceptualizing the interactive communications process. Therefore, I believe this interpretation of Giddens' theory can be successfully adapted to this project, as a clear 'cycle of culture' has been demonstrated which relies upon the dynamic interaction of actors over time. This cycle reflects the movement in Johnson's (1986) circuits of culture model, as illustrated in Figure 2 (see p.60), upon which I have highlighted the external

conditions which influence both reading and text production within the specific cultural framework. Hence, any meaningful measure of interactive communication between animator and reader must take in account the role of the structural context that guides the interaction (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002). Among the respondents, several consumers were in the habit of sharing the works of others (uncredited) on their own platforms, thereby embodying the role of animator of the micronovel, and moving their consumption activity further around the circuit into a cycle of *prosumption.* However, it was also apparent from the interview responses that some consumers, despite habitually sharing such material with online friends, did not see themselves as producers or distributors of queer-themed microfiction, but solely as readers. I believe that this implies that, for these individuals, such a referral process within the social media environment is embedded within the act of *consumption*.

7.4.2 Imagery and indigenization of transnational influences

Although transnational influences on the creation of these stories are readily visible and easily recognized, it is clear from the selection of micronovels that animators have 'indigenized' both content and setting to create works that are distinctly Chinese in aesthetic. Ranging from stories with nods to Chinese history, to tales that include elements of popular national cultural practice and spectacle, it is noteworthy that these tales concern the queering of Chinese lives, rather than focusing on an 'exotic other'[158]. The indigenization of these cultural elements is important from the perspective of identity construction. Published in Chinese on a Chinese social media platform, these works are not aimed at consumption outside of the Chinese-speaking world, yet still draw upon influences and imagery from outside of that cultural sphere. However, when one considers matters of identity and

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[158] Writing in the context of the construction of female beauty in differing cultures, Frith et al (2005, p.65) describe the 'exotic other' as e.g. a "Caucasian woman who displays her body in ways a Chinese model could or would not".

intercultural Discourse, it is often the case that what one understands as 'culture' is taken simply for its empirically verifiable context. 'Context' in this case is viewed as "a stable, community space that fully determines subjective meanings" (Mendoza *et al.*, 2002, p.314). In other words, identity-in-context is denotatively read like a 'text', devoid of adequate connotative linkages to wider socio-political formations and historical influences (ibid.). This is to a certain extent visible in the content sharing practices of microfiction animators, who borrow and adapt transnational imagery from East Asian cultures or from Euro-American media. These instances represent a balance between individualistic appropriation of perceived cultural capital and increasing nationalism in Chinese online Discourse

Cranny-Francis (2005) reminds us that texts have always been multimedia. Indeed, even before the days of digital communication, texts have exhibited various systems of sense-making which come together to create meaning. An obvious example is the inclusion of imagery with text, but one should not neglect that visual clues may stem from more than just pictures: additional sense-making can result from the graphic form of the words as well [159]. However, within the Weibo environment, textual appearance is standardized, and material is restricted to 140 characters. Therefore, the ability to impart extra-textual information in this digital terrain comes from the the ability to include pictures and other multimedia file types along with instances of text, which enrich the communicative exchange between writer and reader.

If a picture 'tells a thousand words', then the inclusion of an image must come as a welcome addition to the mere 140 characters in which animators must habitually tell their stories. Visual arts "engage viewers as embodied subjects, encouraging them to relate the meanings of the visual to their everyday lives" (Cranny-Francis, 2005, p.28), so in theory, the relative meanings situated within the imagery of each

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[159] For instance, a published text may use chirography, typography, conventions of layout etc., in order to impart meaning.

micronovel expand both the *figured worlds* and the *Discourses* contained within each story. Yet, given the discord often observed between subject matter of micronovel and image, I must conclude that in many cases, the image forms an independent communicative act, or functions as a vehicle for distribution of the micronovel, either by occupying more physical space on the screen in order to make the micronovel more prominent within the forum, or through the inclusion of eroticized content—ostensibly declarations of sexual citizenship on the part of the animator—as a lure to consumers.

Interestingly, none of the micronovels encountered in this study use video or audio clips as multimedia enhancements. Both are possible within the context of microblog publishing. However, to engage with either would perhaps be too remote from the reading experience. Static pictures contain less information than the continuous visual stimuli of moving images (Goldstein *et al.*, 1982), therefore moving images (especially when accompanied by sounds) offer less ambiguity of meaning for the viewer. This reduces potential for a reader to form her or his own interpretation of the images. Playing a media file also interrupts the act of reading in a more aggressive way than viewing a single picture would, as moving images divert the eye's attention to a greater degree. Additionally, the inclusion of audio-visual file clips may have implications for the privacy of the act of consumption; playing such clips, especially if one is not sure of their content, may not be appropriate for all settings where otherwise private consumption could occur.

7.5   Methodological contributions

As the first (to the limit of the surveyed literature) comprehensive textual study of Chinese-language queer-themed microfiction and its associated Discourse, one of the initial challenges in formulating a methodological approach for this project was to find an effective way to analyse the texts. As outlined in 3.3.1.2, Gee's (2014)

detailed 42-point framework provided the foundation for this approach. However, an initial pilot study found Gee's original method to be excessive when considering instances of text that are only 140 characters long, as several categories yielded little or no data. For example, it proved unproductive to assess *relationships* (one of Gee's *TOI* categories) from a few lines of text representing a single voice. Therefore, I have adapted the *TOI* framework to better accommodate the specificities of micro-texts.

Reducing the data analysis framework down to 15 categories arranged into three primary thematic groups has allowed me to focus on the areas that have yielded the richest information. My development of Gee's *signs and ways of knowing* tool—which focuses on extra-textual features—into a tool for the analysis of digital imagery tailors the method to the study of multimedia textual artefacts, and offers a methodological contribution to the field. In addition, the inversion of the hierarchical structure of Gee's original framework proved successful in creating a thematic flow of inquiry throughout the chapters. This has allowed me to form a cumulative analysis of the texts as a whole, beginning on a micro-level (assessing 'what' is happening in the texts through linguistic exploration of *situated meanings*), then through a meso-level (observing 'how' things are happening in the texts, as *situated meanings* both shape and are themselves shaped by the *figured worlds* of the stories), and finally through a macro level (explaining 'why' things are happening in the texts, as *situated meanings* and *figured worlds* in turn both create and reflect *Discourse*). This revision of the *TOI* framework therefore offers us a method through which to analyse instances of micro storytelling.

The corpus of data collected for this project (micronovels, their analysis and respondent interviews) stands as a contribution to knowledge, as the literature that I surveyed did not reveal any similar cases of such texts being used as a data source for similar projects. The importance of new technologies as way of conducting interviews with hard to reach populations—specifically the use of WeChat or other

VoIP technology in this project as both conversation facilitator and data collection tool—has been demonstrated, and thereby constitutes a contribution to methods.

7.6   Recommendations for future research

Clearly, this study has confining factors, within which it was conducted. My approach has been informed by my background as a non-Chinese scholar of queer lives in China, by my training in qualitative methods, and by my interest in digital communication. Research and the advancement of knowledge are, of course, collaborative efforts. As such, researchers from different theoretical backgrounds might also explore this area with great success. This section will discuss the limitations of the study, along with suggestions for their remedy or improvement, and will conclude with proposals for the future direction of this research.

The number of micronovels selected for analysis in the project was limited by both time and methodological approach. As a qualitative study being conducted by a single researcher over a fixed time period, a practical maximum has to be established for the number of texts that can be featured. After an initial sample of 100 micronovels, it was deemed that the inclusion of 40 cases of microfiction had achieved a data saturation point among the chronological sample in terms of identifiable features of situated meanings, figured worlds and Discourses. In addition, conducting Discourse Analysis (critical or otherwise) frequently involves the analysis of only a small number of texts, which are presented as typical of a particular ideology or Discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Therefore, owing to the aforementioned restrictions, generalizability of specific findings in respect of the microfiction collection are neither claimed nor implied. With greater resources and a collaborative research design, a larger volume of texts could be analysed. This matter is discussed in further depth at 3.4.2.

The number of participants interviewed for this project is limited by several factors. Firstly, contacting relevant parties was problematic, owing in part to negative social attitudes towards homosexuality in China which enforces a degree of sensitivity on the topic under investigation. For male participants, referral through a gatekeeper became a practical necessity to confirm that my investigation was genuinely academic in nature and that respondents' participation in the study would not compromise their privacy or divulge their sexuality within their personal networks. A similar approach (although to a lesser degree) was seen with the female consumers. A second limiting factor was time, which is tightly linked to the issue of cost. To remain both on schedule and within budget, I was not able to remain in the field for any longer than the allotted timeframe of two months (see 3.2.2). These factors, along with issues associated with researching hard to reach populations (see 3.5.2) lead to the adoption of a split research approach between face-to-face interviews and online email or social media-based conversations and questionnaires. This meant that I could contact a geographically diverse selection of people without incurring the cost of having to travel to 20 different provinces around China, which would not have been possible with the available resources of time or finance. Again, greater resources and a collaborative research design involving multiple sites of inquiry could overcome this limitation.

The evolution of the Internet is swift. As communicative technology improves year on year, so some ways of sharing data fall out of favour. Throughout the fieldwork process (although only a year after the start of my data collection timeframe), it became clear from many respondents that Sina Weibo as a carrier of BL microfiction was slipping out of fashion in favour of the smartphone-based messaging application WeChat. Falling somewhere in between a Facebook-style social networking platform and a direct messaging application, WeChat offers a greater degree of privacy for consumption and communication, as communication is primarily between users who are acquainted with each other, yet retains the portable

convenience of a phone-based microblogging platform. Importantly, posts within WeChat are not restricted to 140 characters, so it is an environment that can play host to not just BL microfiction, but to works of fiction of any length. WeChat users can join interest-based groups from within the application, whose members are only visible to each other, yet need not be known to each other. This alleviates concerns expressed by several respondents as to the public visibility of their data on Weibo, which prevents some consumers from sharing content which would be visible to friends and family. This therefore represents significant structural differences from the Weibo environment, and scholars looking to continue research into the development of the genre must consider how such an online space can be researched, as there are specific challenges regarding ethics owing to WeChat's positioning between private and public network.

An alternative strategy, given the availability of data mining and analysis software specifically developed for use with Weibo[160], may be to approach content-based studies of queer microfiction from a quantitative perspective. Using a far larger corpus of data, this switch to quantitative methods could offer a more generalizable sample in terms of pure content analysis, which would help counter historical accusations that CDA as an approach is too selective, partial and qualitative (Machin and Mayr 2012). However, I believe that such a project, although perfectly valid, would lack the rich, in-depth approach to the study of textual elements that has been demonstrated in this study.

7.7 Final Remarks

Whilst researching this project, I have encountered many attitudes towards my topic, ranging from the fascinated ("do straight women really read that kind of

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[160] Such as *Zhiwei chuanbo fenxi* (知微传播分析, *Zhiwei Communications Analysis*) available at www.weiboreach.com.

thing?") to the bewildered ("why would you spend years of your life studying that? What is that going to do for the world?"). My answer to the latter is that I study this phenomenon because every form of expression is inherently worthy of study. The advent of the Internet has imbued people around the globe with a seemingly limitless capacity for communication, and an increasingly mobile Internet has turned every netizen into an archivist of the human condition. Publication of anything, from our deepest thoughts to a photograph of our latest meal, is literally just a few clicks or taps away. With over 4.66 billion webpages globally by latest estimates, the Internet is a cornucopia for the study of social interaction: an exquisitely detailed collaborative history of recent human development. From the extraordinary to the mundane, every communicative act stands as a cultural artefact, and is imbued with layers of meaning and reflections of social structures and power relationships. The presence of queer-themed microfiction in Chinese cyberspace serves as a barometer of social change. Reflected within are not just the ways in which representation of same-sex intimacies reflect or contest contemporary attitudes to homosexuality, but also imbued within these documents is evidence of ways in which Chinese women are using technology to challenge existing heteropatriarchal frameworks in order to project their own sexual desires and enact their own sexual citizenship. Accordingly, this project charts the evolution of a form of self-determination through technological empowerment within a highly regulated cultural arena, and provides a platform upon which to base further multifaceted approaches to the study of sexuality, gender, literary art and online communication.

In this project, I have endeavoured to draw upon a range of materials to create a comprehensive picture of contemporary queer microfiction. Bringing together the voices of heterosexual and bisexual female producer/consumers with those of gay and bisexual males, whose sexual intimacies are represented and appropriated within the literary genre, I have sought to balance out existing academic Discourse on Chinese BL fiction, which has given primacy to conditions of

production for the female fans and creators without acknowledging the effect such representation has upon greater social Discourse—and by extension, on the lived experience of China's *tongzhi* community. I am certain, however, that my attempt to illuminate this intricate relationship has also left some questions unanswered, and has certainly raised new questions for further research. As the ways evolve through which we—as diverse and interconnected communities across the globe—shape and tell our sexual stories, so too broadens the opportunity to deepen our understanding of human nature and its myriad facets. For me, this study reminds me of how much more there is to explore.

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9   Appendices

9.1   Micronovel directory

A001

7 岁他打碎了邻居家的玻璃他替他背罪 15 岁他翘课逃学他每晚登门为他辅导 18 岁他高考刚够三本线他以全市第一的成绩和他进了同一所大学 27 岁晚上他借着酒意着问他这么出色人长得又帅为什么不找女朋友，他苦笑不语，拿起了桌上的请柬 "我还有事先走了, 你的婚礼, 我会参加"

[At] 7 years old, he broke a neighbour's [window] glass, he took the blame for his crime. [At] 15 years old he skipped class and played truant, every evening he called around in order to tutor him. [At] 18 years old he got just enough in the college entrance examination for the 3rd tier [university], he got the top result in the whole city but he enters the same university with him. [When he was] 27 years old one evening, through tipsiness, he asks him why such a talented and handsome person isn't looking for a girlfriend. He forces a smile without a word, picks up the invitation from the table: "I still have something to go do first, but I will attend your wedding"

A002

1994 年，我 9 岁，与他相识；2005 年，我 20 岁，和他相爱；2008 年，我 23 岁，和他同居；2010 年，我 25 岁，终于和他一起步入结婚礼堂，他是新郎，我是伴郎。

(In) 1994, (when) I was 9 years old, (I) got to know him. (In) 2005, (when) I was 20, (I) fell in love with him. (In) 2008, (when) I was 23, (I) lived with

him in the same house. (In) 2010, (when) I was 25, (I) finally walked together with him into the wedding hall. He was the bridegroom. I was the best man.

A003

第一次他强忍着腰部的疼痛和某部位的不适　捡了衣服夺门而逃　对床上的男人说了句：昨晚喝醉了！　第二次，他从容地去浴室洗完澡　离开时还是那句：昨晚喝醉了！第三次，澡后准备离开，床上的男人说：我们昨晚好像喝的是茶吧。老子醉茶！他狠狠的吼了回去。

The first time, he picked up the clothes, flung open the door and ran out from the room, suppressing the pain in his back and the discomfort 'down there', saying to the man in bed: I drank too much last night! The second time, he took a shower in the bathroom calmly, but when he left, he said the same sentence: "I drank too much last night!" The third time, when he was about to leave after bathing, the man in the bed said: "didn't we drink tea last night?" "I get drunk on tea too!" he yelled back at him.

A004

他每天和女友一起坐地铁，不知何时开始地铁口总有个帅哥倚着跑车对她笑，她先是无视，但帅哥每天准时出现，渐渐她脸上写满期待，对他越加冷淡。直到一天帅哥捧着玫瑰问她："离开他好吗""当然"她很兴奋。他转向他："她不爱你了，做我男朋友吧"他接过了花束："好吧。"

Every day he takes the metro with his girlfriend, but at some point, [he] can't remember when, a handsome guy would always be there, leaning on a sports

car smiling at her near the metro entrance. At first, she ignores [him], but as the handsome boy appears every day punctually [at the same time as the couple], her face begins to show expectancy, and [she] becomes increasingly cold towards him [her boyfriend]. Until one day the handsome boy holding a bunch of roses asks her, "leave him, OK?" "Of course," she is very excited. He turns to him: "she doesn't love you [any more], will you be my boyfriend?" He takes the flowers: "Sure."

A005

女孩看着眼前手捧鲜花的男孩说道："我已经有男朋友了，你为什么还要缠着我？" 男孩毫不在乎的说道："因为只有这样他才能注意到我啊！

The girl looks at the boy in front of her holding a bunch of fresh flowers, and says, "I have a boyfriend ready. Why do you keep on bothering me?" Not caring a bit, the boy says, "Because this is the only way he can notice me!"

A006

他和她要结婚了，结婚典礼上，他对她说 对不起…我 …她说 我知道，你真正喜欢的是伴郎吧。我看过微小说的。 他皱眉 你 怎么会这样想呢？ 说完转身拉起了牧师的 手。

He is marrying her, and at the wedding ceremony, he says to her: "Sorry… I…" She says: "I know, the one you really love is the best man, right? I've read microfiction,". He frowns; "Why would you think that?" Saying that, he turns and takes the priest's hand.

A007

婚前一星期女孩拿着他的照片找到了那个命理师，命理师说，"我不知道你有多爱这个人，但七天后他最亲近的人将会因他而死。我劝你离开他。"不可能，即便是死我也要成为他的新娘，女孩下定决心。七天后婚礼如期举行，婚宴进行到一半，酒店的吊灯松落下来——伴郎用力推开了身边的新郎。

A week before the wedding, the girl went to find the fortune teller holding his [her fiancé] photograph, [but] the fortune teller said, "I do not know how much you love this man, but in 7 days the closest/most intimate person to him will die because of him. I urge you leave him." "Not possible. Even if I am to die, I will become his bride," the girl said determinately. Seven days later, the wedding proceeded as planned, but in the middle of the wedding, the hotel's chandelier fell from the ceiling of the hotel—the best man pushed the bridegroom beside him.

A008

最铁的哥们是在我大学四年的同学。我们一起，同屋睡过三年半，吃过九百多顿饭，打过一百来场篮球，挂过三次四级。我们干架五次，醉过两次，乱性两次。昨天他结婚，我敬酒一杯，为了偿还六年前他趁我装睡时说过的那一次我爱你。

My best friend is my buddy from my four years at university. We lived together for three-and-a-half years. We ate more than nine hundred meals together. We played hundreds of games of basketball. We failed our CET-4 tests three times together. We quarrelled five times. We got drunk two times, had sex twice. Yesterday he got married. I raised a glass to him, to repay him for the one occasion six years ago when he said, 'I love you' while I pretended to sleep.

A009

床边男人的手紧握着病床上女人的手，女人温柔的安慰着男人。 "我该走了，别太伤心。其实你很幸福，有我和那个男人爱着你。其实我很忌妒他能有你的爱。但当 你们分开，他却对我说 '请好好照顾他 '时，我知道，他真的很爱你。我已经强留你太久了 …相信我他会回来的，因为他舍不得你让难过 …"

At the bedside, the man's hand tightly holds the hand of the woman on her sickbed. The woman is warmly comforting the man. "I will soon pass on, don't be sad. In fact, you are very blessed, you have the love of both me and that man. In fact, I'm very jealous that he can have your love. However, when you split up, when he told me 'please take good care of him', I knew that he truly loved you. I already kept you for too long. Believe me, he will come back to you, because he doesn't want to make you sad."

A010

自习室，一对情侣格外放肆，不时的听见女生娇笑连连，男生低声附和，此起彼伏。坐在附近的他和他对视了一眼，他抬手抚上他的唇角，他伸手揽住他的腰，他说"宝贝儿"，他回到"讨厌。"瞬间桌子板凳撞击声迭起，男女收拾东西走人。"喂，他们走了。""我知道。""混蛋，你手怎么还在往下摸呢？"

In the self-study room, there is a couple getting a bit carried away, as the girl giggles continuously and then the boy joins in, and so it goes on. One of the two boys sitting next to the couple raises his hands and strokes his friend's lips. He then puts his arms around his waist and says "babe"; he [the other man] responds "cheeky". Immediately, there is a knocking sound from the table and bench, the couple quickly stands up and starts to collect their stuff

to leave. "Hey, they've gone." "I know." "Bastard! then why is your hand still down there?"

A011

"我儿子不是同性恋，他要结婚了请你离开他。""…我知道了伯父，我答应您。"六年后。"他出车祸了，下肢瘫痪…他常在睡梦里喊你的名字，你有空过来看看他吧。""…能不能麻烦您把他妻子支开一天…""唉，儿媳妇早走了，现在谁还要他…""伯父，能让我回到他身边么？老人泪如雨下…

"My son isn't homosexual. He wants to get married, please leave him". "I understand, uncle, I promise you." Six years later. "He had a car accident, his legs are paralysed. He shouts out your name in his dreams from time to time. When you have time, would you visit him." "Could I ask you to tell his wife to be away for the day?" "Alas, my daughter-in-law left a long time ago. No one wants him any more…" "Uncle, will you let me return to his side?" The old man's tears fall like rain.

A012

一帅哥领着孩纸在公园玩，一老奶奶逗孩子问："更喜欢爸还是妈？"正太毫不犹豫："喜欢爸爸！"大家哄笑着恭喜男人，男人却挑眉，"再说一遍。"正太苦着脸扁嘴："喜欢妈妈…"男人满意的笑了，大家都赞叹男人尊重妻子，只有正太泪流："爸爸快来啊！妈妈又欺负我了"

A handsome man is leading his child playing in the park. An old woman teases the child, "is your favourite daddy, or mummy? The cute boy responds without hesitating: I prefer Daddy! Everyone laughs and congratulates the man, but the man raises his eyebrow: "answer again." The cute boy pouts. "I prefer

Mummy…." The man smiles contentedly, everyone praises the man's respect for his wife. But the cute boy wails: *"Dad come here quick! Mum is bullying me again!"*

A013

他听着媒婆聒噪额角隐隐作痛。忽然从外面跑进来一个小娃娃，扑到他的怀里就叫爹。娃娃在他怀里边 哭边念："爹爹你不要我了吗？你都不想我和父皇…"他一听，赶紧捂住娃娃的嘴，不顾身后叫骂的媒婆冲出院子，却在巷口看到那个顾长的身影"你怎么找到…" "普天之下莫非王土……回来吧"

He listens to the matchmaker with his forehead aching. Suddenly, a little kid runs in and jumps onto him, calling him daddy. In his arms, the kid starts to cry: "Daddy, don't you want me anymore? Don't you miss me and father" Upon hearing this, he rushes to cover the child's mouth and, ignoring the scolding of the matchmaker, runs out into the courtyard. He then sees a tall shadow standing in the alleyway. "How did you find this place…?" "All under heaven is the King's land …. Come back, OK?"

A014

"王爷，夫人让您去见王妃。"望着跪在下面，一脸平淡的侍从，王爷眉头微皱："不见。""夫人之命，还望王爷不要为难小的。"下面那人仍然不愠不火地说着。王爷一把拉起跪在地上的人儿，将他搂入怀中，叹了口气："不就昨晚多做了一次，今晚全听你的，可好？"

"Sire, Her Majesty wants you to see the princess consort" Staring at the kneeling, expressionless attendant, the prince responds with a slight frown: "No." "This is the order from Her Majesty, this small servant hopes you will

not make difficulties for him," replies the kneeling man indifferently. The prince pulls him up into his arms and sighs: "Just because of one extra time last night, tonight I listen to you, okay?"

A015

他拽着自己哥们儿进了家门，介绍道：“爸妈，这是我哥们儿，现在又多了一个身份就是我媳妇儿，也就是你们的儿媳妇儿。”“哈哈…儿子，今年的愚人节玩笑太好笑了，老公你说是吧？哦呵˜”“妈，我没有开玩笑，我说的是真的。这辈子我非他不要！”“呜˜老公，儿子他终于出柜了”

He drags his buddy into the room and makes an introduction: "Dad, mum, this is my friend, and now he has another role, my wife, and that is to say, he's your daughter-in-law now." "Haha...Son, this year's April Fool's Day joke is so funny. Don't you think, husband? Oh ah" "Mum, I'm not joking. What I'm saying is true. I don't want this lifetime without him." "Hmm, Husband, son is finally coming out"

A016

约好的每周下棋时间，他难得迟到，看着他有些异样的神色什么都没问。 突然他开口说：“我儿子刚才说，要和你儿子去荷兰结婚，我答应了。” 他微愣了一下，点点头。 下完棋，两个人都坐着没动。 沉默良久，他轻叹口气：“当初我们要是勇敢一点，也就没这俩小子什么事了。” 他笑笑：“青出于蓝。”

The weekly chess appointment; he is rarely late. The other man looks at him strangely, not saying anything. Suddenly he says, "My son said he is going with your son to The Netherlands to get married. I have consented." Slightly stunned for a moment, he nods his head. After they have finished

playing, the two men sit without moving. A long silence follows, then one sighs; "If we had been a little braver back then, there would not be a problem with these two guys." The other smiles; "The pupil surpasses the master."

A017

两个男人面色凝重地跪在女人面前，不久他说："妈，对不起，爱的是他。。。"他拉着身边男人的手。"不可以！"女人坚决反对。良久，女人开口："孩子，两个受在一起是不会幸福的啊。

Two men kneel solemn-faced before a woman. Later, he says: "Mother, I'm sorry, but I love him." He takes the hand of the man beside him. "No, you cannot", the woman resolutely opposes. A few hours later, the woman says: "Children, two bottoms can't be happy together!"

A018

他带他一起回家过年，两人手牵手站在门前。他突然打起退堂鼓："我们这样会不会太突然了？万一伯父伯母……""没事，别担心。"门开了，他轻轻推他："快叫爸妈。""臭小子，谁是你妈？！"门里同样站着两个人。两个手牵手的……男人。

He takes him back home to spend the spring festival, they stand in front of the door, hand in hand. He suddenly gets cold feet and says, "Will we be too sudden like this? If uncle and aunt…" "Oh no, don't worry." Then the door opens, he pushes him gently. "Call them mum and dad." "Idiot, who is your mum?" In the room two people are standing. Holding hands are… two men.

A019

五岁那年，他拽着少年的白衣　开心的叫他哥哥，十五岁那年，他扯着男子的胳膊　高兴的称他师傅，二十五岁那年，入夜他环着师傅的腰颈低语呢喃：师傅，今日过后我该唤你娘子么？……

When [he] was 5, he happily called him big brother while tugging at his white shirt. When [he] was 15, he would pull at the man's arm, happily calling him 'master'. When [he] was 25, one night, as he wraps his arms around the master's waist, whispers into his neck: "Master, after tonight, should I call you my wife?"

A020

他说分手，他默然接受。以他的习惯刷牙，以他的弧度微笑，以他的方式吃饭。穿他穿的衣服，听他听的歌，看他看的电影。在同一个细节流下泪来，在同一个时间抱头痛哭，在同一个笑点转身大笑时猛然发现，另一个早已不在，沙发的位置永远空了一半。

He wanted to break up, he quietly accepted. [From then on,] he brushes his teeth like he did, smiles like he did, eats like he did, dresses like he did, listens to the songs he listened to, sees the films he used to see. He sheds tears for the same details, starts to cry at the same time just like before, bursts into laughter at the same time then suddenly discovers the other one is not there, and the other side of the sofa is empty forever.

A021

他开车爱超速，一天被交警拦下，交警说了三句话：停车、车牌、身份证。之后的一年中，每当他想有超速的念头时，那位交警就会适时出现，为此慢慢地他超速习惯也改了。一

天他又被拦下。交警再次说了三句话："银行、账号、密码。" "你什么意思？"他问。交警回答：求婚

He loved speeding in his car, one day he was pulled over by the traffic police. The policeman said three phrases: pull over, licence plate and ID card. During the following year, every time when he wanted to speed, the same policeman would appear. Because of this, his habit of speeding was actually modified. One day, he was stopped again, and this time the policeman said: bank, account, password. "What do you mean?" he asked. The policeman answers: "Marry me."

A022

" 是不是我情商不好…才一直没女票。"数次相亲失败少年沮丧地回到合租公寓。他喝口茶看了他一眼："你都怎么跟女孩儿们说房子的？" "我说我现在和以前的寝室室友合租公寓…平常他做饭我洗碗…就这些啊？"少年疑惑抬头，"然后她们就一脸兴奋娇羞，然后就没有然后了…"他的唇角悄然扬起。

"Is it because my EQ is too low... I have never had a girlfriend?" The young man felt a bit down on his way back to the shared flat from another unsuccessful blind date. Drinking tea, he [room-mate] looks at him and asks: "So how do you answer girls' questions about the housing arrangement?". "I just tell them I rent a flat with my room-mate from the dormitory and usually he cooks and I do the dishes, and that's all" answered the young man with uncertainty, "and then they would always become quite excited and shy at hearing my answers, and then, that's the end of conversation…" His lips quietly turn up.

A023

喜欢上了舍友,经常腻在一起,但不知他是不是,也不敢问,就埋在心里,那天偶然从他包里翻出了一本同志小说,按捺不住内心的激动,问他：你...是吗？他红了脸，点头承认了。我高兴的蹦起来拍了他一下："早他妈说啊！害老子等这么久！终于可以和你光明正大在一起了！"他挠了挠头："对不起啊，你太丑了。"

[I] Fell in love with [my] room-mate, often hang around together, but don't know if he is or not [gay], didn't dare ask, just kept it to [my]self. That day, by chance, [I] found a gay novel in his bag and could not hide [my] excitement: [I] asked him: "Are you…?" The roommate blushed and nodded. I happily jumped up and patted him said: "Why the hell didn't you tell me earlier?! I've been waiting for so long! Finally, I can be open with you!" He scratches his head: "I'm sorry but you are too ugly."

A024

"你到底娶不娶？"女人优雅地靠在沙发里，抽着烟。男子同样抽着烟，答："不娶！""都交往了这么久，你还有什么不满意？"女人有些焦急地掐灭了烟，瞪着男子。男人依旧："不娶。"女人拍桌而起，"那我儿子娶你可以了吧！两个男人嫁娶有啥好纠结的！还非让我说媒！"

"Are you going to take a wife or not?" The woman leans back elegantly on the sofa, smoking. The man, also smoking, answers "No!" "You have been dating for such a long time. What is it exactly that you are not satisfied with?" A little anxiously, the woman snuffs out the cigarette, and stared at the man. The man repeated: "No". The woman finally slapped the table and stood up: "How about my son marries you? What's the fuss about two guys marrying! Don't let me also do the matchmaking!"

A025

刚办完手续出来，妻问汪峰：“你这是要去哪？” 汪峰说：“乌鲁木齐，那里有我要等的人．” 妻：“原来你跟她早就…！” “对不起…” 汪峰面无表情，头也不回地坐上了去机场的车。在车上他掏出手机发了条短信：鹏，我办好了，你呢？

After the (divorce) procedures are all done, the wife asked Wang Feng, "So, where are you heading to now?" Wang Feng responded, "Urumqi. There's someone I've been waiting for." Wife: "So you and her already...!" "Sorry..." Expressionlessly, Wang Feng got into the airport-bound car without even looking back. In the car, he fished out his mobile phone and sent a text message: "Peng, I've done it, how about you?"

A026

小哥的再次失忆，吴邪没有伤心，反而显的很高兴，胖子疑问“天真无邪小同志，这小哥失忆了，我怎么看你很高兴似的？”吴邪没理胖子，拉着小哥往家走，心说，每次我都是被动的，这次你失忆了，嘿嘿…，结果，回到家后的第二天早晨，小哥精神十足的在望天，而吴邪到现在还未下床…

Instead of feeling heartbroken, Wu Xie was quite happy at the news that Xiao Ge lost his memory again. Fatty asked Wu Xie: "This is bizarre. Why do you seem so happy?" Wu Xie took Xiao Ge's hand and led him back home, without even replying to Fatty, thinking "Cool, I have always been the passive one, but now you've lost your memory, haha…" However, Xiao Ge looked quite refreshed the next morning while Wu Xie still has not got out of bed….

A027

"哥，听说大学里有很多男男相恋的例子啊。""是的啊，每天晚上都被上铺那两个摇得睡不着觉。"

"Brother, I heard there are many instances of love between men in universities." "Yeah. Every night I couldn't sleep due to the shaking from those two on the upper bunk."

A028

同志微小说（一）：他说他很爱我，可是每次出去吃饭都要让我等半个钟才到 每次去的还是同一间餐厅 终于我再也忍不住等待我提出了分手 他低着头说了句 "对不起每次让你等那么久…" 一天我回到了我们吃饭的餐厅发现味道变了，我问老板为什么 老板说以前有个男的总爱来这亲自为你下厨……

He says he loves me very much, but he always makes me wait for him at least half an hour when we go out to eat, and we always go out to the same restaurant. I can't take it anymore and tell him we shouldn't be together anymore. He bows his head and says, "sorry I keep you waiting for that long all the time..." One day, I go to the very restaurant but find the taste is different, and I ask the owner what happened. The owner tells me that there was a man who always loved to personally cook for you here…

A029

喜欢他五年了，有意无意总有些暗示，却多次被打着哈哈糊弄过去了。他又去酒吧了，平日只为看看他说几句话，今 日却点了 Whisky 蒙头猛灌。他上前按住他又要送进嘴边的酒杯："你又何必…不爱惜自己，要知道你不只是你自己的…"他以为他又要长篇大论讲他是他爸妈 的云云，却听到"你还是我的…"

He liked him for 5 years, always there were hints dropped—intentionally or otherwise—but they were repeatedly laughed off. He went to the bar on weekdays only to see him say a few words, but today he ordered whisky and was drinking irrationally. He stepped forwards and held the mouth of the glass: "Why don't you... love yourself. You should know that you don't only belong to you." He thought he would start haranguing him that he belongs to his parents, but he heard "You are also mine…"

A030

老子[161]从小上学迟到，长大了上班迟到，恋爱了约会迟到，从来没人敢说一句。现在不就结婚典礼迟了一天，你吼那么大声……我、我、我不嫁[162]了！

I have always been late for school, work, dates, but no one ever dared to say a word. Now only one day late for the wedding ceremony, why do you yell so loud… I, I am not going to marry!

A031

相亲节目上，男孩因不错的收入好看的脸蛋，现场许多女嘉宾都留了灯，到了下一个环节好友评价，大屏幕上出现了男孩最熟悉的脸说到:「男嘉宾粗心，不干家务，经常耍孩子脾气」全场霎时间全灭！「没人要了吧，」屏幕上的男子松了口气:「快跟我回家吧！」

The boy is very popular on the blind date TV show thanks to his pretty face and good income, and many of the girl guests decide to leave their lights on for him. Then it comes to friends' references, and another boy appears on the big screen, saying "he's very careless and never does cleaning, and often acts self-wilfully." The lights go off all of a sudden., "See, no one wants you

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[161] *I (male, used jocularly or in anger).*
[162] *Used of a woman, referring to marrying a man.*

anymore", the boy on the big screen is relieved and says "just come home with me."

A032

小时候，他开玩笑等他们长大了他要娶他。到了一定的年纪，他也明白了一些事理，两个人只是维持朋友关系。一次游玩，他用草编成戒指套在了他的无名指上。两人高中毕业便分开了。随着时间的流逝渐渐失去了联系，多年之后两人都有了各自幸福美满的家庭，可没人注意到草丛间有枚泛黄的草戒指。

When [they] were little, he joked that he would marry him when they get older. When [they] reached a certain age, he understood certain matters and the two stayed 'just friends'. He made a grass ring and put it on his ring finger once on a trip. The two separated after graduating from High School. As time flew by, they gradually lost contact, many years later they formed their own happy families, and no one ever noticed the yellowed grass ring in the underbrush.

A033

"你有什么梦想吗？" "我没有什么梦想" "那你有愿望吗？" "有。" "净问些蠢问题，梦想愿望不是一回事吗？还有你也是，也亏你给两个不一样的答案。" "我没有梦想因为梦想总是关于自己，我有愿望是因为我想祝愿一个人一生只为幸福流泪，不为悲伤哭泣。"

"What dreams do you have?" "I don't have any dreams." "Any wishes?" "Yes." "These stupid questions... Aren't dreams and wishes the same thing? And you, you gave two different answers." "I don't have a dream because dreams

are always concerning one's self, and I have a wish because I want to wish that a person only cries for happiness, not for sadness."

A034

他快哭成泪人儿了，水洗似的，楚楚可怜。每次知道男人又换了女人就是不要他，他就哭上一天。男人安慰的口干舌燥："你说你也不是双鱼吧，哪儿那么多泪啊？ 哭一小时了，歇会儿再哭成吗？"他一抽一抽地："我就是要哭…哭成海淹…淹死你，让你整个儿人都…都在只有我的世界里…万…万劫不复！"

He cries and cries, like running water, delicately. Every time when the guy breaks up with a girl but doesn't want him, he cries for a day. The guy is losing patience in the comforting marathon and said, "you are not even a Pisces, where did you get all these tears from? It's been an hour already, give it a break!" He sobbed, "I just want to cry, cry an ocean, to drown you with my tears, so that you will be kept in my world... lost...lost forever!"

A035

16 岁相遇，19 岁相恋，23 岁大学毕业后同居，27 岁欧洲旅行结婚，30 岁领养一子。55 岁养子结婚，60 岁养子离婚，62 岁养子再婚，67 岁养子又离婚，二老教育养子："小子折腾个什么劲，像我们一样大大方方出柜不就得了！"

[They] met at the age of 16, fell in love at 19, moved in together at 23 after graduating from university, got married at 27 during a trip to Europe and adopted a son at the age of 30. By the time they were 55, the adopted son married (a woman) and later divorced when the parents were 60. When they were 62, he married again and divorced when they were 67. The parents

then educated their adopted son: "Son, going around in circles is such effort.

Be like us and come out of the closet!"

A036

他三十有四有妻有子时，他来到他身前"你可愿为我领兵镇守边疆？"不知为何，他毫不迟疑的为他抛妻弃子。八年后，他召他回朝。皇宫内苑，他背对着他。"你可知，功高盖主？"他虎躯一震，嘴角却扬起了一抹笑……"朕这一生最大的错，怕就是赐你一死。"他白发苍苍于桃树下，抚着一陇土包。

When he (a) was aged 34 with a happy family, he (b) came up to him and asked, "would you be willing to lead the troops guarding the borderland for me?" Not exactly sure why, but he (a) left his wife and children without hesitation. Eight years later, he (b) summoned him (a) back to the court. In the palace courtyard, he (b) turned his back to him (a). "Did you know, a meritorious man may surpass his master?" Upon hearing this, he (a) was first shocked but then smiled slightly... "The biggest mistake I've ever made in my life is probably ordering you to your death," said the white-haired old man, caressing a mound of earth under a peach tree.

A037

看着大少爷和二少爷，一直很想问社长：您两个儿子这样，有何感想？其实少爷们的事，早就闻名，我好奇的，　是社长的感受。"百里，你说我生了俩儿子，该挺开　心的。"社长说道。预料之外的话，我下意识的恩[163]了一声表示肯定。社长叹了口气，继续说："可我俩儿子怎么都是被压的那个。

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[163] Sic.

Looking at the first and second sons of the company director, (I've) always wanted to ask: So, do you have any comments on your two sons? I mean, about their situations as such. In fact, the things those two get up to are quite well-known, I am just interested in what the president himself feels. "Baili, I ought to be happy indeed for the fact that I've got two boys," said the director. This being outside of my expectations. I replied with a grunt of affirmation. The president sighs and carries on: "but why are they both bottoms?"

A038

入夜，他趴在床上翻杂志，突然抬起头对他说：”这个测试说属蛇哦！”那边继续瞧着键盘，淡淡开口：”你呢？””我是龙，在上面的！”他终于转身接话道：”你不知道强龙压不过地头蛇吗！”他无语。

At night. He is browsing through a magazine on the bed and raises his head suddenly and says, "ah, this test says Snake!". The boy keeps hitting the keyboard and replied, "what about you?" "I'm a dragon, I'm the top!" He finally turns to him and said, "didn't you know that ground snakes are stronger than big dragons?" He is speechless.

A039

"昏君！"皇帝充耳不闻吃葡萄。"昏君！昏君！"皇帝继续吐葡萄皮。"昏君昏君昏君！"皇帝施施然站起身准备出门。"砰！"一脚踹开门的太傅大人阴寒着脸："我不是叫你把这鹦鹉给煮了吗！"皇帝一把搂过太傅，蹭蹭脖子："煮了它，我怎么能听见某人情动时的声音呢？""昏君！"

"Foolish Emperor!" The Emperor just eats grapes and pretends not hearing anything. "Foolish Emperor! Foolish Emperor!" The Emperor carries on

spitting out grape seeds. "Foolish Emperor! Foolish Emperor! Foolish Emperor!" The Emperor stands up slowly and quietly and prepares to go out. Bang! The door is slammed open by the Taifu Master with a thunderous look on his face: "Haven't I told you to cook this parrot?!" The Emperor pulls the Taifu Master into his arms and rubs the back of his neck, asks: "If it is cooked, how will I hear your voice when you are excited?" "Foolish Emperor!"

A040
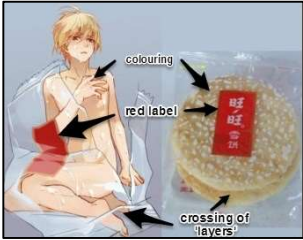
男人将剑抵在他的咽喉。"是我输了，要杀要剐，悉听尊便。"他恨恨道。"呵.."面前的人将他拉起来，揽入怀中。"我们比武之前还没有说输了的人会怎样，是吗？""哼，我说了要杀要剐悉听尊便！！""那么我要说了"，男人看着他，一字一顿："胜者为王，败者暖床"

With a sword against his throat "I've lost, if you want to kill me just do it, you're free to do anything you please" he said hatefully. "Ha" the man in front pulled him up into his arms. "Before the battle, we did not say what happens to the losers". "Urgh, I've said it already, if you want to kill me just do it!" "Then I need to say" the man looked at him, stressing each syllable, "the winner takes all, the loser warms the bed."

9.2 Micronovel image directory

Image(s)		Micronovel	Notes
1		A001	
2		A006	Two characters are *Masaomi Kida* (紀田正臣) and *Mikado Ryūgamine* (竜ヶ峰帝人), and are the central characters from *Durarara!!* (デュラララ!!)
3		A008	
4		A009	

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
5	A010	The image features a depiction of the character Kentin, from the *otome* game My Candy Love.
6	A011	
7	A012	
8	A013	

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
9	A014	
10	A015	Image shows characters from the Japanese manga series Attack on Titan 進撃の巨人 [Advancing Giants]
11 (a) (b)	A017	

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
(c) (d)		 Corresponding characters from 喜羊羊与灰太狼 (not included with micronovel, but provided for comparison)
12	A019	The child says to the man 一定要等我长大 [*You have to wait for me to grow up*]. The man responds 好 [OK]

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
13	A021	
14	A024	
15	A026	Depicts characters from *Daomu Biji* [盗墓笔记 *Grave Robbers' Chronicles*] (*Zhang Qiling* [张起灵] and *Wu Xie* [吴邪])

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
16	A030	Japanese text reads "ゆき、おやすみ" [Goodnight, Yuki], "おやすみ、兄さん" [Goodnight, my brother]
17	A031	
18	A035	Models featured are Josh Beech (top left), Cole Mohr (top right), Ash Symest, (bottom left) and Sean O'Pry (bottom right).

Image(s)	Micronovel	Notes
19	A038	
20	A040	

9.3 Plain language statements

Plain Language Statement

Project topic: **Microblog Fiction: The construction of queer identity and the negotiation of sexual citizenship in Chinese cyberspace**

Dear Interviewee,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview in connection with my PhD dissertation in the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Nottingham. The project is a study of the construction of queer identity and the negotiation of sexual citizenship in Chinese cyberspace.

Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You are able to withdraw from the interview at any time and to request that the information you have provided is not used in the project. Any information provided will be confidential. Your identity will not be disclosed in any use of the information you have supplied or opinions you have expressed during the interview.

The research project has been reviewed according to the ethical review processes in place in the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies. These processes are governed by the University's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics. Should you have any questions now or in the future, please contact me or my supervisor. Should you have concerns related to my conduct of the interview or research ethics, please contact my supervisor or the University's Ethics Committee.

Yours truly,

Gareth Shaw

Contact details:

Student researcher: Gareth Shaw (llxgjsh@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr. Xiaoling Zhang (xiaoling.zhang@nottingham.ac.uk)

University Research Ethics Committee Administrator, Ms Claire O'Callaghan (Claire.OCallaghan@nottingham.ac.uk)

声明

论文题目：<微博小说——对中国的网络空间中同志身份形成和性方面公民权谈判的分析研究>。

尊敬的参与者：

谢谢您参与这次访谈。这次访谈是与我在英国诺丁汉大学当代中国学院的博士毕业论文相联系的。研究题目是对中国的网络空间中同性恋身份形成和性方面公民权谈判的分析。

您是自愿参与此次访谈。您可以在任何时候选择放弃这次访谈，并要求您提供的信息不被使用在这篇论文中。您提供的所有信息都是保密的。在使用您提供的信息时不会涉及您的身份以及个人信息。

中国当代学院已根据研究道德检查程序对这项研究项目进行检查。这一程序是在学校关于研究行为和研究道德的行为标准的指导下进行的。如果您现在或将来有任何疑问，请联系本人或我的导师。如果您对我这次访谈中的研究行为或研究道德有任何质疑，请联系我的导师或者英国诺丁汉大学的道德委员会。

邵嘉瑞 <Gareth Shaw>

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导师：张小玲 <Xiaoling Zhang xiaoling.zhang@nottingham.ac.uk>
诺丁汉大学研究道德委员会秘书：Ms Claire O'Callaghan (Claire.OCallaghan@nottingham.ac.uk)

9.4 Participant consent forms

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project title: Microblog fiction—The construction of queer identity and the negotiation of sexual citizenship in Chinese cyberspace

Researcher's name Gareth Shaw

Supervisor's name Dr. Xiaoling Zhang

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded.
- I understand that data will be stored in accordance with data protection laws.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require more information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Sub-Committee of the University of Nottingham if I wish to make a complaint related to my involvement in the research.

Signed .... (participant)

Print name .... Date ....

Contact details

Researcher: Gareth Shaw (llxgjsh@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr. Xiaoling Zhang (xiaoling.zhang@nottingham.ac.uk)

School of Contemporary Chinese Studies Research Ethics Officer:

Dr. Andreas Fulda (andreas.fulda@nottingham.ac.uk)

参与者同意书

项目标题 <微博小说——对中国的网络空间中同志身份形成和性方面公民权谈判的分析研究>

研究者姓名 邵嘉瑞 <Gareth Shaw>

导师姓名 张小玲（博士）<Dr Xiaoling Zhang>

- 本人已阅读声明，项目组织者已经我解释了研究项目的性质和宗旨。本人理解并同意参与。
- 本人理解项目的目的和在项目中的参与作用。
- 本人明白可以在研究项目的任何阶段退出，不会因此影响现在以及将来的状况
- 本人明白研究过程中信息可能会被公开，但本人身份不会被确认，个人的调查结果始终是被保密。
- 本人知道面谈将会被录音
- 本人了解数据会根据数据保护相关法律进行存储
- 本人知道，如果需要进一步有关研究的信息可以联系研究者或者导师，如果需要对参与研究欲提出投诉则可联系诺丁汉大学科研伦理小组委员会。

参与者签名..

日期...

联系方式

研究者：邵嘉瑞 <Gareth Shaw> (llxgjsh@nottingham.ac.uk)

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当代中国学学院研究道德委员会秘书：Dr. Andreas Fulda (andreas.fulda@nottingham.ac.uk)

9.5 Interview Guide

These questions served as a starting point for both face-to-face interviews and online

surveys/email exchanges.

1）	What is your motivation for reading this kind of fiction? 您是出于怎样的动机来阅读此类(微)小说的？
2）	What elements of these stories do you enjoy? 您最喜欢此类微小说中的哪些因素？
3）	Is reading a solitary activity for you, or do you discuss it with friends, or online? 您一般是自己一个人阅读还是会和朋友们讨论他们？会在线讨论吗？
4）	Do you have any experience of, or exposure to, same sex relationships outside of fiction? 在小说之外您是否有过或听闻接触过同性经历？
5）	Do you think this kind of fiction depicts same sex relationships in a realistic way? 您是否认为此类小说真实反映现实生活中的同性关系？
6）	Do you think this kind of fiction depicts same sex relationships in a positive way? 您是否认为此类小说以一种积极的方式反应同性关系？
7）	Do you think that gay microfiction makes the representation of same sex relationships more accessible/visible? 您是否认为同志微小说帮助同性关系在社会中更广为人知？
8）	Do you consume gay fiction in other formats? if so, what? What are the differences between these formats, and what advantages do they offer? 您是否阅读过其他类型的同志题材小说？主要的区别是什么？它们有什么优势？
9）	Do you write this sort of fiction yourself? Do you reblog this fiction on Weibo? 你自己写过这种小说？你在微博上转发这种小说吗？
10）	Why do you think this kind of fiction is popular with some heterosexual women? 您觉得此类小说在异性恋女性中流行是什么原因？
11）	Do you think this kind of fiction is popular with gay men? Why/why not? 您觉得在同志圈中这类小说受欢迎吗？为什么呢？
12）	How do you feel women are portrayed in these stories? 您认为这类小说中的女性角色是如何被刻画的？
13)	Do you see a conflict between heterosexual relationships and homosexual relationships in these stories? 在这类小说中，您是否认为异性恋恋爱关系和同性恋恋爱关系之间存在某种冲突？
14）	Marriage is a very dominant theme. Does this reflect the social importance of marriage in Chinese culture? 婚姻几乎是永恒的主题，这是否从一方面反映了婚姻在中国文化中的重要性？
15）	Compared to other countries, are Chinese parents more eager to see their child get married? If so, why is that? Does the one child policy have anything to do with it, in your opinion? 与外国家相比，中国家长是否更热切盼望看到自己的后代完婚？如果是这样，为什么？您认为这与计划生育政策有关吗？

16）	Do you think a person can write about male same sex relationships without having personal experience? 您认为在缺乏自身经历的前提下，一位写手是否能够在写作中准确把握男性同性关系？
17）	Do you believe that you can guess the gender of an author by the way he/she writes? 您是否能根据创作方法判断作者的性别？
18）	Some scholars have noted that these stories tend to show sexual behaviour between men without mentioning sexual identity. Do you agree? Why do you think some writers do this? 一些学者曾指出，此类小说更倾向于展现男性之间的性行为而对他们的性取向避而不谈，您认为是这样吗？您觉得这些作者如此处理的原因是什么？
19）	Some of the material is sexually suggestive. Does its presence on Weibo therefore constitute a challenge to censorship? 一部分小说具有明显的性暗示成分，您认为这是对微博内容审查的挑战吗？
20）	Do you think that this kind of material is empowering for gay rights in China? 您认为这样的材料是否能够帮助中国的同性恋群体争取更多的权益？

9.6 Biographical details of participants

Code	Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality	Age	Origin	Profession	Method
B001	Yandong	Female	Straight	24	Zhejiang	Student	Interview
B002	Jianxiu	Female	Straight	21	Anhui	Student	Interview
B003	Zhongyu	Male	Gay	27	Hubei	NGO worker	Interview
B004	Luli	Female	Unknown	23	In. Mongolia	Businesswoman	Email
B005	Hui	Male	Gay	26	Qinghai	Unknown	Email
B006	Xiulian	Female	Straight	25	Anhui	Businesswoman	Email
B007	Sheng	Female	Straight	25	Anhui	Businesswoman	Email
B008	Jin	Male	Gay	25	Guangxi	Unknown	Email
B009	Fangchun	Female	Straight	24	Shandong	Businesswoman	Email
B010	Jie	Female	Bisexual	20	Heilongjiang	Student	Interview
B011	Chunmei	Female	Straight	20	Heilongjiang	Student	Email
B012	Guoying	Female	Straight	18	Anhui	Student	Email
B013	Jingzhen	Female	Unknown	20	Hunan	Student	Email
B014	Yiping	Female	Straight	20	Zhejiang	Student	Interview
B015	Siqin	Male	Gay	18	Xinjiang	Student	Interview
B016	Guoming	Male	Gay	39	Shanghai	Graphic Artist	Interview
B017	Lichen	Male	Gay	32	Zhejiang	Education	Interview
B018	Haocai	Male	Bisexual	22	Heilongjiang	Dancer	Email
B019	Ling	Female	Straight	20	Heilongjiang	Student	Interview
B020	Kehui	Male	Gay	UD	Beijing	Unknown	Email
B021	Pingyan	Female	Straight	20	Tianjin	Student	Email
B022	Tienong	Male	Gay	21	Hubei	Fashion Writer	Email
B023	Shiyu	Female	Straight	21	Shanxi	Student	Interview
B024	Kuiyuan	Male	Gay	39	Guangdong	Salesman	Interview
B025	Kuangdi	Male	Gay	26	Henan	Graphic Artist	WeChat
B026	Jinhua	Female	Unknown	32	Beijing	Businesswoman	Email
B027	Dan	Female	Lesbian	24	Beijing	Businesswoman	Email
B028	Zhaozhuo	Male	Gay	28	Fujian	IT Support	Interview
B029	Mengfu	Male	Gay	25	Zhejiang	Fashion Designer	Interview
B030	Xiuli	Female	Straight	20	Hebei	Student	Interview
B031	Xuan	Male	Gay	23	Liaoning	Businessman	Email
B032	Lei	Male	Gay	23	Beijing	Office Worker	Email
B033	Zhaoguo	Male	Gay	21	Zhejiang	Student	Email
B034	Tieying	Male	Gay	22	Zhejiang	Student	Interview
B035	Lili	Female	Unknown	25	Chongqing	Businesswoman	Email
B036	Yinting	Female	Unknown	26	Henan	Worker	Email
B037	Paihong	Female	Unknown	25	Hubei	Data Analyst	Email
B038	Lihua	Female	Unknown	24	Chongqing	Researcher	Email
B039	Huirong	Female	Straight	29	Guangdong	Academic	Interview

9.7 Feizan participant recruitment advertisement

Posted at http://www.feizan.com/space-event-id-6508.html on 8th November 2014