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Freeing Her Self: The Male Bottom in
Chinese Boys' Love (BL) Fiction

By

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Introduction

“He had suppressed it for way too long. As if he had always been waiting for an opportunity like this throughout these years, while bleeding profusely, he cried and shouted: ‘I will not change! Even if it’s painful, I will not change! Even if I die, I still will not change! I will never change!!!’”¹ This quote marks a classic scene in the climax of the popular Chinese Boy’s Love web novel *Tian Guan Ci Fu* (*Heaven Official’s Blessing*).

In China, Boy’s Love (BL) has become a popular subculture, beyond just a media genre, with a predominantly female audience. The term “Boys’ Love” itself, as an umbrella term for all male homoerotic and homosexual media texts, was first introduced in 1991 in Japan, influenced by the popularization of the media genres *yaoi* and *shoujo manga*.² According to Mizoguchi (2003), *yaoi* as a genre first appeared in 1960s Japan, following the production of male homoerotic and homosexual writings and comics by female authors, whereas the genre *shoujo manga*, consisting of comics catered towards young female audiences, became popularized in the 1970s.³ Whereas the genre BL broadly covers all media that portray male-male romance (such as BL television series, audio dramas, and comics), *yaoi* is often associated with sexually explicit and pornographic male-male media texts and therefore embedded within the broader genre BL.

Shortly following the introduction of the term BL in Japan, BL was migrated from Japan into China in the early 1990s, following a flooding of pirated Japanese manga, including BL manga, into the Chinese market.⁴ The popularization of Chinese BL fan creations started around

¹ Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 墨香铜臭, “Chapter 197: Xiaoyinyin jianjian dan hongyi 笑吟吟渐渐淡红衣 4 [Smiling as red robes fade 4],” *Tian Guan Ci Fu* 天官赐福, Jinjiang Wenxuecheng, updated March 25, 2024, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3200611BbK> (Though originally completed in 2018, the author had re-edited and rewritten some parts of the web novel later)

² Akiko Mizoguchi, “Male-Male Romance by and for Women in Japan: A History and the Subgenres of ‘Yaoi’ Fictions,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, no. 25 (2003): 49–75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42771903>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below,” in *Boy’s Love, Cosplays, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 4.

1998, and the majority of such Chinese works then were still focused on Japanese manga and anime franchises.⁵ More recently, however, the Chinese BL community is at a nexus of cultural exchange, mainly engaging with original *danmei* (Chinese BL) novels, with Japanese BL works and Japanese ACG series, and with slash fanfiction⁶ of Euro-American media products.⁷

My research explores why Chinese women construe the figure of the male bottom in a particular way, such that he is somehow the most humanized character in the text and simultaneously the only male character upon whom fantasies of male pregnancy are performed. I strive to uncover the social forces that drive these women to consume BL and to become interested in such particular portrayals of the male bottom. Finally, I aim to explore why women want and need to fantasize the self as a male bottom, rather than a female character. This thesis analyzes these research questions mainly through the frameworks of feminist theory and audience theory. By focusing on the particular portrayals of the male bottom that pervade Chinese BL, this thesis examines some of Chinese women's hidden, unconscious gendered fantasies, uncovering their hidden sentiments and subconscious resistances to gendered social structures in Chinese society. Studying Chinese women's reflections on Chinese gendered social structures through BL fiction, I seek to illustrate the porosity of Chinese patriarchal structures. This research thus contributes to broader literature on the various ways women contend with patriarchal power and violence.

This thesis argues that the male bottom in Chinese BL fiction, particularly BL web novels and mpreg fanfiction, is a fantasized female subject through whom Chinese women can project their lived experiences of violence and their desires. The tropes commonly found in Chinese BL

⁵ Ming Zhang, "Slash Fan Fiction in China: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Female Fan Communities and Their Fan Texts," Doctoral Thesis, Bournemouth University, 2022.

⁶ Slash fanfiction is a genre of fanfiction that features romantic or sexual relationships between same-sex characters. these relationships are not canon, or official, in the original media text.

⁷ Yang and Xu, "Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below," 8.

fiction, I argue, are reflective of Chinese women's lived experiences of patriarchal violence. In particular, this research explores the social pressures and violences faced by Chinese women, Chinese mother-daughter relationships, and the violent institutions of marriage and childbirth, in connection with tropes of the male bottom, including sufferings on the grounds of identity, the desire to live, complex relationship dynamics, and involuntary male pregnancy. Furthermore, it argues that BL serves as a space for women to express anger, and to express their desire to simultaneously destroy and be destroyed. The male body of the bottom, instead of a female body, is necessary for expressing Chinese women's lived experiences of violence and their desires, because the male body not only provides women with a safe psychological distance but also allows them to escape the psychosocial constraints of being a woman. Overall, this thesis argues that Chinese BL fiction is a form of subconscious storytelling, a form of subconscious contention with patriarchal power, for Chinese women.

Literature Review and the Present Context

Various scholars have examined the relationship between BL media texts, with yaoi as a specific subset, and their female audiences in both Chinese and Japanese contexts. Suzuki (1998) contends that yaoi as a genre was an attempt by female authors to depict ideal human relationships and to break through stereotypical love stories depicted in shoujo manga, through the genre's replacement of the female protagonist with a male protagonist.⁸ Isola (2010) recorded the various debates among scholars regarding yaoi's relation to women's agency, noting the various scholarly arguments that yaoi serves as a resistance to patriarchy, that it allows the female reader to move to the perspective of the voyeur and violator, that yaoi empowers young

⁸ Kazuko Suzuki, "Pornography or therapy: Japanese girls creating the Yaoi phenomenon," in *Millennium girls: Today's girls around the world*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 243-268.

women to negotiate sex from a distance, while some even argue that yaoi is a first step towards “true feminism.”⁹

Specifically, the particular characteristics found in Chinese and Japanese BL works have piqued scholars’ interest. Pagliassotti (2010) has found that, for Japanese BL manga readers, rape scenes in BL manga may not only be conceived of as extreme versions of hurt/comfort tropes in slash fiction but also may offer readers an excuse to enjoy rape fantasies without guilt, that BL manga is often narrated from the bottom’s perspective, and that BL manga allows them to avoid the emotional turmoil that would occur if they identified with a female character.¹⁰ Suzuki (1998) argued that male pregnancy within Japanese yaoi serves as a technique for demonstrating how romantic relationships are deepened.¹¹ In the Chinese context, Zhang (2016) argued that BL empowers women to cast a voyeuristic gaze upon men, particularly because women have no sense of identification with the male protagonist and thus are emancipated from the male gaze and empowered to objectify male characters.¹² Feng (2009) argued that women consume and produce Chinese BL web fiction not only to fantasize about ideal masculinity, but also to imagine themselves as freer than they are allowed to be.¹³ Chao (2016) noted that Chinese BL pornography is characterized by the great popularity of brutality and violence, including depictions of rape, gang rape, BDSM, and physical impossibilities such as male pregnancy, and that the role of a female writer or reader is a female spectator who casts a cross-gender gaze onto

⁹ Mark John Isola, “Yaoi and Slash Fiction: Women Writing, Reading, and Getting Off?,” in *Boys’ Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre*, ed. Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, and Dru Pagliassotti (MacFarland & Co., 2010), 84-98.

¹⁰ Dru Pagliassotti, “Better than Romance? Japanese BL Manga and the Subgenre of Male/Male Romantic Fiction,” in *Boys’ Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre*, ed. Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, and Dru Pagliassotti (MacFarland & Co, 2010), 59-83.

¹¹ Suzuki. “Pornography or therapy: Japanese girls creating the Yaoi phenomenon.”

¹² Chunyu Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women’s Paradoxical Fandom of “Boys’ Love” Fiction,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 3 (2016): 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2016.1190806>

¹³ Jin Feng, ““Addicted to Beauty”: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 1–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41491008>.

the male characters.¹⁴ Both Chao (2016) and Naigake (2012) noted that rape is used as a device to build emotional attachment between the two characters, for both Chinese and Japanese BL works, often defining the violent act as the top's uncontrollable love for the bottom.¹⁵ Chinese cultural scholar Jinhua Dai has argued, in an academic seminar, that Chinese BL is reflective of power relations within Chinese culture, that BL relationships not only reflect women in patriarchal heterosexual relationships but also reflect the historical web of Chinese social power relations, particularly the power dynamics of ruler to subject, husband to wife, and father to son.¹⁶

Importantly, written works on Chinese BL have always been more widely consumed than other forms of media such as comics, because Chinese women have found that fiction writing more easily bypasses Chinese government censorship.¹⁷ Katrien (2020) traces the history of Chinese government crackdown on BL content, noting that while BL was considered harmless in 2008, the period from 2010 to 2015 was marked by major crackdowns from the government, with the most severe raids happening in 2012 to 2014. In the period from 2012 to 2014, some of the actions the Chinese government took included a total ban on *rou* fiction (those that included pornographic depictions) on Jinjiangwenxuecheng, a major Chinese website for web fiction and most known for its massive library of high-quality original *danmei* works, permitting only

¹⁴ Shih-Chen Chao, "Grotesque Eroticism in the Danmei Genre: The Case of Lucifer's Club in Chinese Cyberspace," *Porn Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2015.1119991>

¹⁵ Kazumi Nagaike, "Perverse Sexualities, Perverse Desires: Representations of Female Fantasies and Yaoi Manga as Pornography Directed at Women," in *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-Male Erotica*, vol. 37 (Brill, 2012), 127–128.

¹⁶ Renpiaomiaohenyuyue 任飘渺很愉悦, "Dai Jinhua tan danmei shoukong xinli 戴锦华谈耽美受控心理 [Jinhua Dai discusses the psychology of people who like male bottoms in danmei]," Bilibili, January 31, 2026, 23 min., 28 sec., <https://b23.tv/EVIGJSg>

¹⁷ Zhang, "Slash Fan Fiction in China: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in Chinese Female Fan Communities and Their Fan Texts."

qingshui fiction (those without pornography).¹⁸ To this day, BL still remains a target of state censorship.

While there is no formal history written regarding the development of male pregnancy (mpreg) as a subgenre of BL in the Chinese context, the Chinese BL community generally believe that mpreg in China developed after the subgenre omegaverse was imported from Euro-America. Omegaverse is a subgenre of fanfiction, formally originated in the early 2010s and usually found in slash fanfiction, centered on a world of secondary genders: Alpha, Beta, and Omega, in this hierarchical order. Omegas can become pregnant, no matter their primary gender, even if they are male. Alphas, on the other hand, are responsible for and capable of impregnating Omegas, even if they are female. Betas in the omegaverse universe are average, typical human individuals, without capabilities such as going into heat and having pheromones like Alphas and Omegas do. While the Chinese community often have debates over the omegaverse fanfiction that popularized in China and thus spurred on the development of mpreg in Chinese BL, some of the popular contestants include works on *Sherlock Holmes* and *Supernatural*.

Given the complex web of relations within the world of BL, missing in these academic discussions on the relationship between BL and female desire is a study of female desire grounded in its sociocultural specificities and quotidian realities. My research examines the male bottom in Chinese BL fiction as a holistic unit of analysis, in conjunction with the lived experiences of Chinese women.

¹⁸ Katrien Jacobs, "Smouldering Pornographies on the Chinese Internet," *Porn Studies* 7, no.3 (2020): 337–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2020.1776151>

Methodology

To analyze why Chinese women are drawn to the figure of the male bottom, I use a combination of ethnographic data, textual evidence, and autoethnographic reflections. I chose Archive of Our Own (AO3) as the platform to read and examine Chinese BL mpreg fanfiction, particularly due to consideration for Chinese state regulation and censorship on pornography. Though Chinese women frequently publish and read fanfiction and original fiction on platforms such as Lofter and Jinjiangwenxuecheng, many choose to publish their pornographic works on AO3, in order to avoid censorship and to publish the full work without needing to censor the pornographic parts of mpreg fanfiction. For these reasons, AO3 served as the most suitable platform for me to research mpreg fanfiction. I sorted fanfiction by the “Mpreg” tag and then by the amount of kudos, and I read many of the most liked pieces. It must be noted that, when sorted under the “Mpreg” tag, the most popular pieces were generally published around the period from 2017 to the present.¹⁹ For the duration of this research, I’ve read, analyzed, and coded around 30 to 40 mpreg fanfiction texts. But prior to this research, I have read more than 100 Chinese mpreg fanfiction texts for leisure, without an analytical or disciplinary lens; I use my own, autoethnographic reflections drawn from years of participation in the community.

In addition to fanfiction, I also examine three highly popular Chinese BL original web novels: *Qiang Jin Jiu (Ballad of Sword and Wine)* by Tang Jiuqing (唐酒卿), *Tian Guan Ci Fu (Heaven Official’s Blessing)* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (墨香铜臭), and *Mo Dao Zu Shi (The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation)* also by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. All three web novels were originally published online on Jinjiangwenxuecheng, completed in 2019, 2018, and 2016 in the respective order. I had initially chosen these three works for their popularity, with the two web

¹⁹ It is rather common for Chinese authors to not tag their fanfiction works, aside from simply tagging the characters involved, so the parameters of time may not be highly accurate, but rather an estimate. It can be very difficult to find untagged mpreg fanfiction text if one is not searching inside a specific fandom or a specific ship.

novels by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu gaining global traction. All three original web novels managed to stand the test of time, and they are still considered some of the most popular and the best-written works by the Chinese BL community to this day. Later, I realized that *Qiang Jin Jiu* and *Tian Guan Ci Fu* aligned with the estimated timeline for popularity of the mpreg trope in China, so I decided to keep them within my archive. I kept *Mo Dao Zu Shi* nevertheless, particularly because it is arguably the most influential BL franchise in China. The original web novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* has been serialized into manhua (Chinese comic), the tv show “The Untamed,” donghua (Chinese cartoon), and audio drama. Because of its extreme popularity and its status in the BL community, not only in China but also globally, I thought it would only be fair to include the original web novel in my analysis.

To gather Chinese women’s opinions on why they like to consume BL and mpreg fiction and why they are attracted only to the male bottom, I observed and collected existing social media posts and comments primarily under the tags “#bl”, “#mpreg”, and “#嬷嬷” on the platform RedNote, a Chinese social media platform with predominantly female users.²⁰ At the time of writing, the tags each have 2.49 billion views and 17.5 million discussions, 110 million views and 191k discussions, and 310 million views and 3.62 million discussions, respectively. The term *momo* (嬷嬷) in Chinese BL community denotes an identity for women who like “*shou fu wei*” (“受腐唯,” which is directly translated as “receiver/bottom, oriented in a male-male relationship, only”), meaning that the woman is interested in only the bottom character in a male-male relationship. Though the verb form of the term *momo*, *mo* (嬷), nowadays can be broadly used to convey a notion of doing feminization and vulnerability to any person or

²⁰ Rachel Treisman, “What to Know about Rednote, the Chinese App That American TikTokkers Are Flooding,” *Louisville Public Media*, January 18, 2025. <https://www.lpm.org/news/2025-01-18/what-to-know-about-rednote-the-chinese-app-that-american-tiktokkers-are-flooding>

character, the act of *mo* is still largely situated in the Chinese BL community. Though what exactly entails the act of *mo* – as an act of *doing* – is often debated by the Chinese BL community, to *mo* a character within the context of BL generally carries implications of *inflicting* penetration, *inflicting* feminization, and *inflicting* vulnerability, with implied capacity for the male character to be pregnant.²¹ Because of these implications of doing *mo*, I used the tag “#嬷” precisely for its meaning of women doing *mo* to male bottoms.

In addition, I collected ethnographic data on Chinese women’s lived experiences of various violences (beyond the scope of BL fiction), which are often centered on familial and parental dynamics, by observing existing posts and comments on RedNote. Rather than primarily relying on tag searches for these ethnographic data, I used a combination of short videos under the “trending” tab, posts suggested to me on my homepage by the algorithm, and posts by searching through tags such as “#女性” (“#women”) and “#女性是一种处境” (“#woman is a type of situation”) for my analysis.

All ethnographic data, fanfiction texts, and web novels that I collected and used were originally presented in Simplified/Mandarin Chinese. All translations into English are my own.

My Personal Relation to the Research

I first encountered BL when I was eleven years old, in summer of 2014, a year after I had immigrated to Southern California from Shanghai with my family. I watched an anime series for the first time. Through engaging with its Chinese fandom, I somehow started shipping²² male characters together (I particularly liked shipping enemies) and then discovered the world of BL through fanfiction. At the time, I didn’t know of others who also read this type of literature

²¹ I’ve gathered a general consensus, by no means a comprehensive account, of what *mo* means after observing comments and posts of *momo* on the social media platforms RedNote, Lofter, and Bilibili.

²² Shipping, derived from the word “relationship,” refers to an act of desiring for two characters or individuals to be in a relationship, located within a fandom.

(partially because I could not speak English then), so I only read a combination of Chinese mainland and Taiwanese BL fanfiction in the fandom, through a website that usually featured fanfiction published in the early to late 2000s.

Then, in seventh grade, in fall of 2015, I met a group of Chinese American friends, all women except one, who enjoyed the same genres. During lunch breaks in middle school, we would sit together, and discuss and recommend various manga, anime, and games. It was with those friends that I learned there were many others who also consume BL media texts. While we read and discussed BL fanfiction, manga, anime, and web novels, we also discussed our consumption of yaoi manga, shoujo manga and anime, otome games (heterosexual romance video games targeted towards women), and sometimes even heterosexual romances on the website Wattpad. It is through my friendship with them that I learned about yaoi manga, various new BL works, and various websites and platforms to consume BL content. Over the years, as we entered high school together, we started to consume less and less of shoujo manga and anime, and we entirely ditched heterosexual romance stories on platforms like Wattpad, because we started to dislike how these stories portrayed women and heterosexual relationships in extremely sexist and stereotypical ways. What always continued was the discussion and arguments surrounding BL – we would sometimes get into heated arguments on who should be the bottom or the top in the male-male ship. We also often shared with each other that, instead of going to bed at a reasonable hour, we stayed up late reading BL fanfiction on AO3. By the end of 10th grade, I stopped consuming heterosexual romance texts, whether it be published novels, manga, anime, web novels, or fanfiction – my interest had turned entirely to BL. At this point, I was engaged with both the American and the Chinese BL communities. In college, many of the female friends I've met, no matter their ethnicity, culture, or upbringing, have consumed or know

of BL content in some form or are actively engaged with the genre. I gradually started to spend more of my time engaging with the Chinese BL community, partially because I found their works and discussions more intense than those produced by its American counterpart.

While I have always found many commonalities between myself and my Chinese American friends, who are second or third-generation immigrants, I always felt a significant disconnect from them regarding familial relationships. It wasn't until when I entered college, when I first met a friend who grew up and spent all her time before college in China, that I realized my familial dilemmas were not anomalous. Interestingly, aside from our shared parental troubles, she was also actively engaged with BL. She introduced me to the Chinese social media platform RedNote in 2022, during spring quarter of my first year at UChicago. On RedNote, I saw a myriad of posts and comments by Chinese women who shared their stories and personal experiences regarding their parents. While I have long suspected that my parental troubles were almost entirely based on sexism, seeing those posts and talking with some of my East Asian female friends made me fully confirm that my experiences were part of a broader societal problem. To my surprise, I found that not only do my parents use the same exact coercive and manipulative tactics and strategies as the parents of many other Chinese women do (such as constant deliberate attempts to sabotage our career prospects, personal relationships, and social networks), even the particular wording of certain gaslighting and derogatory phrases used against us would be exactly the same – the same even across a myriad of cases (such as “I should’ve raised a dog instead of you, a dog would at least wag its tail at me”). Through our shared anger, hatred, sorrow, despair, and hope, I quickly realized that there is something within Chinese sociohistorical structures that render these parental violences towards the daughter as rather normative, as things that are not unacceptable within Chinese society.

At the time of writing, I've been consuming BL content for twelve years and continue to do so. I have read a large variety of BL media texts spanning more than two decades, ranging from American BL fanfiction works published in 2000 on fanfiction.net to current BL media texts on various platforms. In a certain sense, I've personally witnessed the growth and changes of the genre, along with many of my female friends. As of now, I've discarded heterosexual romances almost entirely, even ditching otome games such as "Love and Deepspace," and yet, I somehow just cannot stop consuming BL media texts for leisure. Somehow, on stressful days and on many regular days, I just have to consume BL content at the end of the day, disengaged from critical and analytical thinking, in the private confines of my room.

General Characteristics of Chinese BL

Of the Chinese BL web novels and fanfiction texts I've examined for research and personally consumed over the years, critical, shared tropes are found in most of these texts. First, the text usually opens with a description or perspective of the male bottom as entry into the fictional world. In *Qiang Jin Jiu*, the very first scene of the web novel depicts an interrogation of *Shen Zechuan*, the male bottom. In *Tian Guan Ci Fu*, the web novel immediately begins with a description of *Xie Lian*, the male bottom. In *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, the very first sentence of the web novel states the news of the death of *Wei Wuxian*, the male bottom. Such a trend is found in many of the mpreg fanfiction texts I've examined as well. For example, "Blind Alley" begins by describing the male bottom's attempt to escape the monster,²³ "第479号房间" begins with stating that the male bottom had awoken in a room,²⁴ "【all莱】过犹不及(完结)" begins with the male

²³ Desmonty, "Blind Alley," *Archive of Our Own*, completed January 29, 2020, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17681360/chapters/41704481>

²⁴ Flofa, "Di 479 hao fangjian 第479号房间 [The 479th room]," *Archive of Our Own*, completed July 31, 2023, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/45759439/chapters/115153975>

bottom receiving and replying to a text message.²⁵ Not only do readers often first encounter the fictional world through the male bottom, the male bottom usually also serves as the protagonist of the story, that readers often progress through the story via his perspective and have privileged access to only his private thoughts.

The male bottoms, as Feng (2009) noted, are invariably portrayed as having great physical beauty, sometimes appearing androgynous.²⁶ The authors for web novels *Qiang Jin Jiu*, *Tian Guan Ci Fu*, and *Mo Dao Zu Shi* all dedicate a significant amount of time portraying the male bottoms' exceptional beauty, often comparing their skin to fragile pale jade and using scenic depictions to describe their overall appearances. In the mpreg fanfiction texts as well, even when the male characters in the original universe are presented as masculine, authors depict the beauty of the characters, who are positioned as the male bottom in the fanfiction texts, by emphasizing their physical and emotional vulnerability. In some cases, authors of BL fanfiction would even portray the male bottom as having a vagina, instead of a penis.

Cultural scholar Jinhua Dai, in an interview with Peking University Press, noted that Chinese BL fiction, though written by and intended to be read by women, often is set in the genres of Wuxia (a genre of historical fantasy concerning martial arts) and War, that the stories are often filled with depictions of military knowledge, a desire for conquest, a strong desire for power, and a deep understanding of power structures, which are all extremely rare occurrences in heterosexual romances.²⁷ This proves particularly true in *Qiang Jin Jiu*, since the text revolves around how *Shen Lanzhou*, the male bottom, constantly utilizes militaristic strategies, schemed

²⁵ Innerlip, “[all Lai]Guoyou buji (wanjie)[all莱]过犹不及(完结) [all x Reiner]Too far is as bad as not enough (completed).” *Archive of Our Own*, completed December 25, 2021, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/30725672/chapters/75830054>

²⁶ Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” 25.

²⁷ Beijing Daxue Chuban Sheguan 北京大学出版社官 [Peking University Press], “Beida Dai Jinhua jiaoshou: ruhe kandai “danmei xiaoshuo”? 北大戴锦华教授:如何看待“耽美小说”? [Peking University Professor Jinhua Dai: how do you view “danmei novels”?], Bilibili, February 21, 2024, 1 min., 49 sec., <https://b23.tv/3NBGfJb>

with various parties of power, and navigated through power structures, all in order to dissolve existing corrupt structures of power; he eventually became the emperor, even though he began as a prisoner who was scapegoated and tortured for his father's wrongdoings. While *Mo Dao Zu Shi* and *Tian Guan Ci Fu* do not depict the male bottoms desiring power as strongly as the case in *Qiang Jin Jiu*, both web novels do significantly depict how structures of power had framed the male bottoms as scapegoats, as innocent individuals who were blamed for the state of the world. All three web novels, nevertheless, involve larger, complex structures of power as responsible for bringing pain and suffering to the male bottom.

The Experiences of Violence

On the Grounds of Identity

Within the three web novels and almost all of the fanfiction texts I've sampled, major descriptions of suffering and pain are predominantly associated with the male bottom. In *Qiang Jin Jiu*, Shen Lanzhou was imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated for years because his father, who deserted him, had betrayed the imperial power and colluded with the enemy, even though Lanzhou wasn't aware of anything his father did when he was being interrogated and tortured for his father's deeds. Lanzhou was tortured purely because he was his father's only remaining child, even though the imperial court, who ordered for his imprisonment and torture, knows he had been deserted by his father from a young age and thus would. In *Tian Guan Ci Fu*, Xie Lian suffered for 800 years mainly because Jun Wu, who was initially a father/mentor figure for Xie Lian, wanted Xie Lian to make the same choices as he did after seeing the similarities between them. One of the most famous scenes in the novel included Jun Wu successfully inciting a mob to stab Xie Lian, piercing Xie Lian's heart with 100 swords, just because Jun Wu wanted Xie Lian to become a person like him. In *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, Wei Wuxian was severely misunderstood, scapegoated for others' wrongdoings, and killed mainly because he practiced *guidao* instead of the legitimate *jiandao* he previously practiced. But this shift happened only because he sacrificed his *jindan* to save his adoptive brother, rendering him incapable of practicing *jiandao*.

Similarly, in mpreg fanfiction, if sufferings that extend outside of the relationship between the male top and male bottom are depicted in the work, the male bottom's identity is often the cause for these sufferings. In “第479号房间,” there are mentions of the male bottom being attacked and beaten up because of his biological characteristics linked to being an omega²⁸;

²⁸ Omega here is a type of secondary gender, one that enables the character to have certain biological capabilities such as becoming pregnant, no matter if their primary gender is male or female, situated in the fanfiction subgenre omegaverse.

he states that he hates his omega identity.²⁹ In “刺客与皇帝”, the male bottom describes himself to be “a monster who is neither male nor female,” and that his self-hatred was implied to be partly due to the fact that his body had both a penis and vagina.³⁰ In “Dark World,” the male bottom was later gangraped and forcibly turned into a “camp prostitute” (*yingji*) because he was an elf and because he was physically beautiful.³¹ In general, though Chinese mpreg fanfiction is often written and read with a primarily pornographic interest, indicated by the largely skewed proportion of pornographic content to the narrative in the texts, the trend of the male bottom’s identity as a cause for suffering is found in both primarily narrative and primarily pornographic mpreg fanfiction texts. Nevertheless, there are particular differences between primarily narrative and primarily pornographic texts. While male bottoms in both types of texts often suffer due to issues of identity, primarily pornographic texts often use violent sex as cause for initial suffering and pain, compared to primarily narrative texts where their pain and suffering often appear in the form of being scapegoated for sociopolitical problems.

In a certain sense, these male bottoms, in both web novels and mpreg fanfiction, suffered not because of particular deeds they’ve committed, but because of who they were born as, who and how they are, and their positionalities. Their identities and personalities were the primary cause for others to inflict violence upon them. It is not about particular events, it is not about what they’ve done – it has everything to do with who the male bottoms *are*.

In Chinese society, similarly, simply being born as female serves as legitimate grounds for inflicting violence. On the issue of marriage, whereas men are motivated to marry through the promise of a wife providing free affective labor, women are constantly belittled, gaslighted,

²⁹ Flofa, “Di 479 hao fangjian.”

³⁰ Jijuta, “Cike yu huangdi 刺客与皇帝 [The assassin and the emperor],” *Archive of Our Own*, completed February 04, 2018, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/13427751/chapters/30772425>

³¹ Ire1ia, “Dark World,” *Archive of Our Own*, completed February 16, 2026, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/42211704/chapters/105980160#workskin>

and hunted down via the discourse of needing to marry to prove their “value” and adherence to discourses of “love.” This is reflected in countless Chinese women’s accounts of their life experiences. For example, a woman posted about her experience regarding the pressure to marry, in contrast with that of a man:

[Marriage for women] is not something that delivers happiness, it is a planned hunt (*wei lie*). Did you discover, once girls are almost at the age [of marriage] and still without signs [of marriage], people around you...no longer care if you’re happy, they will only incessantly whisper in your ears, saying how you’re 30 and still unmarried, how your value will decrease; they will say that you won’t even have a person to pour you water in front of your hospital bed when you’re old... They will threaten you, crack you down, belittle you, and even forcibly tie you to national social responsibilities, all to force you to bow down your head and admit defeat in this game called marriage. But go look at how they’re coaxing (*hong*) boys. They’ve prepared houses and cars for you, collected enough brideprice for you, the only thing missing is *qu* (marrying in) a wife to cook, clean, and *ci hou* (taking care of / serving) your entire family. Once you *qu* a wife you’ll have someone to pamper you, someone will make you noodles the moment you get back from work, someone will take care of you once you’re old, and if she has a child she can continue your lineage/bloodline...³²

Coercion is at the heart of the discourses and tactics employed to force Chinese women to marry. People around her attempt to induce fear in her, to try to convince her that she is losing her value as a woman and that her future will be compromised if she doesn’t marry a man. In an entirely opposite fashion, a Chinese man is enticed, instead of belittled, into marriage, by the promise that he and his family will be taken good care of by his wife. For Chinese women, these coercive discourses do not dwindle as women age; they may appear in different forms at different ages, but they nonetheless permeate a woman’s entire life. I here offer an extended quotation from a woman’s personal experience regarding the pressure to marry, in order to demonstrate how coercive discourses shift throughout different phases of a Chinese woman’s life:

...At 20 years old, the whole world told me: love is the best destination for women. They said: “Find someone you can entrust your life to, so you will live happily ever after.” ...

³² “为什么对女孩是施压对男孩是利诱？这篇文章拆解了婚姻...,” RedNote, January 08, 2026.

These discourses have only one core goal: at the height of my reproductive value, they want to make me willingly give over my body, last name, and my entire life. Nobody said this was an exchange, everybody called it “love.” Nobody said this was ownership, everybody said this was “happiness.” Moreover, nobody told me, once you give birth, you enter into a track of mother-occupation labor, wife-occupation labor, reproductive labor for the family. For the rest of your life, you are trapped within this system.

At 30 years old...pressure came from all directions. “If you don’t give birth soon it will be too late.” “If you don’t have a child you will be alone when you’re old.” The entire world is reminding you, your “core value” will expire soon... Because I was always unwilling to surrender, I’m...being belittled, being crushed down, being told “you’re too picky” “your standards are too high.” This is using humiliation to force you to conform.

40 years old, this is my current situation. Those men who privately messaged me... they seek 40 year-old independent women because: financial independence, he doesn’t need to support her, and he can even share her property. Emotional stability...she can even offer [him] emotional value. Her health is decent, she can take care of him in his old age. They are selecting an unpaid premium caregiver, another way of exploiting single women.

I can foresee that when I’m 70 years old, a group of “sunset romance” pursuers will appear... In their eyes, old women are the last usable resource: they can move, they can take care of people, they have retirement funds, “what requirements/standards can they have”... Women’s productive values are exploited until the very last moment, and yet, her right as “someone needing to be taken care of” is always ranked as last.

Why can this hunting system penetrate our entire lives? Because there’s a system of discourses that is cooperating, it is called “love.” It teaches women to believe: to never make calculations in love, to be needed is a form of value, and that sacrifice is noble...³³

Along with coercive discourses, the discourse of love is central to the exploitation of Chinese women. By being repeatedly told throughout their lives that they need romantic “love” from men, women are coerced into willingly being exploited by men through the institution of marriage, whether it be their affective labor, economic assets, or reproductive capabilities. Moreover, within the family, women are the objects of exploitation, such that the preservation of the Chinese family depends on the exploitation of women. In the case of the mother, she is

³³ “亲身经历到，女人的一生，都是被围猎的对象,” RedNote, January 13, 2026.

exploited by her son and her husband. In the case of the daughter, she is exploited by her brother and her father, and often her mother as well:

East Asia is mother-daughter acting as wife-husband, husband-wife acting as son-mother, mother-son acting as a couple, a couple acting as father-daughter, father-daughter acting as daughter-mother.³⁴

This cycle [mentioned above] mainly consists of father sucking blood (of mother and daughter), son sucking blood (of mother and sisters), and the mother sucking blood of the daughter. The daughter is the last in this bloodsucking chain, she has to endure bloodsucking from 3 people. If she wants to upgrade, she can only become a mother. This way, she only has to endure bloodsucking from 2 people, her son and husband, and she can start to suck the blood of her daughter too, which totals to having to endure bloodsucking from only 1 person.”³⁵

Give their daughter a meal, hoping she would carve out her heart for them. Carve out their hearts for their son, hoping he would give them a meal.³⁶

Even when they are positioned as children in the Chinese family, Chinese men’s gender as male already allows them to exploit all women in the family, whether it be his mother or his sisters.³⁷

Women, however, suffer from permanent exploitation in the Chinese family – no matter if she rises through the ranks of seniority – due to her lack of power on the basis of her gender.

All of the accounts above, whether it be differences in position in the family or in tactics and languages used to encourage marriage, reflect how differently men and women are treated in

³⁴ User A (pseudonym), comment on “东亚人的亲密关系 🤮 狠狠点了,” RedNote, May 15, 2025.

³⁵ User B (pseudonym), comment on “东亚人的亲密关系 🤮 狠狠点了.”

³⁶ “父母对女儿VS儿子,” RedNote, February 11, 2026.

³⁷ I have elected to not give details about the various forms of exploitation within Chinese familial relationships in the body of this paper. Nevertheless, it is very common in China for daughters to go to work (and give up on education in more rural areas) in order to or be expected to earn money to fund for her brother, whether it be for his education, the brideprice money he has to prepare, or the houses and cars he has to buy. Even though parents will often take the daughter’s earnings to fund for their son, to buy properties for him and nothing for her, they will still only expect the daughter to take care of them in their old age. The son is not expected to take care of them, even though he reaped all the benefits. In the case that the family has no daughters, the responsibility of caretaking falls onto the son’s wife, not the son. And this is only one form of the exploitation that women face in the family. In another example, in situations of domestic abuse, it is not uncommon for the son to side with his father to abuse his mother together. I have seen many accounts, whether it be news reports or personal accounts online, of women saying that after witnessing the mother beaten up by the father, the son told the mother to go make dinner for the entire family without any words of concern. In the Chinese family, it is common practice for the son to not only ignore his mother’s active misery but to also actively encourage her to tolerate abuse for his own benefit.

Chinese society. They clearly highlight how women are being hunted down and exploited in order to sustain Chinese patriarchy. Chinese women are in alienated positions throughout their lives: they are exploited by men, by their husbands and sons, with the entire society generating discourses urging them to willingly submit to exploitation. Michel Foucault's theory of biopower contends that bodies are regulated through various technologies of the state, including social punitive mechanisms.³⁸ Belittlement and gaslighting, as reflected in the previous accounts, are common punitive mechanisms used to make Chinese women willingly be exploited under the discourse of love. Contrasting the male experiences, her identity as a woman somehow is her original sin, that it somehow serves as legitimate reasons for her to tolerate violence from those around her and from larger social structures. Is it pure coincidence, I ask, that the reasons why male bottoms and women suffer are both an issue of identity, given that the male bottoms are written by women? Is it pure coincidence that the male top's identity almost never makes him suffer to the same extent as the male bottom does from his identity?

The Desire to Live

What's also remarkable in Chinese BL texts is the consistent trope of the male bottom expressing his fierce desire to live in face of pain and suffering. For example, in *Qiang Jin Jiu*, Shen Lanzhou frequently makes statements such as:

“Tens of thousands of people want me to die, but if I let them have their way, then wouldn't it be very unpleasant for me”³⁹

The one thing Shen Zechuan [Shen Lanzhou's other name] believes the least in is the destiny predetermined by the universe!⁴⁰

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).

³⁹ Tang Jiuqing 唐酒卿, “Chapter 29: Mingshu 命数 [Destiny],” *Qiang Jin Jiu* 将进酒 [Ballad of Sword and Wine], Jinjiang Wenxuecheng, updated October 28, 2018, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3373718>

⁴⁰ Tang Jiuqing 唐酒卿, “Chapter 31: Qiecuo 切磋 [Spar],” *Qiang Jin Jiu* 将进酒 [Ballad of Sword and Wine], Jinjiang Wenxuecheng, updated November 20, 2020, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3373718>

Now that [Shen Lanzhou] had worn these shackles and chains, he would have to drag these heavy burdens with him forward from now on. But he is not willing to accept it (*bugan xin*)!⁴¹

In mpreg fanfiction “刺客与皇帝,” the emperor, the male bottom, is described as such:

Even though he always verbally referred to himself as “the person on the brink of death,” the emperor never actually wanted to die. He wants to live, probably more so than anyone else...the price he was willing to pay for his survival...was not a simple bargaining chip to be easily tossed. Even for the emperor, it is precious.⁴²

In mpreg fanfiction “吴邪的受难笔记,” the male bottom says:

Like now, I don’t want to die, but my will to live is getting slowly eroded by the pain...but I cannot die.⁴³

These are just a few examples of the common trend of male bottom’s desire to live, and even so, the described extent to which the male bottoms want to live is rather remarkable. Bottoms are portrayed as not willing to accept their fate, not willing to give in to pain, and as wanting to live more than anyone else.

Similarly, when Chinese women on RedNote are asked why they like to *mo* (an act generally encompassing the implied acts of *inflicting* penetration, *inflicting* feminization, *inflicting* vulnerability, with implied capacity for pregnancy) a male character, they often express that it is because they want to see him as being able to resist and to live as himself in face of pain and suffering:

Some characters will only burst with dazzling vitality in dire situations, this is why *mei qiang can* (beautiful, strong, and miserable) [characters] are popular. Misery is only a means; the goal is to change, reflect, break down and rebuild through misery. The process of bursting into resistance or destruction is to demonstrate character personality...⁴⁴

⁴¹ Tang Jiuqing 唐酒卿, “Chapter 5: Yixian 一线 [Frontline],” *Qiang Jin Jiu* 将进酒 [Ballad of Sword and Wine], Jinjiang Wenxuecheng, updated December 05, 2018, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3373718>

⁴² Jijuta, “Cike yu huangdi.”

⁴³ Ignoble_being, “Wuxie de shounan biji 吴邪的受难笔记 [The journal of Wuxie’s suffering],” *Archive of Our Own*, updated February 23, 2021, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/18653584/chapters/44237014#workskin>

⁴⁴ User C (pseudonym), comment on “想知道一些同人女当嬷嬷是不是因为...,” RedNote, May 28, 2025.

...I love these types of people. His fleshly body is being tortured, ruined; his beautiful eyes are filled with tears; his body trembling, or covered in scars, or wrapped in desire; his vulnerability is breathtakingly beautiful. And yet, through his tears, you saw his unshakeable, indestructible soul. He is so insignificant in the face of power and class; power can easily kill him, but it can never completely own him. He painfully yet resolutely gazes at his own ideals and faith. He would rather die in the cold wilderness, than to return to the empty hotbed of power and wealth.⁴⁵

...I personally think, the “stronger” the character is portrayed, the more meaning there is to *mo*. It is exactly that moment of brokenness and vulnerability that I want to see, watching how someone standing at the top is forced to grovel, or how he willingly sinks. If you simply mold [oppositely] him into a weak character, you’re brutally removing his inherent pride and rebellious spirit, forcing him to accept his fate.⁴⁶

While these comments state “male characters” instead of specifically “male bottoms,” because to *mo*⁴⁷ conveys a notion of *inflicting* penetration and feminization to a male character, we can assume that these male characters are positioned as male bottoms. Plus, there is a similar trend between these Chinese women’s comments and the male bottoms’ desire to live in the fiction texts as presented previously. These comments express a central desire to see the male bottoms persevere through their encounters with violence – women want to see the male bottoms as being able to hold on to their beliefs and souls when others are trying to break them down. Suffering is only a process; what is truly at stake is a testament to the strength of the male bottom’s will to live and to resist the breakdown of the self. This desire to see male bottoms succeed in maintaining their selves echoes the portrayals of male bottoms in BL texts, where they are, as demonstrated previously, portrayed as wanting to live more than anything else, unwilling to succumb to pressures, and not willing to just accept their fate and give up their faith, in face of misery and pain.

⁴⁵ User D (pseudonym), comment on “喜欢内在强大或心中有围墙的右位,” RedNote, November 22, 2025.

⁴⁶ User E (pseudonym), comment on “为什么可以接受嬷但好像一直不太吃泥塑的饭,” RedNote, October 15, 2025.

⁴⁷ In the introduction of this paper, I’ve also outlined that *mo* is a verb form of *momo*, which denotes an identity for women who are only interested in the male bottom in a male-male relationship.

Is this not somewhat reminiscent of Chinese women's situations in their patriarchal society? When Chinese women are being gaslighted, belittled, and humiliated by people around them, is it not a form of violence that is attempting to break them down, attempting to make them submit to exploitative institutions such as marriage? Chinese women's desire to see the male bottom hold on to his beliefs and to see him resist in face of violence, the male bottom's suffering and encountered violence due to his identity – the male bottom mirrors Chinese women's own experiences of violence and their own desires to resist violent structures and to maintain their selves.

Complex Intimate Relationships

Another interesting trope found in many of the Chinese BL works features a particular relationship dynamic between the male top and the male bottom: an initial tense relationship, sometimes beginning with the two characters hating each other, that gradually turns into a relationship of mutual affection and love. In *Qiang Jin Jiu*, Shen Lanzhou's first ever encounter with Xiao Chiye, the male top, involved Xiao Chiye violently kicking Lanzhou, with the intention of killing him with the heavy kick. The beginning of the novel featured them as mutually hating but interested by each other, and the pair gradually began to flirt with and to care about each other, soon developing into mutual genuine affection and love for each other. In *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, Wei Wuxian's initial relationship with Lan Wangji, the male top, featured Wei Wuxian intentionally provoking Lan Wangji, who was annoyed by him and found his provocations disrespectful. Later, Lan Wangji realized that he had feelings for Wei Wuxian, but when Wei Wuxian had returned practicing *guidao*, the relationship between the two deteriorated and was marked by tension and arguments; it was after Wei Wuxian had resurrected that the pair developed into a mutually loving and affectionate relationship with each other. In mpreg

fanfiction, the shift from a tense relationship to a loving one is more drastic, as many of the mpreg fanfiction texts involve rape. The male bottoms in these works are often described to initially strongly hate the male tops because of violences such as rape, manipulation, and imprisonment, but these authors sometimes eventually reconcile the relationship by describing that the top eventually started to care about and to treat the bottom better.

In Chinese society, the daughter in the family often experiences a fraught relationship with her parents, often suffering from an emotionally absent father (whose inflicted violence upon the daughter is often rendered hidden and even invisible) and a particularly complex relationship with her mother. It is often extremely difficult for the daughter to delineate a clear feeling she has towards her mother – it is often characterized by a strong turmoil, constantly alternating between love and hate, without occupying any middle ground:

...Mother-daughter is always different. She admires you yet is jealous of you, she crushes you yet supports you, she protects you yet hurts you. The candy covered with blood is always memorable. You often hate her, hate her broken marriage, hate her bitter tears. Yet you cannot hate her, you pity how she has no shoulder to lean on, pity how she bears the burden all alone. But how can you not hate her? The person you love the most hurts you the deepest. But you really cannot hate her, the patriarchal structures forced her to point her sword at someone weaker...⁴⁸

...Mama...the person who loves me the most is you, and yet the pain intertwined in love is without end. I can't accuse you, but I can't forgive you. I later realized, I can't say I love you or hate you. I hate you while loving you, and yet I love you while hating you.⁴⁹

...Mama, there is nobody in the world who knows better about your pain and suffering than I do, nobody who loves you more than I do, and there is nobody who hates you more than I do.⁵⁰

Chinese women, as daughters, are stuck in liminality. The constant tug-of-war between love and hate, the inability to clearly delineate their relationship dynamic with their mothers, the

⁴⁸ “东亚母女关系是世界上最复杂的关系,” RedNote, August 17, 2024.

⁴⁹ “东亚母女的关系是一颗藏着针的巧克力,” RedNote, January 01, 2025.

⁵⁰ “恋母的本质是恋痛,” RedNote, August 08, 2024.

incredible emotional distress they suffer from complex mother-daughter relationships – these are common, prominent dilemmas women suffer from. Because Chinese society emphasizes the discourse of love as central to women’s lives, women’s relationships with their family and husbands, those that Chinese society construes as “love,” are often a central concern with which Chinese women occupy themselves.

The relationship development between the top and bottom in Chinese BL fiction, that it usually ends in mutual love and affection despite often fraught beginnings, can be interpreted as not only just women fantasizing about an idealized romantic relationship, but also as women imagining reconciliation with these fraught familial relationships. Janice Radway, in discussing why 20th century women read heterosexual romance novels in their entirety even when those novels aroused strong or unpleasant feelings, argued that the act marked “the intensity with which they desire to be told that an ideal love is possible *even in the worst of circumstances...*”⁵¹ When love is described to be so prominent in Chinese women’s lives and yet their own relationships with their mothers are so complex and tumultuous, would it not be sensible for women to want to imagine that they will be loved and that their mother-daughter relationships will be more affectionate? As one RedNote comment said:

Actually, I think that people who like the trope of *zhuiqihuoizangchang* (literally “chasing wife to the crematorium,” meaning that the top later regretted his actions and attempts to win the bottom back) basically fantasized, in their childhoods, about how their parents knew their own problems and attempted to change for the better...but in reality, 0 people will change.⁵²

⁵¹ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 71.

⁵² User F (pseudonym), comment on “如图 为什么很多大众喜欢的设定全是折磨受的,” RedNote, February 04, 2025.

The portrayal of those relationship dynamics found in BL texts can serve as fantasies for women, that women can find “true love” and can have mutually loving, affectionate relationships, even when their current circumstances indicate otherwise.

On Pregnancy

At present, the capability of male bottoms to become pregnant is usually assumed in Chinese BL fandoms of fictional universes. Even when there are no mentions of the male bottom’s capability for pregnancy in the original media texts or in the non-mpreg fanfiction, the Chinese BL community does not conceive of the lack of mentions as implications that the male bottom is unable to be impregnated. As such, fanfiction texts that explicitly describe the male bottom’s pregnancy are no surprise, and rather considered arguably normative, within the BL community. In the particular subgenre of mpreg BL fanfiction, which almost always appear in the context of pornographic texts, there are several interesting trends of plot development from the Chinese works I’ve read:

1. The male bottom is never pregnant by choice. They are usually either raped, forced to be impregnated, or they accidentally got pregnant from consensual or semiconsensual⁵³ sex.
2. Upon learning that they are pregnant, male bottoms initially are reluctant, anxious, or pained at the thought of bearing and birthing a child, for various personal reasons.
3. In some cases, male bottoms undergo abortion or miscarriages.
4. In many cases, male bottoms eventually cave in and accept the fact that they’re pregnant, sometimes citing the reason for the shift in attitude as “instinct,”

⁵³ I use “semiconsensual” here to refer to situations such as when both the top and the bottom are “in heat” and thus not fully conscious.

sometimes as the shift in the top's attitude, and sometimes they've convinced themselves.

5. The male top almost always starts to treat the male bottom better after learning that he's pregnant.
6. In many works, even though the author tags the work as "mpreg" and may explicitly state "mpreg" in the description, the pregnancy part is implied, instead of explicitly spelled out, or it may be just a brief mention at the end of the text. In this case, pregnancy serves as a means for depicting violent sex, in a similar fashion as "breeding" fantasies.
7. In one-shots and shorter stories, pregnancy of the male bottom sometimes purely serves as a means for the author and reader to inflict physical violence, usually describing a desire to torture the male bottom through pregnancy.

Fascinatingly, trends 1-5 involve a shift from an initial unwillingness to be pregnant into a reconciliation with pregnancy and with the male top who is responsible for the male bottom's pregnancy. This general shift in the male bottom's attitude toward his pregnancy and towards the male top is predominantly his own act of negotiating his feelings with himself. For example, in "Blind Alley," the bottom's shift in his attitude is depicted as initially wanting to escape, then to a tug-of-war between how he feels and how he *should* feel, and eventually ending with him growing numb and accepting the situation as is:

...He knows that if he gives up on resistance, if he submits to this Alpha, then he will never be able to turn back – he will be completely rendered to this Alpha's bitch, birthing children for him...but all this [resistance] is useless...Leon (the bottom) knows his escape plan failed, and failure this time means that he will never be able to escape... Every day, his womb will be filled by the Alpha's semen, until he's pregnant, birthing offsprings for the Alpha.

...Leon knows clearly that his feeling for Tyrant (the top) is abnormal. He should hate this Alpha who forcibly marked him, but for some reason, Leon discovers that he is increasingly reliant on Tyrant – he uncontrollably craves for his Alpha, craves for its pheromones, its kisses, and its hugs. But after their daughter Alice was born, Leon began to ruminate less and less about these complex emotions. He no longer resisted Tyrant, instead, he tries to live together with this Alpha who is destined to be tied to him in this damn shabby house. Simultaneously, Leon has to figure out how to raise their daughter well, preventing her from turning out to be an asshole like her Alpha father.⁵⁴

In “【李简】基因偏执”, the bottom is afraid of what having a child may mean for his future, thinking that having children will stray his future possibilities:

Now, to tell [Jian Suiying, the bottom] that he's pregnant, that he has to give birth, he really cannot do it. And it hasn't even been a long time since he's known Li Yu (the top)...He feels that once he has children, it means that he's tied to Li Yu for his entire life. ...He has to admit he's scared. The fear for uncertainty of the future is like a withering hand gripping his neck, and this child is the source of the hand. Even though he is perfectly capable of raising a child, let alone one, even ten isn't a problem. But he doesn't dare to bear the responsibility this child gives him. He is insecure, Li Yu is unable to give him security or support. Can he really expect an 18 year old boy to settle down and spend the rest of his life with him?

All this happened way too fast. This burden is way too heavy. Even though he can already shoulder many things early on, he couldn't help but fear such a future.⁵⁵

On the other hand, in “Dark World,” the bottom tries everything he can to abort the fetus, even at the cost of physically harming himself:

After noticing the arrival of the monster inside his stomach, Legolas clenched his fist, and started slamming his stomach in desperation, again and again...Soon after the first punch, sticky, warm blood gushed out between his legs. He spasmed in excruciating pain, wanting to scream, and yet can't make a sound.

He cruelly deprived the fragile, not yet formed life of its hope at survival. He pushed through; it is not until he's sure that the monster inside his uterus no longer exists that he stopped beating himself...Eventually, completely exhausted, he collapsed on the ground, curling up into a ball, with a mocking smile on his lips, he sank into unconsciousness peacefully, with a river of blood flowing beneath him.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Desmonty, “Blind Alley.”

⁵⁵ Lithiumland, “【Li Jian】Jiyin pianzhi【李简】基因偏执 [【Li x Jian】Genetic bigotry],” *Archive of Our Own*, updated April 20, 2020, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/18127919/chapters/42859838>

⁵⁶ Ire1ia, “Dark World.”

In all three examples of different tropes above, there is an underlying recognition by the male bottoms that life has gone astray because of pregnancy, and there is also a profound fear about what having children would mean for their future. Legolas was beating his stomach repeatedly to abort the fetus inside him, and he was only able to feel reassured after he ensured the fetus was dead, no matter how violent the process was. Jian Suiying was ruminating over what his future would hold if he gave birth. Even though Leon reconciled with his life in the end, he did initially express fear about how his life would be ruined, with no means to turn it back, if he gave birth. The central thread across all these examples and tropes is a profound reflection of what pregnancy and childbirth really mean, an understanding of what having children really does to one's life, and a fear for having children. It must be noted that, even in the case that the child is birthed and does have weight in the narrative of the texts, the actual child in question is almost never a real character – in the sense that it has personality – but rather as a trope, or a passive tool used to progress the plot.⁵⁷ Chinese mpreg fanfiction texts are not attempts at meaningful depictions of families, instead, they are essentially reflections on the meanings of pregnancy and childbirth for the male bottom.

The popular trope of the bottom's reconciliation with the top and with their pregnancy is particularly remarkable. The bottom, as evidenced by the first example with Leon, does initially recognize pregnancy and childbirth as something violent, something that could negatively impact, or even ruin, the male bottom's future. It is often for some unnamed reason, such as the phrase “but for some reason” in the first example, that the male bottom gradually accepts his

⁵⁷ For example, in the popular trope of *zhuiqihuoancang* (the male top trying to win the male bottom back after he wronged the bottom) in mpreg fanfiction, the child often simply serves as a bridge for the top and bottom to reconcile their relationship. Readers and authors are not interested in the particular character of the child, as the child is almost never given any personal description nor imbued with any attempt at construing a human individual. They are only interested in how the relationship between the top and the bottom progresses after the top sees the child (which is often filled with misunderstandings at first, with the top usually regretting how he treated the bottom after learning the truth, which is that the child is indeed his).

situation. In Chinese society, many women give birth not because they've thought childbirth through or because they truly want to have children, but either because they were subject to pressures from those around them, or because they didn't want to be or weren't fully aware of the impact of childbirth. On RedNote, many women have voiced their experiences regarding the pressure to bear children, echoing accounts like this one:

...at the 7th month of my marriage, both my parents and my parents-in-law have started to pressure me to give birth...for a couple months both parties continuously “harrassed” me, with all kinds of outrageous tactics and speeches...from my mother-in-law – “humans sometimes can't be too aware, you have to do it dazedly (*mimihuhu*) to even have the courage to do it.” When she said this sentence, it was the first time I've seriously talked with her about childbirth... At that moment I was stunned, I remembered women from the past, I remembered the girls who were pregnant before marriage, did they get pregnant and become mothers under this muddled, unaware state?
...from my mother...“Children sustain the marriage and the relationship between the husband and wife, if you don't give birth, you and your husband will separate”...⁵⁸

The pressure for women to give birth also manifests itself in many forms of discourse, but even women who encourage other women to give birth do subconsciously recognize the violence of being a mother. For those women, it is very common to express that even though having and raising children may be very painful and difficult, it is somehow all worthy in the end, without ever delineating why it is actually worthy, other than that it is. For example, this user posted the following screenshots of her chat records with her mother:

“if you don't have money don't buy a car, if you don't have a house then just rent a house, but if you don't have a child, you can't even buy a child with money in the future.” ... “even though [raising children] is very difficult/painful, but it is worth it.” ... “Don't listen to those garbage, I'm your biological mother, could I not wish well on you? I now realize, if you don't have a child you won't have hope. When humans are in despair, the child is an attachment you can care/worry about, or else committing suicide will be a real possibility.” “Don't say nobody will take care of the child, I'll help you,

⁵⁸ “东亚父母的催生比人血馒头还可怕...,” RedNote, March 05, 2025.

please, I am begging you, if nobody can take care of it once you give birth, could I really not help you?”⁵⁹

At times, the pressure to urge other women to give birth is even explicitly ill-intentioned, with conscious recognition of how having children permanently confines women’s possibilities and freedom:

I gave birth at 33 years old, it is already considered late. I have many 30+ year old friends around me who are still single or married and without children. Sometimes I try to convince them to give birth soon, while their bodies are still physically capable, while the elders can still help them. But aside from good intentions, I have hidden dark thoughts, that I don’t want to see them so carefree, with so much freedom. I want to drag them down to the quagmire with me.

I am insanely jealous of them, I’m jealous that the time of every day belongs to themselves, that they have an unbounded heart without restraint, that they have a life full of possibilities. But me, I’m firmly trapped within the role of a mother, without end.⁶⁰

The three accounts above depict various degrees of active recognition on the violence of having children for women, from the mother-in-law in the first example stating that women cannot be too aware if they want to have children, to the mother in the second example stating that raising children somehow is worthy in the end despite the pain, to the woman in the third example actively stating that having children firmly and permanently trapped her within the role of a mother and confined her possibilities in life. What these accounts all share, however, is that having full awareness on what having children does to women, for a woman who already gave birth, is painful.

Although Chinese women have varying degrees of active recognition of the negative effects of childbirth, many of them do know that childbirth has negative consequences to a woman’s life, even if they do not confront and actively acknowledge this painful fact, even if they sweep the pain under the rug. Chinese women who have not yet given birth face tremendous

⁵⁹ “我妈的催生金句,” RedNote, April 21, 2025.

⁶⁰ “劝生本质就是见不得人家好,” RedNote, February 23, 2025.

pressure from everyone around them, their parents, their parents-in-law, their relatives, their friends who have already given birth. It is not usually the case that Chinese women who pressure others to give birth do so because they truly think it benefits women; they often use the discourse of *needing* to give birth, even when they actually know its detrimental impact – whether they confront it or not – as evidenced by phrases such as “you have to do it dazedly to even have the courage to do it.”

The popular trope in Chinese BL mpreg fanfiction that the male bottom eventually reconciles with his pregnancy or his child despite initial reluctance and unwillingness, then, is quite reminiscent of Chinese women’s situations in real life. The male bottoms, despite initially resisting or unwilling to give birth, eventually, “for some reason,” accept their situation. Many Chinese women, though often actually knowing that childbirth has detrimental effects to their selves, many did nevertheless give birth “dazedly (*mimihuhu*),” and many others convince themselves that it is somehow all worthy in the end, without ever articulating why. The alignment of not being able to verbally or consciously delineate a clear reason as to why they accepted their pregnancy or childbirth, the alignment of the recognition of the detrimental impact of childbirth – the experiences depicted of male bottoms in Chinese mpreg fanfiction are reflections, though by no means necessarily conscious reflections, of what pregnancy and having children mean to women.

Screaming for Her Subjectivity: Her Expression of Her Self through the Male Bottom

With all these aforementioned parallels and tropes found in Chinese BL fiction, would it really be unreasonable to conceive the male bottom as a projection of Chinese women's selves? The alignment between Chinese women and male bottoms on suffering from violence due to their identities, the familiarity between Chinese women's familial relationships and the male top and the male bottom's relationship, the profound reflection and understanding of what pregnancy and childbirth does and means to one's future – these tropes are fundamentally female experiences in Chinese society.

Carol Clover, in examining the phenomenon of the Final Girl in horror films, argues that “the Final Girl is (apparently) female not despite the maleness of the audience, but precisely because of it.”⁶¹ Clover suggests that the trope of the Final Girl is a masculinizing tale of coming of age, one that men identify with due to the gender ambiguities of the character and the avoidance of her involvement in sexual encounters. In BL, similarly, the male bottom is of a similar phenomenon: the discourse surrounding the male bottom is one of female experience, and the male bottom is placed in this discourse only because they are imbued with tropes that characterize Chinese women's experiences. Adrienne Shaw, in examining the process of identifying with video game characters, found that identity markers, such as markers of race and sexual orientation, are not implicated in drawing readers to identify with characters; individuals connect with specific characters by identifying with some aspects of a character, who does not necessarily share the same identity markers as the player.⁶² In the case of Chinese BL, female authors and readers share significant similarities with male bottoms, given the various parallels

⁶¹ Carol J. Clover, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (University of Texas Press, 1996), 100.

⁶² Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

between those fictional tropes and real life female experiences, and thus the male body of the male bottom does not bar women from identifying with them. The male bottom, therefore, is a fantasized female subject onto which Chinese women project their own experiences and selves.

I would like to push against the notion that these portrayals may actually be a deliberate portrayal of men, as male subjects. After all, if these portrayals are truly a deliberate, subversive⁶³ act of women inflicting violence onto a male subject truly recognized as male, that they truly are women merely casting their voyeuristic gaze on men, why is it that these tropes almost never appear for the male tops? Why is it that these fundamentally female experiences are only ever depicted through the male bottom, never through the male top?

The Need for a Male Body

As mentioned previously, Chinese mpreg BL fanfiction almost always appears in the form of pornographic texts, and the pornography depicted in these fanfiction texts is extremely violent, so much so that it almost cannot be written without a deliberate negative intention of the author herself. Consider these various depictions of sex in mpreg fanfiction:

“I am going to violate you on every cellular level, penetrate my DNA into every single one of your chromosomes, rape your humid breeding ground in eternal time and endless space.” An utterly evil desecration into the depth of the soul. As if Claude’s brain is being raped together.⁶⁴

Fuck. Mitsurugi’s insides drive people crazy. So tight, so soft, with more than enough lubrication, affectionately sucking his penis. Naruhoudou almost lost his rationality for a moment, wanting to pin Mitsurugi under him, grab his hair, and forcefully shove his entire penis into him, then fuck him hard and deep, completely tearing apart the mask of restraint that Mitsurugi is still clinging onto. He wants to make him not be able to do anything other than to cry and scream out his name. He took a deep breath, and tried to throw aside these violent fantasies, feeling a vein on his penis ominously throb.⁶⁵

⁶³ My usage of the word “subversive” here refers to a sense of reimagining and reorganizing power structures.

⁶⁴ 9zvma9jsrxplk9ki, “[SC]Zhanbai CG[SC]战败CG [[SC]The Defeat CG],” *Archive of Our Own*, updated June 14, 2024, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/55995364/chapters/142209283>

⁶⁵ fishinggrocery, “Che houzu de nizhuan 车后座的逆转 [The reversal in the backseat of the car],” *Archive of Our Own*, published September 30, 2015, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/17092979>

“We’re going to fuck you until you can’t stand, can’t close your legs, until your ass is completely filled with semen!”... Gangrape did not stop, and not knowing whose idea it was, they started using sharpies to write on spiderman’s naked body. Writing “39-week twin gestation” on his belly, with a heart-shaped image on his belly button, writing “bitch!” on the sides of his abdomen, “creampie only” on his thigh, pointing at the hole waiting to be penetrated, “addicted to sex” on his other thigh, marking how many times he had been penetrated on his ass. Finally, they used their phones to capture the spiderman currently being raped to the point of daze, drooling unconsciously, with every part of his body being covered in semen.⁶⁶

...[the top] felt his teeth and hands itching, a destructive desire burning in his heart, making him want to crush something.⁶⁷

What Leon doesn’t know is that, his already coarse voice is tainted with lust, and Tyrant loves when he make sounds like this – it sounds pitiful, while making you want to further fuck and break him.⁶⁸

These depictions of sex in mpreg fanfiction, with some of them explicitly stated as rape, are incredibly violent. In some cases, as evidenced by the latter 2 examples, the desire to break, the desire to destroy, or the desire to ruin is explicitly named. In other cases, those desires, as with the former 3 examples, are implicitly referenced; there is undeniably a notion of wanting to break, to ruin, since the detailed depictions describe an active action towards or a desire to actively see the bottom breaking and becoming a mess, physically and emotionally. The extent of a desire to enact violence is quite astonishing, it is almost as if these female authors could not have written this without some degree of anger. Some within the Chinese BL community express the reasons for their desire to do violence to the bottom as actively desiring to destroy something, as such:

⁶⁶ mizer29, “Huaiyun xiao zhizhu 怀孕小蜘蛛 [Pregnant little spider],” *Archive of Our Own*, completed July 03, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/19461301/chapters/46321870>

⁶⁷ Jijuta, “Cike yu huangdi.”

⁶⁸ Desmonty, “Blind Alley.”

I feel like stabbing a stick-like object into the body is already a form of torture...since his body is already tortured, why not also destroy (*cuican*) his psyche. Borrowing the top's hands, cruelly treating the fictional character, it's about fulfilling my guilty pleasures. *Huozangchang* (here referring to treating the bottom harshly) can prevent me from having moral burdens and simultaneously allow me to savor the pleasure from destroying (*cuican*) beautiful things.⁶⁹

What's particularly significant in comments like this is women's explicitly stated, active desire to destroy. Taking this comment together with the detailed depictions of a desire to *do* violence in the previous examples, it seems that these women are not receiving pleasure just from passively observing the male bottoms being tortured. They take on a more active role – they are the ones *doing* violence to the male bottoms, through the top as a vehicle. They don't want to just watch the exertion of violence – they actively *want* to *inflict* violence; they *want* to destroy things. This active desire to destroy something, to want to actively inflict violence, can be interpreted as an expression of anger in itself, particularly given the context of Chinese patriarchal society.

In Chinese society, women's emotional expressions are extremely policed. They cannot express anger, nor can they express any “negative” attitudes and emotions, not in the public nor private sphere (perhaps with the singular exception of towards her daughter). Many Chinese women describe their experiences as such:

The anger of young girls is made into a spectacle, the anger of middle-aged women is mocked, and the anger of old women is ignored.⁷⁰

...I don't know why these people can be so understanding towards *him*, but so exceptionally picky towards *her*. You can't have a bad attitude, you can't use a harsh tone, you can't talk to him about these things (referring to things like childbirth pain), because these things are apparently not of his concern. But...are they truly not of his concern? ... The same exact words, if he says it, then he's the best man in the world. But if I say it, I become a resentful/complaining woman (*yuanfu*). The same exact words, he

⁶⁹ User G (pseudonym), comment on “如图 为什么很多大众喜欢的设定全是折磨受的,” RedNote, February 04, 2025.

⁷⁰ “我不喜欢美人嗔怒这个词,” RedNote, July 26, 2025.

can freely say without any limitation, but I have to continuously revise my wording and still be accused of being rude and aggressive?...⁷¹

Evidently, Chinese women are not allowed to express anger, or they will be policed by those around them. If a Chinese woman dared to express anger, she would be singled out, made into a spectacle, ridiculed, ignored, and criticized. As Foucault has argued, punitive mechanisms serve to consolidate sexualities and gender, to police the body's modes of conduct.⁷² Because of such policing, Chinese women have extremely limited spaces in which to express anger.

BL, however, can serve as one of those limited spaces. Radway argues that romance fiction “fulfills certain basic psychological needs for women that have been induced by the culture and its social structures but that often remain unmet in day-to-day existence as the result of concomitant restrictions on female activity.”⁷³ Because the violence in BL is oriented towards the male bottom by borrowing the hands of the male top(s), the expression of anger, through the active infliction of violence, is not evidently or consciously read as a form of *female* anger. Female authors and readers can hide behind the body of the male top and inflict violence onto a male body, even when it is a fantasized female subject. The construction of the male bottom's body as male is enough to put a safe psychological distance from the conscious recognition of the male bottom as a female subject, as many women in the Chinese BL community have commented:

I don't care about abuses in male-male relationships, the more treacherous the plot, the more pleasure I get, and the less psychological burden/guilt (*xinli fudan*) I feel. But with male-female relationships, I can't accept the abuse of female characters, especially with a happy ending. Even if there's no abuse, I still don't like happy endings where people get

⁷¹ “只对女儿强调“受难日”的后果...,” RedNote, January 27, 2026.

⁷² Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁷³ Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 112-113.

married, have kids, and live happily ever after; it's like the prince and princess' happily ever after in fairy tales, it's very discomfoting.⁷⁴

Bg (boy-girl, heterosexual romances) is too easy for me to project my reality. For example, tropes like forced love and sugar daddies that dance around the legal boundary, when I read bg I want to call the cops.⁷⁵

Even when the male bottom is usually constructed as a subconsciously fantasized female subject, that fundamentally female experiences are projected onto them, his *body* as male gives readers a psychological distance, one in which they don't have to feel psychological burden or guilt as they would with an explicitly female character in a female body. Then, the popular thread of comments such as “reading bl fiction gives me pleasure by watching the fire burn from the other side (*gean guanhuo*)...whatever happens between them I can watch for fun”⁷⁶ can be interpreted as a pleasure felt from inflicting violence, from expressing anger, but at a safe psychological distance for readers to still feel pleasure without needing to consciously recognize their own circumstances. However female the male bottom's experiences may be, the fact that his body is male is sufficient for readers to not consciously contend with their own reality. This is also probably the exact reason why – at least true from my personal experience as a reader – that anger is not turned towards the male top, because inflicting violence towards the male top requires a conscious recognition that the male bottom figures as a female subject. Inflicting violence towards the top would require a conscious recognition of women's own reality, and therefore also erase their safe psychological distance from the text, which is crucial for feeling pleasure and wanting to continue reading for leisure from my personal experience.

⁷⁴ User H (pseudonym), comment on “腐剧的受众是谁？爱看的是什么心理？百思不得其解,” RedNote, July 10, 2025.

⁷⁵ User I (pseudonym), comment on “不爱看BG却能看BL的原因,” RedNote, November 16, 2024.

⁷⁶ User J (pseudonym), comment on “李涛：为啥基佬小说就是比普通言情小说好看很多捏,” RedNote, February 27, 2026.

But even so, why is it that authors and readers *need* to project female experiences of violence onto the male bottoms in these fiction? When asked about why they like to consume BL content over BG (boy-girl, heterosexual romances) ones, even when the two may have the same tropes, many Chinese women express that they chose BL because the romantic relationship is still relatively more equal, and because they are allowed more psychological freedom while reading:

It is only with the unrestrained and reckless psychological world can I balance the rigid real world, where I live the life of needing to be a good child, a good student, a good mother, a good employee.⁷⁷

Because BL hatred [between the top and bottom] is that you stabbed me with a knife so I stab you back with a sword, it is very equal. In any case, I'm not the one who's affected by the angst, I just read it as play between a couple. But the hatred in BG is that the male main character killed the female main character's entire family, but the female MC only slapped him in return, which the male MC read as her playing hard to get...⁷⁸

For hate relationships to be delicious, it must involve two villains... This BG pair in *yanhuishi* (a tv show) is not yummy precisely because... even when [the female MC] suffered that much in her childhood... She still gets soft-hearted because of [another character], she cannot bring herself to set a fire. When faced with her initially cold and stern mother, she didn't blame her and instead tried to understand her... Whereas with the male MC here... he has a happy family, a bright career, but he is extremely selfish, he is ruthless to his enemies (he kills someone right when he first appears, and he later interrogates [another character] to death). His only weakness is his family and his daughter, and he is only nice towards the female MC on this basis.⁷⁹

From these accounts, one can glean that the main reason driving Chinese women to consume BL instead of BG, even under the same tropes, is that they are allowed more psychological freedom and recklessness, through a more equal romantic relationship, when reading BL. It is only through a male character that they can feel reckless and unrestrained, because somehow female

⁷⁷ User K (pseudonym), comment on “我为什么喜欢看BL？因为看BL时，我的道德标准比较低,” RedNote, May 05, 2025.

⁷⁸ User L (pseudonym), comment on “理讨 首先说一下我自己的属性...,” RedNote, March 29, 2025.

⁷⁹ User M (pseudonym), comment on “理讨 首先说一下我自己的属性...”

characters, even under the same trope of revenge, are still depicted as soft-hearted, understanding, and caring. As Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁸⁰ Female characters, by virtue of being female, are still confined within the expectations associated with being a woman – that they still have to be caring, that they cannot be too ruthless and selfish. The female body, by virtue of its gender, is already bound by psychosocial shackles.

Furthermore, even though the male bottom in BL still suffers from various violences such as rape, certain violences such as pregnancy and being scapegoated for others’ wrongdoings due to the bottom’s identity are, at least, recognized as violence in his male body. For the female body of a Chinese woman, having children and being exploited and scapegoated by others are considered normative and “natural,” given previously mentioned accounts on the exploitation of women within the family and on the pressure to marry and to have children. Using the male body of the male bottom forces the reader to recognize that these female experiences are indeed violences and not inevitable. By no means, however, do I wish to suggest that authors are consciously insisting on a recognition of subjectivity and of women’s experienced violence through the male bottom, particularly given that the safe psychological distance between the reader and the male bottom is crucial for readers’ enjoyment. Still, perhaps a male body is absolutely necessary for female authors and readers to truly voice and recognize the violence in their lived experiences. Perhaps, in using the male body of the male bottom, authors and readers share a tacit recognition that a male body must be employed in order to demonstrate the true extent of the brutality and violence encountered by Chinese women in their quotidian lives.

⁸⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage Books, 2011), 330.

Nevertheless, the fact that female characters are bound by psychosocial shackles is no surprise given the reality of Chinese patriarchal society. When Chinese women have been repeatedly told things such as “women cannot have ambitions”⁸¹ and “nobody wants an assertive woman,”⁸² when such discourses permeate their entire lives and are used as technologies to police what is acceptable for female bodies, wouldn’t it be rather difficult for them to fantasize a female body/character as selfish, ambitious, ruthless, and vengeful?⁸³ The various discourses that have bound Chinese women psychosocially and psychopolitically may be so pervasive that it prevents women from even fantasizing themselves as having a certain extent of freedom. It may be that it is only through the male bottom, a fantasized female subject in a male body, that women can fully voice their subconscious thoughts about their gendered experiences of violence, that the full extent of violence in their quotidian lives can be recognized. It may be only through the male body of the male bottom that women can even fantasize about revenge, about ambitious feats, about not needing to be understanding and caring for others, and about being able to be ruthless and carefree. Perhaps Shen Lanzhou in *Qiang Jin Jiu* wouldn’t have been the emperor, wouldn’t have so profoundly challenged power structures, wouldn’t have been so ruthless towards his enemies, had he been in a female body. The male bottoms, perhaps, would not be recognizable as fully agentic subjects undergoing horrific violences, were they written as female.

⁸¹ “我们说女孩应该(),” RedNote, n.d.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Although there has been recent movements in China that call for female characters to be construed as ambitious and more selfish, the extent to which those female characters are allowed to be ruthless and selfish is still not comparable to the standard allotted to male characters. Furthermore, selfish and ambitious female characters often still need some form of justification, however minor (such as needing to state that the character is a strong woman), whereas the selfishness and ruthlessness of male characters are taken for granted without needing any justification.

Dialectical Desires

A tension, then, is clear in these stories: while Chinese women identify with the male bottom and want to see the male bottom live as himself in face of violence, they are also actively torturing and doing violence to the bottom. Drawing from my personal experience, from being a reader of BL fiction for 12 years, these conflicting tensions are reconciled by another conflicting desire – a simultaneous desire for the female self to be destroyed.

Although I have not observed any explicit data in my research stating that other Chinese women also share this desire, I do speculate that these desires, if they do indeed exist for others, are unarticulated not only because it may be embarrassing or awkward to share, but also because of social policing online, of a fear that other women would accuse these desires as not feminist. Nevertheless, my personal experience of reading Chinese BL shed light on the possibility of a desire to be destroyed, simultaneously existing with the desire to destroy.

When I read Chinese BL mpreg fanfiction, I do take the perspective of the male bottom and identify with him. When the male bottom is being violently treated in the text, I often find myself imagining the violence as something being done to me – taking the bottom’s perspective – and simultaneously as something that is not external to me, similarly to how other Chinese women have expressed a desire to destroy something. In my personal experience, I do not take the perspective of the top, even when I do echo the anger via the infliction of violence, and neither do I shift between the perspectives of the bottom and the top. The expression of anger, of a desire to destroy, occurs simultaneously as the identification with the male bottom, as the person upon which the violence is inflicted. There is undeniably a part of me, while reading these fanfiction texts, that is rather self-destructive, which leads me to secretly wish to be broken down, to cave in to the violence, momentarily. In the moment of reading, however, these desires

are all muddled together into general pleasure – they are far from conscious to me. The act of reading BL, whether pornographic or not, is an act of leisure for me and other women. In the moment of reading, I have almost never engaged in critical thinking, unless the plot or the pornographic depictions becomes too *obviously* heterosexual and the male bottom is too *obviously* female, upon which I would usually stop reading the text. Nevertheless, for me, these muddled pleasures are almost like dancing on the edge of a cliff: there is a thrill from the danger of falling off and being destroyed, and a thrill from being unrestrained and inflicting violence.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theories that conceive of individuals as having a basic desire to not be recognized as subjects, Leo Bersani argued that the male bottom desires the destruction of the male subject in his attraction to gay sexual intercourse.⁸⁴ In the context of Chinese BL, the male bottom is a fantasized female subject, unlike the male subject in Bersani's discussion of gay sex. In my experience, and also seen in how previously mentioned quotes explicitly state the desire to ruin and to destroy, the desire for destruction, simultaneously existing with the desire to live, is taken to a more literal level in the context of Chinese BL. Here, rather than desiring the destruction of the male subject, I desire the momentary destruction of the female subject – of my gendered self. In my experience, at least, this desire to be destroyed is more literal than psychoanalytic theories arguing for the basic desire to not be recognized as subjects; I secretly want to cave in to the violence momentarily, to be destroyed momentarily, not only because being broken down is secretly pleasurable, but also because the act of resistance against violence is difficult. Thus, to be momentarily destroyed temporarily relieves me from the pressures I, as a female subject, face in my quotidian life. It involves specifically a desire for the female self to be destroyed, not merely for the self, because those violences are experienced solely on the grounds of being female.

⁸⁴ Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October*, no. 43 (1987): 197–222. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

The desire for the female self to be destroyed and the simultaneous desire to destroy are dialectical, but they nonetheless function together in the form of muddled pleasure. In this sense, the conflicting tensions of identifying with the male bottom and wanting to see him survive, of inflicting violence on the male bottom, and of wanting to be broken down momentarily by the violence are not exactly an issue of conflicting perspectives, but that these tensions are all expressions of complex female desire. The complex web of female desire, while reading BL mpreg fanfiction, is similar to the complex relationships women have with their mothers: it cannot and should not be clearly delineated, as doing so would risk losing the nuance in these tensions.

Contending with Patriarchal Power

The desire to destroy, the desire to be destroyed, the desire to live despite suffering, the reflection of what childbirth means for women, the desire to be loved despite circumstances in reality, the reflection of inflicted violence as an issue of identity – all of these desires are, at heart, a reflection on and a contention with patriarchal violence and power. In particular, the desire to destroy, to inflict violence, is an act of exercising power, specifically a penetrative and destructive power – a form of power Chinese women cannot exercise in real life. The power to inflict violence and to destroy, in the context of BL fiction, is a particular feeling of power that women cannot obtain in reality.

However, this exercise of power is not subversive, in the sense that it does not reimagine patriarchal power, for two reasons. First, women are not consciously exercising the destructive and penetrative power. Two, the violence is done to a fantasized female subject, not to the male subject truly recognized as male, the male top. As previously stated, this desire and power to inflict violence is not done to the male subject recognized as male, because doing so would not

only require conscious recognition that the male bottom is a fantasized female subject and thus erase the psychological distance for safety, but it would also force female readers to consciously contend with their own reality regarding violence in heterosexual relations.

All of those desires, as a contention with patriarchal violence, are not conscious and subversive reflections on patriarchal power. They are instead subconscious, recounting experiences of patriarchal violence and power, as well as exercises of a certain freedom and power not possible for a female body in reality. Though Chinese BL fiction does not reimagine power structures, it nonetheless is a form of subconscious resistance towards patriarchal power.

BL as a Form of Storytelling

As Sara Ahmed argued, “we all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with so many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen, and how we are not seen. You find a way of giving an account of what happens, of living with what happens.”⁸⁵ Telling the stories of male bottoms is a way for Chinese women to subconsciously give an account, seeing their psychological distance from the violence in the fictions, about the violences that happened to them. It is a way for them to subconsciously contend with Chinese patriarchal violence and power. BL fiction, in the Chinese context, is not a conscious, deliberately feminist effort at criticizing and reflecting patriarchal power. Instead, using the male bottom for storytelling may be the only way in which Chinese women can freely and fully express their desires and their experiences of violence. In this sense, Chinese BL fiction is a form of resistance against Chinese patriarchy – even though it is not a deliberate nor conscious process – one through which women subconsciously challenge patriarchal violence and power, while simultaneously replicating the violence by virtue of the male bottom being a fantasized female subject.

⁸⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Feminism is Sensational” in *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 23.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored, in detail, the common tropes associated with the male bottom in Chinese BL fiction: sufferings due to his identity, his fierce desire to live, particular relationship dynamics between the male top and the male bottom (from one filled with tension into one marked by mutual love and affection), and particular characteristics and shifts in the male bottom's attitude toward his pregnancy (from an initial unwillingness to be pregnant into a reconciliation with pregnancy and with the male top). Alongside exploring these tropes, I also examined the social pressures and punitive mechanisms experienced by Chinese women, complex mother-daughter relationships, and Chinese women's understanding (though not necessarily consciously recognized) of the violence in having children for women. These lived experiences of Chinese women, I found, smoothly aligned with the aforementioned tropes associated with the male bottom. The figure of the male bottom, imbued with female experiences, is therefore a fantasized female subject, a figure through which Chinese women can project their selves.

Through inflicting violence on the male bottom, Chinese women use BL as a space to express anger, while simultaneously maintaining a safe psychological distance from the text that would allow them to not consciously contend with their own realities. Particularly, the male body of the bottom, as opposed to a female body, is used because it is only through a male body – even when he is a fantasized female subject – that women can freely and fully voice their experiences of violence and their desires. The complex web of desires expressed by Chinese women through the male bottom, including the desire to destroy, to be destroyed, to live, and to be loved, along with reflections expressed through the male bottom on what childbirth means and on inflicted

violence as an issue of identity, are acts of contending with patriarchal violence and power and acts of exercising power. BL fiction is a form of subconscious storytelling for Chinese women.

Importantly, because the male bottom is a fantasized female subject, Chinese BL texts are not attempts at reimagining patriarchal power. Instead, the male bottom is a figure through whom Chinese women subconsciously challenge patriarchal power, while simultaneously replicating patriarchal structures through inflicting violence onto a fantasized female subject. Beyond mere escapism, and being neither conscious reflection nor direct social change, Chinese BL fiction perhaps signifies a more complex process of escapism: one that allows readers to escape from their realities in order to feel pleasure, precisely through exploring possibilities within a familiar, but not *too* familiar, setting.

Or, perhaps, such storytelling by Chinese women through the male bottom can be envisioned simply as women *needing* to tell of their experiences, in ways that would avoid the pain from consciously contending with their realities. It may be as simple, and simultaneously as complex, as needing an outlet to tell the world of their suppressed subjectivity and their ignored pain. Perhaps, like an overfilled cup, pain eventually oozes out and expresses itself in some form, whether women consciously realize the overflowing pain or not. Perhaps, subjectivity that is suppressed always manages to manifest itself in some other form – power structures can never truly suppress subjectivity. Patriarchal structures, perhaps, are more porous and fragile than conceived.

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