

Position paper

Response to Queer Media Studies' Futures

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My response speaks directly to one particular area that has been undeservedly neglected by Western scholars in the past—online Chinese queer culture. Online queer spaces constituted by people from repressive societies are emblematic of the complex contestations and negotiations between queer and normative cultures. They help cast doubt on the traditional methodology that positions virtual queer spaces in opposition to off-line normative environments. Plenty of scholarship on queer studies has demonstrated that queers are extremely subject to mainstream, conventional ideas about queer identities and inclined to gain legitimacy through performing in conformity with heterosexist frames of homosexuality. In view of this normative tendency in queer culture, it would be significant to examine whether and in what way queers in some conservative cultural and social environments negotiate with off-line, mainstream heteronormative and oppressive views about non-heterosexual identities and relationships within online spaces.

To achieve this goal, I would like to use a case study of one of the largest virtual queer fan communities in China. In so doing, I address that the failure of current academic literature to consider non-Western possibility greatly hinders the development of queer research in the age of media and cultural globalization.

The online queer fan community involved is devoted to a sensational Chinese reality TV show, *Super Girl*. *SG* is a large-scale Chinese TV singing contest that only allows female participants. The highlight of this show is the large number of contestants who look either “boyish” or “androgynous.” The latent intimate relationships between these contestants are the focal point of its online slash fandoms. My response focuses on *Fei Se Chao Nv*, one of its most popular slash fan sites dedicated to some of its contestants in 2006. *FSCN* was built in 2006 and is fraught with queer gossip and slash writings. By the end of May 2012, the forum had more than 460,000 entries and over 3,200 threads. Hundreds of original slash fictions have been circulated on this site, a few of which are more than 300,000 words in length.

What is truly mesmerizing yet perplexing is the ways *FSCN* fans imagine lesbian relationships, narrate lesbian stories, and queerly gossip about androgynous female celebrities. *FSCN* slash activities, while do provide a site for queer fans to express and experience lesbian fantasies, are neither unconcerned with nor completely detached from the local, repressive realities.

Much of *FSCN* slash fiction shows a blending of a queer challenge to heterocentric and patriarchal hegemony and a normative view of lesbianism as an imitation of heterosexuality. Although the writers attempt to portray non-hegemonic sexual expressions and transgressive gender performances, they often simplify

butch/femme identities to a masculine/feminine division and rebuild a gendered power difference within the lesbian pairings. Also, the fan writers often use Western worlds or other historical/futuristic contexts as queer fantasy contexts to “normalize” fictional lesbianism. The lesbian romances in these culturally distant settings often imply that contemporary, mainstream Chinese society offers no homosocial space for non-heterosexual people. The plots of most slash literature often suggest that those who want to have a lesbian relationship need to run away from the judgment of their peers, cut off their social ties with family members and friends, and live in either a culturally distant place or time in order to evade the pressures that could hinder the development of their non-mainstream love. This implication demonstrates the fan writers’ deep frustration and constant negotiation with the normative and hegemonic repression and marginalization of lesbianism in the real world, contemporary Chinese society.

FSCN often openly others nonfictional lesbian topics and silences lesbian-identified fans. During queer gossip, the fans’ divorcing of their queer fantasies from nonfictional lesbian themes is also a representation of their eagerness for gaining legitimacy in mainstream society and obtaining a more “justified” cultural position within slash fandom. By showing a disinterest in nonfictional lesbianism and downplaying real-world lesbian rumors about the celebrities, the fans successfully participate in slash practices without overstepping the boundary between the constructed, media world and heteronormative reality. *FSCN* does provide a playground for realizing queer fans’ constructed, alternate imaginings of media characters. However, the alternate scenarios created by the fans on this forum always remain fictional and provisional. The fans’ queer gossip within this fandom are often complicated, distorted, and interrupted by the inevitable infiltration of normative and hegemonic assumptions of identities and sexualities. Without truly liberating all kinds of gender, sexual, and cultural minorities, *FSCN* only has a limited effect in realizing gender and sexuality boundary transgression and amplifying certain kinds of fictional, queer voices and desires. In consequence, it would be problematic to name it a queer heterotopia.

Drawing support from my case study of the *FSCN* forum, I argue that the emancipating potential of online slash fandom should be neither overlooked nor overstated. *FSCN* slash activities unveil an ideological struggle between the fans’ queer desires repressed by online and off-line mainstream cultures and their normative views of real-life lesbianism.