Consuming castrated masculinity:
Studying fandom of Korean pretty boy pop groups
among young Chinese female fans

Abstract

The pretty boy pop group is a typical as well as successful way of star creation in entertaining industry in Korea. This type of boy idols demonstrates a series of characteristics that vary from the conventional patriarchal masculinity. Recent years, this type of boy pop group has gained tremendous popularity among young female fans across nations, particularly in Asian areas such as China. This study investigates into what kind of pleasure that the fans obtain from consuming this type of masculinity and what is the gender politics behind such fandom.

By analyzing online fan club postings and doing interviews with fans, this study argues that the pleasure of the female fans is associated with the consumption of “castrated” masculinity that complicates, if not challenges, existing gender power dynamic. More fluid perception of gender and sexuality boundaries, a component of so-called postmodern mentality, is found in the fandom of pretty boy stars. Six recurrent and inter-related themes including image centrality, storyline imagination, pretty masculinity, imperfect performance, homosexual intimacy and nurturing expressions yielded from online fan club observation. Interviews with fans resonated with these online expressions, while at the same time demonstrated variance in their interpretation of different gender issues and in the way they incorporated the pretty boy idols into their everyday life.

Introduction

Korean popular boy bands such as EXO, Super Junior, SHINee, and so on, have gained huge popularity in China, especially among young female fans, who are rather
fanatic and loyal. The group members are usually in their late teens or early twenties. They are packaged by the entertainment companies in a pretty and boyish way that drive fans fanatic. The fans intensively engage in fandom both online and offline. The most visible fan activity online is that they keep posting and reposting photos and videos about their idols with passionate comments. They are so fanatic that they even orally fight against fans of another pop group.

The pretty boy idols in Korean pop groups in this study can be considered as a part of the heterogeneous landscape of masculinity in contemporary Korea\(^1\). They deviate from hegemonic masculinity that value power, status, and wealth, and tend to demonstrate effeminacy, intimacy and delicateness. Since 1990s, the hegemonic masculinity, which is constituted by patriarchal authoritarian masculinity, seonbi\(^2\) masculinity and violent masculinity, has been deconstructed by contemporary socio-political contexts (Moon, 2002). More heterogeneous and contradictory masculinities are then engendered and further enabled by transcultural communication (Jung, 2011). For example, the soft masculinity embodied by Bae Yong-Joon\(^3\), the global masculinity embodied by Rain\(^4\), and the postmodern masculinity embodied by Oldboy\(^5\).

The EXO boys examined in this study falls rightly in this counter-hegemonic realm of masculinity. They are so-called pretty boy, or kkonminam\(^6\) ("flower- like handsome man" or "pin-up boy"), which usually refers to young men who have great sense of fashion and style. They wear make-ups such as eye-liner and lipstick. They are young

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\(^1\) Scholars have observed that masculinity in East Asia tends to be androgynous. According to Geert Hofstede’s scale of masculinity/femininity, South Korea scores low, meaning that South Korea can be considered as a feminine society (Hofstede, 1998).

\(^2\) Seonbi means "virtuous scholar" in Korean and typically denotes young noblemen who prepared for the gwageo examination or passed it but did not take on government positions during the Joseon Dynasty and who had reputations for integrity and incorruptibility.

\(^3\) The leading actor of Winter Sonata, a popular Korean romance television drama firstly broadcast in 2002.

\(^4\) Rain is a South Korean singer, actor, songwriter, dancer, model, producer and designer.

\(^5\) Oldboy is a South Korean film broadcast in 2003 based on the Japanese manga.

\(^6\) It has been argued that the emergence of kkonminam is influenced by bishonen in yaoi or shojo manga originated in Japanese culture.
— usually born around or after 1990s, and look boyish. This style of masculinity invokes enormous adoration among young female fans.

Though the popularity of the heterogeneous masculinity has been studied in the theoretical lens of transculturation and hybridization among different cultural entities (Jung, 2011), the gender and sexuality issues in the fans’ consumption of kkonminam popularized by pop idols has not been given sufficient interrogation. This study intends to explore the complexities of the gender/sexuality-related pleasures that fans obtain from consumption of pretty boy idols.

**Research questions**

By analyzing posts in online fan community and interviewing fans of Korean pretty boy bands, this study seeks to know: What do fans like about their idols who embody non-hegemonic masculinity? What kinds of pleasure they obtain from consuming this type of masculinity? Is gender power relationship an explainable perspective to understand such fandom other than cultural proximity between China and Korea? If it is explainable, does the consumption of non-hegemonic masculinity rewrite or reinforce existing scripts of hierarchal gender relationships? Or demonstrate more complexities other than simply rewriting or reinforcing gender power relationships? Moreover, this study also seeks to explore if the consumption of such masculinity can be related to the fans’ everyday gendered experience and the gendered politics behind.

**Methods, findings, and analysis**

**Method I: Internet observation**

In order to understand what the fans are consuming for pleasure, I look into the EXO Baidu bar\(^7\) — a main online forum of EXO fans, to see what kinds of posts are

\(^7\) The EXO Baidu bar has over 800,000 members.
circulating and how fans comment on the posts. The EXO Baidu bar is rather productive, so I limited the time period of posts between Oct 1st to Oct 5th. The time period here does not refer to the time when the posts were posted, but the time of the latest comments posted by fans under the original posts. Then I selected the hottest posts - posts that received more than 5000 comments from fans. The total number of the selected posts (including comments below) was 30. Each of the post had around 20 – 30 pages when saved as pdf. file. I numbered each pdf post from 1 to 30 for the purpose of citation in the following analysis.

I closely read each post (including fans’ comments). I marked down recurring themes such as “homosexuality” “unthreatening masculinity” “imagine the story line”, and so on, which later yielded into the main issues for analysis. I kept reading until no more new themes occurred. I also constantly re-read each post to connect and compare the common themes across posts, so as to make more valid and generalizable summaries.

After reading and analyzing all the posts and following comments, I summarized below six recurring themes which are inter-related and gender-related. Then I try to make sense of the gender politics behind each theme and behind the connections of these different but in fact consistent themes. It was probably because I intended to look at the gender and sexuality issues in EXO fandom that the themes that I summarized were gender and sexuality related. Such confession of the researcher, however, did not negate the predominance and efficacy of these issues in understanding and explaining EXO fandom.

1. **Image centrality: Altering gazing dynamic and expressing erotica**

   Appreciation of images of the boys is one of the things that the fans most often do. Indeed, such behavior is not unique as fans of many other stars also enthusiastically endorse the idols’ gorgeous looking, on the basis of which those idols can enter into
entertaining industry.

Such behavior, however, is particularly important for fans of EXO that it becomes a prominent part of the fandom. A considerable number of posts in the online fan bar are about – to be exact, purely about - “high definition” pictures of the boys, without referring to anything else. Fifteen out of thirty of the sampled posts in this study highlights “pictures” (“图图” or “图楼”) in the titles. Every “high definition” picture arouses great pleasure in the fans, as can be seen in the huge number of following comments and strong emotion expressed in it. This is unique compared to fans of other stars, whose fans may pay relatively equal attention to both the star’s appearance and other aspects such as character and performance.

“At first, I was just taking a casual look at Korean pop groups and got disappointed, because the ‘face’ (颜, yan) (appearance of the stars) is not as good as it once was. But when I saw the four Chinese boys, I was so proud of them!”

“Star Museum Entertainment finally found some pretty Chinese boys to join the group! It is unbelievable to have such good looking Chinese boys in Korean pop groups!”

The extreme form of such fantasy about image is “face fans” (颜饭, yan fan) and “corporeal fans” (肉体饭, rou ti fan). They are particular groups in fan community. “Face fans” refers to those who fancy about the idol merely due to his delicate facial appearance, overshadowing other aspects. Similarly, “corporeal fans” refers to those who only desire the body figure of the boys. Both of them righteously claim such

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8 In fact, I was attracted to this topic firstly by the fans’ persistent efforts to keep posting and reposting nice photos of the boys with emotion-loaded words in social network.
9 14-5 (pdf 14, page 5)
10 S.M. for short, a representative entertainment company in Korea.
11 14-4
12 Indeed, other fans recognize the idol’s outer appearance and inner character, as well as performance. But, as is mentioned before, appearance (especially the face) adoration still makes up a significant part in the fans’ comments.
label and do not think it superficial at all. Yao, the male fan that I interviewed said that he was a “face fan” of Lu Han (a member of EXO) when I asked what did he like about Lu Han. He even used an almost exaggerated four-character word in Chinese - “beautiful face of the grand epoch” (美颜盛世), to describe Lu Han.

“Face fans” and “corporeal fans” show strong passion in “dissecting” and complimenting on the details of the boys’ images in close-up shots. Such way of looking resonates the way that male gaze at objectified female in dominant gender culture. They comment on the boys’ delicate (almost unreal in the processed photos) facial skin, facial contours, appealing eyes, slender hands and good body shape. Some of the descriptive vocabularies that fans employ copy the set of words that people usually use on women, such as “beautiful eyes look like pictures” (美目如画) or “beauty” (美人).

Such visual intimacy established by “face fans” and “corporeal fans” are associated with unrestrained sensual erotica that is deemed inappropriate for women in traditional Asian culture. Their erotic feelings are unleashed in a pleasurable way without guilty. For example, when looking at Kai dancing in suite, some fans comment that: “The button on the suite is to firm! Burst open please!!” Other comments on Kai’s photos also express explicit erotica:

“My vessels are emptied.”
“I am shot by him.”
“This is so sexy! A large number of desiring zombies are approaching. Where are the corporeal fans?! ”
“The V neckline is so deep! ... Deep V neckline is the just the primary level of sexiness for Kai”
“Super figure! It has actually been looked all over already. ”

13 Used to describe Tao. 21-9.
In short, for one thing, image centrality in the fandom poses challenges to, or may just copy the way of, the male gaze logic in dominant gender culture; for another, it evokes erotica expression in the fans (most of whom are female), which challenges the traditional norm that denies female’s desiring position and their sexual expression.

2. Imagine the storyline: Feminine, domestic, and homosexual

Another theme that recurs in the fan comments is to imagine the storyline of the photos. Fans are creative in providing novel scripts unintended by the original texts for photos of their idols in outdoor contexts, in television shows, or in photo studios. By examining what kinds of scripts are conceived by the fans, we can explore what kinds of desire are projected in the boys.

The storyline conjured up by fans are found to be in a feminine/domestic style and surface homosexual imagination. For example, under a photo showing several boys sitting together and interacting with each other, the leader of K team\textsuperscript{14} Kim Joon Myun - nicknamed as “Myun mom” (绵妈), is imagined as the “Mom” attending other “little kids” in the team\textsuperscript{15}. Chan Yeol also got a nickname “Yeol girl” (灿妮儿, a suffix that will be used on young girls). Feminine expressions are also employed to interpret the boys’ gestures:

“\textit{Lulu says that my mushroom-like hair should be cut now.}” (1-5)

“\textit{Dodo says that he wants mean he wants meat he wants meat ~~}”(2-14)

As the quotes show, the photos, either girlish or not, are usually decoded with feminine language. Caring for appearance or playing coquetry (repetitive use of

\textsuperscript{14} EXO consist of two teams - Korean team (K team) and Mandarin team (M team). Each team has six members.

\textsuperscript{15} 2-8.
“wants meat”) are usually deemed as girlish. But fans, most of whom are female, impose their own daily (gendered) experience to their idols in a pleasurable way that they do not feel any inappropriateness or uncomfortableness in such feminization of male idols. This rarely happens in fans of masculine male stars, whom they expect to exemplify ideal heterosexual men. The feminine daily culture of the fans is thus evoked and reinforced in their consumption of EXO.

Although EXO boys are feminized by the fans to a certain extent, it should be noticed that fans appreciate both femininity and manliness of the boys without feeling any discomfort. The gender characteristics of the boys tend to be plastic rather than prescribed or fixed in the fans’ interpretation. Femininity is not in stark contrast with manliness in fans’ consumption of EXO boys. They are quite comfortable transferring between such binary constructions. Such easy transferability between masculine and feminine applies to most of the boys:

“Lulu you are tsundere as well as handsome and manly!” (14-13)
“Lulu is the complex of cute face and manly heart! I love this!” (14-5)
“Luhan is true man!” (14-15)
“Tao is girlish again! Look at your facial expressions, so cute. Warm men! Almighty captain!” (13-9)

Homo friendship is another very important interpretive repertoire that fans draw on. A photo showing Lu Han’s sorrowful eyes without any other information is decoded by fans as missing Sehun who is distanced from him (26-10). The issue of homo friendship will be further discussed later.

3. Pretty masculinity: Male power stripped off

The traditional assumption of masculinity positions men as powerful figures that one
should revere. As is mentioned at the beginning, masculinity in Asia is more diverse than such simplistic assumption. While male stars such as Rain - representing global masculinity, Bae Yong Jun – representing soft masculinity, and mugukjeok representing postmodern masculinity, I propose here that the Korean pop group – EXO is representing “castrated” masculinity. Though I am not using psychoanalysis framework here, I borrow the psychoanalysis term “castrated” here, for the reason that it epitomizes a non-hierarchal, unthreatening relationship between the fans and the boy idols. The following will elaborate on this.

In terms of visual construction, EXO boys are wrapped up in a pretty way – long or smooth hair, dyed and stylish hairstyle, painted finger nails, eye makeup, rosy lips, creamy skin, stylish but not luxurious clothing and accessories. Fans often use words such as “beautiful” (Mei, 美 in Chinese), “cute” (Ke’ai, 可爱) and so on - the word that usually used to describe girls, to comment on the boys close-up shots.

A typical set of characteristics that fans find desirable are “stupid” “numb” “cute” and “obedient” – which are in contrast with traditional ideal notion of masculinity that expects men to be mature, capable, authoritative and cool. Even though some of the members, for example, the leader, Kris, are more close to powerful man (fans use “handsome” “domineering” “manly” to describe him), but this does not conflict with his cuteness.

“Lulu will scratch his head when he is nervous.” (1-5)
“Their laugh is super stupid!”
“They will become number under the leadership of Chan” (Chan Yeol) (2-26)
“I am totally attracted by him. He is so ignorant and cute when he speaks, and so are all other EXO members! How I wish I could hug him!” (26-3)
“I love Lay’s numb facial expression and Kris’s ignorant smile so much!” (4-12)
Moreover, fans like the obedience (乖) of the boys. It is following – that is, being controlled, rather than controlling, that is being complimented by fans. Boys having smooth hair are thought to be obedient kids. Fans also make compliments to Lu Han when he follows the order of an elder girl’s instructions (2-19).

Consuming the stupidity, numbness, cuteness, and obedience of the boys indicates the desire for unthreatening, non-hierarchal masculinity. These characteristics are associated with a sense of irrationality, immaturity, and incapability. The boys are so young and so pretty that they are not expected to be a mature man. The patriarchal culture expects wealth, strength, and status from men, but these seem to be irrelevant to the EXO boys. While people would admire how rich Beckham is or how strong Schwarzenegger is, fans of EXO are relatively indifferent toward them.

Instead of projecting a physically or socially powerful role on the pretty boys, the fans tend to imagine them to be angelic boys. What they like about them is not how socially or culturally powerful they are, but their active spirit, sunshine character, clean appearance, and warm smiles. For fans, “warm and handsome smiles are the most charming!” In my interview with Yao, he also emphasized that, the first and foremost important thing that he liked about Korean boy stars was “he should love smiling”.

4. Making fun of imperfectness: Peer relationship

Pictures showing imperfect images of the boys’ body gestures, facial expressions and stage performances are consumed a lot by the fans. The boys’ stupid looks, wild facial expressions, wrong steps on stage, and so on, are made fun of by the fans. For the fans, talking about these “wrongs” is by no means serious contempt of their idols’ performance; they just playfully “despise” the flaws of their idols in order to express their adoration.
For example, in a photo showing Su Ho bending due to instable control of body on stage (2-13). Fan comments either show light despise (by no means criticism) saying that a, or show sympathy towards his painful knees. Fans also “warn” Lu Han to pay attention to “image management” under a series of photos of Lu Han’s wild facial expressions. They also make fun of Lay’s incapability to make a good looking cake (11-7), or even the shortness of Baek Hyun.

Making fun of the imperfectness demonstrates a close distance and relatively equal status between stars and fans. Idols are no longer standing high above the masses that one need to look up. Instead, they are like peers that they can closely play with. Fans have a say on the stupidness of their idols, which, however, does not harm the perfectness of idols in their mind. Criticism (in a mild and gentle way) and love are not in stark contrast. In one comment, the fan writes that “I actually secretly satirized your first MV a little bit, the Chinese lyric and your Chinese singing”. But the fan then immediately goes on to compliment Lulu’s appearance, dance, voice and kind heart.

5. Homo intimacy and homoerotica

“Homo” culture is critical to the fans of Korean pop male groups. Each pop group has “official couples” (官配) and “civil couples” (民配). Official couples refer to couples that are matched by the entertainment companies who deliberately deliver intimate message about the couples in posts, television shows, photos, etc. Civil couples refer to couples that are created by fans. The following will analyze two ways that the fans consume homosexual culture presented by the boy band.

_Homo intimacy: Desiring for relations_
Couple culture promoted by the entertainment companies does not have to lead to homoeroticism, especially in a public environment in which the companies seek maximum reach to audiences. For the public, or even some of the fans, homoeroticism is not appropriate. The EXO Baidu bar, a mainstream online fan community announces explicitly that homosexual erotica is forbidden in the forum. Some fans insistently argue that the intimate relationship between two boys is just friendship rather than homosexual relationship.

“*Homosexual?! It is just friendship, OK?! Many people see them as homosexual, but what I see is just pretty boys*.”

“*Distanced love? This is going too far...This is just very good friendship.*” (26-5)

What the fans find pleasurable is not the gay relationship but the intimate relationship between boys. The intimacy is demonstrated in many sweet relational gestures in photos or in the fans’ knowledge about the boys’ closeness. Fans like to post and discuss photos containing intimate gestures between boys. In a photo, Lay grabs Kris’s arms and puts his hand into Kris’s sleeve (4-16). This kind of situation is interpreted as “pink” (粉红, which indicates sweetness) or “lovely” (有爱). One fan posts that she is so moved when she knows that Lay knows that Kris does not use cup when he brushes teeth (4-13). Her post then invokes discussion about how intimate they are, and not surprisingly, leads to homosexual imagination.

But intimacy does not necessarily link to homosexual imagination. Intimacy among boys itself is a source of pleasure for fans as it constitutes a forever harmonious realm without conflicts; there are mutual support, care between members, close understanding of each other, responsiveness to each other, and so on, which the fans found precious in interpersonal relationship. It has been found that females are more attached to intimacy than males in interpersonal interaction. Intimacy is one of the

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16 Bacon in her study of *Star Trek* fans found that woman fan fiction writers wanted to “tear down the institution of hierarchical power that constructs men as individuals, not relational beings” (Bacon,
most important things that female seek in romance, but it is often neglected by their partners who are not expected to have the talent to take care of female’s need (Radway, 1984; Bacon, 1992).

**Homoerotica: Multiple identification and fluid identities**

Another way of consuming the homosexual culture, however, touches on homoerotica. Relational gestures such as holding hands, clasping waist, eye contact, and so on, are interpreted by the fans to be romantic. There are both emotional/relational imagination and more sensual consumption of the homosexual romance.

“what is Lulu’s position in Kris’s heart?”

“Luhan is so cute when he holds hands with Sehun and protects him while walking!”

“The truth is there is another one beside Sehun on the bed!” (12-4)

Most of the fans favor particular couples (can be more than one couple) while liking particular individuals. Such consumption of homoerotica of male by female fans, according to Bacon (1992:239), enables female fans to identity with more than one position, and they can imagine giving and receiving love from the point of views of different males.

One thing that I have to point out is that no significant women present in the overall EXO promotion and EXO fandom. They do not have rumors with any girls, and fans never imagine their idols to be coupled with a girl. What does it mean by absence of women? It is possible that the presence of women disenable the female fans to “be the one and have the other” (ibid). With the presence of women, female fans can hardly “be the one” who can imagine a heterosexual relationship with the desired boy, while absence of women eradicates moral concerns that impedes the female fans’ desire.
Close examination of fans’ consumption of homoerotica finds that homosexual script adopts heterosexual script. The fans make sense of the homosexual relationship with heterosexual frameworks and vocabularies.

“Chan Yeol! You flirt with Myun in front of your wife!” (12-5)

But homosexual script here imposed on EXO boys is more fluid than heterosexual script in positioning identities in three ways. One is that the seme-uke\textsuperscript{17} positions are reversible in some fans’ interpretation. One does not necessarily always be the dominator or subordinator, but can transfer between them under different contexts.

Secondly, fans accept both straightness and gayness with regard to one boy, without feeling any discomfort. At one moment fans are crazy about the heterosexual charms of the boys, while at another moment, the fans are imagining homosexual script for the couples. Under a photo showing Kris’s charming action, fans comment that “Kris was super appealing to girls!”. While at the same time, they enthusiastically consume the Kris’s homo friendship with other boys.

One thing that should be noticed is that the heterosexual imagination on the boys deconstructs the power relationship between male and female in traditional heterosexual script underpinned by the notion of “strong men and weak women”. Such pattern is not salient and is even challenged in fans’ interpretation. The female fans tend to seek an ownership of the desired boys - “How I wish I could keep a Lu Han” (Lu Han is animalized here), rather than to be owned.

Thirdly, there is no fixed couples and no strict requirement for loyalty in homo romance. For fans, one boy can be coupled with different boys in fans’ own creation. Favoring one couple does not exclude other possibilities in a hostile way.

\textsuperscript{17} Dominator-subordinator relationship in BL (boy love) fiction.
6. Nurturing expression

Female fans can be categorized into “elder sister” fans (姐姐饭, Jiejie Fan), “mom” fans (妈妈饭), and “younger sister” fans. “Elder sister” fans are usually born after 1980s, while most of the EXO members are born after 1990s. “Elder sister” fans are more organized in fan community, as they set up many QQ discussion groups only for fans born after 1980s. “Mom” fans are fans who are at the age of a mother. While these two labels prevail in the fan community, young female fans who are at the same age as or younger than the boys do not literally label themselves as “younger sister” fan group (妹妹饭), but they are usually the most agitating and frenetic ones.

Assuming the role of elder sister and mother (“elder sister” fans often self-identity themselves in comments while “mom” fans do not do that much), the female fans exert discursive power over the EXO boys.

Elder sister (Jiejie, in Chinese pronunciation) fans:

*Follow Jiejie and let’s go home!*
*Let Jiejie kiss you!*
*Make ugly faces to Jiejie next time! Don’t be so cute please!*

Some fans treat the boys as children discursively:

*“How I wish I could take these two little kids home!”*

*“He is so involved every time he plays games, but does not have much to say in interviews. Lulu, how could mom deal with it?!"* (14-11)

Treating the boys as younger brothers and children, Jiejie fans and mom fans obtain a

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18 饭 is pronounced similarly to 粉 in Chinese term 粉丝 (fans), so it is used by involved fans to refer to fans.

19 Female fans who are at the age of a mother.
discursive position that enables them to use imperative tones. “Follow”, “let...kiss” “make” “don’t” “take...home” – verbs from the quotes all default the speakers a more agentic role. In this sense, even though the boys are shining stars, they can be assigned a subordinate role by the female fans. In addition, assuming self as sister or mother enables fans to express their intimate love that has implication of ownership.

While the imperative expressions can be read as a non-hierarchal, if not reversal, power relationship between female fans and the boys, we should admit that it is used to build up imaginary intimate relationship, as well as to express caring voice, rather than reversing the power positions. Female fans demonstrate very typical mothering tone when concerning the boys’ health:

“Lulu, why your eyes are red? Haven’t had a good rest?” (1)
“Lulu is too slim!” (1)
“Baibai is so cute when he is sneezing! But I still worry about him. His has not recovered from cough yet.” (2-10)

Gendered roles – elder sister and mother, on the one hand give female fans a position to exert hierarchal power rooted in Confucius familial ethics that respects the elder; on the other hand reinforces traditional gender roles that require women to be caring for others.

Method II: Interview

I invited four fans (three female, one male) to participate in the interview by snowballing (See appendix I). All the interviews were conducted online via wechat or QQ. Each interview lasted around one hour. Before each interview, I briefed the general topic of my study to them, and promised that I would keep their real name confidential, and that I would only use the data for non-profit academic purpose.
My primary main questions seek to know what they like about the pretty boy Korean pop groups, and what is the relationship between their fandom involvement and their everyday life. Although I did not ask gender-related questions explicitly, this issue recurred and threaded many answers they offered. But it is also possible that I was preoccupied by a gender perspective, that my interpretation and analysis were much influenced by it. Of course there were other issues coming up, such as cultural proximity between Korea and China, online community culture, fan clusters, and so on. But these issues are not quite relevant to the research questions of current study.

After the interviews, I re-read the interviewing scripts closely, and marked down key words such as “gender-appearance” “generation” “cultural proximity” “unthreatening masculinity” “real life” “heterosexual imagination” “homo friendship”, and so on, according to the themes of each part of their answers. Then I clustered together the answers of different interviewees with regard to the same themes, and tried to summarize, compare, and make sense of their answers.

1. Projection of heterosexual desire: Real life and fandom

Two female fans that I interviewed tended to project heterosexual desire on their idols, thus interweaving fandom and real life. Shu and Lin admitted that fandom of Korean male pop groups to a certain extent uplifted their standard of choosing male partners, as well as influencing the actual interaction with male partners. Both Shu and Lin were not in a heterosexual romance relationship when interviewed, and they admitted that it was probably because their high standard that impeded themselves from finding a boy friend. Appearance surfaced as an important issue when they talked about male partner:

Shu: “I prefer boys who pay certain attention to self image”.
Lin: “Although I do not intend to compare boys in real life with my idols, it is hard to
avoid such comparison when you see the idols are packaged in such a perfect way. My height is 170cm, so I wish my partner higher than me...I like boys who dress themselves neatly.”

Fans varied with regard to whether fan behaviors influence real life or not. Lin mentioned her cousin’s case to exemplify that fandom of Korean male pop groups was to some extent excluded from actual interaction with boy friend. But another female interviewee, Bai, who asserted that she could consciously separate fan behaviors and real life, said that it was not realistic to apply the perfect standard of idols on screen to real life people. Yao, the male fan, said that: “the only influence that they have on my life is money...I spend quite a lot on them. And I also need to ask for a leave to go to their concerts.” He denied other influence in a definite way.

2. Non-hierarchal idols

In the interviews with female fans, all three of them showed their appreciation towards the unthreatening masculinity and equal status with their idols. This resonates with findings in internet observation. All three female fans mentioned the relative low status of Korean pop stars in the entertaining industry when compared to Chinese stars. Such low status, according to the fans, can to some extent explain the idols’ modesty.

Bai: Korean idol singers are not high up in the air because they are at a low social status in Korean entertainment, lower than film actors, TV actors, and hosts. They often go to television shows. Most of the time, they amuse others without caring about their own images. So they are not that kind of distanced stars.
But the only male fan Yao did not bring up this issue.

Shu: I like them because they are so modest...In fact, these Korean idols differ from stars in China. These singers rank low in the hierarchy of Korean stars, lower than
actors. Korean treat these stars as ordinary people rather than shining stars. But in China, stars are high above us. Unlike Korean stars, they have to be different from ordinary people in order to be the stars.

Lin: They look handsome, adorable, and they don’t put on airs.

The low status is related to the relatively few money that these boy idols obtain. Even though Korean pop groups are popular in Asia, they are not paid highly, since a large sum of money will go to the entertainment companies, and the money that they make has to be shared with other group members. Under the competitive circumstances in Korean entertaining industry, fans become the lifeblood of those idols. They have to appeal to considerable scale of fans so that the companies will invest more on them. As Shu said that the idols more likely to treat fans as equal beings. She then took Chinese stars as comparison, saying that some Chinese stars were making much money and were too arrogant to fans. However, non-hierarchal status between fans and idols does not come up as a prominent issue in the interview with the male fan.

3. Homosexuality

Homosexuality, be it implicit or explicit, surfaced as an important issue in all four interviews. All of them found the intimate relationship between boys to be pleasurable to consume. Shu and Lin were fond of the intimacy rather than homoerotica between boys, while Bai was more explicit when talking about homoerotica. Shu interpreted the homosexual friendship as companionship among boys cultivated in long term training and career, while Lin interpreted it as caring relationship – one took care of the other and one needed to be taken care of. Such intimacy resonates with femininity that seeks relational interaction and thus arising pleasure in female fans.

Shu: Isn’t it treasonable experience to spend youthful days together? Like one or two years. Maybe that’s why they are close to each other.
Lin: Sometimes I conjure up such relationship to have fun. The warmness between them is so touching.

Bai: I enjoy the actions (actions between boys) and fanart (comics drawn by fans) because the actions show the pinkness of love and CP (coupling), and fanart is cute and softens heart.

Yao, the male fan, however, though also endorsed homosexual friendship, the way he talked about it did not show as much desire for intimacy as female fans did.

Yao: My understanding of coupling is that, one needs someone else to strive for destinations together with him. If one strives by himself, that would be a hard time.

While all interviewees consumed homosexuality, they varied in their interpretation of the straightness and gayness. After saying that she enjoyed imagining the relationship between boys, Lin immediately emphasized the straightness of them by saying that those boys were still fond of beautiful girls. Despite the androgynous appearance packaged by the company, Lin still hold that they were actually very manly persons who had made enormous painful endeavors to go on stage. Yao also asserted the straightness of Hyuk Jae (a member in Super Junior) in a protective tone, even though he consumed the bodily erotica of Hyuk Jae. Shu and Bai, however, did not assert certain the sexual orientation for their idols.

Fans also varied in their interpretation of the power relationship between seme and uke, as well as reversibility between them. Bai was open to the reversibility between seme and uke. She did not care who dominated and who subordinated as long as it was the couple that she liked. But Yao preferred the boy he liked (Lu Han) to be the seme: “I would like him to be the seme. After all, I don’t want the person that I like to suffer.” For Yao, being the uke is disadvantaged while being the seme is advantaged.

20 Yao set a half nude picture of Hyuk Jae as the background of his weibo homepage and he thought he was really charming when cooking in half nude body.
21 Dominator and subordinator in male homosexual relationship.
in homosexual relationship.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of online fan community of EXO and interview with fans of Korean pretty boy bands found that the pleasure of the fans, most of whom were young females, was associated with the consumption of “castrated” masculinity that challenged existing gender power dynamic.

Six inter-related themes are found via online observation. Firstly, female fans obtain a discursively (not necessarily “real”) active/agentic position to “gaze” at their boy idols, in the way of which, they express desiring erotica that is deemed inappropriate for proper femininity. Secondly, female fans also impose feminine and domestic scripts on the boy idols without feeling discomfort of such feminization of males. Thirdly, the fans endorse the pretty boys’ unthreatening, non-hierarchal masculinity that is lacking in real life circumstances. Fourth, the fans treat their idols as equal as peers that they can make fun of their idols’ imperfectness. Fifth, homosexual culture is important in the fans’ consumption of pretty boys. Desiring the homo intimacy among boys resonates with the female’s relational longings, while the consumption of homoeerotica enables female fans to identify multiple positions and more fluid gender identities than the traditional heterosexual normative prescribes. Sixth, being a female fan of young pretty boys invokes both empowering discursive position and traditional gender roles.

In the interview, there are variations between female and male fans, as well as within the group of female fans, with regard to different gender issues. It is found that female fans would project their heterosexual desire on their boy idols, but they vary in the extent to which they integrate fan activities and everyday life. The only male fan...
retains a distanced attitude towards such “integration” of fandom and real life. The endorsement of non-hierarchal idols found in internet observation is confirmed in fan interviews, but it does not surface in the interview with the male fan. While female fans endorse the homo intimacy, the male fan shows less desire towards it. With regard to sexual orientation of the idols and the power relationships within homosexual couple, the male fan more likely to retain straightness for the idols, and that being seme\textsuperscript{23} is privileged. Female fans, however, hold more fluid and open views towards the sexual orientation of the idols, as well as towards the reversibility of seme and uke within a couple.

\textsuperscript{23} The dominator.
## Appendix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Fans of</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shu</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Agent of oversea study (White collar worker)</td>
<td>Wuhan, Hubei province</td>
<td>SHINee, Super Junior, EXO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Civil engineer        (White collar worker)</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>EXO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bai</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Master student</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>SHINee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Mechanical worker</td>
<td>Liaoning province</td>
<td>BoA, TVXQ\textsuperscript{24}, Super Junior, SHINee, EXO, BigBang, NEWS, AKB48, Girls' Geneation\textsuperscript{25}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{24} 东方神起
\textsuperscript{25} 少女时代
Bibliography


