

*A Shifting Gender Regime in Contemporary China?  
Fans' Queer Readings of the Film Ne Zha*

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**Abstract**

The animation film *Ne Zha* was a hit in the summer of 2019 in Chinese cyberspace. The film generated a lot of discussion and user-generated content from online fans. This is due largely to the film's nuanced depiction of the relationship between its protagonist *Ne Zha* and his friend/enemy, *Ao Bing*. The homosocial/homoerotic undertone in their interactions had provoked the production and distribution of various forms of gay-themed fan arts (drawings, remixed short videos, photo-shopped pictures, etc.) regarding the two characters across the internet. This phenomenon is all the more thought-provoking when situated in China's particular cultural environment, where depictions of non-heterosexualities or behaviors online are officially prohibited, inviting thorough scholarly scrutiny. Taking a post-modern feminist and queer perspective, this study examines fan-produced drawings and pictures of the film *Ne Zha* on Douban.com, one of the top rating websites in China. By interpreting selected fan works through content analysis, the study argues that while gay fan works of the film bridge together the disconnected relations of male homosociality and homosexuality between the two main characters, they nonetheless reproduce the patriarchal, hetero-sexist gender norms of a post-socialist China.

Keywords: Chinese Queer Fandom, Gender, Sexuality, Homosociality, Content Analysis

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## **Introduction**

The screening of *Nezha: birth of the demon child* in China in the summer of 2019 was phenomenal. Having beaten the world-renowned *Zootopia*, it climbed on top in China's box office record for animations within the first week of screening. Indeed, the exquisite storyline and refined portrayal of characters in the film had largely restored public's confidence in domestic animation industry, which has long been dominated by imported works from Japan and the US (Xinhuanet, 2020).

Along with discussions of the film itself was a rising online queer fandom. This is due largely to the film's nuanced depiction of the relationship between its protagonist Ne Zha and his friend/enemy, Ao Bing. The homosocial and homoerotic undertone in their interactions had provoked the production and distribution of various forms of queer fan arts depicting the two characters as a gay 'couple' across the internet (Cheng, 2019). On Weibo, Chinese twitter, the hashtag Oubing, a neologism for fans' coupling of the two characters, has gathered more than 400,000 fans with approximately 1.5 billion views (Cheng, 2019; Weibo, 2020). This phenomenon is all the more thought-provoking when situated in China's particular cultural environment, where depictions of non-heterosexualities or behaviors online are officially prohibited, inviting thorough scholarly scrutiny (Zhao, 2020).

In this paper I will explore fans' queer reading of the animation film Ne Zha as indicated in their fan works, and their roles in contemporary Chinese gender culture. I will first briefly introduce queer fandom in contemporary China where queer readings of Ne Zha have been produced and circulated. Then, I will outline the plot of the film, and why and how it has provoked fans' queer reading. Having done so, I will examine fan-produced drawings and pictures of Ne Zha on Douban.com, one of the top rating websites in China through content analysis (Douban.com, 2020). Taking a post-modernist feminist and queer perspective, I argue that while queer fan works of the film bridge together the disconnected male homosociality and homosexuality between the two main characters, thereby challenge the regime of gender and sexuality, they nonetheless reproduce the hetero-sexist and dualist gender norms of a post-socialist China. I'll also point out directions for future research at the end.

### **(Online) queer fandom in a post-socialist China**

#### **Post-socialist China: the cultural landscape**

The reform and opening up policy since the late 1970s has seen great social, economic and political transformations in Chinese society. On the one hand, international investments have shifted the former socialist economic system towards a state-capitalist one; on the other hand, marketization and the nation's aging population render the promotion of nuclear family urgent, resulting in a resurgence of gender inequalities compared to the former socialist era, when women were depicted as 'holding up half the sky'. Many scholars consider China's contemporary political economy as 'post-socialist', in which neoliberal agenda promoting individualism is accompanied by a rising patriarchy of sexual difference and labor segregation (Glasser, 1997; Fincher, 2016; Yu, 2015; Santos & Harrell, 2017; Feldshuh, 2018; Chen, 2018).

## **Queer fandom in China**

It is out of these circumstances that a queer fandom has arisen in China. With the intra-Asian and global cultural flow, and the facilitation of new media, fans produce, distribute, and consume often ‘norm-defying genders, sexualities, personhood and relationships’ (Zhao & Wong, 2020, p. 1). Among various social and economic forces, scholars have highlighted the significant influences of Japanese Boy’s Love (BL) culture and Western slash fandom in contemporary China’s queer fandom (Yang & Xu, 2017; Zhang, 2016).

BL fandom is a subculture originated in Japan at around late 1970s. It originally signified a specific genre of manga depicting homosexual relationships between androgynous young men, whose main target audience were young, heterosexual women. First imported to Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1990s, together with the facilitation of the internet, BL culture has subsequently gained its momentum in mainland China (Martin, 2017; Zhang, 2016). Similarly, slash fandom in the Euro-American pop culture is known for its heterosexual female fans’ pairing up of (usually heterosexual) male characters in movies and/or TV series. Originated in the 1960s Star Trek series, slash culture has only recently become popular in China along with the import of American superhero movies and BBC Sherlock since the 2010s. The inflow of western slash culture has added diversity to China’s queer fandom, which until then has followed an East-Asian tradition (Jenkins, 1992; Wei, 2014; Gu, 2017). Queer fandom in China today takes on a multi-faceted manner, in which fans not only compose fictional and/or audiovisual derivative works from both domestic and international media productions, but also produce their own original works (McLelland et al., 2015; Wei, 2014; Lavin, Yang & Zhao, 2017).

Dynamism of China’s queer fandom has attracted increasing amount of scholarly attention, discussing its potentiality or incompetence in transforming China’s gender norms and ideology (Xu & Yang, 2013; Zhou, 2014; Zhang, 2016; Zhang, 2017; Xu & Tan, 2019). Some argue that the subculture, with its diversified portrayals of desires and sexualities, constructs a contrasting force against China’s patriarchal traditions stigmatizing women and the sexual minorities (Xu & Yang, 2013; Zhou, 2014; Zhang, 2017; Xu & Tan, 2019). Meanwhile, concerns have been raised on queer works’ reiteration and therefore solidification of existing gender ideology, as content producers carry out their signifying practices from a ‘neoliberal’, often ‘heteronormative’ worldview consistent with the socio-economic paradigm of the post-socialist China in the first place (Zhang, 2017, pp. 125, 136).

It is exactly in this dynamic context that fan works on the film *Ne Zha* are produced and consumed. Indeed, popularity of *Ne Zha*’s queer fandom and fan works have been believed to be the largest contributor to the film’s success (Cheng, 2019). In these works fans provides their own readings of the relations between *Ne Zha* and *Ao Bing*, and in so doing negotiate with the dominating gender norms.

### **Ne Zha and Ao Bing: From Taoist myth to coming-of-age story**

*Ne Zha* is originally a character in *The Investiture of the Gods* (《封神演义》), a Taoist myth in the 16th century China about the overturn of the corrupt Shang dynasty by Zhou. *Ne Zha* is a general’s son and an incarnation of a sacred bead, who facilitates the

King of Zhou in defeating the Shang empire. On the other hand, Ao Bing is the third son of Ao Guang, Dragon King of the East Sea. In the original story, Ao Bing is a secondary character symbolizing evil and patriarchal law and order, who has been 'skinned and pulled out a tendon' by the adolescent Ne Zha. In the 2019 *Nezha* film, however, Ao Bing has become a major character, who resonates to, but at times also confronts with Ne Zha. Through their interactions, the two come to terms with their identities (Sun, 2019; Jiang, 2020, p. 58; Liu, Wei, & Yang, 2019).

In the film, the original sacred bead in the Taoist myth becomes a chaos pearl born out of the energy of heaven and earth, absorbing both the divine and the demonic energies, which later on has been divided into the spirit pearl and the demon pill. The divided chaos pearl is then incarnated by Ne Zha and Ao Bing respectively, indicating the complementary and entwined relationship between the two characters.

To be more specific, Ne Zha is the incarnation of the demon pill. Though he tries hard to blend in, his nature as the demon child renders him naughty and isolated by his peers. Ao Bing, by contrast, is the incarnation of the spirit pearl. Although injected with the sacred spirit, his identity as a dragon is still considered 'evil' by the human society (Liu et al., 2019, 1:18:30). The two met each other and, having experienced similar discrimination, became each other's best and the only friend immediately. However, they were later told each other's true identity, and their relation as 'sworn rivals' (Liu et al., 2019, 0:58:11). They fought against each other. During the process, Ne Zha, though controlled by demonic spirit, decided to take his own responsibility and to fight against his fate. On the other hand, Ao Bing, while determined to defeat Ne Zha so as to claim his 'birthright as the spirit pearl' and to reverse people's stereotypes, was inspired by Ne Zha and therefore decided to fight against his fate as a demonic dragon as well (Liu et al., 2019, 0:58:31). Together, the two shoulder a coming lightning curse and saved the civilians of their hometown in spite of the injustice they have received.

This film can be seen as a narration of a coming-of-age story through the shifting bonding between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. The relationship went through a friend-rival-friend transition. Though differently experienced, this bonding is continuous throughout the story. By first finding consolation in, then rivaling against, and finally inspired by each other, both Ne Zha and Ao Bing come to terms with their own agency to fight against stereotypes and 'fate', and thereby establishing their identities (Liu et al., 2019, 1:35:51).

Eve Sedgwick defines this relationship between men as 'male homosocial desire' (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1). The term 'desire' is used as analogous to the psychoanalytic libido, signifying 'the affective or social force, the glue' that maintains the male bonds, which can take the forms of either alliance or rivalry (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 2). This can be seen in the smooth transition from friendship to rivalry and back again in Ne Zha and Ao Bing's relationship in the film. Libido in essence, male homosocial desire is in theory consistent with male homosexual desire (Sedgwick, 1985). It is exactly this continuum that has provoked fans' multiple readings of Ne Zha and Ao Bing's relations, some of which explicitly sexual. However, when asked how he feels about fans' coupling of Ne Zha and Ao Bing in an interview with *The Beijing News*, a mainstream party-owned newspaper, Yang Yu, the director of the film claimed that he was impressed by fans' creativity:

*'We just wanted to portray their pure friendship and their resonance with each other in a more nuanced way. I was surprised by how people received it. You're all so talented'* (The Beijing News, 2019).

This explicit disassociation of homosociality from homosexuality poses an interesting contrast. Examining modern English literature, Sedgwick detects a similar radical disruption between the two. In fact, male homosocial desires are always accompanied by misogyny and homophobia. To be more specific, by excluding both women and gay men, i.e., those not qualified as 'real men', heterosexual men affirm their masculinities, and therefore their hegemonic positions in the patriarchal system of production. This structure of gender relations may vary when intersecting with other forces such as ethnicity or class that are prominent in different societies and across different historical moments, but its role of maintaining patriarchal order remains consistent (Sedgwick, 1985; Ueno, 2015). In this session my aim is not to disclose the particular forces that have defined the homosocial, but not homosexual bonding between Ne Zha and Ao Bing, although this line of request would be beneficial in understanding contemporary Chinese gender and pop culture. Rather, by conducting a content analysis of 50 fan-produced drawings and pictures on Douban.com, I would like to find out the impacts of fans' multiple readings of Ne Zha and Ao Bing's relationships on the supposedly disruption between male homosocial and homosexual desire in the film, and the extent to which these works comply with, or contrast to, China's contemporary gender norms.

### **Methodology and method**

My aim of analyzing fan works so as to disclose their relations to China's gender norms is in line with the traditions of textual analysis. As a methodology, textual analysis gives equal (if not more) weight to 'the mechanism of making-sense', i.e., 'how' meanings have been constructed out of the specific contexts in which the media texts concerned are situated, compared to 'what' the meanings actually are (McKee, 2001). With the post-structuralist 'shift' to 'discourse' since Foucault in the academy, textual analysis has been increasingly dedicated to the specific power structure, hegemony and ideology in which the texts are produced and consumed (Hall, 1997, p. 44). As such, it is competent in digging out the gender relations underpinning in my selected fan works. Specifically, content analysis is used in this study, for its competence in directly and quantitatively counting certain 'phenomena in texts', in this case the relations between Ne Zha and Ao Bing, and how the two characters have been displayed (Stokes, 2003, p. 56).

Based on former research on queer fandom's competence and shortcomings in negotiating with China's gender discourses, two hypotheses have been made:

H1: Fans' queer readings of Ne Zha and Ao Bing bridge together the homosocial and the homosexual male bonds, thereby de-stabilize gender hegemony.

H2: Fans' depictions of the two characters resonate with a dualist logic underpinning the regime of heterosexuality.

## Homosocial, but not homosexual? Queer readings of Ne Zha and Ao Bing

While queer fanworks about Ne Zha and Ao Bing can be found on a variety of new media platforms, I chose Douban as it is one of the top rating websites dedicated to books, movies and music in China providing exclusively user-generated content (Douban.com, 2020). An album is attached to each film entry, in which a ‘fan pictures’ category could be found. Pictures in each category are ranked according to ‘popularity’, ‘size’ or ‘time uploaded’. Opting out the repetitive pictures, and those without the co-presence of the film’s two characters, the top 50 most popular fan works featuring Ne Zha and Ao Bing under the category ‘fan pictures’ were collected and coded (Douban.com, 2020).

I first look at the relationship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing in the selected fan works. Studies on men and masculinities have been dedicated to the boundaries of interactions between men (Arxer, 2011; Bridges, 2013; Robinson, Anderson & White, 2018; Munsch & Gruys, 2018). While the boundary between male homosociality and homosexuality is itself ambiguous, varying across different time periods and against different socio-cultural backdrops, sexual desire is perceived as an indicator for homosexuality (Robinson, Anderson & White, 2018).

Drawn from these literature, the relationships between the two characters have been depicted in a variety of ways, ranging from homosocial to homosexual. As can be seen from Table 1, while most of the fan works portray Ne Zha and Ao Bing in homosocial terms as friends or rivals, some of them are explicitly sexual, involving the two characters touching, kissing, hugging, exchanging romantic or erotic gazes, and even engaging in S&M. These readings indicate the ultimate continuous nature of homosocial and homosexual desires in the male bonds between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. In her study on the male homosocial bonding in Chinese BL fictions, Ning (2014) argues that by bridging together the social and the sexual in male bonds, BL fictions destabilize the mechanism for maintenance of gender hierarchy, i.e., the strengthening of male homosocial relations through misogyny and homophobia (Ning, 2014; Sedgwick, 1985). By the similar token, fans’ multiple readings of the relations between Ne Zha and Ao Bing have challenged the dominating patriarchal logic of exclusion.

Relationship	Display	Percentage
<b>Homosocial</b>	Friends	30%
	Rivals	12%
	Other	32%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>Homosexual</b>	Touching	6%
	Hugging/holding	4%
	Kissing	4%
	Romantic or erotic eye-contact	10%
	S&M	4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>26%</b>

Table 1: Relationship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing

On the other hand, although fan works of Ne Zha and Ao Bing indicate a continuum between male homosocial and homosexual bonding, the gender displays of the two characters take on a rather bipolar manner.

Bem (1974) identifies 20 characteristics that are perceived by people as desirable for men, and 20 desirable for women in American society in her phenomenal Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). These characteristics, 'on the basis of sex-typed social desirability' instead of 'differential endorsement by males and females', are then allocated as 'masculine' and 'feminine' respectively (Bem, 1974, p. 155). In so doing, Bem (1974) emphasizes the constructive and productive nature of gender characteristics, i.e., men and women adjust their behaviors according to what is deemed appropriate for their sexes in society.

While original BSRI provides a perception of gender traits in the American society in the 1970s, Zhang, Norvilitis and Jin (2001) test the validity of the inventory against contemporary Chinese society, and thereupon develop a short form of the original BSRI for measuring Chinese gender orientation. To be more specific, the scholars identify 'independent, assertive, strong personality, forceful, has leader abilities, willing to take risks, willing to take a stand' and 'aggressive' as desirable concepts of masculinity, while 'affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to other's needs, understanding, compassionate, warm, tender' and 'gentle' define what a legitimate and respectable female social member should be like (Zhang, Norvilitis & Jin, 2001, p. 247).

By the similar token, Goffman (1979, p. 1) perceives human behaviors as 'displays' in accordance with social situations and rules, but which appears as natural and taken-for-granted. In terms of gender, displays are often exhibited in 'a very systematic "opposite number" arrangement', given the seemingly un-diminishable differences between male and female (Goffman, 1979, p. 2).

Examining gender displays in various commercials, Goffman (1979, p.5) discloses an asymmetrical 'parent-child complex' in the representations of men and women, in which women are constantly being cared for, but at the expense of their total subordination to men. The slavery status of women in regard to men are displayed through the techniques termed by Goffman (1979, pp. 28-83) as 'relative size', 'the feminine touch', 'function ranking', 'the ritualization of subordination', and 'licensed withdrawal'. These norms facilitate our understanding of ideal femininities and masculinities, our acceptable interactions with the opposite sex, and the way in which we come to terms with ourselves for sake of maintaining social order (Goffman, 1979).

Drawn from Bem's Sex Role Inventory and Erving Goffman's analysis of gender display, several themes stand out in the portrayal of the gender relations between the two characters. As can be seen from Table 2, Ne Zha tends to occupy the elevated or the central position of the picture, and a posture of domination. He embodies stronger personalities such as aggressiveness, assertiveness etc. These characters are perceived by Bem and Goffman as typical masculine traits (Bem, 1974; Goffman, 1979). On the other hand, Ao Bing tends to occupy the periphery position in the pictures, with a dominated posture. In these works he tends to be portrayed as affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to other's needs, compassionate, and gentle, all of which

indicate his status as the more feminine role. These portrayals reiterate a heterosexist logic of dualism, i.e., the masculine vs. the feminine; the dominating vs. the dominated, hindering their abilities in negotiating with existing gender norms and hegemony.

Gender display		Nezha	Aobing
Elevation		32%	10%
Centrality		22%	4%
Domination		22%	2%
Subordination		2%	24%
Strong personality	Aggressive	12%	0
	Attacking movement/posture	10%	2%
	Assertive	22%	0
	Demonstrating emotions	18%	0
	Leading/making (first) moves	16%	2%
	Wicked/untamed	10%	0
	Naughty	28%	2%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>4%</b>
Soft personality	Meek	0	12%
	Quiet	2%	8%
	Affectionate	0	20%
	Sympathetic	0	8%
	Shy	6%	4%
	Sensitive to others' feelings	0	4%
	Gentle	2%	24%
	Tamed/following the lead	0	4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>46%</b>

Table 2: Gender display of Ne Zha and Ao Bing

## Conclusion

In this paper I examine the homosocial bonding between the two major characters in the film *Ne Zha*, and the influence of fans' queer readings of the male bonds in China's contemporary gender culture. That being said, two relevant issues stand out, inviting further exploration.

First, as elaborated above, we might want to consider the forces that have defined the homosocial, yet not homosexual bonds between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. This line of request will provide us a better understanding of the social and cultural landscape and discourses of a post-socialist China in which the film is produced.



On the other hand, aside from the analysis of media content, we need to consider the perspective of fans themselves. Why they engage in the queer fandom and fan activities? What have they gotten out of them? What are the relations between their fan activities and their negotiation of identities in contemporary China? These questions would add nuances to our understanding of queer fans as a community.

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