

**Processing Intergenerational Trauma:
The Usage of BDSM Elements in Chinese BL Fiction**

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Abstract

While Chinese BL (Boys' Love) fiction, a female-oriented literature genre, has been frequently studied in this decade, its subgenre of BDSM has not yet gained enough attention in academia. Happening in the late 1990s, the massive layoffs in China brought significant impact on the society and lead to intergenerational traumas, which are articulated and processed in some BL fictions with BDSM elements. To investigate how Chinese females have used this subgenre of online literature for processing traumas related to massive layoffs and other cultural factors, this research conducts case studies on five chosen fictions. Text-analysis is used to examine the themes, the portrayal of characters, the BDSM dynamics in the fictions, and their associated comments. Based on the result, these fictions are found to have three main functions: articulating traumatic experience, building a caring authority, and rebelling against the existed power structure in the society.

Keywords: BL fiction; the massive layoffs; 1990s China; Sadomasochism; BDSM

Introduction

The massive layoffs in China during the 1990s has garnered widespread attention from society since its onset. Beginning with the reform and opening-up policies in 1978, China initiated a transition from a socialist economic system to a market economy, accompanied by subtle shifts in ideology. The state-owned enterprise reforms that started in the mid-1990s led to a substantial number of workers being laid off, with existing research primarily focusing on its extensive impact on family economic levels. Moreover, the layoffs of male workers had a more significant impact on family finances, and the cities most affected by these layoffs were primarily in northeastern China—regions often associated with traditional masculinity; Academic studies and artistic works, therefore, have largely focused on the male perspective. However, female workers were, in fact, the first to be laid off¹. At that time, the responsibility of educating children largely fell on females, yet their perspectives have not received sufficient attention. The massive layoffs marked the first direct impact of the economic system transition on individuals, affecting them not only economically but also emotionally. Under the previous socialist system, most people worked in state-owned enterprises, which were not only a source of economic livelihood but also a medium of trust in the state. Therefore, the massive layoffs significantly affected people's sense of hope and security². The emotional trauma experienced by workers due to the massive layoffs was transmitted through families to the children of laid-off workers and persists to this day, yet this aspect has not received enough attention.

¹ Zhao, Ying, “Employee Layoffs, Family Resources and Children’s Education,” *Economic Research* 5 (2016): 101–15.

² Yang, Jie, “The Politics and Regulation of Anger in Urban China,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 40, no. 1 (March 2016): 100–123, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-015-9476-1>.

Since the early 21st century, online novels have risen and flourished. Due to fewer restrictions and more lenient censorship, online novels provide authors with a broader space for expression, allowing marginalized cultures to thrive within this medium³⁴. Female writers have transformed online novels into vehicles for expressing female desires and tools for processing trauma. Consequently, the content of online novels often reflects societal changes. Among these, novels depicting gay, lesbian, and other queer relationships exhibit diverse discussions on sexuality, gender, and romantic relationships. Boys' Love (BL) fiction, or "danmei" in Chinese, has become one of the most popular genres within this category, with marginalized cultures such as BDSM being commonplace in these novels. BDSM, an acronym for Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism and Masochism, has a long history but exhibits different characteristics in each geographical region. There are two roles in a typical BDSM play; one is the "Dom" who plays the dominant role, while the other is the "Sub" who plays the submissive role⁵. A consistent feature is its emphasis on power dynamics within the play, often mirroring real-world power relationships⁶. In Chinese BL fictions, BDSM elements are complementary with teacher-student, superior-subordinate, and parent-child relationships, making the analysis of these sadomasochistic relationships crucial for understanding significant events in Chinese society and the cultural impact on young women.

³ Zhao, Jamie J, "It Has Never Been "Normal": Queer Pop in Post-2000 China," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (18 May 2020): 463–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1754626>.

⁴ Liu, Yihan, "A Study on the Phenomenon of Disease Writing in Internet Literature in the New Century," 2024, Harbin Normal University, MA thesis.

⁵ Kao, Ying-Chao, "The Rise of BDSM (Sub)Culture and Its (Dis)Contents: A Literature Review," *Sexuality Research in China* 34, no. 2 (2013): 160–80.

⁶ Drdová, Lucie, and Adéla Mólzer Hrabáková, "United Collars of BDSM: Critical Exploration of Changes in the New BDSM Scene in a Postcommunist Environment," In *Kink and Everyday Life*, 29–44, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-918-520211011>.

This research paper aims to explore how Chinese female authors utilize sadomasochistic BL fictions to articulate intergenerational trauma associated with the massive layoffs in 1990s China as well as confucianist culture. Through qualitative studies, this paper will closely examine the BDSM elements within these fictions to understand their therapeutic functions for both the writers and the readers. Additionally, the paper will analyze how these narratives address the societal challenges faced by Chinese females. By investigating these aspects, the paper hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intergenerational influences of large events in Chinese modern history through a lens of online popular culture.

Literature Review

The current BDSM subculture has flourished since the mid-twentieth century, whereas the history of its development in China remains unclear. In China, the study on this topic is still in its early stages, with scholars exploring from a psychological perspective the formation of sadomasochistic behavior⁷ and the cognitive effects that this behavior has on its participants⁸.

Yet the formation of this particular subculture can be speculated to be after the reform and opening up in 1978. According to Weinberg⁹, the BDSM subculture emerges and becomes institutionalized in a society when the dominance-submission relationships are embedded in the mainstream culture and further manifested through gender and class inequalities, and when

⁷ Liang, Wanying, and Yuqing Zhang, "The Correlation between Sadomasochists' Experience and Their Sadomasochistic Behaviors and Fantasies: A Qualitative Analysis of Interviews," *PsyCh Journal* 13, no. 2 (December 2023): 295–321, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.706>.

⁸ Luo, Siyang, and Xiao Zhang, "Embodiment and Humiliation Moderation of Neural Responses to Others' Suffering in Female Submissive BDSM Practitioners," *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 12 (9 July 2018): 463, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnins.2018.00463>.

⁹ Weinberg, Thomas S, "Research in Sadomasochism: A Review of Sociological and Social Psychological Literature," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 5, no. 1 (1994): 257–79.

people have the leisure time and imagination to engage in BDSM practices. After the Reform and Opening Up, even though Chinese people's social mobility was increased, the gap between the upper and lower classes was also widened¹⁰. Launched in 1996, the reform of the state-owned enterprises led to the massive layoffs of more than 20 million workers, causing urban areas to be filled with unemployed people¹¹. Yet the 1990s saw the rise of commercialized media content in China. Because the Chinese government has loosened media censorship. Western culture and fashion became available to Chinese people. At the same time, “modernization” and “innovation” were highly promoted keywords by the media¹². According to Weinberg, the Chinese society at that time had characteristics that could potentially contribute to the emergence of BDSM subculture. Moreover, people's anger caused by massive layoffs and poor working condition was regulated and suppressed by the state, resulting in their development of coping mechanisms for the increasing social tensions between individuals and the governing institutions¹³. Drdová and Hrabáková¹⁴ argue that, in the Czech Republic, which is also a post-communist country, the existence of BDSM subculture is closely linked to state repression because the repression drives people to transform their oppressive daily lives into sexual fantasies whereby they modify power relations between roles to gain a sense of autonomy.

¹⁰ Naughton, Barry, “A political economy of China’s economic transition,” *China’s great economic transformation* 10 (2008): 91-135.

¹¹ Yao, Shujie, “Unemployment and Urban Poverty in China: A Case Study of Guangzhou and Tianjin,” *Journal of International Development* 16, no. 2 (March 2004): 171–88, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1058>.

¹² Hung, Eva PW, and Stephen WK Chiu, “The lost generation: Life course dynamics and Xiangang in China,” *Modern China* 29, no. 2 (2003): 204-236.

¹³ Yang, Jie, “Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance,” 2015.

¹⁴ Drdová, Lucie, and Adéla Mólzer Hrabáková, “United Collars of BDSM: Critical Exploration of Changes in the New BDSM Scene in a Postcommunist Environment,” 27.

Similar aspects may have contributed to the formation of a BDSM subculture in the Chinese context.

Apart from the nature of the society in 1990s and especially the massive layoffs, some characteristics of the Chinese modern society could have potentially contributed to the flourishing of BDSM subculture. The emphasis on unequal-power relationship brought by Confucianism¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷ might play a crucial role, regarding its influences on various aspects of the Chinese society. Confucian values define clear hierarchies between the ruler and the ruled, the elder and the youth, and the husband and the wife, which enhances the patriarchal structure within the family and further expand to larger social institutions¹⁸¹⁹²⁰. For instance, a case study done by Wong²¹ investigated the teacher-student power relations in four different primary schools and found that these relations are impacted by traditional cultural values of “honor the teacher and respect his/her teaching” (*zunshi zhongdao* in Chinese) and “students are teachers’

¹⁵ Farh, Jiing-Lih, and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, “A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations,” In *Management and Organizations in the Chinese Context*, 84–127, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2000, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511590_5.

¹⁶ Wong, Mei-Yee, “Teacher–Student Power Relations as a Reflection of Multileveled Intertwined Interactions,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 2 (17 February 2016): 248–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.916600>.

¹⁷ Xu, Qiong, “Fatherhood, Adolescence and Gender in Chinese Families,” London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017.

¹⁸ Farh, Jiing-Lih, and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, “A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations,” 84.

¹⁹ Xu, Qiong, “Fatherhood, Adolescence and Gender in Chinese Families.”

²⁰ Hamilton, Gary G, “Patriarchy, Patrimonialism, and Filial Piety: A Comparison of China and Western Europe,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (March 1990): 77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/591019>.

²¹ Wong, Mei-Yee, “Teacher–Student Power Relations as a Reflection of Multileveled Intertwined Interactions,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37, no. 2 (17 February 2016): 248–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.916600>.

subordinates and should be obedient” (*shangzun xiabei* in Chinese). One type of traditional relationship that is intriguing for Chinese people and has been fantasized by films²², novels, and role-playing games²³ is the master-apprentice relationship (*Shitu* in Chinese). It is often depicted as caring and encouraging but also combine punishment and discipline, which is similar to the Confucian understanding of fatherhood. Specifically considering the importance of fatherhood in China’s patriarchal tradition, Farh and Cheng²⁴ explored the paternalistic leadership in the context of Chinese family businesses. Through analyzing leaders’ behavior and subordinates’ responses, this certain type of leadership was found combining “strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity”²⁵. These interpersonal relationships mentioned above are influential in a cultural aspect and share a common figure of combining dominance, discipline, and caring, which overlap with the natures of a typical BDSM relationship. Thus, this emphasis on unequal power relations in general might be another breeding ground for Chinese BDSM subculture.

The theme of BDSM started to emerge in Chinese cyberspace in the 1990s, following the establishment of underground fan culture on Boys’ Love (BL) fiction or *danmei* in Chinese²⁶. As a genre of online writing that depicts male same-sex intimacies, Chinese BL fiction is originally

²² Sun, Zixun, “Traditional Ethical Concepts in Chinese Fantasy Films,” *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 9, no. 3–4 (December 2022): 229–38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-022-00258-0>.

²³ Gao, Shenghan, “Passing the Flame of Care: A Study of Shitu (Master-Apprentice) Social Relationship in Chinese Video Games Based on the Examination of JX3,” 2023.

²⁴ Farh, Jiing-Lih, and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, “A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations,” 84.

²⁵ Farh, Jiing-Lih, and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, “A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations,” 84.

²⁶ Xu, Yanrui, and Ling Yang, “Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction,” *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 4, no. 1 (June 2013): 30–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2013.771378>.

impacted by Japanese BL manga and fan culture, usually written by and for females²⁷²⁸²⁹.

Besides BDSM, several taboo themes including Mpreg (male characters get pregnant and give birth), rape, imprisonment, incest, and animal sex commonly exist in these fictions³⁰. Due to the fact that online fictions are easy to disseminate and that cyberspace can hardly be fully censored³¹, online BL fictions have become a safe space for Chinese females to process their experiences regarding the social and cultural oppression on them.

The existence of taboo sexual themes is universal in the global BL culture. For instance, Madill and Zhao³² compared the risqué contents that are particularly popular in respectively Sinophone (Chinese-speaking) culture and Anglophone (English-speaking) culture and found many overlaps, with BDSM as the most popular theme in both culture groups; unusual sexual behaviors including rape are prevalent in Japanese BL fictions³³; stories featuring incest also have some audiences in both Japan and China, though it is less common in the United States³⁴.

²⁷ Madill, Anna, and Yao Zhao, "Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male-Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51, no. 2 (February 2022): 897–910, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02107-4>.

²⁸ Xu, Yanrui, and Ling Yang, "Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction," 30.

²⁹ Zhao, Jamie J, "It Has Never Been "Normal": Queer Pop in Post-2000 China," 463.

³⁰ Madill, Anna, and Yao Zhao, "Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male-Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions," 897.

³¹ Xu, Yanrui, and Ling Yang, "Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction," 30.

³² Madill, Anna, and Yao Zhao, "Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male-Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions," 897.

³³ Perper, Timothy, and Martha Cornog. "Eroticism for the masses: Japanese manga comics and their assimilation into the US." *Sexuality and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2002): 3-126.

³⁴ Pagliassotti, Dru, "Globalization and hybridization: Publishers' strategies for bringing boys' love to the United States," *Intersections-Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20 (2009).

However, Xu and Yang³⁵ demonstrated that there are specific meanings for a theme relating to a certain cultural and geographical context. In terms of China, the sexual fantasy of incest is deeply rooted in the key concepts of filial piety (*xiao* in Chinese) and disciplining/teaching (*guanjiao* in Chinese) in the traditional Chinese culture of family. Through eroticizing intergenerational conflicts, the female writers can turn the father's absolute power over the son into an exchange between body and power. By doing so, they use BL fictions to provide an imaginary compensation for the repressive parent-child relationships in a semi-totalitarian society and to articulate their desires for a more democratic parenting and governing style. Similarly, as one of the most popular themes in global BL culture, BDSM can be hypothesized to have significance, specifically in the context of the Chinese mainland, which has not yet been studied in academia. It is true that BDSM typically includes implements of pain, humiliation, bondage, and other physical or mental abuses³⁶, but it appears in the popular Chinese BL fictions as a tool for the characters to achieve a closer and deeper relationship between each other³⁷. In addition, it is common for characters who perform the submissive role in the fictions to have childhood traumas, mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, and experiences containing sexual abuse, while sadomasochistic practices help them to recover from traumas and mental injuries.

³⁵ Xu, Yanrui, and Ling Yang, "Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction," 30.

³⁶ Weinberg, Thomas S, "Research in Sadomasochism: A Review of Sociological and Social Psychological Literature," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 5, no. 1 (1994): 257–79.

³⁷ Madill, Anna, and Yao Zhao, "Are Female Paraphilias Hiding in Plain Sight? Risqué Male-Male Erotica for Women in Sinophone and Anglophone Regions," 897.

Since most of these sadomasochistic BL fictions were written after 2000, their writers were still teenagers or children in the 1900s, which means that they are the offspring of the laid-off generation. The massive layoffs have brought great economic and social pressures on the unemployed workers, and the impact is widespread across China. The results of Yao's study in 2004 indicate that over one-third of the population lived in poverty after the layoffs³⁸. Specifically, the data from Global Economic Data shows that between 1995 and 2003, the number of state-owned enterprises fell from 118,000 to 34,200, and the number of workers in state-owned enterprises fell from 112.6 million to 68.8 million³⁹. The remaining 67 million employees suffered from a high level of anxiety⁴⁰. Before, a job in a state-owned enterprise was called an "Iron Rice Bowl" (similar to life tenure) by Chinese citizens, but after the layoffs happened, it suddenly stopped providing any economic security. In a survey done in 2004, only 1 percent of households with laid-off workers had an optimistic view of their future⁴¹. Related to the historical context, a qualitative study done by Huang and Chiu⁴² found that this generation has a feeling of betrayal by the state because they felt they had demonstrated their loyalty by working for state-owned enterprises for many years under the socialist values. The mental instability of this generation has a direct impact on their children in terms of the parent-child

³⁸ Yao, Shujie, "Unemployment and Urban Poverty in China: A Case Study of Guangzhou and Tianjin," *Journal of International Development* 16, no. 2 (March 2004): 171–88, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1058>.

³⁹ "Global Economic Data, Indicators, Charts & Forecasts," n.d., <https://www.ceicdata.com.cn/zh-hans>.

⁴⁰ Kong, Nancy, Lars Osberg, and Weina Zhou, "The Shattered "Iron Rice Bowl": Intergenerational Effects of Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Reform," *Journal of Health Economics* 67, no. 102220 (September 2019): 102220, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2019.06.007>.

⁴¹ Yao, Shujie, "Unemployment and Urban Poverty in China: A Case Study of Guangzhou and Tianjin," 171.

⁴² Hung, Eva PW, and Stephen WK Chiu, "The lost generation: Life course dynamics and Xiangang in China," *Modern China* 29, no. 2 (2003): 204-236.

relationship, education, anxiety level, and so on⁴³⁴⁴⁴⁵. For instance, parents' increased risk appetite due to the layoff can have a significant impact on the children's risk attitudes⁴⁶, and children's heightened feeling of insecurity was a reaction to the anxiety of their laid-off parents⁴⁷. In addition, researchers found that there are strong correlations between layoffs and domestic violence⁴⁸. Evans⁴⁹ reviewed existing studies on the topic of domestic violence and a lot of them shown empirical evidence that poor income and other class-related features do contribute to the occurrence of domestic violence. Exploring the reasons behind this correlation, Gilligan⁵⁰ argued that people's shame provoked by the way they are treated by others or by society is one of the largest causes of their use of violence. Since laid-off workers experienced a great sense of shame which negatively impacted their family and social relationships⁵¹; as a result, their family members were more vulnerable to domestic violence. In addition, most people born in the 1980s and 1990s were the Only Children of their parents due to the

⁴³ Zhao, Ying, "Employee Layoffs, Family Resources and Children's Education," *Economic Research* 5 (2016): 101–15.

⁴⁴ Hung, Eva PW, and Stephen WK Chiu, "The lost generation: Life course dynamics and Xiangang in China," 204.

⁴⁵ Kong, Nancy, Lars Osberg, and Weina Zhou, "The Shattered "Iron Rice Bowl": Intergenerational Effects of Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Reform."

⁴⁶ Zhao, Ying, "Employee Layoffs, Family Resources and Children's Education," 101.

⁴⁷ Kong, Nancy, Lars Osberg, and Weina Zhou, "The Shattered "Iron Rice Bowl": Intergenerational Effects of Chinese State-Owned Enterprise Reform."

⁴⁸ Santaularia, N. Jeanie, Marizen R. Ramirez, Theresa L. Osypuk, and Susan M. Mason, "Economic Hardship and Violence: A Comparison of County-Level Economic Measures in the Prediction of Violence-Related Injury," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 38, no. 5–6 (March 2023): 4616–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221118966>.

⁴⁹ Evans, Susan, "Beyond gender: Class, poverty and domestic violence." *Australian Social Work* 58, no. 1 (2005): 36-43.

⁵⁰ Gilligan, James, "Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic," New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

⁵¹ Hung, Eva PW, and Stephen WK Chiu, "The lost generation: Life course dynamics and Xiangang in China," 204.

government's One-Child policy, which put them under greater family pressure⁵². As this article later reveals, my examination of Chinese sadomasochistic online fictions suggests that these stories serve as a tool for writers and readers to process the intergenerational trauma arising from the massive layoffs in the 1990s, accompanied by other factors rooted in Chinese confucianist culture.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, incorporating text analysis on five selected online fictions and their associated comments. Based on the literature review, fictions are selected referring to the criteria: 1) they are BL fictions with BDSM content either written by or translated by Chinese females; 2) they are popular among readers with available comments and reviews; and 3) they are being recommended fictions on multiple posts from the Chang Pei Forum, a Chinese non-profit BL fiction site founded in 2010 known for its lower level of censorship compared to Jinjiang Literature City, another famous Chinese female-oriented fiction website. Data collection primarily relies on online sources, including the Chang Pei Forum and related platforms, to access the target fictions and the discussions surrounding them.

The first component of this study involves a comparative analysis of two fictions, *24/7* (1999-2001) and *Zhi Zhi Jintou* (Until the End). *24/7* is chosen due to its early emergence as one of the pioneering fictions within the BDSM subgenre of BL in China. This selection allows for an investigation into its influence on subsequent works. *Zhi Zhi Jintou* is deeply influenced by *24/7*, but it also added another layer of Chinese traditional culture to the original plot, thus

⁵² Wu, David, "Parental Control: Psychocultural Interpretations of Chinese Patterns of Socialization," 1996, 1–28.

making it an ideal candidate for comparative analysis, particularly as both fictions depict romantic relationships between a supervisor and a subordinate. The second comparative analysis focuses on the fictions *Kouyu* (Oral Fixation) and *Wenrou de Laolong* (The Gentle Cage, 2017-2019). These fictions are selected as they both explore the recovery process of traumatized characters. *Kouyu* is narrated from a traumatized character's perspective, while *Wenrou de Laolong* presents the perspective of a traumatized character's partner, offering a contrasting viewpoint. Furthermore, an independent case study is conducted on *Haoxue de Jiang Fan* (The Studious Jiang Fan, 2017-2018). This fiction is unique as it is written by a high school student and incorporates sadomasochistic sexual fantasies into the daily life of a public high school student in response to the pressure caused by the National College Entrance Examination in China. The case study aims to explore the distinct characteristics of this fiction, particularly the ways in which it reflects the author's processing of societal pressure through the lens of BDSM themes.

Analysis

Job, Leadership, and Father Figure

24/7, one of the earliest BL fictions with a BDSM content existed in mainland China, was originally written by an English author and was translated into Chinese. Although it was not written by Chinese author, it had influenced many upcoming Chinese BL fictions. It deserves to be discussed as it had been chosen by the translator and was well received by Chinese readers. In the story, Fox was an FBI agent who secretly participated in BDSM activities. He wanted to be the Sub of a famous Dom in the community. After signing the relationship contract, he discovered that the Dom was actually his boss, Walter, and Fox had no choice but to live in

Walter's home and serve him. As their relationship grew closer, Walter told Fox that he had long been aware of Fox's self-destructive tendencies, and that he had decided to heal Fox in this sadomasochistic way. Fox was eventually moved by Walter's love and they entered into a long-term dominant/submissive relationship. Among the BL fictions influenced by *24/7*, the most popular one is *Zhi Zhi Jintou* (Until the End), as its author explicitly claimed that her writing was inspired by *24/7*. The story contained very similar plots to those of *24/7* wherein Zheng, the Dom, took care of Xia, the Sub, with a more mature personality. Later, Xia found out that Zheng was the president of the client's company he was currently working for. Eventually, they built a long-term relationship and Xia worked for Zheng both inside and outside the family life.

Although the author of *24/7* claimed that the fiction was not a guide for living a BDSM lifestyle⁵³, some Chinese readers described it as their initial introduction to BDSM subculture. "It is the equivalent, I think, of the Communist Manifesto (in Chinese BDSM subculture)," one comment responded to a query on *24/7*⁵⁴. Similarly, some readers claimed that *Zhi Zhi Jintou* helped them unpack the psychological reasoning and inner workings of the BDSM subculture⁵⁵. It made them understand that the extreme power difference between characters was based on trust. In both fictions, the way that the characters deepened their relationships was not only in the bedroom but also at the workspace – a factor that is especially appealing to the readers. For the two characters who play the submissive role, jobs were not only connected to their income and welfare, but also their intimate relationship. On the other hand, they are attracted by their bosses'

⁵³ Xanthe, "24/7," Archive of Our Own, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/564555/chapters/1009691>.

⁵⁴ Hanlingyue, "How to Evaluate the Novel '24/7,'" <https://www.zhihu.com/question/380557802>.

⁵⁵ Maymay, *Chang Pei Forum*, October 2012, <https://allcp.net/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=9716&highlight=%E7%9B%B4%E8%87%B3%E5%B0%BD%E5%A4%B4>.

financial capacity and leadership. *Zhi Zhi Jingtou* provided detailed description on the leadership of the dominant character in a local BDSM community:

Some people politely and courteously referred to Zheng as Sir or Mentor, carefully speaking on the spot. In short, Xia could tell that Zheng had a very good reputation in the community and had many friends.

Comparing to *Zhi Zhi Jingtou*, the impact of Walter's leadership on Fox was even more obvious, since Walter was Fox's boss at the very beginning. In these stories, the supervisor-subordinate relationship drives the romance between characters, while the supervisor's love for the subordinate character provides the latter with a sense of security and comforts the reader. "Walter saved Fox on a spiritual level... Walter became my ideal boyfriend after reading the story," a review on *24/7* said.⁵⁶ The appreciation of this kind of relationship is common in Chinese online fictions. As represented in the qualitative study done by Hung and Chiu⁵⁷, people used to have strong connections with the state enterprises they worked for, as they relied on the enterprises for both material and political life. A job where one's physical and mental health would be taken care of by the institution, which was depicted in both BL fictions, was something the laid-off generation eagerly yearned for and taught their children to follow suit. As a result, the happy endings of the two fictions seem to demonstrate the relevance of job and stable life, and both readers and writers regain the feeling of being cared by an institution twenty years after the massive layoffs.

⁵⁶ I'm just a normal human being, "A Record of Reading Fictions," <https://weibo.com/5553697091/NosIpBv1p>.

⁵⁷ Hung, Eva PW, and Stephen WK Chiu, "The lost generation: Life course dynamics and Xiagang in China," 204.

The biggest difference between *24/7* and *Zhi Zhi Jintou* is that the latter added another layer of Chinese traditional culture to the characters. The conflict between the character's personal desire for submission and his sense of traditional morality was presented in the beginning of the story:

He remembered that traditional culture says that Tian Di Jun Qin Shi (respect the heaven, the earth, the ruler, the parent, and the teacher); he did not believe in God and Buddha and had never kneeled down in front of a shrine; his mother worked hard and took care of him, but he did not kneel down in front of his mother; his Shifu (master), Shen, had always been a great teacher, but he did not kneel down in thanks to his Shifu.

However, later on, Xia was moved by Zheng for his personality which was very close to an ideal father figure, which was possibly due to the fact that Xia lost his father at a very young age. Zheng's house was decorated with Chinese calligraphy, many sets of tea utensils, tea collections, and books of different subjects. He is knowledgeable and authoritative, while being attentive and thorough with people, resonating with the description made by Farh and Cheng⁵⁸ on the paternalistic leadership which is popular in Chinese organization. Xia cooked, made tea, cleaned the house, and asked him for instruction and care, just as a filial son would do for his father. The construction of the fatherhood was an intersection of masculinity, families, and larger communities⁵⁹; the ideal father figure could also be an ideal masculine figure who supports the family. From *Zhi Zhi Jingtou*, serving the father figure became a warm, loving thing to do for the

⁵⁸ Farh, Jiing-Lih, and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, "A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations," 84.

⁵⁹ Matta, D. S., and C. Knudson-Martin, "Father Responsivity: Couple Processes and the Co-Construction of Fatherhood," *Family Process* 45, no. 1 (2006): 19–37.

beloved, while the authority and discipline was eroticized, making the original power differences between parent and children tolerable and even desirable.

Another characteristic shared by two fictions are their emphasis on the therapeutic aspect of BDSM. A comparative review on them commented: “(because of 24/7) I thought for a while that sadomasochism was an extreme tool for psychiatric treatment”⁶⁰. In *Zhi Zhi Jingtou*, Xia worked very hard and were easily stressed out, but BDSM activities with Zheng effectively helped him to relax and improve his mental well-being. Readers described these stories as “fairy tales” because of the caring relationship shared by characters, regardless the violence and “abnormal” sexual activities presented in the fictions.

Trauma, Healing, and Mother Figure

As the implication of disease in literature depends on the time and social context in which the author lives, mental disorders in online fictions are often metaphors for human alienation and breakdown in a postmodern society⁶¹. According to Liu⁶², difficulties such as self-doubt and the loss of motivation in characters with mental disorders may to some extent reflect the reality of people's state of being in society; in some of the BL fictions with BDSM content, symptoms of mental disorders reflect intergenerational traumas related to the massive layoffs. *Kouyu* (Oral Fixation) and *Wenrou de Laolong* (The Gentle Cage, 2017-2019) both contained characters with very serious mental disorders and poor health. The story of *Kouyu* is told from the point of view

⁶⁰ Maymay, *Chang Pei Forum*, October 2012.

⁶¹ Liu, Yihan, “A Study on the Phenomenon of Disease Writing in Internet Literature in the New Century,” 2024, Harbin Normal University, MA thesis.

⁶² Liu, Yihan, “A Study on the Phenomenon of Disease Writing in Internet Literature in the New Century.”

of a character named Qu who was both mentally and physically abused by his previous partner. He was incapable of living independently and was mentally ill: he had serious oral fixation, which means that like an infant, he must carry objects in his mouth in order to feel safe and satisfied. He was taken by a stranger named Xiao – who is much younger than Qu – in a BDSM club, who provided him with very good living conditions and was very generous in taking care of Qu. When Qu was a young adult and worked as a high school teacher, he wrote a sadomasochistic novel about his sexual fantasies and published it online. After his novel being discovered, he was abused by his students and lost his job. Later, both Xiao and Qu realized that Xiao was Qu's formal student. Eventually, Qu's illness was healed under Xiao's caring. *Wenrou de Laolong* (The gentle cage) depicted a similar story but is from a healer's perspective. The story began with a character named Ariel who is a therapist and treated a patient named Yuri who had a traumatic past as a sex slave and a strong inclination towards self-harm. Yuri had a fear of abandonment and believed that self-harm protected him from being hurt by others. Ariel learned about BDSM to understand Yuri's experiences and provided care for him. With Ariel's support and effective treatment, Yuri regained his physical and mental health.

Both fictions belong to the "narrative of quest" which proposed by Diane Scrofano⁶³ who reviewed the narratives of mental illness in 21 centuries' young adult fiction. A "narrative of quest" focuses on the process of people being able to manage their symptoms in a healthy way, compared to a "narrative of chaos" which focuses on how people's symptoms disrupt their lives. In Scrofano's point of view, the former has significant empowering effect to the reader, which is consistent with the reviews that readers have given to the two BL fictions. Romantic fiction can

⁶³ Scrofano, Diane, "Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness," *Journal of Research on Libraries & Young Adults* 10.1 (2019).

be seen as compensatory literature for females as it provides “second-hand experience” for readers to gain emotional nurturance⁶⁴. BL fanfictions have been found to have the ability of functioning as a resolution of past traumas because they often provide detail descriptions on characters’ traumatic experiences and also the step-by-step process of healing⁶⁵. Authors of the two BL fictions gave sufficient information on past experiences of characters to explain the reason behind their illness, and childhood trauma is one of the common themes. In *Kouyu*, Qu suspected that his masochistic tendencies were due to his mother’s abuse of him:

The violence and coercion of his mother's rapist made the abuse he suffered as a child seem reasonable. In a small room of less than ten square meters, his mother tied his neck with an electric wire and chained him to the doorknob. Qu felt like he had already become a dog by then...It may have been a conditioned response to his mother's abuse, not necessarily his instincts. But there was nothing he could do about it, the inverted mindset caused him to yearn for humiliation and torture.

The helplessness and humiliation Qu felt due to his mother's abuse is amplified in the fiction, but violence against children is normalized in the society in which the author of this fiction lives. Child abuse is prevalent in China since parents are allowed to punish children to maintain authority by the cultural norms⁶⁶. For Qu, he couldn't blame his mother because he knew that her violence came from her experience of being raped, just as for the author's generation, it was often difficult to blame their parents for their violence because they could understand where this

⁶⁴ Radway, Janice A, “Reading the Romance,” Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

⁶⁵ Sereda, Anastasiia, “Dirty Stories Saved My Life: Fanfiction as a Source of Emotional Support,” 2019.

⁶⁶ Dunne, Michael P., Jing Qi Chen, and Wan Yuen Choo, “The Evolving Evidence Base for Child Protection in Chinese Societies,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health* 20, no. 4 (2008): 267–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539508325047>.

violence came from. The generation born in the 1950s, which is also the laid-off generation, were required to pay their debts by obeying the government because they were given a “good life”; as a result, they gave the same requirement to and performed “spiritual rape” upon their children who are the generation born in the 1980s⁶⁷. The laid-off generation’s feeling of being abandoned by the state also lead to their children’s feeling of insecurity. Characters in both fictions have two layers of trauma: one is from their childhood and the other is from their former intimate relationship. They are terrified by the possibility of being abandoned again. For instance, Yuri often begged Ariel to not leave him by self-harming. These plots might facilitate the processing of trauma and the articulation of fear. In addition, while anger management on people is constantly conducted by the state^{68,69}, giving a character an extreme experience of suffering can be seen as a way of expressing anger, as it justifies the existence of traumas due to social issues by articulating them to the reader.

Regardless the violent content of the two fictions, readers commonly use the word “therapeutic (Zhiyu in Chinese)” to describe them⁷⁰. This is not only due to the care provided by Xiao and Ariel but also the vulnerability of Qu and Yuri. Despite being the elder in the relationship, Qu is portrayed as childlike, and his physical disabilities further emphasize this feature. For instance, “he is like a child, unable to control his excretion, leaving dirty urine stains

⁶⁷ Xu, Yanrui, and Ling Yang, “Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction,” 30.

⁶⁸ Yang, Jie, “Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance,” 2015.

⁶⁹ Yang, Jie, “The Politics and Regulation of Anger in Urban China.” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 40, no. 1 (March 2016): 100–123, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-015-9476-1>.

⁷⁰ Ejiang, “Those BDSM-Related Novels on Chang Pei,” In Allcp.net/forum.phpmod=viewthread&tid=42345&highlight=bdsm, 2017.

on Xiao.” Yuri, on the other hand, is introduced as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old boy who is unable to walk. These vulnerabilities warrant the care they receive; Xiao and Ariel take on the role of their missing mother, teaching them to walk, cleaning up after them, constantly accompanying them, and granting them a sense of rebirth. The emotions of Chinese females toward the mother figure are contradictory because, on one hand, they can empathize with daughters due to collective experiences, while on the other hand, mothers often reinforce the oppression by disciplining their daughters just like how they have been disciplined by the patriarchal society⁷¹. Xiao and Ariel embody the idealized mother figure. They retain occasional instability in their emotions, aligning with the collective memory held by Chinese females regarding mothers, yet they never allow these emotions to harm their loved ones and take care of the “child” in a perfect way.

Pressure from the Chinese Educational System

In Chinese BL fiction, it is common to find the portrayal of BDSM dynamics in relationships characterized by power imbalances, such as teacher and student, prisoner and warden, and doctor and nurse. Some novels subvert the original power positions between characters, such as in *Kouyu*, where the student became the one humiliating the teacher. While others may not overtly overturn the power structure, they eroticize elements that were meant for punishment, turning them into sources of pleasure, thereby eroding the dominance and submission relationship. *Haixue de Jiang Fan* (The Studious Jiang Fan, 2017-2018) is an example of subverting the senior-junior power dynamics, and what makes it unique is that it is written by a high school student. Jiang was a grade 11 student whose parents were always

⁷¹ Lee, Amy, “Chinese Mothers-Western Daughters?: Cross-Cultural Representations of Mother-Daughter Relationships in Contemporary Chinese and Western Women’s Writing,” 1999.

working. He was attracted to BDSM subculture and found a Dom through social media. The Dom, whose name was "Eight Six", trained him to memorize knowledge that are required for National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao in Chinese) through BDSM plays. Later, he found out that Eight Six was a grade 10 student from his school with very good grades. Eventually, Eight Six left the city, and under his education and encouragement, Jiang succeeded in entering a top university.

One striking feature of the fiction is how Gaokao played an essential role in the development of intimacy between two characters. In each BDSM scene, Eight Six asked Jiang to recall knowledge related to the examination and punished or rewarded Jiang based on his answers. The level of intimacy between the two characters was directly reflected in the improvement of Jiang's grades. Exam-oriented education has a long history in China that can be dated back to the invention of Imperial Examination System (kejuzhi in Chinese) in CE 605, Sui dynasty. Both the National College Entrance Examination and the Imperial Examination System have served as the most widely accessible means for individuals to attain power and wealth. Simultaneously, they have been intricately tied to moral principles. In ancient China, the Imperial Examination System represented an avenue for serving the country, second only to joining the military. It was the only way for individuals to enter the imperial court and assist the emperor in governing the nation. In modern China, Gaokao is a way to pursue higher education and engage in scientific research, which is considered a form of patriotic dedication. Through scientific advancements, individuals can contribute to the country's global competitiveness. Additionally, achieving high scores in Gaokao is regarded as a display of filial piety, as children are culturally expected to repay their parents' nurturing with the wealth and power they acquire. Throughout the history, the content of examinations in China has been closely intertwined with

the ideological propaganda of the state⁷². After the Song Dynasty, the imperial examination system focused on the literature of Confucianism; after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Marxism became a mandatory subject of study, as well as ancient literature that fits into the neo-Confucianist morality. This feature has linked the exam-oriented education to state supervision, and individual's growth takes a backseat to the goals of obedience to the state apparatus and adaptation to social norms. Thus, in *Haixue de Jiang Fan*, Jiang's preparation for Gaokao created a stark contrast with the erotic context:

(As Eight Six's dog) Jiang has to greet Eight Six every morning, but he doesn't have to bark like a dog. Instead of that, he just has to recite the times of major historical events. "Morning." Jiang usually hangs up one side of his headphones to send voice messages to Eight Six, while he is waiting in line for his breakfast. "The publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, marking the birth of Marxism." "On November 7, 1917, the Petrograd Armed Uprising, or October Revolution, overthrew the bourgeois provisional government."

"This is very stimulating," many of the readers commented under the fiction⁷³. What is subverted in this scene is not only the hierarchical relationship between juniors and seniors, but also an inviolable and moral image of Gaokao. According to Heger⁷⁴, people are aware of the unequal nature of Gaokao given the wealth gap between provinces and have developed various

⁷² Xu, Han, and Thada Siththada, "The Traditional Chinese Education on Modern Educational Management in China," *Proceeding National & International Conference* 16 (2024).

⁷³ Huaimihuaimi, "Haixue de Jiang Fan." November 18, 2017, <https://allcp.net/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=42954&page=3>.

⁷⁴ Heger, Isabel, "Understanding the Persistence of China's National College Entrance Examination: The Role of Individual Coping Strategies," 2017, 113–33.

coping mechanisms to confront it without directly protesting against it. Eroticizing Gaokao in literature and consuming such literature could be viewed as a form of rebellion, not only to Gaokao, but also to the large power structure behind it.

Discussion

This research paper aimed to examine the utilization of Chinese BL fictions incorporating BDSM elements as a means to process intergenerational trauma resulting from the massive layoffs in the 1990s and other cultural factors such as Confucianism. By conducting an analysis of five selected cases, including two instances of comparative analysis and one individual case analysis, several prominent themes emerged: trauma processing, the longing for authority, and the rebellion against the larger power structure.

Primarily, the examined novels portrayed characters struggling with mental disorders or, at the very least, displayed signs of mental illness. These conditions were intricately linked to their past experiences, characterized by extreme violence, confinement, and sexual abuse. Childhood trauma emerged as the most prevalent experience, stemming from parental maltreatment or neglect. These findings align with existing research suggesting a heightened risk of domestic violence associated with economic hardships and job loss⁷⁵. Moreover, within the specific historical context of China, laid-off workers experienced a sense of abandonment by the state they once relied upon, leading to a pervasive sense of helplessness and anxiety, which was subsequently transmitted to their offspring. Characters exhibiting mental illnesses portrayed a diminished sense of agency, vulnerability, anxiety, and fear of separation. Their helplessness was depicted in extreme manners, bordering on regression, rendering them unable to function or

⁷⁵ Evans, Susan, "Beyond gender: Class, poverty and domestic violence," 36.

attend to basic life tasks. Authors employed their literary works as a means to articulate the real-life predicaments faced by individuals. The sadistic torment inflicted upon these characters may be perceived as a form of anger expression, considering the long-standing suppression of anger expression by the state. Consequently, Chinese females employ indirect and ambiguous means to express their anger. In addition to vulnerable characters, another category of nurturing figures was introduced to meticulously foster their recovery. The healing process was portrayed in elaborate detail, encompassing both spousal care and maternal affection. Through such literature, readers and authors are provided with a "second-hand experience," compensating for the lack of healing and care for trauma they may desire but have yet to encounter in reality.

Furthermore, the examined novels responded to the absence of reliable authority figures by constructing dependable and all-encompassing ones. During the socialist era, work symbolized a complete package of livelihood, encompassing housing, healthcare, entertainment, and education. However, the sense of economic and psychological security associated with these provisions was entirely shattered by the massive layoffs. Nevertheless, the longing for such security persists within the cultural fabric. Older generations placed great value on the concept of a secure job, commonly referred to as the "iron rice bowl," in their education of the younger generation. The younger generation, in turn, yearns for this sense of security, as evidenced by the integration of supervisor-subordinate relationships and romantic associations within the novels, culminating in an extreme state where work dominates their lives. Nevertheless, the younger generation seeks a revised form of authority, rejecting a tyrannical ruler. In accordance with Confucian culture, leadership is expected to exhibit paternalistic characteristics, combining care with authority. Consequently, the novels portray superiors who not only exude authority but also

demonstrate tenderness. Moreover, the emphasis on equality is consistently emphasized, reflecting the younger generation's aspiration for democratic values.

Lastly, BDSM plays a pivotal role in subverting innate power dynamics within the examined fictions. Traditional power relationships characterized by dominance, such as parent-child, teacher-student, and superior-subordinate, are unsettled and overturned through BDSM activities. The presence of stringent censorship and significant societal pressures, exemplified by Gaokao, prompt individuals to develop coping mechanisms. By enabling the traditionally powerless party, such as the student, to exert dominance over the party in power, such as the teacher, through BDSM relationships, both the writers and readers experience a heightened sense of autonomy. The incorporation of seemingly inviolable aspects, such as the gaokao and historical contexts associated with socialism, into BDSM literature can be viewed as a form of resistance against the state apparatus and ideological propaganda.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all Chinese BDSM-themed BL novels encompass these aforementioned themes. For instance, in the fiction *Zu Xia de Lianren* (Lover at Your Feet), the two characters are students of the same grade, and their interactions lack elements of parental care. Instead, the narrative focuses solely on the portrayal of masochism, sadism, and fetishism. Additionally, BDSM fictions exhibit certain limitations. Despite their reflection upon power dynamics within intimate relationships, there is a prevalent admiration for masculinity and the idolization of father figures, which perpetuates patriarchal norms. Furthermore, the presence of derogatory language towards women is not uncommon, potentially hindering female empowerment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Chinese online BDSM fictions reveals their significant role in processing intergenerational trauma related to the massive layoffs in 1990s and providing emotional nurturance for Chinese females. These fictions serve as a platform for individuals to navigate and make sense of their experiences within the cultural context. The depiction of characters with mental disorders and their journey towards healing offers a vicarious experience of care and recovery, compensating for the lack of real-life opportunities for healing and support. Additionally, these fictions reflect the longing for authority and security in a society that has experienced a loss of economic and psychological stability. By eroticizing inherent power structures, the fictions showcase acts of resistance and the pursuit of democracy and stable lives.

Chinese BL fictions with BDSM elements represent the intersection of BL culture and BDSM subculture. Primarily written by female authors and read by female readers, these fictions reflect Chinese females' perceptions of significant historical events within a broader social context. Reader responses highlight how these literary works are utilized to process and respond to these perceptions and influences. BL culture provides a platform for the expression of female desire and exploration of gender identity, while BDSM subculture is impacted by existing power relationships in society. The fusion of these two cultures results in more direct and provocative expressions within these fictions. Future research can further explore the relationship between Confucianist ideology and Chinese BDSM subculture and females' participation in this culture. Moreover, studying how BL literature and queer popular culture in general respond to social and political events can deepen our understanding of Chinese online literature and contemporary Chinese society.

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