



**Adaptation of homosexual content in contemporary Chinese  
television drama**

**A textual analysis on “*Chen Qing Ling*”**

**Media and Culture Bachelor Thesis**

**By Bingwen(Serena) Wang**

**6487769**

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**Block 2, Supervisor: Alec Badenoch**



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## **Abstract**

China is known to have the world's strictest censorship system, which forbids the screening of certain content such as homosexuality on national TV. The discourse around gender norms in China fits the concept of gender essentialism, which promotes the idea of males and females having an intrinsic essence to themselves. Meaning, certain attributes to be ascribed to males and females. Thus, this ideology excludes homosexuality to be seen as a norm but rather as unnatural. The Web novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* received a lot of popularity amongst Chinese citizens which resulted in an adaptation of the original novel into a TV series version. This research focuses on the comparison of the original web novel to the series *Chen Qing Ling* in regard to the changes in homosexual to heterosexual content in its adaptation. Using textual analysis, three scenes of the series will be investigated in regard to how they show changes in adaptation due to the originals' explicitness of homosexuality. To conduct this research, the dialogue between the two male protagonists will be analyzed in relation to the visual components of the series such as music, camera work, scenery, costumes, facial expressions and body movement. Moreover, it will be argued that although the series shows significant elements of adaptation, the representation of the relationship between the protagonists Lan and Wei, still suggests forms of femininity and thus aspects of its original's homosexuality. This research aims to demonstrate how the censorship regulations of homosexual content on national TV reflects the gender essentialist ideology in Chinese society. Moreover, the significance of this study is to illustrate how the practice of adaptation is employed to content suggesting differently than the gender essentialist norms in China.

**Keywords:** gender essentialism, adaptation, homosexuality in China

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## Introduction

Homosexuality has been documented in China since ancient times. Until the Qing dynasty and the early stage of the People's Republic of China, homosexuality was viewed and perceived as a shame and treated as an illness.<sup>1</sup> In the contemporary society of China, homosexuals are still viewed as "mentally ill" and the topic is seen as a forbidden subject to talk about to a number of people in China.<sup>2</sup>

A controversial TV show in China called *Chen Qing Ling* (The Untamed) was aired in China from June 27 to August 20, 2019. It was adapted from the online novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (The Dao Master) by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. While the original web novel depicts the relationship between the two main male characters Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian as romantic lovers, the adaptation changed this depiction rather into a "bromance" due to the strict censorship in China. The series follows the story of Wei and Lan who have supernatural powers and are from different worlds but are forced to work together to protect the peace in their worlds.<sup>3</sup> On their journey the two fight villains, solve a series of murders, to uncover a dark mystery that happened in the past.<sup>4</sup> However, Lan and Wei in the series still create a palpable sexual tension with micro-expressions, physical contact and lingering eye contact. Due to the existing censorship in China, this representation was adapted more subtle and only shows homosexual elements of their relationship through symbols such as the colors of the costumes or by music and facial expressions.

This change in the narrative from a homosexual to a heterosexual relationship introduces the concept of heteronormativity and gender essentialism, wherein China, certain discourses around gender roles do not allow for homosexuality in mainstream media. Thus, the censorship in China does not allow any form of representation that is different from their

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<sup>1</sup> Jiang Chang and Hailong Ren, "'Keep Silent, Keep Sinful: Mainstream Newspapers' Representation of Gay Men and Lesbians in Contemporary China.," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 24, No. 3 (2017): 317-340. 24, no. 3 (2017): pp. 317-340.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bridget Lusky, "'The Untamed': Chinese Boy Love Drama We Can't Stop Watching," *Film Daily*, August 15, 2020, <https://filmdaily.co/news/the-untamed/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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ideology around gender, resulting in the adaptation of these shows. This leads to the following research question “How does the show *Chen Qing Ling* change the relationship from its original web novel to fit the gender essentialist discourse in China?” In my analysis I will focus on the different aspects such as dialogue, camera angle, background music, custom, setting, facial expressions, and body language. After, these observations will be compared to the same scenes but in the original web novel to see where adaptation was employed. The following sub-questions will guide me through my analysis:

1. How does the series differentiate itself from the novel to fit the gender essentialism ideology in China?
2. How do the costumes, setting, and dialogue suggest elements of sissy-ness of the protagonist despite the series heterosexual adaptation?
3. How does the body language, camera angle, and symbolic imagery suggest homosexuality of the two protagonists to the audience?

To conduct this research, firstly, the academic debate around the concepts of gender essentialism and heteronormativity in China and adaptation will be illustrated to get a better overview of how these concepts can be employed in the analysis of the series. The practice of censorship in China will assist me to show why these concepts are important to the changes of the storyline in the series. Secondly, a textual analysis will be employed in this research to demonstrate how the visual components of the series as well as the dialogue between the characters show the adaptations from the novel. Besides, it will be shown how forms of homosexuality as depicted in the original novel are still present. Thirdly, three scenes of the series will be analyzed through detailed observations in regard to the research question. Here, the concepts already introduced in the theoretical framework will be employed to support the claims made in this study. Lastly, the observations made in the analysis and the contributions this study is making to the broader academic debate around heteronormativity and gender essentialism in China and adaptation will be stated.

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## Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

### 1.1 Gender essentialism and Heteronormativity

To build a framework for assessing how the series adapts the homosexual relationship from the original web novel to a heterosexual one, it is necessary to elaborate on the already existing debate around gender essentialism, heteronormativity and adaptation. Moreover, the explanation of social norms and the practice of censorship in China will assist me in illustrating why these concepts are important to the series.

Gender essentialism as a concept is crucial for my research because it helps to understand why the relationship between the protagonists of the original novel needed to be changed for the series. Gender essentialism suggests that every person has either a male or female “essence” that is determined by biology, chromosomes, and the sex assigned at birth.<sup>5</sup> As claimed by Meyer and Gelman, viewing gender as an essentialized category also appears to guide individuals not just in their judgments of others, but also in how they behave and see themselves.<sup>6</sup> Thus, essentialist ideas can present a guide for people in terms of acting on behalf of the gender norms assigned to their sex. Furthermore, Coleman and Hong emphasize how promoting an essentialist view of gender in a society causes people to respond to these gender-typical views onto themselves.<sup>7</sup> In connection to this, Xiong argues that in traditional Chinese culture men are ascribed to be strong in comparison to women due to women’s association with emotions.<sup>8</sup> Meaning, a man symbolizes his masculinity through his toughness.

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<sup>5</sup> Bobby Ho-Hong, Ching et al., “Gender Essentialism, Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation, and Filial Piety as Predictors for Transprejudice in Chinese People,” *Sex Roles* 83 (January 23, 2020): pp. 426-441.

<sup>6</sup> Meredith Meyer and Susan A. Gelman, “Gender Essentialism in Children and Parents: Implications for the Development of Gender Stereotyping and Gender-Typed Preferences,” *Sex Roles* 75, no. 9-10 (2016): pp. 409-421, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0646-6>.

<sup>7</sup> Jill M. Coleman and Ying-Yi Hong, “Beyond Nature and Nurture: The Influence of Lay Gender Theories on Self-Stereotyping,” *Self and Identity* 7, no. 1 (April 2007): pp. 34-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860600980185>.

<sup>8</sup> Xuemin Xiong, “女性主义视角观照下张爱玲小说中的男性形象,” *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, June 15, 2017, pp. 1-9.



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The concept of gender essentialism is closely engaged with heteronormativity. Michael Warner popularized the term heteronormativity in 1991, it is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, and therefore the preferred, expression of sexuality.<sup>9</sup> It is also often associated with beliefs in birth-based gender expression (e.g., the genitals you are born with determine your gender identity), a clear gender binary, and traditional gender roles.<sup>10</sup> In other words, heteronormativity presents the idea of heterosexuality being the normalized narrative in the society. Thus, defining every sexuality as heterosexual and thereby making homosexuality invisible. This western concept also applies to Chinese society. According to Yeung and Mak, in the Chinese culture, homosexuality is represented as a challenge to the yin–yang harmony, family integrity, and social order as valued in the traditional Confucian philosophy.<sup>11</sup> They emphasize how in Chinese society, gay men are associated as negative because of their failure to fulfill the traditional duties described to their sex.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they state that a non-heterosexual identity is also believed to bring disgrace to the family and disrupt its harmony.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the concepts of gender essentialism and heteronormativity have differences, this research identifies their intertwined relationship in the analysis of the TV show. As stated above, gender essentialism is about acting according to the characteristics ascribed to one's assigned sex, while heteronormativity is more focused on establishing heterosexuality as a societal norm. However, the concepts are equally interrelated with one another by rejecting queerness. Moreover, the presence of this discourse around these two concepts as a norm in China is visible through homosexuality being perceived as a 'problem' in public space, especially in the media. Film has been seen to possess great power due to its function of entertaining the masses. Many critics argue that cultural representations of reality in films could serve the purpose of educating the masses by providing them knowledge about diverse cultures and thereby disseminating desired ideologies, opinions, and beliefs among

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, 1991, pp. 3-17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3-10.

<sup>11</sup> Nelson Yeung and Winnie Wing Sze Mak, "Sexual Identity and Its Disclosure as Moderators Between Norms of Heterosexual Self-Presentation and Well-Being Among Hong Kong Chinese Men," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 17, no. 2 (2016): pp. 165-176.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 165-169.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Yeung and Winnie Wing Sze Mak, "Sexual Identity and Its Disclosure as Moderators Between Norms of Heterosexual Self-Presentation and Well-Being Among Hong Kong Chinese Men,"

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them.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a romantic (non-sexual) narrative within the frame of heterosexuality becomes the only legitimate discourse in Chinese TV shows.<sup>15</sup> In this research, gender essentialism and heteronormativity help me to illustrate how gender and sexuality are asserted through the dialogues and the behavior of the two protagonists of *Chen Qing Ling* in relation to Chinese social norms and the adaptation based on the censorship.

## 1.2 Social norms and Censorship

In Chinese society, according to Zheng, Fang and Ling, in their research, they argue how social norms are formed and developed in Chinese society. They claim that social norms refer to “the rules of social behavior, which are the standards of cultural values that constitute the acceptable or unacceptable behaviors of members of a social group.”<sup>16</sup> According to Zheng, Fang and Ling, Chinese ethics and moral norms contain various aspects related to one’s existence, which are strongly influenced by Confucian culture.<sup>17</sup> Meaning, Chinese social norms are based and reflect the ideology of Confucianism. Kou, Semaan and Nardi also support the presence of Confucianism in Chinese society. In their research, they explain that Confucianism is conceptualized by its five virtues (五常): benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and integrity.<sup>18</sup> These virtues can be found in every aspect of Chinese society, such as “a comprehensive system of philosophy and ethics covering morality, politics, economy, family life, and education.”<sup>19</sup> One of the virtues is Propriety, which refers to how a person should respect behavioral norms that maintain social structures, such as

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<sup>14</sup> Amna Haq and Farzana Masroor, “Othering’ of the Orient: A Critical Exploration of Green Zone,” *Erevna Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 3, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Fung and Xiaoxiao Zhang, “The Chinese Ugly Betty: TV Cloning and Local Modernity,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (December 2011): pp. 265-276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877910391866>.

<sup>16</sup> Xiaoming Zheng, Liluo Fang, and Wenquan Ling, “社会规范研究综述,” *心理学动态* 5, no. 4 (1997): pp. 16-21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>18</sup> Yubo Kou, Bryan Semaan, and Bonnie Nardi, “A Confucian Look at Internet Censorship in China,” *Human-Computer Interaction - INTERACT 2017*, 2017, pp. 377-398, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67744-6\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67744-6_25).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 377-398.

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hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> In this Confucianism view, homosexuality is incompatible with Confucian Propriety.<sup>21</sup> Thus in Chinese society, by following the Confucianism view, they reject homosexuality as the Propriety suggests. According to Kou, Semaan and Nardi, Confucianism is still having a great impact on the current Chinese society and culture, including the practice of censorship.<sup>22</sup> They mention “When observing through the lens of Confucianism, we can understand this political system as government leaders having taken it upon themselves to make censorship decisions for the public good.”<sup>23</sup> Even though social norms and censorship are two different concepts, from this statement, it is possible to notice the interrelation between them within Chinese society.

According to Xu’s research, she states that censorship is broadly defined as monitoring and suppression of information, communication, media, and/or speech that the government deems objectionable and harmful.<sup>24</sup> One non-Western country which is often used as a context to explore censorship is China—widely considered to be an authoritarian state with one of the most sophisticated, strict, and comprehensive systems of censorship in the world.<sup>25</sup> The Chinese government has held close control over the media as a means of promoting certain values and restricting others. Although its major concern about politics, the government has imposed regulations on sexual content, especially in televised advertising and entertainment content.<sup>26</sup> This censorship also applies to queerness in China. Zhang and Fung state that “based on the regulations of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (2007a, 2007b), homosexuality and queer behavior are strictly forbidden

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<sup>20</sup> Yubo Kou, Bryan Semaan, and Bonnie Nardi, “A Confucian Look at Internet Censorship in China,” *Human-Computer Interaction - INTERACT 2017*, 2017, pp. 377-398

<sup>21</sup> Jinli Huang, “从儒家学说来看同性恋婚姻的合法化,” *Journal of Mudanjiang University* 24, no. 12 (December 2015): pp. 175-177.

<sup>22</sup> Yubo Kou, Bryan Semaan, and Bonnie Nardi, “A Confucian Look at Internet Censorship in China,” *Human-Computer Interaction - INTERACT 2017*, 2017, pp.379.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 381.

<sup>24</sup> Beina Xu, “Media Censorship in China,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 25, 2014, pp. 1-6.

<sup>25</sup> Yubo Kou, Bryan Semaan, and Bonnie Nardi, “A Confucian Look at Internet Censorship in China,” *Human-Computer Interaction - INTERACT 2017*, September 2017, pp. 377-398, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67744-6\\_25](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67744-6_25).

<sup>26</sup> Jane D. Brown, Xinshu Zhao, and Quan Liu, “Love Is All You Need: A Content Analysis of Romantic Scenes in Chinese Entertainment Television,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 23, no. 3 (November 26, 2012): pp. 229-247.

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on China's TV screens."<sup>27</sup> Hence, original pieces, such as the web novel, need to be edited and adapted with changes if aspects of queerness are present. Hao Xiaojiang also emphasizes in an interview that "homosexual people [can exist in reality, but] cannot exist on [China's] television [...] This is the regulation of the state."<sup>28</sup> Meaning, homosexual content is not allowed to be screened on television if explicitly shown through dialogue due to what is socially acceptable or not. Jane D. Brown, Xinshu Zhao, and Quan Liu investigated how romantic scenes are depicted and broadcasted on Chinese television.<sup>29</sup> Their result shows that due to the censorship, homosexual content in China has always been a forbidden topic to show on TV programs.<sup>30</sup> According to Zhang and Fung, media production is not only a primary means for social control but also constitutes a textual system and representation of modernity.<sup>31</sup> Based on this, the censorship regulations against homosexual content reflect the rejection of homosexuality from the state. In relation to this research, censorship assists me in examining how the show adapts the original novel to fit the censorship.

### 1.3 Adaptation and Signs

The adaptation of the homosexual relationship from the original web novel into a heterosexual one illustrates how the discourse around homosexuality in China is rejected in forms of censorship. Thus, adaptation is employed to change a storyline to fit the discourse in Chinese society. The research by Fung and Zhang, on the adaptation of the Chinese TV drama *Ugly Betty* illustrates this idea of adaptation based on gender essentialism and heteronormativity. Their research shows how the sensitive topics are handled in China's

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<sup>27</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, "TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community," *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 1-16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 1-16.

<sup>29</sup> Jane D. Brown, Xinshu Zhao, and Quan Liu, "Love Is All You Need: A Content Analysis of Romantic Scenes in Chinese Entertainment Television," *Asian Journal of Communication* 23, no. 3 (November 26, 2012): pp. 229-247.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 229-231.

<sup>31</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, "TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community," *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 1-16.

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cultural domain.<sup>32</sup> By featuring what is and what is not socially acceptable, the production team reproduced the narrative of *Ugly Betty*, and in doing so produced its own Chinese modernity.<sup>33</sup> Due to these existing discourses in China, the representation of any alternative lifestyles and sexual orientations would have to be negatively and pejoratively characterized in the drama.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the representation of the heterosexual character Jiaming, who has very feminine attributes, is described as a sissy in the Chinese version.<sup>35</sup> As stated above, due to the strict censorship, homosexual characters are rejected on screen. Thus, the adaptation of Jiaming from an originally homosexual character to a feminine heterosexual man presents the compromise the show made to fit the state censorship. According to Fung and Zhang, a sissy refers to heterosexual men with too many girly traits.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the character is not fulfilling the norms of masculinity according to Chinese culture and is thus categorized as feminine. This idea of being a sissy connects to gender essentialism and heteronormativity. As on the one hand, it rejects gender essentialist ideas about masculine men, but on the other hand it still obtains traditional ideal of heterosexuality. In this analysis, the term sissy will help to demonstrate how adaptation was done in *Chen Qing Ling* based on the censorship regulations around homosexuality.

To help understand the analysis of the scenes, it is essential to not only focus on examining the dialogue and behavior but also investigating the symbolic representations and their meanings. It is important to acknowledge the signs which are presented in the TV show through elements such as costumes, music and setting. These signs can be interpreted as giving hints referring to the original relationship depicted in the web novel. According to Hall, language and signs are crucial elements of representation: in his explanation he introduces Saussure's findings about the importance of signs in the production of meaning.<sup>37</sup> Like Saussure, Hall considers signs as representations of concepts and the conceptual

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<sup>32</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, "TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community," *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 1-16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Fung and Xiaoxiao Zhang, "The Chinese Ugly Betty: TV Cloning and Local Modernity," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (December 2011): pp. 265-276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877910391866>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 265-269.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Fung and Xiaoxiao Zhang, "The Chinese Ugly Betty: TV Cloning and Local Modernity,"

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Hall, Edwina Diane Griffith, and Stuart Hall, *The Work of Representation*, 1991.

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relations between what we see and think, in the construction of meaning within a culture.<sup>38</sup> Meaning, there is a mutual understanding between different individuals in the same culture when seeing a sign. This connects to how according to Meyer and Gelman, gender essentialism involves the creation of an explanatory structure whereby the differences between categories are seen as natural and represented in form of stereotypes.<sup>39</sup> This is supported by Ronen who agrees with Bakan's claim that essentialism relies on gender stereotypes.<sup>40</sup> Meaning, stereotypes of men and women, and masculinity and femininity, present the basis for how a person is supposed to act, but also communicate. This is also underlined by scholars such as Ridgeway who argues that stereotypes provide the base for each individual to shape their expectations of which job fits them depending on their gender.<sup>41</sup> This argument supports the claim of essentialist thinking having influence on the decisions a person makes in his life based on all the stereotypical characteristics of its sex.

The discourse around these concepts will help me to illustrate how the TV show *Chen Qing Ling* adapted the story from the original novel but changed the romance between two gay lovers into a "brotherhood" relationship to meet the gender normality in China and fit into the Chinese modernity.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

To conduct this research a textual analysis will be employed. "Textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which

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<sup>38</sup> Stuart Hall, Edwina Diane. Griffith, and Stuart Hall, *The Work of Representation*, 1991.

<sup>39</sup> Meredith Meyer and Susan A. Gelman, "Gender Essentialism in Children and Parents: Implications for the Development of Gender Stereotyping and Gender-Typed Preferences," *Sex Roles* 75, no. 9-10 (2016): pp. 409-421, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0646-6>.

<sup>40</sup> Shelly Ronen, "The Postfeminist Ideology at Work: Endorsing Gender Essentialism and Denying Feminine Devaluation in the Case of Design Work," *John Wiley & Sons Ltd*, June 9, 2019, pp. 1-18.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1-18.

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communication may be understood. Often the messages are understood as influenced by and reflective of larger social structures.”<sup>42</sup> According to Bainbridge, he refers to the media theorist McKee who claims that “textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world. It is a methodology—a data-gathering process—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live.”<sup>43</sup> Meaning, by employing a textual analysis in this research, it can be observed how the adaptation and representation of the originally homosexual protagonists into heterosexual friends, shows the cultural norms in Chinese society. Besides, it reflects the discourse around queerness and homosexuality in China. Textual analysis is a useful methodology because it focuses on the media texts themselves.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when analyzing the three scenes, the dialogue between the two characters will function as a way to understand cultural norms and their applications to mainstream media such as film. In order to analyze the scenes, the text, here the dialogue between the characters, needs to be broken down into its component signs, or units of meanings.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is necessary for this research to investigate the symbolic elements of the scenes due to all the signs having intrinsic meaning assigned to them based on the culture. In other words, by analyzing the signs used in the scenes, it can be interpreted what message the show wants to convey. Moreover, based on the adaptation of the original homosexual content it can be investigated how Chinese culture perceives homosexuality in its society.

The analysis will focus on three scenes: episode 26, 35, and 36. These three scenes were chosen for this research because these were the only three scenes that adapted the homosexual content from the original web novel into the series. All the other homosexual scenes in the original web novel were left out in the adaptation. Thus these three scenes are interesting to investigate concerning how homosexuality from the original is shown in the

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<sup>42</sup> Mike Allen, “Textual Analysis,” *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* 4 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>.

<sup>43</sup> Bainbridge Jason, “Tools 3: Textual Analysis and Media Research,” *Media and Journalism: New Approaches to Theory and Practice*, 2011, pp. 224-237.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227-237

<sup>45</sup> Bainbridge Jason, “Tools 3: Textual Analysis and Media Research,”

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series. This research will investigate the signs in regards to costume, color choices, music, camera angles, dialogue, setting, symbol and micro-expressions of facial and bodily movements. The focus of this research will be on these elements, since each has an influence and purpose on the representation of the depicted. Meaning, the way these elements are employed causes different representations and thus understanding of the presented. Thus, analyzing each of these elements individually as well as in connection to each other can reveal how homosexuality is depicted in the show. These observations will be compared to the web novel and how the original version differentiates itself from the adapted series scenes. These observations in this research show that homosexual elements of the original novel are still present in the selected scenes of episode 26, 35 and 36. However, the explicitness of homosexuality was changed in the adaptation. Meaning, the series does not explicitly and directly present Lan and Wei as homosexual but leaves room for interpretation for the audience. This is done through costume choices, background music, micro-facial expression, body language, setting, dialogue, and camera angle. It will be claimed that these elements show the characters' affection for one another as originally present in the web novel. By not explicitly presenting the characters' homosexuality but changing and leaving out homosexual content, the adaptation of the series suggests the discourse around heteronormativity and gender essentialism in Chinese society which rejects homosexuality as a norm.

The concept of gender essentialism is essential for this research because it reflects the ideology Chinese society has on queerness, including homosexuality. Thus, it can be linked to why certain censorships do not allow homosexual content to be shown on national TV. Additionally, these constructed norms around gender performativity and the censorship in China introduces the concept of adaptation, since adaptation needs to be employed if, for instance, a storyline from a film or series clashes with the societal norms. To show how the concepts of gender essentialism and adaptation are reflected in the series, the three scenes of the series will be investigated in regards to the depiction of the relationship between the two protagonists. While, the original web novel presents a homosexual lover relationship, the series depicts them as heterosexual, close friends. A textual analysis will help to observe the scenes in more detail and help to understand how the concepts of gender essentialism and



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adaptation can be demonstrated in the TV show based on the Chinese ideology. Firstly, this research analyzes a scene from episode 26, which shows change in its adaption in the previously explicit homosexual scenes from the novel. It can be observed how the first kissing scene of the two protagonists was cut out in the series, which introduces the concepts of adaptation, heteronormativity and gender essentialism. Secondly, these concepts are also present in the analysis of the scene in episode 35 where explicitly shown femininity from the web novel was cut out in the series due to the discourse around gender essentialism in Chinese society. Besides, it can be interpreted that micro-facial expression and body language still suggest forms of affection and femininity from the character Lan towards Wei. Thirdly, the scene from episode 36 is analyzed concerning the concepts of gender essentialism and adaptation of this research. The above mentioned elements such as dialogue, facial expression and body language etc. are closely investigated similarly to the analysis of the other two scenes.

This research recognizes the limitation of meaning making through interpretation. I am aware that these interpretations are from a subjective standpoint, however, these observations are based on the academic discourse around gender essentialism and adaptation. Thus, all interpretations made in the analysis of this research will be supported with academic evidence and function to illustrate how homosexuality is presented on Chinese television. These results will give an insight into Chinese society and their discourse around gender essentialism. Besides, it will be demonstrated why the change in adaptation was employed. As a heterosexual Chinese, it is important to acknowledge that by no means this research intends to speak on behalf of the LGBTQ community in China

### **Chapter 3: Analysis**

#### **First scene**

Episode 26 presents the first scene that will be analyzed in regards to how the scene differs from the original novel. For this, the end scene was selected because the visual and textual

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components suggest a closer relationship of the two characters Lan and Wei than described in the story.

In the scene, Wei is leaving Lan, because he has a special mission that he has to leave town for. When Lan found out about this special mission he has doubts about this task and does not want Wei to leave. However, unfortunately, there is no turning back for Wei, because it is his obligation to fulfill this mission. In this scene, Lan is standing in the rain, looking at Wei with tears in his eyes, saying goodbye to him. As emphasized by Xiong that in traditional Chinese culture men are ascribed to be strong in comparison to women due to women's association with emotions. This reflects the gender essentialist perspective in Chinese society where emotions such as tears are associated with femininity.<sup>46</sup> Meaning, even though the characters are not depicted as homosexual, the tears, on a gender essentialist level, symbolizes the strong emotional connection between Lan and Wei.

The scene goes on with a close up shot of both protagonists, with the rain drop sound and melancholy music playing in the background. The atmosphere is cold and sad due to the heavy rain fall and the distance between the two characters. While Wei is already sitting on a horse, all packed and ready to leave to the mission with the other companions, Lan is standing on the opposite side alone. After the audience gets the sensation of this rather distant atmosphere, the first line is spoken from Wei saying: "Lan, are you here to stop me?" The camera angle moves from a close up shot from Wei to Lan, Lan asking "Wei, where are you going?", underlining him being unaware of his leaving. "I have no idea. But the world is wide. There must be a place for us," Wei responds. "You need to think again. If you go, it will be considered a rebellion against orthodoxy with no way back." By this, Lan means that if Wei leaves now he is betraying his family and their traditions because according to their belief he must stay with them. Wei gets mad and says "Rebellion against orthodoxy? What kind of orthodoxy is that? Lan, do you still remember the promise we have made together?" The scene ends with a close up shot of Lan, but with no response. What the adaptation of this scene from the original novel lacks is the bodily contact and romantic relationship between

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<sup>46</sup> Xuemin Xiong, "女性主义视角观照下张爱玲小说中的男性形象," *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, June 15, 2017, pp. 1-9.

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them both, which emphasizes their homosexuality. While the series shows Lan being protective over Wei by making sure he knows that if he is leaving it can cause serious trouble with his family, leaving the romantic aspects out which is present and highlighted in the novel. Compared to the series, the novel continues the scene with Wei getting off from the horse and coming towards Lan. He gently touches Lan's face and looks him deep into his tearing eyes. Filled with thoughts in his head, Wei could not stop himself from admiring Lan's beauty and soft face, thinking if this is the right time for their first kiss. Without expecting it, Wei leans over and kisses Lan for the first time. In the novel, it is described how the rain is still pouring onto them while kissing which makes the entire scene more romantic yet dramatic due to the reader knowing their upcoming separation. After the kiss, Lan and Wei look deeply into each other's eyes and both are blushing, with the chapter ending.



(1) Lan and Wei in the rain

This scene adapts the dialogue from the original web novel, but left out the kissing part due to the strict TV censorship in China. Zhang and Fung emphasize how in China, heterosexuality is the only dominant and legitimate discourse.<sup>47</sup> This can be seen in the show where Lan and Wei are depicted as close friends, which can be considered as a brother-like relationship, rather than two homosexual men who have affection for each other. However, the sign, dialogue, and micro-expressions and body movements hint towards romantic tension between Lan and Wei such as in the original storyline. Based on Warner's idea about heteronormativity, these moments which can be interpreted as romantic reflect the rejection of heteronormativity.<sup>48</sup> At the same time gender essentialism which Fung and Zhang

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<sup>47</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, "TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community," *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, 1991, pp. 3-17

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emphasis as being a discourse endorsed by the government which forbids the expressions of alternative sexual identities on television is challenged. By Lan showing emotions such as having tearing eyes, the discourse around men not showing emotions is questioned. According to the censorship in China, homosexual attributes on television are forbidden, hence, the further scene of their first kiss were left out in the adaptation.

According to Ronen, essentialism relies on gender stereotypes, including the ways how a person is acting and communicating in their daily lives.<sup>49</sup> Thus, essentialist norms influence the ways a person makes sense of their surrounding and reality. Ridgeway agrees with this perspective and claims stereotypes to provide the base for each individual to shape their reality.<sup>50</sup> This argument supports the claim of essentialist thinking have an influence on the decisions a person makes in his life based on all the stereotypical characteristics assigned to its sex. Thus, the reason for the censored and cut adaptation of this particular scene can be explained with the explicit description of two male characters kissing and showing sexual affection in the novel which speaks against the essentialist and heteronormative ideology in China. As emphasized by Haq and Masroor, film could serve the purpose of educating the masses.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the series employed adaptation to this particular scene due to the discourse around homosexuals in China being presented as unnatural. Thus, elements that do not meet the norms, are being changed or left out in mainstream media such as film or series to not challenge the already established discourse around that topic.

The scene from episode 26 demonstrated how the TV show adapted the elements from the original novel due to the essentialist thinking within Chinese society and its censorship. The deleted kissing scene is an example of censorship in Chinese media, due to heteronormativity and gender essentialism that establish the social norms. However, there are signs in facial expressions and dialogue that suggest the two protagonists have a more intimate relationship than just friendship. By showing the two protagonists relationship in an

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<sup>49</sup> Shelly Ronen, "The Postfeminist Ideology at Work: Endorsing Gender Essentialism and Denying Feminine Devaluation in the Case of Design Work," *John Wiley & Sons Ltd*, June 9, 2019, pp. 1-18.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Amna Haq and Farzana Masroor, "Othering' of the Orient: A Critical Exploration of Green Zone," *Erevna Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 3, no. 1 (2019).

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implicit way the show follows the regulation of the censorship while letting the viewers interpret the possible romance between them.

### **Second scene**

In the beginning scene of episode 35, Wei is wandering around the streets when he suddenly sees Lan standing on a bridge alone under the bright light of the full moon. Lan is wearing a white long robe. The white costume in this scene and the bright colors throughout the series that Lan is dressed in underlines his personality traits of being a soft, innocent, protective and understanding person. In relation to gender essentialism, those characteristics are ascribed to femininity.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it can be interpreted that Lan is rather feminine due to these personality traits he is presented as concerning the gender essentialism ideology in China.

Moreover, the prominence of the moon in the background of Lan who is wearing the same color as the moon, and Wei being presented in black clothes, can be interpreted as Wei and Lan symbolizing Yin and Yang. Throughout the series, this seems to be a reoccurring and prominent theme. This is important because of its symbolism suggesting Wei and Lan belonging to each other. According to Yang Hui, the Chinese mythology behind the symbol of Yin Yang symbolizes the moon (Yin) as the “sister” or “wife” of the sun (Yang).<sup>53</sup> The sun, therefore, stands symbolically for the male, its source being warmth and brightness. In the series, Lan is always wearing white color robes, which can symbolize the moon which stands for feminine energy. Even though the show does not explicitly refer to Lan as being feminine and therefore the moon, Wei, who is depicted as his best friend and therefore the other half, is always shown in darker clothes. Thus, it can be interpreted that Lan represents the moon (Yin) and Wei his other side, the sun (Yang). This symbolism in form of costumes throughout the series emphasizes their connection and belonging to one another, since Yin completes Yang, and both could not live without each other. Meaning, Lan by being correlated to the moon shows characteristics of femininity according to the methodology of

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<sup>52</sup> Xuemin Xiong, “女性主义视角观照下张爱玲小说中的男性形象,” *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, June 15, 2017, pp. 1-9.

<sup>53</sup> Hui Yang, “从月亮神话看性别本质主义,” *Journal of Qinghai Normal University Philosophy and Social Sciences* 6 (2006): pp. 1-5.

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the symbol. The relationship between the two protagonists is not shown romantically in the series in terms of them having a physical relationship with each other like in the original novel. However, there are hints of romance between Lan and Wei in the TV series that the audience can interpret as a lover's relationship; this leads to the discussion of the sexual orientation of the two protagonists.

The scene continues with Wei walking up to the bridge and approaching Lan. He acts as if he is doing fine, even though his leg was scared from an evil spell he got during one of the missions. Without asking, Lan senses that Wei was injured and immediately uncovers his robe and is shocked by his bloody wound. Wei tries to convince Lan that it is nothing and that he is fine. However, Lan persisted in helping him by offering to carry him. "Let's go. Let me carry you on the way," Lan says in a serious tone. The camera gives a dolly shot and shows Wei, who is emphasizing that the wound is minimal and thus he does not need any help. He emphasizes this, by stating "I'm an adult man. It's so embarrassing." Consequently, Lan asks confused and disappointed "Embarrassing?" and reminds Wei that once he offered to carry him after a fight. Wei denying multiple times that this ever happened. "No way did I want that. You must have mistaken it. It's impossible." Lan gets upset and responds: "Never would you try to remember these," in a disappointed and dramatic way. Lan's behavior and his micro-facial expressions towards Wei denying that this particular moment ever happened, can be interpreted in terms of Lan remembering this moment because it was special to him. Thus, his reaction suggests that he is upset about Wei not seeing the same significance at that moment as he does. This reflects Lan as a hyper emotional and overly caring person when it comes to Wei, which can be connected to the gender essentialist idea of emotions being associated with femininity, therefore a sissy. Fung and Zhang emphasize how male figures who have too many girly traits are referred to as "sissy".<sup>54</sup> Hence, it can be interpreted that even though Lan is depicted as a heterosexual man and as a friend to Wei, his behavior towards Wei indicates characteristics of femininity according to gender essentialism and he can thus be seen as a sissy.

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<sup>54</sup> Hui Yang, "从月亮神话看性别本质主义," *Journal of Qinghai Normal University Philosophy and Social Sciences* 6 (2006): pp. 1-5.

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This moment in the scene is followed by a flashback memory of that particular point Lan is talking about. The flashback shows the time Lan got injured and Wei offered to carry him. The flashback is supposed to show the viewers that Wei did not always have this masculinity trait of not accepting help since there was a moment in the past when he was the one offering it. After the flashback, Wei says that everyone says that he has a bad memory. “Well, let it be so. No carrying me.” Without hesitation or listening to Wei’s words, Lan rushes over to the other side of Wei, grabs his arm and throws him over his own shoulder, and starts carrying him on his back. The camera shows a slow motion of this moment of Lan throwing Wei over his shoulders, which is emphasized with a gentle background music starting to play. Wei is surprised and asks confused but not angry “What are you doing?” The scene ends with a slowly lifting crane shot of them walking down the bridge. Compared to the series, in the novel Wei does not resist Lan’s offer of being carried due to his injury. Instead, he is presented as rather shy yet caring about Lan worrying about him. He repetitively emphasizes that he is doing all right, as presented in the series, however, he does not state that he does not want to be carried due to that being unmanly. Besides, he accepted the offer and lets Lan carry him but not over the shoulder and forced such as in the series, but in a princess hug. This shows way more tension and intimacy between the two compared to the scene on the television.



(2) Lan is carrying Wei

The quote in the series “I’m an adult man. It’s so embarrassing” reflects the idea of gender essentialism where certain attributes and characteristics are said to be assigned to the sex. Meaning, there is an essence in being a man and an essence in being a woman. Thus, in relation to the dialogue, Wei emphasizes fulfilling the characteristics of being a man by not

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needing nor accepting help. This ideology is supported by Meyer and Gelman, who emphasize gender essentialism to work as a guide for individuals to make meaning of others as well as of themselves.<sup>55</sup> Thus, essentialist ideals can present a guide for people in terms of acting on behalf of the gender norms assigned to their sex. Coleman and Hong's argument agrees with this perspective by emphasizing how promoting an essentialist view of gender in a society causes people to respond to these gender-typical views onto themselves.<sup>56</sup> This idea is also reflected in the series, where Wei's quote "I'm an adult man. It's so embarrassing" underlines this exact idea of him viewing himself as not needing help due to this being a characteristic of the masculinity assigned to his sex. The fact that the series chooses the word "embarrassing" in the dialogue, which was not used in the web novel, shows this idea of masculinity, where it is considered feminine if a man needs help. Thus, this essentialist idea of men not needing help is a clear example of how the series chose to adapt the scene but change its content in terms of the words used. Furthermore, by changing the context of the dialogue, the series changes the narrative by showing none homosexual content to support the norm around gender essentialism and the censorship in China. Due to this gender essentialist thinking, feminine and homosexual representations of men are forbidden and frowned upon in Chinese media, especially television and broadcasting. The missing scenes from the original web novel of Wei accepting to be carried and Lan holding him in a princess hug, thus, show a change in the adaptation due to its explicit femininity, since the essentialist ideology in Chinese society does not accept feminine men.

The scene from episode 35 demonstrated how the series adapted web novel to fit the Chinese social norms and censorship through the change in the dialogue and the physical interaction between the two protagonists. On one side, the web novel presents Wei accepting to be carried by Lan, while on the other side the TV series shows Wei rejecting Lan's offer because it is "embarrassing": the adapted version of the dialogue reflects the influence of

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<sup>55</sup> Meredith Meyer and Susan A. Gelman, "Gender Essentialism in Children and Parents: Implications for the Development of Gender Stereotyping and Gender-Typed Preferences," *Sex Roles* 75, no. 9-10 (2016): pp. 409-421, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0646-6>.

<sup>56</sup> Jill M. Coleman and Ying-Yi Hong, "Beyond Nature and Nurture: The Influence of Lay Gender Theories on Self-Stereotyping," *Self and Identity* 7, no. 1 (April 2007): pp. 34-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860600980185>.



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censorship in producing the show which involved the strict omission of explicit romance between the two male figures. Similarly, on the level of physical interaction, the original novel depicts the two protagonists in explicit sensual physical contact while the TV show changed the reactions of Wei due to censorship regarding the representation of homosexuality in Chinese media.

The ideology behind the societal norms in China are based on gender essentialism and heteronormativity which do not consider acceptable any form of homosexuality. However, the concept of sissy has been introduced to describe the feminine traits in men. This term became a compromise for the gay people within society, although, the term refers to straight men with feminine attributes.

### **Third scene**

In episode 36, a zoomed out shot shows Wei carrying Lan, supported on one shoulder, to Lan's house. They were drinking together at a place and Lan got too drunk which is why Wei had to help him walk. Wei gently puts Lan on his bed and lays his head down on his pillow. Moreover, Wei puts Lan's feet on the bed into a comfortable position and grabs his hands, when suddenly slow and gentle music starts playing. Even though the music is slow and sensual, which would underline a romantic scene in another heterosexual love relationship scenes, it is presented as regular background music without deeper meaning to it in this series due to their brotherly relationship.

The camera zooms to Lan's upper body and shows how Wei is putting his hands on top of Lan's. The camera then shifts to Wei who is observing Lan and he starts to remember the time Lan first got drunk with him. The flashback shows how Wei asks Lan to call him "Brother Wei" while he was drunk. In Chinese society, calling a non-blood related man "brother" usually shows an intimate relationship between them both. Besides, usually it is a girl or woman who calls or asks to call a male brother because she has feeling for him. Meaning, in Chinese culture calling an older non-blood related male "brother" represents a lover, couple relationship. Thus, the scene can be interpreted in terms of Wei wanting Lan to call him "brother" to emphasize their "special" relationship. As stated above, normally, in heterosexual lovers relationship, this term would symbolize lovers or having interest in the

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other person. However, this series depicts the “Brother Wei” term as just close friends like brothers. As stated above heteronormativity in China does not see homosexuality as a norm. Thus, the series represents a brother-like relationship between the two characters to show the audience that this type of intimacy reflects a good friendship instead of homosexual lovers.

The scene goes on, with Wei remembering the memory and smiling about how it is been 16 years, yet Lan still being a lightweight drinker. He puts the blanket over Lan and tucks him in. Then he leans closer to Lan’s face, calling his name repetitively to make sure he is already asleep. The scene continues with Wei touching Lan’s face slowly, but then quickly taking away his hand, with a thoughtful expression on his face, resulting in him standing up and leaving the room. The camera gives a dolly shot from Lan’s face to a wooden bed frame, showing a drawing of two men kissing and holding hands, resulting at the end of the scene.

Different than the series, the novel continues with this scene, where it describes Wei touching Lan’s face way longer, more intimate and over and over again. In the web novel, it is described after Wei lays Lan down on his bed, he starts admiring his face’s beauty. He starts putting his fingers on Lan’s lips and slowly and gently drifts down his majestic jawline. It is highlighted how Wei cannot get enough of his face. He continues touching the jawline, going up and down, resulting then in him caressing his mellow cheeks. The more Wei looks at Lan, the more he obsesses with his face and beauty. Wei cannot help himself then holding on to his face, and getting closer and closer to it. So close that he suddenly realizes he cannot do this. He abruptly takes his hand off his face, Lan falling down to his pillow again. Wei needs to collect and distance himself from the situation to calm down. He stands up, and walks away, just to find himself starring back again at Lan’s sleeping beauty from a distance. Again, something inside of him, a pulse, makes him walk back immediately just to look over at Lan. In this point of the novel, the two characters are not yet together, which supports the intense tension to be close to each other. He cannot resist himself to leave Lan alone, and starts poking his cheeks, when realizing that he has never seen Lan smiling. Not thinking much of it, Wei tries to push the outside of Lan’s mouth corners up to imitate a smile. Suddenly, he feels a bite on his finger. Even though it did not hurt him, it pulled him out of his thoughts, making him realize that he not only woke Lan up, but Lan biting his finger tip to tease him. The chapter ends with letting the reader use their imagination to continue this

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scene which already gave them a tease with this rather intimate and sexual movement, highlighting their sexual attraction to one another.

Compared to the series, this explicitly sexual scene in the novel was not shown, however, it makes an indirect reference to it by showing a drawing of two men holding hands and kissing at the end of the scene. Thus, even though the series was not allowed to show the intimacy and love between Lan and Wei based on the heteronormativity and gender essentialist ideology in China, it does show its characteristics of it by symbolically representing it with the drawing. Meaning, it is not directly shown but it leaves space to the imagination of the audience to decide for themselves how to view their relationship.



(3) Wei is taking care of Lan

The strategy of TV formatting and adaptation is trendy in China. As argued by Zhang and Fung, who show that the combination of local accents and the structural elements of a TV format present the guidelines on how to adapted program formats to reduce cultural distance, the series cut elements that do not fit their norms out from the original version.<sup>57</sup> This is necessary to show that the discourse around heterosexuality as the social norm in China. This way, the elimination of problematic content, meaning content that does not match the ideology in China, is necessary to avoid the problem of contradiction to its societal belief.<sup>58</sup> As described above, heteronormativity excludes same sex love since it is seen as unnatural,

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<sup>57</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, "TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community," *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Xingang Chen and Weigang Tian, "Television Program Formats' Transnational Traffic and Local Reconstruction.," *Contemporary Communications* 1 (2012): pp. 100-107.

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and therefore needs to be eliminated out of the series context as seen in the scenes analyzed above. The exclusion of homosexuality in the TV series reflects the idea of censorship and adaptation. “Given China’s strict control of its cultural domain, format/modernity modification is not uncommon when Chinese producers appropriate foreign cultural goods.”<sup>59</sup> Even though the original novel is not a foreign product, this argument is still appropriate for this research since it demonstrates that modifying content is not uncommon in China if it does not match their ideology. This is also emphasized by Hao Xiaojiang who states that homosexuality cannot exist in Chinese TV.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, the intimate relationship of the homosexual characters Wei and Lan, as presented in the novel, is not allowed to be shown on national television by the state’s regulations and require to be adapted with changes. Meaning, it is possible for the content to remain the same, however, the relationship between the characters as being homosexual, must be changed.

The described scene shows the adaptation of the series from the novel in depicting the emotional and physical relationship between the two protagonists. The novel and the series narrate the same storyline in the scene where Wei asks Lan to call him “brother” and the scene where Wei touches and admires Lan’s face. However, the ending scene of the series changes the narrative from the novel. On one side, the novel presents explicitly the intimacy between the two protagonists by describing their physical interaction such as finger biting and the fact that they woke up naked in the same bed, which is told in the following chapter. On the other side, the series ends the scene in the bedroom with Wei leaving the room and the camera framing the drawing of two men kissing. This adaptation of sexual interaction to a drawing instead is the result of censorship because within the Chinese social norms, homosexual content is not allowed to be shown explicitly. In fact, the TV series offers the idea of a desired intimate interaction between Lan and Wei, such as a kiss, however, it is expressed only through a drawing. In this way, the series followed the regulation of the censorship and found a way to present implicitly the romantic relationship of the two in order to lead the audience to an open interpretation.

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<sup>59</sup> Xiaoxiao Zhang and Anthony Fung, “TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community,” *Television & New Media*, 2014, pp. 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p 8.

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## Conclusion

This research aimed to analyze how does the show *Chen Qing Ling* adapt the homosexual relationship of the two protagonists from the original novel into a heterosexual one based on the existing discourse around gender essentialism as the norm in China. I have argued that the TV show adapts the chapters from the original web novel but left out the kissing, and physically intimate parts due to the strict censorship in China regarding homosexuality. This research focused on adaptation based on the concept of gender essentialism and heteronormativity in China.

Firstly, the scene from episode 26 was analyzed where Wei and Lan are depicted as friends who have to go separate ways due to the missions assigned to Wei. The scene was compared to the original web novel and it was investigated how the series cut out significant parts of the characters showing homosexual attributes. Moreover, the analysis employs the concepts of adaptation, heteronormativity, and gender essentialism to explain the reason for this censored representation of the originally homosexual characters. Secondly, the scene from episode 35 was analyzed concerning the same concepts. The results show that the symbolism in the scene suggests the strong bond and connection between Lan and Wei. However, different than the original web novel, this relationship is presented less explicit in its femininity and homosexuality by cutting out elements of the scene such as kissing moment and princess hug. These observations are also present in the last analyzed scene from the episode 36, where very visual and explicit sexual scenes between Lan and Wei were cut out and changed in its adaptation. Throughout this research, it is argued that the reason for this adaptation are the heteronormativity and gender essentialist ideologies in Chinese society which argues that men and women have intrinsic characteristics assigned to their sex. This excludes men showing any forms of femininity such as emotions, or same sex love.

The findings of this research reveal hoe the adaptation can be performed to a TV series in China based on the state censorship. By analyzing the series *Chen Qing Ling* compared to its original version, it can be seen how the original homosexual relationship between the two

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protagonists is changed based on the different gender norms taught to Chinese society. The original web novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* was very popular amongst the young generation in China, thus, it was adapted and created into a TV series. However, due to the censorship in China, the homosexual elements of the original version needed to be changed in its adaptation since they challenge the norms around gender and sexuality. Hence, the significance of this research is to show ways adaptation can be employed to produce media products that fit in the Chinese culture. Furthermore, it suggests that homosexuality in China is not allowed to be explicitly shown or displayed to the public in any form on television. However, even though homosexuality is not seen as a norm in China, and thus not represented on television, there are elements in this series that can be interpreted as Lan and Wei showing affection to one another. The elements which were focused on in this research, such as dialogue, setting, camera angle background music, costume, symbols and facial and body expressions suggest that the explicit homosexual scenes were cut out, but, still present forms of affection. Thus, these adaptations indicates – that homosexuality cannot be explicitly displayed on TV. However, I argue that this TV show presents how same sex affection is fairly tolerated by the Chinese public when it is presented implicitly through signs which can leave room for interpretation. By allowing open interpretations, the show gives the audience space to discuss the relationship between the two protagonists while the show follows the regulation of the state censorship.

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## **Appendix**

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List of screenshots of the series:

1. Lan and Wei in the rain. (40:45)
2. Lan is carrying Wei. (05:09)
3. Wei is taking care of Lan. (03:19)