

Exploring Nisu Culture: Unveiling the Complexities of the Female Gaze in Chinese Fan Communities

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the realm of Nisu culture, an emerging fan subculture that has gained significant popularity among Chinese women in recent years. By examining the perspectives of Nisu fans and their engagement within the Nisu fan community, this study aims to present a comprehensive and authentic depiction of this cultural phenomenon. Additionally, the research explores the concept of the female gaze within the context of Nisu culture, shedding light on its complexities.

Through interviews with Nisu fans and online participatory observations, a wealth of detailed information was collected, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of Nisu culture. The findings highlight the diverse experiences and viewpoints of female fans, showcasing their varied forms of engagement and the nuanced manifestations of the female gaze. The gaze of Nisu fans extends beyond mere objectification, emphasizing emotional connections, and challenging conventional gender norms.

By critically examining the development and limitations of Nisu culture, this study contributes to the ongoing debate surrounding its progressive potential and its impact on gender dynamics. This study emphasizes the need to go beyond a simple gender role reversal and advocates for equality, inclusivity, and the amplification of marginalized voices within fan communities.

Keywords: Nisu culture, female gaze, fandom culture, gender, Chinese women

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and context

In recent years, China has witnessed a remarkable surge in the popularity and visibility of a once niche fandom culture known as “nisu” (泥塑) or “nisu” (逆苏). Nisu typically involves accentuating the feminine attributes of males or imagining them as women. In essence, nisu seeks to “feminize” men.

Although the origins of nisu culture in China remain uncertain, its emergence is closely linked to the increasing popularity of TV dramas adapted from “danmei” (耽美) novels in recent years. The term danmei, borrowed from Japanese, predominantly refers to gay love within the Chinese context. Dangai (耽改) dramas are adaptations of original Danmei novels. Notably, the tremendous commercial success of TV series such as Zhenhun (镇魂, 2018), Chenqingling (陈情令, 2019), and Shanheling (山河令, 2021) has propelled danmei from a niche hobby to the mainstream, catapulting the genre into the limelight. Consequently, the leading actors of these TV series have also gained overnight fame.

It is noteworthy that female fans of these actors often affectionately refer to their idols using terms like “wife,” “mummy,” “daughter,” and so forth. These fans take delight in modifying the names of their idols to feminine versions, akin to transforming Oliver into Olivia. They employ tools like Photoshop and other techniques to enhance the femininity of male idols in pictures, such as removing body hair and beards, refining facial features such as noses and jaws, and the like.

Simultaneously, male idol groups that debuted through survival shows like Idol Producer (偶像练习生) in 2018 have created a sensation and amassed a large fan base. Over the past five years, various online streaming platforms and traditional TV stations have successively launched similar boy groups. The predominantly female fandom of

these boy groups shares similar characteristics with fans of actors who have starred in dangai dramas.

The primary participants in nisu practice are young women who actively engage in social media platforms such as Weibo. In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend in the “consumption of sexualized men” (男色消费) (Ng & Li, 2020). This trend has not only yielded substantial economic benefits but has also become a noteworthy social phenomenon that has garnered significant public attention.

However, due to the deeply rooted homophobic atmosphere prevailing in patriarchal Chinese society, this phenomenon has generated considerable controversy. Furthermore, the central government has issued a series of statements aimed at rectifying fandom culture and vehemently criticizing “abnormal aesthetics” such as “effeminate men” (General Office of the National Radio and Television Administration, 2021). In January of this year, boy group survival shows and dangai dramas were officially banned by the government (Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau, 2022).

1.2. Research questions

- (1) How do nisu fans perceive and engage with nisu culture, and what are their motivations and experiences within the fan community?
- (2) How does the gaze of female nisu fans reflect their negotiation of desires, agency, and resistance within a patriarchal society?
- (3) To what extent does nisu culture challenge or reinforce existing gender stereotypes and power imbalances within the Chinese context?

1.3. Research objectives

The objectives of this research can be outlined as follows:

- (1) To examine the practice and cultural significance of nisu within the Chinese fandom community: The study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how nisu culture is

practiced and its impact on individuals and the broader society. By exploring the cultural significance of nisu, the research seeks to shed light on the ways in which it challenges traditional gender norms.

- (2) To investigate the experiences and perspectives of nisu fans: The research aims to explore the experiences, motivations, and attitudes of nisu fans, particularly focusing on heterosexual women. By conducting interviews and participant observations, the study seeks to capture the diverse voices within the fan community and understand how individuals engage with and interpret nisu culture.
- (3) To explore of the female gaze in the context of nisu fan culture: The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and controversies surrounding nisu culture, including an examination of the female gaze as a lens through which fans engage with and interpret nisu culture.

1.4. Significance of the study

The topic of nisu culture holds significance and relevance for several reasons. Firstly, it reflects the evolving dynamics of fandom and fan culture in the digital age. Nisu culture represents a distinct form of fan expression and engagement, wherein predominantly female fans actively participate in reshaping and feminizing male idols and characters. By examining the practice of nisu, the study sheds light on the ways in which gender norms and stereotypes are challenged and reimagined within fan communities.

Moreover, this study can bring attention to the experiences and perspectives of young Chinese women who are active participants in nisu culture. By highlighting their agency, desires, and challenges, this research contributes to the broader discourse on women's empowerment, agency, and gender equality in a Chinese context.

Furthermore, this examination of the female gaze within the context of nisu culture contributes to the ongoing discussions on gender and spectatorship. By analyzing how female fans engage with and consume visual media, and how they negotiate power

dynamics and gender roles, this research offers insights into the complexities of female gaze and its manifestations in contemporary media consumption.

Also, nisu culture intersects with broader social and cultural issues in China, such as homophobia, gender inequality, and patriarchal norms. The controversies and criticisms surrounding nisu culture expose the tensions between societal expectations, government regulations, and individual expression. It contributes to academic discourse by shedding light on the complexities of contemporary Chinese society.

1.5. Scope

In a broader sense, nisu encompasses the amplification of femininity in men or the direct portrayal of men as women, as well as the amplification of masculinity in women or the direct portrayal of women as men. However, in the context of this study, nisu is defined in a narrower sense, focusing specifically on men as objects.

The participants of this research consist of heterosexual women who are fans of nisu culture. It is important to acknowledge that there are nisu fans from diverse sexual orientations and gender identities; however, due to limited access, this study will not include those groups.

1.6. Challenges and limitations

Accessing comprehensive and reliable data on nisu culture may be challenging, because the culture is still emerging or relatively niche. Depending on the availability of data, I need to rely on smaller sample sizes or limited sources, which can affect the generalizability and depth of my findings. Also, researching a topic that challenges traditional gender norms and societal expectations may face resistance or skepticism, particularly in the Chinese context where conservative views prevail.

The study encountered limitations in sample selection, primarily due to a lack of response from nisu accounts contacted via direct messages on Weibo. Consequently, a

convenience sampling method was employed, resulting in a small sample size of only 8 interviewees recruited through personal networks. This non-random sampling approach introduces potential sampling bias and limits the generalizability of the findings to the larger population of nisu fans. Furthermore, ethical concerns arise regarding fairness and justice when certain groups are excluded or underrepresented. Notably, the sample consisted exclusively of heterosexual cisgender women, neglecting other sexual orientation groups and failing to represent the diversity of the nisu fan community.

I acknowledge my limited prior knowledge of nisu culture and the potential biases that may have influenced the data collection process. To address these limitations, online participant observations were conducted in conjunction with interviews. Online participant observations minimize personal biases by reducing the researcher's influence on participants' responses. Additionally, conducting online participant observations allows for a broader sample size, promoting diversity and mitigating the issue of limited interviewees. However, online observations have their own challenges, such as limited access and difficulties in interpreting fandom terminology.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Female gaze

The concept of the “female gaze” has emerged in academic discourse in response to the male gaze, which is introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975. The term “gaze” refers to a particular power-coded way of looking that formulates a structure of power containing an oppressive or dominant aspect (subject) and an oppressed aspect (object). The academic discourse of the gaze focuses on harmful structures of power enacted through relations of looker and looked-at. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the psychological effect upon the person subjected to the gaze is a loss of autonomy upon becoming aware that they are a visible object (Manlove, 2007). In the 1970s, film theory and criticism began using the term “gaze” to describe how audiences interact with visual media, such as commercials, television shows, and films.

Mulvey (1989) adapted this concept and introduced “the male gaze” in film studies to describe a particular condition experienced by women under patriarchy. According to Mulvey (2001), the gaze is a crucial element in the construction of modern subjectivity, filtering ways of understanding and ordering the surrounding world. The cinema, as a visual medium, is able to build the pleasure of the gaze into its narrative structures and conventions. Studio system Hollywood closely tied narratives of desire and “women as spectacle” to their productions (Mulvey, 2001). In films, female bodies are often displayed erotically and women are objectified as an erotic spectacle. The male gaze invokes the sexual politics of the gaze and suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. Within the male gaze, women are visually positioned as “objects” of heterosexual male desire, while their own feelings, thoughts, and sexual drives are subordinate to their being “framed” by male desire. As Mulvey (1975) wrote, women are characterized by their “to-be-looked-at-ness” in cinema.

The term “female gaze” was coined as a response to the concept of the male gaze, but there is no major single source text that defines it. If one tries to derive its counterpart

from the definition of the male gaze, then the female gaze can be interpreted as visual and narrative strategies for depicting men as sexual objects for consumption by heterosexual female spectators. However, the female gaze cannot be a mere reversal of the male gaze. Mulvey acknowledged in an interview that “the male gaze is also the female gaze.” (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 127) According to Mulvey, even if a female filmmaker tries to invert the idea of the male gaze by fetishizing male bodies, it still uses the same language and techniques that male filmmakers use to create a gaze upon female bodies. Thus, it still falls under the purview of the male gaze. The visual rhetoric of objectification in general can, in fact, be called “the male gaze,” regardless of who is being objectified. The erotic display of men in films cannot produce a complete reversal of the power structures that maintain the male gaze. Thus, under the premise that patriarchy continues to exist, the female gaze cannot be just the female equivalent of the male gaze.

The concept of the female gaze is a relatively new perspective, and as such, there is limited information available on the topic. The definition of the female gaze is still being explored, and no universally accepted definition exists to date. Moreover, with the increasing awareness of the male gaze in various forms of media and daily life, the definition and implications of the female gaze continue to evolve. Building on Mulvey’s ideas, the concept of the female gaze has been further explored in recent years. In studies by scholars such as Schauer (2005) and Neville (2015), the term female gaze is used to represent the visual dimension of female desire and agency when women consume male bodies as visual spectacles. In particular, Neville’s (2015) research on women’s consumption of male/male pornography indicates that most straight porn invites women to view sex from a “male” perspective, where female pleasure is rendered invisible. The perspective of portraying men and sexuality to please women is missing, and that’s where the female gaze comes in.

However, Laura Mulvey’s essay has also attracted criticism for its essentialist views on gender and how individuals perceive things, as well as its exclusion of non-white and

non-straight audiences (Benson-Allott, 2017). Despite these critiques, the female gaze remains a valuable lens for understanding how gender and sexuality operate in various media forms.

In this study, I aim to use the concept of the female gaze to analyze how female nisu fans engage with and consume visual media. Since the focus is on heterosexual female nisu fans, it avoids the issue of the female gaze's lack of representation for minority groups. I will critically examine research findings based on the experiences of white women and apply them to Chinese women with care. My definition of the female gaze is not a reverse objectification of men by women but rather a critique of the inherent power dynamic in the act of looking and being looked at. The female gaze disrupts the objectification of females and emphasizes relationships, emotions, and subjective experiences, tending to subvert or resist dominant patriarchal norms.

Through our study, I will investigate how female nisu fans engage with and consume visual media and how they interpret and negotiate the complex power dynamics and gender roles present in typical nisu narratives. I will also explore how female fans use nisu as a means of expressing and exploring their own desires and identities. By using the female gaze as a tool for analysis, I can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality operate in media and the ways in which female audience negotiate and subvert these norms.

2.2. Nisu

“Nisu” (泥塑) is also known as “nisu” (逆苏). These two are originally homophones but has the same meaning when used as fandom jargon. According to previous research, the etymology of the term “nisu” (逆苏) is inseparable from fandom culture (Chen & Huang, 2021). “nisu” (逆苏) can be interpreted as a reverse version of “Mary Sue”. Mary Sue is the type of original female characters that can be considered as an author's idealized self-insertion in fan fiction. In the Chinese context, its meaning is extended to a character created to satisfy romantic fantasies about male characters or the creation

itself. While “zhengsu” (正苏 or 整肃, normal version of Mary Sue) emphasizes common heterosexual paradigms and traditional masculinity of men, though has no widely accepted strict definition, “nisu” generally refers to amplifying the feminine side of a man or imagining him as a woman. Simply put, “nisu” is to “feminize” men. In addition, a few research suggest that the word “nisu” (泥塑, which can be literally translated as clay sculpting) itself contains the meaning of “(actively) (re)shaping characteristics of people” (Li & Tao, 2021). The objects of nisu can range from real people to fictional characters, from members of boy groups, male singers, and actors to characters in mangas, games, animes, and dramas, etc. As long as they are males, they can theoretically be potential objects. In fact, the popularity of nisu culture in recent years has made “nisu fans” (泥塑粉) everywhere to be seen on the Internet.

2.3. CP fans

Chinese literature on nisu has confirmed that the emergence of nisu culture is closely related to danmei, also known as BL (Boys’ Love), culture (Chen et al., 2021; S. Wang, 2021; Xiang, 2021). Moreover, nisu enthusiasts tend to have a fondness for BL culture, with a particular interest in fantasizing about romantic and/or sexual relationships between two men (Chen et al., 2021; S. Wang, 2021; Xiang, 2021). Given the significant overlap between nisu fans and CP fans, it is difficult to completely separate the behavior of nisu and ke CP (嗑 CP, shipping). Therefore, in order to comprehensively understand nisu culture, this research will introduce the concept of CP fans and compare the similarities and differences in the gaze of CP and nisu fans during analysis.

In the Chinese context, the term “CP” is short for coupling, which is used primarily in online communities, such as social media platforms. This term is originated in ACG (anime, comics, and video games from Japan) fandom for fictional characters’ pairing. Over time, it has expanded to include real-life ships in the Chinese fan community. CP fans (CP 粉 or CPF) and wei fans (唯粉) are two opposite concepts. Unlike wei fans who admire only one celebrity, CP fans are more interested in the real or imagined

romantic relationship between two individuals. They are keen to pair virtual characters or real people into romantic relationships.

From an academic standpoint, shipping can be seen as a form of fan culture that centers around the creation and consumption of romantic or sexual fantasies involving fictional characters or real-life ship. CP fandom can provide a sense of community and belonging for fans who share similar interests and can serve as a space for the exploration of identity, desire, and intimacy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Female gaze

The concept of the “gaze” has been widely discussed in film theory and cultural studies since the 1970s. Traditionally, the gaze has been considered a male-centered phenomenon, with the male gaze being the dominant mode of looking in mainstream film and media. In recent years, however, scholars have started to explore the idea of the female gaze, which challenges the male gaze and provides an alternative way of looking at the world.

One of the most influential studies on the female gaze was published by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In this article, Mulvey argues that mainstream Hollywood cinema is structured around a male gaze, which objectifies and fetishizes the female body. She suggests that female spectators are often left feeling uncomfortable or excluded from the dominant mode of looking in film. Mulvey calls for a new mode of looking that can provide a space for the female gaze to be recognized and valued.

More recent studies have built on Mulvey’s work to explore the complexities of the female gaze in contemporary media. In recent years, the concept of female gaze has been widely discussed in the field of visual arts and cultural studies. According to Hustvedt, author of *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*, there are two types of female gazes: one that conforms to the universal male gaze, and another that is subversive and feminist, a resistance to the historical objectification of the female form (Goh, 2017). However, some critics, such as Perfetti-Oates (2015), have questioned the contribution of the female gaze to gender equality. She argues that objectifying men does not create true gender equality but only serves to reverse sexism.

The female gaze has also been explored in media other than film and literature. Hemmann (2013) conducted an in-depth study of the female gaze in Japanese BL works.

These works, often created by women for women, feature male-male relationships and challenge traditional gender roles and power dynamics.

Overall, the concept of female gaze has sparked significant academic debate and has been applied in various fields of cultural analysis. While some argue that the female gaze can contribute to the subversion of gender norms, others caution against using it as a means of perpetuating objectification and inequality.

3.2. Nisu culture and nisu fans

The research on the topic of nisu in academic literature is limited, particularly in English. This study retrieved ten Chinese academic works on nisu, including four dissertations and six journal articles, published between 2019 and 2022. The aforementioned literature covers a range of disciplines, including fine arts, media studies, communication studies, and sociology. The paucity of research on nisu in academia indicates that it is a relatively new topic that has recently emerged.

The earliest research on nisu in China was conducted by Meng in 2019, as part of her master's thesis. Meng (2019) explored the topic of nisu through a chapter in which she introduced nisu and compared it with “the fourth love” (第四爱). “The fourth love” is a love and lifestyle phenomenon that involves the interchange of social roles between men and women. On the other hand, the primary focus of nisu centers around altering gender identity, occasionally accompanied by changes in biological sex. However, nisu is distinct from “genderswap,”(性转) which solely involves a biological sex change. Meng (2019) emphasized that the essence of nisu is fantasy, whereas “the fourth love” is a sexual fetish in real life. Meng (2019) also noted that unlike female characters, male characters in literature, movies, and other forms of art are often portrayed as multi-dimensional and independent rather than sexual objects. Therefore, works like nisu fanfiction, created by women for women, provide an opportunity for female-oriented entertainment.

From a communication perspective, Zhao (2022) investigated the popularity of nisu culture among young women. She identified Weibo, bilibili, Douyin, and other platforms suitable for subculture fermentation as spaces where nisu fans continue to spread the pleasure of nisu. When nisu creators disseminate text, pictures, and videos containing nisu content on these platforms, they receive feedback from others, which can make them feel satisfied. The attracted fans may also invest in creating nisu texts. The boundaries between producers and consumers are blurred with new media technology, and everyone can be both a consumer and a producer, which encourages the formation of participatory culture. Nisu fans also experience a continuous stream of vitality through emotional communication.

From the perspective of audience participation, Peng and Fan (2022) analyzed the cultural characteristics of nisu subculture audiences who participate, negotiate, produce, and disseminate media content using digital media technology. They defined nisu as “magnifying the femininity of male stars or directly imagining them as women.” Nisu has evolved from being a subcultural phenomenon solely within the fan fiction community to one that extends to the wider realm of celebrity fandom. Fans of male stars use edited photos, AI face swap videos, textual content on social media, fan fiction, and other means to rewrite the original communication texts about male stars and project fans’ idealized female images and related social relationships on male stars. In edited pictures or AI face swap videos, nisu fans use techniques such as softening male faces and adding special makeup effects to weaken male physical characteristics continuously and strengthen female appearance characteristics. In social media posts and fan fiction creations, fans envisage characters with nuanced and multifaceted personalities. As a result, the character stories are rendered more realistic and individualized, thereby adding depth to the portrayal of male stars in female personas. Nisu subculture in the digital media age mainly takes the form of reshaping male stars’ images into women, rewriting and creating derivative works of related communication texts related to male stars in reality.

Huang's (2021) research revealed that both zhengsu and nisu are essentially manifestations of female audience desires. While zhengsu conforms to traditional gender temperament, nisu deconstructs it. The male image that nisu promotes is the complete opposite of the traditional masculine image, which is fresh and attractive to women.

Furthermore, Huang (2021) identified three characteristics of nisu fans' expressions on social media: addressing men with titles of female relatives such as "wife" and "daughter"; using Chinese adjectives that are usually reserved for women such as "pretty" (漂亮) and "delicate" (娇弱) to describe men; and having sexual fantasies that imagine men as women.

Scholars such as Chen et al. (2021) have also explored the aesthetics of nisu fans. Their survey data indicates that nisu fans prefer female characters with flirtatious, dangerous, and provocative sexual charm. These fans tend to have a high degree of acceptance of sexual descriptions and are attracted to young and beautiful female images. "Pale-skinned and slim little girls" (白幼瘦) are their main aesthetic standard. Based on submissions to the influential nisu account @内娱泥塑 BOT on Weibo, most nisu targets are young male stars with less tough looks and less traditional masculine qualities. Nisu fans do not seem to have a strong preference for personality traits, focusing instead on appearance and figure. The survey also found that only about 20% of respondents prefer muscular male stars, and the popularity of strong masculine figures is low.

Wang (2022) has noted that the nisu craze, which reverses the gender and temperament of idols, is the most typical aesthetic representation of fandom culture. The main characteristics of nisu fans are their preference for gender bending, obsession with "pale-skinned and slim little girls," and self-identification as pioneers. The rise of nisu's

aesthetics reflects not only the crisis of identity in the digital age but also deep-seated anxieties about personal identity, image, and social circles.

Several studies have shown a strong connection between nisu culture and danmei culture. Xiang et al.'s (2021) research on nisu fanfic indicates that the Chinese nisu fanfic's birth background is inseparable from the dynamic development of danmei writing. The audience groups of nisu fanfic and danmei texts overlap significantly. While maintaining narrative traditions such as genderswap, danmei novels explore a new genre based on fan circle characteristics, and nisu fanfic is the product of danmei novel's continuous and innovative within the fan circle's mechanism. In the development process of women-oriented online novels, CP was the core element from the beginning, but for a long time, it was "dormant" in the traditional heterosexual romance story mode. Because of its deep roots in the soil of the fan economy, dangai TV dramas have achieved amazing success once they aired. CP culture is a core element that captures the "excitement" of readers, as it is prevalent among nisu fans and danmei novel readers. For fans, nisu fanfic and danmei novels are both tools for shipping (ke CP), which can meet their entertainment needs.

Chen et al.'s (2021) research indicates that nisu texts often contain many sexual fantasies and erotic descriptions. Since nisu fans are mostly CP fans or "fuwei," the focus of nisu is to "ke CP", highlighting the sexual attraction of nisu objects and the sexual tension of CPs. Wang's (2021) survey results indicate that nisu fans are mainly young women aged 19-25, with Weibo (95%) and Douban (75%) being their favorite social media platforms. Most of them had prior exposure to ACG culture and danmei culture before becoming nisu fans. Wang (2021) argues that nisu culture is a new subculture that emerged from danmei culture, and the two are fundamentally interlinked. The root of danmei culture is women's desire for freedom, and creating and reading danmei novels provides fans with a window to express love, equality, and autonomy. However, it is challenging for them to escape the stigma of patriarchal culture. The danmei culture emerged from women's struggles and is a product of gender inequality.

Women took the initiative to create texts that met their own needs, challenged the “male gaze,” and consumed the sexual objectification of men.

While some scholars express positive attitudes towards nisu culture and its fans, others have raised concerns and pointed out its limitations. Wang (2021), for example, has a positive view of nisu fans, stating that their aesthetics are inclusive, boldly subverting traditional gender norms. She also identifies hedonism and the desire for the right to speak as notable characteristics of nisu fans. Other scholars hold different views. Chen and Huang (2021) contend that the nisu cultural practice demonstrates the resistance and rebellious attitude of female nisu fans towards their own weak status. Thus, they choose to use gender reversal to express their discourse and fight for sexual freedom, indicating a transformation and progress in consciousness. However, the rise of nisu culture does not necessarily imply a structural change in the social construct. Although fan rights are often an “illusion of empowerment,” and nisu fans’ text creation and gender awareness are difficult to deviate from the discipline of traditional gender awareness. Furthermore, their requirements for male stars to be “young and beautiful” confirms this point. Additionally, Peng and Fan (2022) observe that although nisu fans intentionally imbue male stars with “femininity” and attempt to propose a gender identity metaphor with subversive potential based on gender-ambiguous bodies, this classification standard conforms to the traditional masculinity or femininity, thus strengthening the cisgender cultural construction of patriarchy.

In summary, it can be posited that nisu culture represents a subculture that originated from danmei culture, which was in turn born out of the historical struggles of women for freedom, and is a byproduct of prevailing gender inequalities. Nisu fans primarily comprise young women who seek to challenge traditional gender norms and fight for sexual freedom. However, the rise of nisu culture does not necessarily imply structural change in the social construct, as fan rights may only be an “illusion of empowerment,” and nisu fans’ text creation and gender awareness are challenging to deviate from traditional gender awareness. Furthermore, despite nisu fans’ attempts to subvert

traditional gender norms, their classification standards ultimately conform to the cisgender cultural construction of patriarchy.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research design

Nisu culture is a subculture of fandom that has gained increasing attention in China in recent years. To gain a deeper understanding of nisu fans, who are active on various social media platforms, this study adopts a qualitative research method. Through this approach, the perspectives and experiences of nisu fans are explored to analyze the reasons behind their behavior. Qualitative research is a suitable method for this study as it considers social and cultural factors, which provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of nisu fans and nisu culture.

4.2. Data collection method

This study utilized two methods of data collection, namely online participant observation and semi-structured interviews. To examine the real interaction and practices of nisu fans in their daily lives, and to gather more opinions and experiences from them, participatory observation was chosen (Bryman, 2016). Online observations were conducted mainly on Weibo and Douban because these two popular social media platforms have gathered a certain amount of nisu fans who are easy to find. The nisu fan circles on these platforms exhibit different forms of social media engagement. Weibo allows fans to entertain themselves in a small circle and indulge in their own hobbies without being accused (圈地自萌), while Douban is a niche forum popular among young women, and nisu fans need to be wary of other fan groups who are not interested in nisu or even hate it.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of each interviewee's point of view and understanding, and to allow some flexibility during the interview to encourage respondents to give more detailed answers (Bryman, 2016). This approach was deemed necessary due to the diversity of personal experiences and backgrounds of the interviewees. This study adopted purposive sampling to achieve a more targeted sample, and convenience sampling to sample those who are easily

accessible. The study recruits eight Chinese heterosexual women, mainly college students and young working women who have just entered society. All participants are below the age of 30. Their favorite stars include K-pop idols, Chinese male singers, male actors in dangai TV dramas, among others.

Furthermore, the inclusion of online participant observation enables the examination of perspectives from individuals who do not identify as nisu fans. While the interviewees in this study consist solely of nisu fans, their insights offer valuable insights into the intricacies of nisu culture within the fan community. However, given the controversial nature of nisu culture as a social and cultural phenomenon, it is crucial to evaluate it from a broader range of perspectives in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

4.3. Limitations

In terms of sample selection, the study faced limitations. Despite contacting nisu accounts via DM on Weibo, there was a lack of response or rejection from most of them, resulting in a small sample size of 8 interviewees, who were found through my friends and classmates. This non-random and convenience sampling method may have led to sampling bias, and the results may not be generalizable to the larger population of nisu fans. Moreover, ethical concerns regarding fairness and justice may arise if certain groups are excluded or underrepresented. In fact, the sample was composed entirely of heterosexual cisgender women, which may exclude or underrepresent other sexual orientation groups. Although prior investigation suggests that nisu fans are primarily composed of heterosexual women, this study fails to represent the diversity of the nisu fan community.

It should be acknowledged that I am not a nisu fan and had limited knowledge of nisu culture prior to conducting this research. My lack of familiarity with nisu culture may result in personal biases and one-sided perspectives during the data collection process. Therefore, I employed online participant observations in conjunction with interviews

to mitigate the limitations and potential biases.

Firstly, online participant observations can reduce personal or interview biases by limiting the researcher's influence on participants. During interviews, the researcher may inadvertently influence participants' responses through the use of leading questions or by expressing their opinions. However, through online participant observation, I can observe participant behavior and interactions without affecting their responses. This method allows for real-time observation of interactions and conversations, leading to a more holistic understanding of the participants' viewpoints. Secondly, conducting online participant observations enables the expansion of the sample size, resulting in greater diversity. This approach can help alleviate the issue of having a limited number of interviewees.

However, online participant observations also have limitations. One limitation is that obtaining in-depth information or accessing certain aspects of online communities may be difficult. Additionally, I may not have access to certain online communities, such as WeChat groups. Furthermore, there may be challenges in interpreting fandom terminology and contextual cues used in fan interactions.

Overall, the study's results should be interpreted with caution, given the limitations and potential biases. Future studies should aim to address these limitations by using more diverse and representative samples, including participants with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and considering the impact of researchers' personal biases.

4.4. Ethical considerations

As part of this study, online interviews were conducted, and it was critical to ensure that the participants' personal information remained confidential. Prior to the interviews, the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, how their responses would be used, and how their privacy would be protected. To protect their anonymity,

I obtained prior consent from all interviewees to use their screen names, and I carefully reviewed the interviews to eliminate any information that could reveal their identities.

There have been ethical concerns raised about the use of social media data in research. In this study, I collected and analyzed posts and comments from Weibo and Douban platforms. The users on these platforms were anonymized to protect their privacy. Additionally, since the original text was in Chinese, it was less likely to be used to identify specific users based on my translated English text. Furthermore, when selecting screenshots of Weibo posts as evidence to support my argument, I anonymized the account name to ensure that the user's identity was not disclosed. The only exceptions were "bots" with inherent anonymity that do not represent personal accounts.

In summary, this study took steps to protect the privacy of participants and anonymized social media data to ensure that the study complied with ethical guidelines.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. The evolution of nisu in Chinese fan culture

Sanqi has the most extensive experience in fandom participation among all the nisu fans who I interviewed, particularly with regard to the Chinese fan community. She possesses in-depth knowledge of significant events and changes in the fan community, as if she were a living fossil of Chinese fangirls. According to her recollection, she initially came across nisu in 2012, when she first discovered the K-pop boy group EXO and became enamored with one of its members, Lu Han. Lu Han's androgynous appearance made him a favorite among fans, and Sanqi's interest in the group led her to read fanfiction on Tieba, a Chinese online forum.

Initially, Sanqi was hesitant to read fanfiction that portrayed Lu Han as more feminine than his actual appearance, but over time, she gradually came to accept it due to his physical attractiveness. The term "nisu" was not frequently used in the early years of fanfiction and fandom participation on Tieba. In those days, bottoms - the passive partner in a homosexual relationship - would often be depicted wearing women's clothing instead of being regendered in fanfiction.

However, by 2016/17, the term "nisu" had gained popularity in the fan circle, with Lu Han's nisu fans attracting significant attention after a post on Douban criticized them. The popularity of the dangai TV drama, "Guardian" (镇魂) in 2018 further fueled the nisu trend in China, with the phrase "one couple for one lifetime" (一生一世一双人) becoming a popular catchphrase. As a result, any male actor playing the role of a bottom in a homosexual relationship would be "nisued" by fans, which means the fan community portrays them as more feminine or passive than they are in canon.

In recent years, the nisu culture has evolved further. While the original concept was centered around portraying male figures as more feminine, nisu fans now imagine male celebrities or male characters as women, rather than simply feminizing them in fan

creations. This phenomenon has gained considerable attention in the Chinese fan community. Sanqi notes that while some fans, especially zhengsu fans, have criticized this new trend, many others find it interesting and innovative. While zhengsu fans still prefer the traditional portrayal of the male, nisu fans are exploring new ways to express their love for their favorite celebrities and fictional characters through more unconventional forms of fan creations.

Stage	Targets	Platform	Form	Characteristics
Early 2010s (Rise of K-pop)	Feminine-looking K-pop idols like Luhan	Tieba	Fanfiction	Emphasis on femininity and feminine appearance
2018 (Emergence of dangai TV dramas)	Male actors who play the role of “the bottom”	Mainly based on Weibo and Lofter	Fanfiction and fan art	Imagining male actors as real women
Current Status	Almost all male celebrities and characters	Various social media platforms, including Xiaohongshu, Douyin	Mainly “kouhai” (big talk or exaggeration that will not be put into practice) and Photoshopped image	Redefining “femininity” and exploring new forms of nisu expression beyond traditional gender roles

(Table 1 Different stages of nisu culture’s evolution)

The current status of nisu culture’s evolution in Chinese fan culture is characterized by its continued popularity and diversification. While nisu content still primarily circulates on social media platforms like Weibo and Lofter, it has also expanded to include newer platforms popular with young women, such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Nisu continues to feature heavily in fan fiction and other creative works, which often

emphasize femininity and feminine appearance. Overall, nisu remains an important aspect of Chinese fan culture, constantly evolving and adapting to new trends and platforms.

5.2. Nisu fandom and male/male cp

5.2.1. Nisu fans and BL fans, nisu and “ke cp”

All interviewees confirmed the strong association of nisu with the concept of “ke cp” (嗑 cp, shipping). Specifically, Mengyoudeyangyang and Xiaotu indicated that nisu is often more easily accepted within the context of shipping. Sanqi, for example, first encountered nisu due to the Xunlu (Wu Shixun and Luhan) ship and subsequently explored nisu content in Tieba’s fanfiction.

Regarding the relationship between nisu and shipping, as well as between nisu fans and cp fans, the interviewees elaborated as follows: According to Xiaotu, “nisu fans and cp fans are in a symbiotic relationship that complement each other. Nisu fans generally regard their nisu objects as the bottom. Nisu fans are easily a person’s shoufuwei (受腐唯). However, cp fans are not necessarily nisu fans. Because some cp fans just want to ship two men, so they don’t accept nisu. But the cp fans who can accept nisu must be the majority.” Similarly, Mengyoudeyangyang noted that “for many fan work creators, nisu is often included in shipping. Nisu content often appears in their creations.”

Sanqi added that “nisu and shipping, nisu fans and cp fans are intersecting relationships. Some cp fans will nisu, and some cp fans just want to see two men fall in love. Among nisu fans, there are wei fans and cp fans.” Overall, these statements illustrate how nisu and shipping are intertwined within the fan community, and how nisu is frequently incorporated into fan creations alongside shipping.

5.2.2. Top/bottom are both “nisable”?

In the world of nisu, the criteria for distinguishing top and bottom are not the same as those for determining whether a man is “nisable.” To distinguish between top and

bottom, cp fans in China tend to rely on traditional attributes, such as physical appearance and personality. Tops are often portrayed as more masculine, tall, and strong, while bottoms are typically depicted as beautiful, thin, and cute. However, cp fans may also base their categorization of top and bottom on real-life interactions and even their popularity.

In fact, CP fans lack a universally agreed-upon set of standards to differentiate between the top and bottom roles within a pairing. According to one of the interviewees, a questionnaire survey was conducted among fans of a male idol whom she admires, revealing that opinions on whether he plays the top or bottom role were nearly equally divided. It is evident that the same individual can exhibit diverse personalities in the eyes of different fans, and the preferences for CP dynamics can vary among individuals. While the conventional belief associates cuteness with the bottom role, it is worth noting that contemporary preferences have emerged where some fans find the notion of a cute top appealing.

The interviewees who were questioned regarding their fan preferences have confirmed that a majority of the bottom role in BL pairings have a large proportion of nisu fans. BL fans are often enthusiastic about expanding and amplifying the bottom's femininity. However, it is important to note that the interviewees also emphasized that nising is not exclusive to the bottom role alone.

So, when it comes to men who can attract nisu fans, looks matter a lot. Guys with delicate, feminine features like big eyes tend to be more popular with nisu fans. And if a guy can convincingly pull off a female persona, that's a big plus. And if you're a bottom in the BL fandom, you're already halfway there to being nised. But here's a fun fact: even some tops can be nised if they're super good-looking, like "beauty cucumbers" (美女瓜) that some BL fans love. (Xiaotu)

According to Xiaotu, it is worth noting that occupying the bottom position within the Boys' Love (BL) fandom can serve as an advantageous foundation for attracting nising.

Interestingly, even individuals who primarily assume the top role possess the potential to elicit nisu interest among specific BL fans if they possess exceptional “beauty”.

5.3. Nisu culture through the fan lens

5.3.1. Factors influencing the attractiveness of men to nisu fans

Based on the interviews conducted, several findings can be observed regarding the kind of man who is more attractive to nisu fans. Firstly, idols or fictional characters with delicate and beautiful appearances tend to garner more nisu fans. Features such as big eyes and feminine traits are particularly appealing to nisu fans. Additionally, individuals who can convincingly portray a female persona are seen as more desirable. The concept of being a bottom in the BL fandom also holds significance for nisu fans, as it often increases their appeal.

Xiaotu observed that certain male actors in dangai TV dramas may not conform to the conventional beauty standards associated with nisu fans, yet they still possess a substantial following of nisu fans. She proposed two possible explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, it could be attributed to their natural portrayal of the “bottom,” within the dramatic narratives. Secondly, it might be the outcome of skillful marketing and promotional strategies employed to cultivate their appeal among nisu fans.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the preferences of nisu fans have become more diverse over time, blurring the traditional standards. While appearance remains a crucial factor, fans now consider other qualities as well. Fictional characters with good looks are preferred, although extreme beauty is not a requirement. Moreover, a diverse range of personalities can be used as “nisu characters”(泥塑造), ranging from hot girls (辣妹), female alpha (女强人), to obedient and innocent “little white rabbits.” (小白兔) Xiaotu noted that, those with an artistic personality are also more likely to be nised because they are usually more sensitive and delicate, with strong creativity and artistic perception. Certain endearing qualities, such as a tsundere personality, can also contribute to a fictional character’s attractiveness to nisu fans.

Lately, fans are getting more diverse in their tastes, so the old rules of top versus bottom and what makes a guy nisable are getting blurry. But still, there are some things that consistently make a guy nisable, and that's mostly about how he looks. (Xiaotu)

Interestingly, some villains in fictional characters also have a considerable number of nisu fans. It is suggested that the act of nisuing allows fans to focus on their strengths and overlook their flaws, making it easier to accept their personalities. Imagining these characters as females may aid in separating their evilness and enhancing their likability. The work of skilled artists who create beautiful nisu illustrations further contributes to the acceptance and attraction towards these characters.

Z: You mean it would be easier to accept their personality if you imagine them as a girl?

M: Yes, I saw a good example of this. Have you seen the popular anime Jujutsu Kaisen?

Z: Yeah, I know that one!

M: Well, there's an artist (太太) I follow who drew some really beautiful nisu pictures of Mahito, even though he's an evil character.



M: (Figure 1, 2 Fan art of Mahito, provided by Mengyoudeyangyang)

M: I think maybe imagining him as a woman makes it easier to separate him from his evilness, so he's not so hateable after nisuing. But, it's also because the artist (太太) is just really good at drawing.

(Z=Interviewer, M=Mengyoudeyangyang)

Additionally, personal preferences and individual interpretations play a significant role in determining who fans choose to nisu. Factors such as a person's background, personality, and life experiences can influence their attractiveness. For instance, Sanqi mentioned that she preferred to nisu individuals who have endured hardships in their upbringing as this kind of experience may elicit her sympathy and admiration.

In conclusion, the attractiveness of a man to nisu fans is influenced by a combination of factors, including appearance, portrayal of feminine traits, ability to embody a female persona, and specific character traits. However, it is important to note that preferences can vary among fans, and individual interpretations allow for the creation of different nisu characters based on personality.

5.3.2. Nisu fans' perception of the phrase “万物皆可泥”: can everyone really be nisued?

Based on the interviews conducted with nisu fans regarding their opinions on the statement “everyone can be nisued,” several findings can be derived.

For me, there might not be any person who can't be nisued. Those whom I don't nisu are simply those whom I don't like. (Xiaotu)

Xiaotu expressed a belief that there is no person who cannot be nisued, emphasizing that nisuing is driven by personal preference and love rather than specific appearance or personality traits. This viewpoint suggests a broad inclusivity in the nisu community.

I think anyone can be nisued since it's a subjective experience. As long as I like this man, I'm open to nisuing him. (Mengyoudeyangyang)

Mengyoudeyangyang echoed a similar sentiment, asserting that anyone can be nisued as long as the individual holds personal appeal to the nisuer. The criterion for nisuing varies among individuals based on personal tastes and entertainment value. She thinks anyone can be nisued as long as they can provide entertainment value, while also acknowledging the potential complications of nisuing public figures like athletes or

political figures. However, while respecting the original characterization of a person or character, out-of-character nising is not considered acceptable by her.

Of course not everyone can be nised! Only good-looking ones can be my wife. (Shierdianshuijiao)

In contrast, Shierdianshuijiao held a more selective perspective, asserting that only good-looking individuals are eligible to be nised. Her preferences revolved around aesthetics and an aversion to nising individuals perceived as unattractive. Additionally, she found it difficult to nise masculine men or those who exhibit gender stereotypes. Shierdianshuijiao's aversion to individuals who prioritize a protective role based on gender stereotypes highlights a preference for a more egalitarian dynamic where vulnerability and care are not limited to specific gender roles.

I don't believe that all men can be nised, but I respect people's right to nise whoever they want. (Sanqi)

Meanwhile, Sanqi respected people's right to nise whoever they want but believed that "the core of nise lies in an individual's ability to elicit affection from others, which ugly men will never have." Sanqi expressed a preference for avoiding nising old, muscular straight men or those who are too machismo. Her disinterest was rooted in the perception of these traits as incompatible with her nise preferences.

Overall, the interviews showcased a range of opinions within the nise fandom. Despite their varying preferences, all four interviewees agreed that fans' love for their idols is perhaps the paramount aspect of nising. Additionally, nising is subjective, and what constitutes out-of-character nise varies from person to person. The interviewees also acknowledged the potential complications of nising public figures like athletes or political figures.

5.3.3. Factors influencing disappointment and sustained nising among fans

Based on the interviews conducted, it is evident that certain factors can lead nisu fans to experience disappointment and find it challenging to sustain their nisuing. In the first interview, Xiaotu highlighted a decrease in nisu fans for a particular yangchengxi idol, attributing it to a shift in the idol's personality towards that of a mischievous and typically Chinese young boy as he grows older, which deviates from the delicate and beautiful image preferred by nisu fans.

In the second interview, Shierdianshuijiao expressed concerns about the potential disappointment and loss of interest in her favorite male idol if she were to encounter him in real life and discover that he is an adult man. This suggests that the fantasy and illusion of perceiving the idol as a woman through the screen play a significant role in maintaining the nisu fan's enthusiasm. The encounter of seeing the idol in person, particularly if their appearance contradicts the desired delicate and slim attributes, can lead to disillusionment and emotional distress for the nisu fan. However, as Shierdianshuijiao's level of fanatical devotion has decreased over time, she has become more accepting of such realities.

These findings indicate that a misalignment between an idol's character portrayal, physical appearance, and the idealized image preferred by nisu fans can result in disappointment and hinder the fan's ability to continue nisuing. The discrepancy between the fantasy constructed through media consumption and the reality encountered in real-life situations plays a significant role in shaping the emotional connection and level of engagement experienced by nisu fans.

In addition, the interview also touched on nisu fans' acceptance of male idols' appearance changes, particularly in relation to working out (举铁), becoming muscular (熊化), growing facial hair, becoming overweight, and other physical changes.

Mengyoudeyangyang expressed that it depends on the extent of the changes and whether she finds them aesthetically pleasing. She mentioned that while some Asian

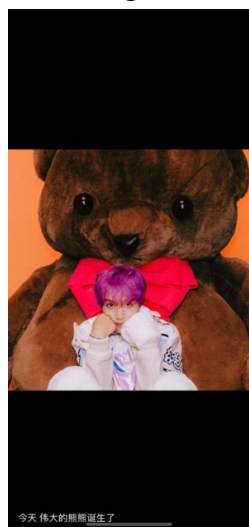
men may not look good with a beard, European and American male stars can appear handsome with one. In terms of muscle development, Mengyoudeyangyang preferred a moderate amount of muscle, considering it the mainstream aesthetic, but dislikes excessive muscle.

Shierdianshuijiao shared a similar sentiment, stating her dislike for idols working out excessively, being overweight, or having a beard. She specifically mentioned that a beard is out of the question for her. When it comes to makeup and styling, she generally appreciated her idol's appearance but particularly favored a cute look.

Z: What about makeup and styling? Are there any types you dislike?

S: Let me think about it. Since the idol I like rarely changes his appearance, I generally like his look. But there are certain styles that I prefer more. I mean, I like his cute look the most.

S: Something like this.



S: (Figure 3 A cute look of Shierdianshuijiao's idol, provided by Shierdianshuijiao) (Translation of the caption: Today a great bear was born.) (S= Shierdianshuijiao)

Sanqi acknowledged that moderate exercise or weight gain is understandable and acceptable as long as it does not significantly alter the idol's appearance. Regarding facial hair, she mentioned that slight stubble is normal for guys, but she preferred the idol not to resemble a middle-aged man. Sanqi emphasized that since niusing is based on fantasy and the idol is not a real woman, she would not feel disillusioned by these

changes.

Overall, factors such as aesthetic appeal, moderation, and the extent to which the idol's appearance aligns with their preferences play a role in determining their acceptance or disappointment with these transformations. Drastic changes in the idol's physical appearance can lead to disillusionment and a decline in fandom.

5.3.4. A typology of nisu fans

The interviews provide insights into the different types of nisu fans based on their relationships and interactions with idols. Some interviewees described their nisu activities as a form of emotional support and talked about feeling a sense of closeness and intimacy with the men they admire. A type of idols mentioned by several interviewees as “yangchengxi” (养成系) idols is a notable example. Xiaotu mentioned that one of her favorite idols has a lot of “mother fans” (妈粉) who perceive him as a little girl due to his yangchengxi idol status, implying a nurturing or protective dynamic. “Yangchengxi” refers to the process of fans witnessing their favorite idols grow up gradually. China's TF family and South Korea's NCT DREAM are prominent examples of yangchengxi idols. The primary audience of these idols are “mother fans,” most of whom are women. These female fans possess strong empathy towards the idols on the screen, often worrying about their future career development, much like a typical “East Asian mother.” The interviewees highlighted that the allure of yangchengxi idols lies in the mutual growth of the idols and their fans. Following idols is a way of filling the void in our everyday life, but yangchengxi idols are more likely to create die-hard fans than mature idols who are already fully developed. Most of the yangchengxi idols are still minors, which compels people to take good care of them, giving fans a sense of fulfillment that “he/she needs me.” Accompanying yangchengxi idols during their growth offers fans a sense of intimacy and realism, satisfying their desire to participate in the growth and changes of their idols. Through this process, fans can attain a sense of accomplishment, as if “my child has grown up.” This suggests that the nisu culture is, to some extent, driven by a desire for emotional connection and intimacy.

Moreover, Shierdianshuijiao confirmed the existence of various types of nisu fans, such as those who refer to their idols as wives, mothers, and little sisters. The choice of these terms appears to vary depending on the idol's image and fans' preference.

Z: So, are there different types of nisu fans? Like those who call their idols wives, mothers, and little sisters?

S: Yeah, there are. But I think it depends on the idol. I usually refer to my favorite idol as my “daughter.”

Z: Oh, got it. Does it depend on the idol's temperament?



S: (Figure 4 The “wife” type, provided by Shierdianshuijiao)

S: Fans of this type usually call their idol “wife.”

Z: That makes sense. I wonder if the leader of the idol group is often called “mother,” and the youngest is called “daughter” more?

S: Yeah, there's a saying like that. But it also depends on whether the idol's personality is easy to nisu. (S=Shierdianshuijiao)

Another respondent, Sanqi noted that within idol groups, individuals who exhibit a fondness for nurturing others tend to be referred to as “mothers,” while younger members who exhibit cute behavior are often identified as “daughters.” Additionally, those who demonstrate a preference for engaging in domestic chores may be designated as “wives.” It is evident that the prevailing “nisu character” (泥塑设) within a male idol's fandom are closely associated with his distinctive personality, hobbies, and temperament. Furthermore, Sanqi expressed her inclination to refer to her male idol as “daughter” solely based on her personal preference, without any direct association with

the male idol himself. Sanqi explained, “I guess it’s because deep down, I really wish I had a daughter, you know?”

Overall, the interviews highlight the existence of different types of nisu fans, with varying relationships and designations based on the idol’s attributes, such as their idol status, personality, and role within the group, as well as fans’ inclination. It shows the multifaceted nature of nisu fandom and different fan-idol dynamics.

5.3.5. Diverse perspectives and tastes within the fandom

Based on the interviews conducted, it is evident that nisu fans and zhengsu fans hold different perspectives when it comes to perceiving and interpreting characters. Also, the interviews shed light on the diverse tastes within the nisu fan community.

Mengyoudeyangyang emphasized the subjective nature of nisu fandom, highlighting that beauty and femininity can be perceived differently by individuals. This demonstrates the existence of varied perspectives within the nisu fan community, where different individuals find different qualities and characteristics appealing. The notion of perceiving a character as nisuable can vary greatly, even when considering characters with more paternal or masculine qualities.

Z: Hmm, what if some characters have a more paternal image? Wouldn’t it be difficult to see them as nisuable?

M: Daddy becomes mommy?

Z: I didn’t expect it to be resolved so easily. (M= Mengyoudeyangyang)

Mengyoudeyangyang’s personal taste in nisu extends beyond the traditional portrayal of “delicate flowers” and little princesses, expressing a preference for “beautiful top and strong bottom” (美攻强受) and non-conventional character dynamics. She recognized that her taste may be niche and that mainstream readers still favor the “delicate flowers” type of bottoms. However, she acknowledged the presence of other fans who share their preferences, indicating a growing acceptance of diverse tastes

among nisu fans.

Mengyoudeyangyang mentioned that what one person may consider a beautiful woman, another may view as a handsome man. These differing perspectives contribute to the distinct viewpoints held by nisu and zhengsu fans. It is noteworthy that even when presented with the same image, nisu and zhengsu fans exhibit contrasting opinions.

M: There are a thousand interpretations of a thousand people. Perhaps what we see as a beautiful woman, others perceive as a handsome guy who is not beautiful at all. It's just a matter of different perspectives.



M: (Figure 5 Both a cool guy and a hot girl, provided by Mengyoudeyangyang)

M: For example, this pic was shared with both nisu and zhengsu bots, but it's like a cool guy for zhengsu fans and a hot girl for the nisu fans.

(M= Mengyoudeyangyang)

Moreover, Shierdianshuijiao pointed out a unique aspect of nisu fan interpretation. She mentioned that even if a character appears cool or masculine in a picture, nisu fans tend to interpret it as a little girl seducing people. This statement suggests that there may be a common perception of nisu fans as individuals who project their fantasies onto characters, regardless of their actual portrayal in media. Additionally, the comparison with zhengsu fans implies that there may be a fundamental difference in the way that the two fandoms interpret and perceive media content, as zhengsu fans may not have the same interpretation as nisu fans when viewing the same image. This observation

highlights the transformative power of the nisu perspective, where fans reimagine and reinterpret characters to fit their desired narrative and romantic dynamics.

Overall, these interviews underscore the existence of diverse tastes within the nisu fan community. While mainstream preferences may still lean towards traditional feminine portrayals, there is a growing acceptance and appreciation for alternative character dynamics and interpretations. The nisu fandom allows for varied perspectives and opens up possibilities for fans to explore and enjoy different facets of femininity and character relationships.

5.4. The controversy over nisu

5.4.1. Nisu: An insult to men?

S: Have you heard about the AO3 incident from a few years ago?

Z: No, what happened?

S: Well, it all started with fanfiction about Wang Yibo and Xiao Zhan's ship, Bojunyixiao. In the story, Xiao Zhan was portrayed as a prostitute who had gender dysphoria and dressed up as a woman, and Wang Yibo was portrayed as underage. When some of Xiao Zhan's fans discovered the fanfiction, they reported the website AO3, and as a result, it became inaccessible in China, just like YouTube.

S: I honestly think some of Xiao Zhan's fans are a bit crazy.

Z: Do you mean the ones who reported the website?

S: Yeah, because people should be free to have their own sexual fantasies (人的xp是自由的). Why do they care what other people write? Just because Xiao Zhan was portrayed as a prostitute in fanfiction doesn't mean he actually is one in real life.

Z: I've noticed that when I search for "nisu" on Weibo, I often see Xiao Zhan's zhengsu fans criticizing nisu fans and saying that his "feminine" image could negatively impact his career as he tries to establish himself as a serious actor.

S: That's just ridiculous.

Z: What do you think motivated them to report the fanfiction in the first place? Do you think it was really just because of the underage aspect?

S: I don't think so. I think they were just using the excuse of portraying underage characters in sexual situations to report the website. They just felt like the fanfic was insulting to Xiao Zhan. (S=Sanqi)

As can be observed during the interview, there exists a polarized attitude towards nisu

among fans of male celebrities. Specifically, zhengsu fans, who support a traditional and conservative approach to gender roles, consider nisu to be derogatory and damaging to an idol's image and career. They believe that nisu characterizes men as feminine, a concept they view as degrading. As a result, zhengsu fans discourage nisu fans from engaging in public nisuing and urge them to confine it to their private circles (圈地自萌). Should nisu fans comment on a male idol's social media account with words such as "wife" (老婆) or "daughter," (女儿) they are likely to encounter verbal attacks from zhengsu fans (出警). The negative perception of nisu stems from the societal notion that femininity is inferior to masculinity. The gender stereotype of today's society tends to equate masculinity with dominance and power, while femininity is associated with dependence and weakness. This stereotype hinders the progress towards a more inclusive society, as men often feel ashamed of expressing feminine characteristics while women can freely embrace masculine traits.

Furthermore, nisu has become a tool for haters to attack male celebrities. The interviewees also shared their understanding of swear words and sexist words in Chinese. In China, whether it is Mandarin, local dialects, or ancient Chinese, the vast majority of swear words are linked to female sexual organs and matrilineal family members. For example, the most frequently used swear words in the northern dialect is "fuck your mother" (操你妈). Many words that imply disrespect and moral derogation, such as 嫉、妒、妄、奸、婊、媚、妖、奴、婪 (envy, jealousy, arrogance, adultery, whore, flattery, demon, slave, greed), all have the Chinese radical 女, which indicates those characters are related to women. Discrimination against women in the Chinese language persists and affects Chinese speakers for thousands of years. Although nisu is primarily intended to praise the beauty, cuteness, and sexiness of male idols, some haters use derogatory nisu terms such as "aunt" (姨), "middle-aged woman" (大妈), "girly" (母), and "effeminate" (娘) to demean their appearance and character. For instance, haters may use nisu words to describe the celebrities they hate, such as Xiao Zhan as an "aunt" (姨) and Wang Yuan as a "middle-aged woman" (大妈). Such words are not originally derogatory terms, but when used to describe men, they carry a

negative connotation. Nisu, in this context, serves as a double-edged sword as it can either elevate or degrade an idol's image.



(Figure 6 An insult to Wang Yuan via Weibo)
(Translation of the caption: Wang Yuan Dama. How come this old aunt becomes like this?)

The interviewees also revealed that fans of male idols, including zhengsu and nisu fans, do not like to see idols being called “aunt” or “middle-aged woman.” Nisu fans, in particular, only nisu those who are considered “young beauties”. The core of nisu, as Sanqi said, lies in an individual’s ability to elicit tender emotions and affections from others, which ugly men will never have (泥塑的精髓在于惹人怜爱。丑男是不会惹人怜爱的。). They believe that beauty is qualified to be a woman, and not everyone is worthy of being nisued. The aesthetic standard of nisu is centered around the idea of “pale-skinned and slim little girls,” (白幼瘦) which has resulted in women’s anxiety about their appearance and age in China’s patriarchal society. In the nisu world, titles such as “grandma” (老太婆) and “old woman” (老女人) do not exist, and even older male actors are often nisued with terms such as “little girl” (小女孩) and “little sister.” (妹妹) This further reinforces the societal view that a woman’s value lies in her youth and beauty, which is problematic and damaging to women’s self-esteem and worth.

In conclusion, nisu has sparked a polarized attitude among fans of male celebrities, and its use has become a tool for haters to humiliate and slander male idols. The aesthetic standard of nisu reinforces the societal view that a woman's value lies in her youth and beauty, resulting in anxiety among women about their appearance and age. To promote inclusivity and gender equality, it is crucial to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote diverse expressions of gender identity.

5.4.2. Nisu: Subversion or reinforcement of gender stereotypes?

As a popular subculture in China, nisu is often touted as a form of literature that challenges traditional gender roles and allows women to express their sexual desires freely. However, a closer examination of the phenomenon reveals a more complicated picture.

Is nisu a genuine awakening of female consciousness or a manifestation of deeper misogyny? To explore this question, I gathered and curated the opinions of interviewees and some Weibo and Douban users.

Several interview respondents and Douban users expressed that nisu culture can be seen as a progressive phenomenon that challenges and disrupts conventional gender norms. By assuming the male role and taking the initiative, individuals engaged in nisu demonstrate a step towards embracing a female consciousness.

“Referring to a man as ‘wife’ is a form of rebellion. If you called him ‘husband,’ you would feel passive and owned by someone else; but if you call him ‘wife,’ you can take the initiative and make him belong to you. That’s how I feel.”

This shift in perspective is reflected in the use of terms such as “wife” to assert agency and rebellion against passive ownership. Through this linguistic choice, nisu fans claim ownership over male idols, enabling them to establish a sense of control.

Furthermore, it is noted that one motivation for nisu fans is to “praise you with my gender,” while another is finding self-comfort in gazing at men in a patriarchal society where women are typically the object of the male gaze. Men are often perceived as having the right to gaze, but by feminizing male idols, the authority of men can be diminished, resulting in a more equal gender dynamic between female fans and male idols. This reconfiguration of power dynamics facilitates a closer connection between female fans and male idols, enhancing the overall fan experience.

Nisu and zhengsu are fundamentally rooted in the process of challenging and dismantling stereotypical identities. It is often believed that boys should not embody “feminine” traits and are discouraged from expressing femininity. This notion stems from the underlying assumption that femininity is undesirable, and that men should conform to a rigid masculine ideal. The Chinese government has repeatedly criticized “sissy men” and banned Korean pop culture, which further intensifies societal pressure to conform to gender norms. The rise of nisu culture reflects a larger cultural shift towards greater gender equality awareness, facilitated by the internet and the dissemination of feminist ideologies. Nisu fandom offers a platform for fans to express their individuality, challenge gender norms, and actively participate in redefining societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

However, numerous users on Weibo and Douban presented contrasting perspectives to those mentioned earlier. For instance:

“Both nisu and danmei are just women’s imagination. Nisu is all about beautifying a man’s appearance and character. Danmei is even more ridiculous. Danmei is a gay romance novel genre predominantly written by heterosexual women who lack a proper understanding of gay men.”

“I believe that nisu behavior is anti-feminist. Although women can now openly gaze at men and indulge in sexual fantasies about their favorite male celebrities, they have to adopt a male perspective to simulate certain behaviors that men do to women. This results in a serious lack of the female perspective.”

“Nisuing an actor and treating him like a cute wife (娇娇老婆) is not about gender equality but about seeking women’s privileges. They even diminish women, believing that women should be pampered as long as they are beautiful and cute.”

“When someone is nisuing another person, is the fan’s perspective male or female? If it’s a male perspective, isn’t it still a man gazing at a woman?”

“I dislike female celebrities being called husbands if they are not ‘weak,’ and I also dislike male celebrities being called wives if they are a bit ‘fragile.’ Ultimately, both reinforce gender stereotypes. Why does ‘husband’ represent strength, while female titles such as ‘wife’ are associated with weakness? While nisu fans may resist gender stereotypes to some extent, their words only serve to reinforce the sexism inherent in our society.”

“I would say that nisu is both progressive and regressive in terms of gender awareness. While nisu may have played a role in dissolving gender stereotypes and awakening women’s consciousness, today, nisu has lost its pioneering role in gender awareness and instead reinforces the stereotype that ‘gender determines personality traits.’”

“If you want to praise someone, it’s fine to do so directly; why use the nisu method? Are good qualities still divided into two groups according to sex? Must tenderness and beauty be exclusively feminine? Does it have to be binary thinking, such as ‘he’s like a woman, so he has these qualities,’ or ‘he has these qualities, so he’s like a woman’? To truly promote a more open society’s gender awareness, we should first promote the understanding that ‘gender does not monopolize character.’”

“I used to believe that nisu was simply the reverse of malisu (玛丽苏), where the male characters ‘love’ (宠爱) the reader. I thought that nisu was the reader’s way of ‘loving’ (宠爱) male characters in the same way, although I was never quite sure how to do it. However, the current trend in nisu seems to be just giving male characters (including real people) female titles such as mother, daughter, sister, and widow, usually accompanied by ‘kouhai’ like ‘very sexy’ (好色) and ‘very obedient.’ (好乖) This confuses me because the same ‘kouhai’ can be applied without the female titles. What is the purpose of adding female titles? Is it due to a kind of sexual inferiority complex that requires men to be turned into women to be gazed upon? Or is there a deeper reason, or perhaps no reason at all? I don’t care what other people call characters

or real people, but as a result of this trend, all the kouhai are being associated with ‘mothers, daughters, little sisters, and widows.’ People are saying that widows are sexy and daughters are obedient, while the males who were meant to be gazed upon are disappearing.”

From the above points of view, it can be seen that one of the main criticisms of nisu is that it fails to address the root causes of gender inequality in Chinese society. Instead of challenging gender norms and advocating for equality, nisu merely swaps the gender identities of male and female characters, reproducing existing power dynamics and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Some argue that nisu simply replicates the male gaze, rather than subverting or challenging it. Additionally, nisu often fails to take into account the experiences and perspectives of actual LGBTQ+ individuals, reducing their experiences to mere fantasies for straight women.

Others argue that nisu is a form of resistance against patriarchal norms and gender roles in Chinese society. By portraying male characters as female, nisu allows women to explore their own desires and fantasies in a way that is otherwise not possible. In a society that still places a great deal of pressure on women to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, nisu provides a space for women to explore alternative gender identities and expressions. However, even those who defend nisu as a form of resistance acknowledge that it is not without its problems. Nisu often perpetuates harmful stereotypes about women, portraying them as passive and submissive, and reinforcing the idea that women are only desirable when they conform to traditional gender roles.

During my interviews, several respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the portrayal of women in simplified Chinese novels. Women are often depicted as objects to be gazed upon with a strong male gaze that pervades throughout the text. This portrayal leaves female readers feeling disheartened and powerless to effect change. Traditional Chinese gender roles further limit women’s imaginations of equal relationships between men and women. Consequently, some heterosexual women have

turned to writing gay novels, also known as danmei in the Chinese context, which they believe embody true love between equals. Danmei is a genre of fiction featuring homoerotic relationships between male characters that has gained popularity among heterosexual female readers because it doubly satisfies them with two beautiful men as protagonists. One respondent pointed out that “Danmei is created and enjoyed by women. It embodies all of women’s fantasies of love and sex.” However, these women writers often lack a true understanding of gay men, and some may even be homophobic due to the lack of visibility of homosexuality in China. This lack of understanding has resulted in heterosexual women creating gay novels that are far removed from reality. In reality, danmei and heterosexual romance novels have no essential differences, as danmei often feature a dominant “top” and a submissive “bottom.” Unfortunately, the “bottom” in these novels is often weighed down by female gender stereotypes. Similarly, the creation of nisu, which stems from danmei, perpetuates this indirect approach to expressing sexual desires. Women seem unable to express their sexual desires openly, thus necessitating this twisted method. As a result, women may be unable to fully embrace and enjoy the sexual experiences that are naturally associated with the female body.

In China, the legitimacy of sexual imagination has long been reserved only for men’s sexual imagination of women. Nisu, as a way for women to express their sexual fantasies of men, challenges the traditional gender authority by reversing the trend of women being objectified, vulnerable, and marginalized and making men the object of gaze. However, nisu does not entirely disintegrate gender stereotypes but rather offers an exchange and reversal of roles. Despite its potential to challenge traditional gender roles, nisu’s creation has failed to break through the limitations of these roles. Instead, it replaces the object of gaze with a man who is packaged as a woman. In this way, the creator experiences male desire as a female, thereby engaging in a disguised sexual experience that expresses female desire by erasing the self. This further reinforces the notion that men are dominant in the minds of creators. Furthermore, in the world of nisu, the men who are envisioned by fans as “feminine” tend to embody qualities such

as vulnerability, gentleness, and a need for protection. By doing so, it reinforces gender stereotypes of protecting and being protected, dominating and being dominated. In the words of one interviewee, nisu works still carry a strong male gaze, and the reader appears to be a voyeur looking at men who are placed in women's positions from a male perspective. This kind of nisu creation still fails to break free from the male gaze, resulting in a contradiction in the reader's experience.

As several interviewees noted, women's sexual experiences are often met with social disapproval, while men's sexual experiences are more widely accepted. This societal inequality has led to women trying to gain acceptance of their sexual experiences by pretending to be men in online forums. This approach has allowed women to express their sexual desires more openly without fear of being labeled promiscuous or slutty. "When a woman expresses her sexual desire on the internet by saying 'I'm wet', she is often met with slut-shaming (荡妇羞辱) and labeled as promiscuous. However, if a man were to express his sexual arousal by saying 'I got an erection', he would not receive the same criticism." This double standard highlights the inequality in the way Chinese society views and judges the sexual experiences of men and women. Men are granted more leeway to express their desires while women are judged and shamed for doing the same. This unequal treatment is a reflection of deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that portray women as passive and submissive while men are seen as dominant and in control. Women's sexuality is often associated with passivity and submission, while men's sexuality is viewed as assertive and dominant. These stereotypes perpetuate an unequal power dynamic in which men hold more power and women are relegated to a subservient position.

All in all, while nisu may provide a space for women to explore alternative gender identities and expressions, it is not without its problems. As one Douban user pointed out, nisu does not necessarily reverse inequality, but rather uses the very tool of inequality to attack its own shield, which ultimately reinforces gender stereotypes. Despite achieving a degree of rebellion against social norms and conventions in nisu

activities, fans may have unknowingly entered into deeper bondage. Additionally, interviews with nisu fans raise questions about whether nisu genuinely seeks to explore gender-conscious relationships. It is also rare for nisu fans to consider whether their behavior is feminist or contributes to breaking down gender stereotypes. As one interviewee stated, “Most people participate in nisu just for fun, without delving too deeply into its implications.” Nisu also tends to focus on romantic and sexual relationships between male characters, often ignoring the experiences and perspectives of actual LGBTQ+ individuals. Nisu’s tendency to reinforce gender stereotypes and power imbalances, and its failure to challenge the root causes of gender inequality in Chinese society, means that it is unlikely to bring about any meaningful change in the status quo. Rather than simply swapping gender identities, a more meaningful form of resistance would involve challenging and subverting existing power dynamics, advocating for equality and inclusivity, and amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized groups.

6. CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter, an analysis of interviews with several nisu fans was conducted to gain insight into their perspectives on nisu culture and their engagement as members of the nisu fan community. Through the active cooperation of the interviewed fans, a wealth of detailed information about nisu was collected, providing valuable insights that are often difficult to find online. Additionally, opinions on nisu culture were gathered from non-nisu fans through online participatory observation on platforms such as Weibo and Douban, with a particular emphasis on critical thinking. By combining these two distinct perspectives, this study sought to present a more authentic and comprehensive depiction of nisu culture, shedding light on its complexities and nuances.

As previously discussed, the concept of the female gaze emerged as a response to the “male gaze.” However, it is important to note that there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the female gaze, and it cannot be simply viewed as the female equivalent of the male gaze. Throughout the course of this research, a constant interrogation of the nature of the female gaze was undertaken. While feminists on the Chinese Internet often employ the female gaze as a reversed version of the male gaze, a nuanced examination of the gaze of nisu fans reveals that it extends beyond a mere objectification of men. For instance, a notable example is found in the experiences of Shancundabanli, a nisu fan of a male singer in his 30s, who affectionately refers to him as “my lovely daughter,” despite being younger than her idol. Within the fan community, there exists a significant presence of “mom fans” who prioritize emotional connections with their idols, devoid of a “sexual desire” as articulated by Sanqi. Nisu culture, being an offshoot of the danmei (BL) culture, predominantly involves women as its participants and consumers. Thus, the gaze of nisu fans can be seen as representing the perspectives of contemporary female fans. The diversity among female fans contributes to the varied nature of the nisu gaze, highlighting the multifaceted experiences and viewpoints within the fan community. The development and limitations of nisu culture are reflective of Chinese women’s exploration of their desires and their ongoing struggles within a patriarchal

society.

This study also aims to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding nisu culture by examining contrasting viewpoints. Some view nisu culture as a progressive movement that disrupts conventional gender norms, however, others argue that nisu fails to address the root causes of gender inequality and merely swaps the gender identities of male and female characters, reproducing existing power dynamics and reinforcing gender stereotypes. It is necessary to go beyond simply swapping gender identities and instead challenge and subvert existing power dynamics, advocate for equality and inclusivity, and amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized groups to bring about meaningful change.

Nisu culture is an emerging fan subculture that has gained significant popularity in recent years, particularly among young Chinese women. By conducting an in-depth analysis of nisu culture and the experiences of nisu fans, this research can provide valuable insights into this relatively understudied area. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on fandom and cultural practices by examining the specific phenomenon of nisu culture. The findings deepen our understanding of fan perspectives, highlighting the nuanced ways in which fans engage with and interpret nisu culture within the larger cultural landscape. Also, this study engages with the concept of the female gaze and explores its manifestations within the context of nisu culture. By critically examining the gaze of female nisu fans and highlighting its complexities, it contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion on the female gaze. This can enhance our understanding of how gender, desire, and agency intersect in the consumption of media and fan cultures. By analyzing how female nisu fans navigate and challenge patriarchal norms within their engagement with nisu culture, this research sheds light on the ways in which Chinese women negotiate power dynamics and express their desires in a patriarchal society. This contributes to broader discussions on gender, agency, and resistance within media cultures. Moreover, as nisu culture is primarily prevalent in Chinese-speaking communities, this research can serve as a bridge for

English-speaking scholars to gain insights into this cultural phenomenon.

It is important to acknowledge that this study does have certain limitations and areas for further exploration. As previously mentioned, the survey primarily focuses on heterosexual women, which presents a notable shortcoming as it does not encompass the experiences of sexual minorities. Indeed, the perspective of non-heterosexual women who consume men as sexual spectacles is an intriguing area of investigation that warrants further exploration. However, given the challenges faced by the LGBT community in China, finding suitable participants for this study proved to be significantly difficult. Furthermore, as an emerging fan subculture, nisu culture continues to evolve and transform over time. Thus, future research could delve into the changes arising from the widespread dissemination of nisu culture across different social media platforms and the influence of these platforms on the dynamics and expressions within the nisu fan community. It is worth noting that within the English-speaking academic sphere, nisu culture remains relatively unexplored, indicating significant opportunities for future inquiry. Despite the aforementioned limitations, it is hoped that this research provides valuable insights and serves as a foundational reference for scholars interested in studying nisu culture and the intricate dynamics of the nisu fan community in the years to come.

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GLOSSARY

Nisu fans: 泥塑粉/逆苏粉. Fans who like to amplify a man's femininity or imagine him as a woman.

Zhengsu fans: 整肃粉/正苏粉. Fans who like traditional masculinity in men.

CP fans: cpf/cp 粉. Fans who prefer relationships between people rather than individuals.

Wei fans: 唯粉. Fans who only like one single idol and do not care about their relationships with other people.

Shoufuwei: 受腐唯/受抚慰. In essence, shoufuwei are Wei fans of a certain person, but they like to regard him as a bottom and ship him with many tops.

Mother fans: 妈粉. Fans who regard their idols as their own children.

Yangchengxi idols: 养成系偶像. Idols whose fans have witnessed the process of their growing up from childhood.

Beauty cucumber: 美女瓜/美人瓜/美人攻. Beautiful tops.