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Queer Representation in Mandarin Chinese Language Learning Textbooks of the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a queer theoretical lens and mixed methods conceptual framework for use in assessing the level of queer representation of characters portrayed in Mandarin Chinese language learning textbooks published in the United Kingdom. MFL textbooks largely produce content which reinforces a perceived cisgendered, heteronormative characterisation of individuals within texts. Research that assesses the level of queer representation, tend towards focusing solely on gender or sexuality, and largely through qualitative research methods. Through the development of a mixed methods conceptual framework which allows for consideration of queer diversity along several spectra, the results of this study highlighted a significant lack of queer representation within Mandarin Chinese language learning textbooks. The implication of this is not only a mixed methods approach which accounts for often overlooked minority queer identities, but also identifying the need for a greater variety of queer representation within textbooks to better represent people of the 21st century.

1. Introduction

Throughout its two decades in effect, Section 28 prohibited the intentional promotion of homosexuality as a familial relationship within schools in the United Kingdom (UK) (Macnair, 1989; Moran, 2001). Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 (Waites, 2013) and the subsequent legalisation of Same-Sex Marriage in 2014 (Paterson & Coffey-Glover, 2018), queer¹ people in the UK are still finding a lack of representation nor meeting of needs to prepare them for later life as queer individuals (Government Equalities Office, 2018). This is not a uniquely UK phenomenon as queer students around the world also find their needs within schools unaddressed as teachers and curriculum, whether intentional or not, erase the existence of minority sexual orientations and gender identities through the reinforcement of cisgendered-heteronormativity (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018; Stauffer, 2020; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014). This is particularly prevalent in the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) curricula where textbooks tend to project the contemporary classroom as homogenously cisgendered and heterosexual through the assumption of compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexism (Nemi Neto, 2018). Yet, research shows this is anything but the case (Government Equalities Office, 2018; Moore, 2019). This assumed notion that being heterosexual is the preferred or typical mode of sexual orientation and identity within society (Oswald et al., 2005) only serves to erase queer identities through the discrimination and prejudice against queer people based on the heteronormative ideas of society (Misawa, 2010). This phenomenon is not entirely restricted to MFL, and has been noted to be present

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¹ An umbrella term to describe a person of the LGBTQ+ community who is usually not of the cisgendered-heterosexual persuasion. This is also a pejorative terminology reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community.

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in English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks (Gray, 2013), with similarly student-focussed literature prevalent within English Language and Literature (Spurlin, 2002) and Sex Education (Drazenovich, 2015). Additionally, it is not wholly resigned to the Anglosphere (countries where English is considered the main native language), and has been observed in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks in Poland (Sunderland, 2021b) and Vietnam (Trinh & Tinker Sachs, 2023).

However, with the limited research available inquiring into queer representation within MFL, much less within Mandarin Chinese language learning textbooks, this study aimed to construct a queer mixed methods conceptual framework to be utilised in the assessment of queer representation within such textbooks. This study has then discussed the intersection of queer theory with MFL education to support and critique the proposed methodology and its findings.

1.1. Positionality of the Author

As a gay, cis-gendered man growing up in the late 1990s and early 2000s in New Zealand, despite nationwide decriminalisation in 1989 (Brookes, 2015), homosexuality was still largely a taboo topic, often spoken of pejoratively by family, teachers, other students, and never discussed further. All teaching material within my own education presented only cisgendered heterosexual relationships and people. Now as an openly gay educator, with a decade of teaching Japanese and Mandarin Chinese as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) to secondary school students in both New Zealand (NZ) and the United Kingdom (UK), I strive to include diverse representation of all, including queer folk, within personal curriculum content and pedagogy. However, many colleagues struggle in this facet; often citing a lack of knowledge of queerness and queer themes, and a fear of producing incorrect or offensive representation. It is these issues of a lack of support for queer representation that is central to this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender, Sexuality, and Queerness

The intersection between gender, sexuality and queerness is central to the queer lens and understanding what it means to be a queer individual (Browne & Nash, 2010). Created by Trans Student Educational Resources (2015), the gender unicorn (Fig. 1), highlights how the different characteristics, independent of each other, fall along several spectra from a lack of, to abundance of, in a sliding scale. All these scales intersect for all individual identities, resulting in a more fluid and nuanced understanding of gender and sexuality and allow individuals to place themselves on continua that expand beyond both binary heterosexual and homosexual ideals (Nemi Neto,

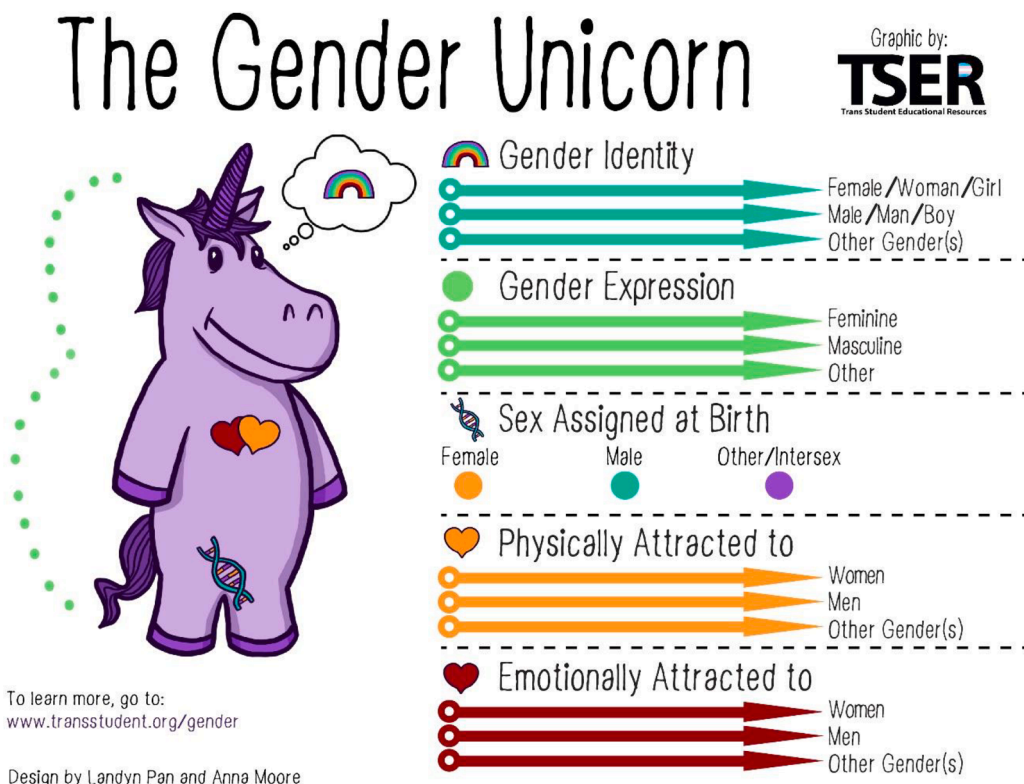


Fig. 1. The Gender Unicorn by TSER.

2018). Ultimately, this highlights that queerness is not solely relegated to simple gender and/or sexuality markers, and indicative of much deeper understandings (Browne & Nash, 2010). What is perceived as more important for many queer people, is the representation of the width and breadth of queer individuals, over direct representations of themselves; beyond the distinctive stereotypes of queer individuals (Hoffman & Delahanty, 2021).

Research has shown that heterosexual participants largely attribute queer individuals with the subversion of traditional cisgendered-heteronormative notions of gender and expression; largely in the form of feminine men and masculine women (Blashill & Powlisha, 2009; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2021). Ultimately this reinforces the harmful notion that homosexuality is nothing more than the subversion of heteronormative standards (Chambers, 2007). However, care must be taken if we are to rely on subversion of heteronormativity, as radical subversion neglects the shared social contexts, thus obscuring the complexity of sexual marginality (Green, 2002). This can easily be seen within the gay community, where gay subcultures such as the *twink* or *femboy* align with this subversion (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017), whereas the *bear* subculture emphasises and promotes masculine expressions and aesthetics, such as body hair and weight (Manley et al., 2007; Monaghan, 2005; Moskowitz et al., 2013). Therefore, to relegate queerness to simply the subversion of heteronormative ideas does little more than reinforce this perceived default. Thus, it is imperative when assessing materials for queer representation, a consideration of all spectra highlighted above is key in identifying both majority and minority gender and sexual identities.

2.2. Gender, Sexuality, and Queer Pedagogy in MFL

Queer pedagogy represents an intersection of queer theory and studies into educational teaching, learning, and assessment (Pinar, 2014), with the aim to motivate educators towards building emancipatory practices aimed at benefitting both queer and non-queer students (Mayo & Rodriguez, 2019) and drawing marginalised sexual and gender minorities from the sidelines into view in society and media (Raymond, 2003). However, this practice is largely driven by individual teacher approaches and inclusion (Vecellio, 2012), and largely absent from educational material (Drazenovich, 2015; Gray, 2013; Nemi Neto, 2018). Application of this within the education sector largely relies on drawing from external fields (Shlasko, 2005), and focused predominantly within the English Language and Literature and Sex Education fields (Drazenovich, 2015; Spurlin, 2002).

In many MFL curricula, the expression of one's identity within the immediate context (self, friends, family, work, school, etc.) is a central concept (Gruber & Hopwood, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2007), and is central to a queer individual's perception of themselves (Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2012). Due to external influences such as busy scheduling and limited selection, textbooks can often be relied upon to support structure, context and progression for the benefit of students within teachers' lessons (Andon & Wingate, 2013). Often these textbooks reiterate the notion of binary gender assignment and heteronormative familial disposition (Nemi Neto, 2018) centred on the Western nuclear familial structure (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012); largely presented as father, mother, and 2-3 children, despite a noted decline in recent years across Western countries (Pilkauskas & Cross, 2018; Siggers & Sims, 2005). These representations within textbooks ultimately reinforcing gender and heterosexual stereotypes alongside promoting a neither equitable nor equal representation of wider society. However, the inclusion of a diversity of characters in terms of extra-binary genders and non-heterosexual sexualities would work to counteract passive exclusionary heteronormative practices and produce improvement in both queer and non-queer student achievement and wellbeing (Ross et al., 2010).

With limited research in this area focussing predominantly on English or European language acquisition, this research represents a novel approach within East Asian, specifically Mandarin Chinese, language acquisition.

3. Aim, Design, and Setting of the Study

3.1. Aim

The aim of this study was to develop a queer mixed methods conceptual framework to identify the extent to which queer individuals are represented within Mandarin Chinese language learning textbooks. Such textbooks are written and published within the United Kingdom by Mandarin Chinese language educators and British publishers for the use in British MFL classrooms. From this study, the researcher could then use this information to transform the material within their own teaching practice to enhance the level of representation within their own teaching materials and support others to do the same. This conceptual framework drawing on mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Clark, 2017), queer pedagogy (Mayo & Rodriguez, 2019; Misawa, 2010), queering research methods (Fish & Russell, 2018; Shannon-Baker, 2021), and previous queer research (see: (Nemi Neto, 2018; Spurlin, 2002; Trinh & Tinker Sachs, 2023)) to design a more detailed framework.

3.2. Methodological Design

This methodology took on a Sequential Transformative Strategy as it requires a theoretical lens (in this case, queer) overlaying the sequential procedures to explore a problem (the lack of queer representation), ending with a call to action (for publishers to include authentic representation) (Creswell, 2009).

A mixed methods approach was chosen due to its longstanding usage in both education and queer research (Shannon-Baker, 2021) and its usage of both quantitative and qualitative aspects to both quantify issues and illuminate further reasoning to these (Fish & Russell, 2018). Firstly, the author considered the four important aspects of mixed methods design – timing, weighting, mixing, and theorising (Creswell, 2009). In considering timing, not only was the project undertaken as a master's thesis, but the author was also

working full-time in teaching, thus it was more manageable to collect data at roughly the same time (Guest, 2013). In terms of weighting, with the emphasis being on the quality of representation of queer lives in textbooks, qualitative collection and analysis was given the greater emphasis (Browne & Nash, 2010). As the quantitative data was collected to identify the amount of queer or potentially queer characters and/or families with the qualitative data providing supporting data into their representation, an embedded mixing approach was most appropriate here (Cronholm & Hjalmarsson, 2011; Fish & Russell, 2018). Finally, due to the theme and the author's own queerness, a queer theoretical lens was applied to shape the direction and interpretation through guidance towards queer themes (Browne & Nash, 2010; Creswell & Clark, 2017). In considering these aspects, the prevailing approach was to undertake a Sequential Transformative Strategy due largely to its design for the exploration of underrepresentation of marginalised groups with an intended call for action (Almeida, 2018; Creswell, 2009). This approach is best served to the theoretical perspective of the researcher to better advocate and understand phenomena (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This is represented by the following model (Fig. 2) below:

In the first instance, a qualitative phase was utilised to collect written, spoken, and/or visual gender and sexuality markers of each character. This was then analysed for characteristics that would inform the researcher of the characters' presented gender and sexuality within each textbook.

- Gendered information was data points like pronouns², visual markers such as gendered presentation, or names that may suggest a gender to the character.
- Sexuality-based information were any data points which may have alluded to the character's sexuality, such as an expression of attraction towards an individual or individuals, or gendered relationship pronouns such as boyfriend or wife, or gender neutral, such as partner.

Following this, a quantitative phase was then implemented to quantify gendered markers to confirm the gender of characters, before identifying the composition of relationships between characters to support the confirmation of the sexuality of characters, with statistics and data drawn to identify the extent to which queer individuals and relationships were present. For sexuality, characters were assigned a tag in a separate column denoting their relationship in one of four categories:

- *Opposite Sex Couple (OSC)* – wherein both characters referenced to be in a relationship were of different genders to one another.
- *Same Sex Couple (SSC)* – wherein both characters referenced to be in a relationship were of the same gender to one another.
- *Lone Parent Unit (LPU)* – wherein only a single parent is referenced, with no explicit detail given about another parent to confirm sexuality. While here, the presence of a child would initially suggest a heterosexual relationship, this would only serve to reinforce heteronormative ideology and erase any possibility of other options (Lavender-Stott, 2023).
- *Other Parental Unit (OPU)* – where family is mentioned as a collective, but not explicitly defined in terms of familial roles, pronouns, or names.

A final analysis of character presentation was undertaken for characters who displayed potential queer markers through the triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data. Due to the significant lack of overtly queer characters within these specific textbooks, the final analysis and discussion focussed on characters who had the potential to be considered queer-coded based on information presented. This allowed for a possible diverse range of characters to be presented, whilst also promoting a deeper understanding of the process (Almeida, 2018).

3.3. Setting

The textbooks for this study were drawn from a state secondary school in England, as the main texts for each key stage and year level of a Mandarin Chinese course of work, and within the researcher's personal collection for active use in teaching. The books selected were those suggested by other experienced teachers of Mandarin Chinese, and both the Mandarin Excellence Program (MEP) and Confucius Institute in the UK, for teaching in Key Stages 3 and 4 (Years 7-11), and one suggested by the relevant examination board to support teacher instruction in Key Stage 5 (Years 12-13). All textbooks chosen are also available in other countries and used by teachers to support Mandarin Chinese instruction for students sitting exams other than the British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). Additionally, all textbooks chosen had sections where family, relationships and identity were discussed, which would allow for greater opportunity to represent a diverse array of gender and sexuality.

These textbooks were selected due to the need for multiple ($n \geq 2$) sources of evidence to assist in the triangulation of data to provide greater credibility (Bowen, 2009), with both Creswell (2002) and Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) suggesting a similar size ($3 \leq n \leq 5$).

The textbooks were separated into three main categories to cover the entire secondary school curriculum: Beginner (instruction within the first 0-3 years of language acquisition education), Intermediate (instruction within the subsequent 3-5 years of language acquisition education), and Advanced (instruction within the subsequent 5-7 years of language acquisition education) as adapted from

² For audio files, written transcriptions of audio, where available, are used to triangulate spoken data, such as names and third-person pronouns, to validate the researcher's assigning of gender as in spoken Mandarin Chinese there is no distinction between the masculine and feminine third-person pronoun.

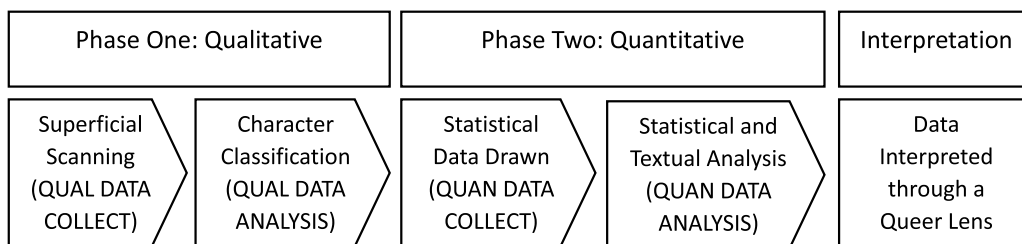


Fig. 2. Representation of sequential transformative mixed methods conceptual framework based on (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Hill and Bjork (2008) and based on the research of Ellis (1989) and Krashen and Terrell (1983):

Beginner

- Jīn bù 1 (Years 7-8): Zhu, X., Bin, Y. (2010). *Jīn bù 1*. Pearson Education.
- Jīn bù 2 (Years 8-9): Zhu, X., Bin, Y. (2011). *Jīn bù 2*. Pearson Education.

Intermediate

- Edexcel GCSE (9-1) Chinese (Years 9-11): Yan, H. Liu, L., Tate, M., Wang, L., Bin, Y., Zhu X. (2017). *Edexcel GCSE (9-1) Chinese (new ed.)*. Pearson Education.

Advanced

- Mandarin B for the IB Diploma (Years 12-13): Burch, Y. (2019). *Mandarin B for the IB Diploma (2nd ed.)*. Hodder Education.

4. Results

A total of 789 characters were analysed across all four of the textbooks. Of those characters, 679 of those characters had their genders confirmed by a combination of spoken, visual, and written factors such as gendered pronouns, appearances, and voices. Two major findings emerged from this data: an abundance of heterosexual relationships and cisgendered characters, and a distinct lack of queer relationships and queer characters. The following section first details the presentation of family, followed by detailing of interpersonal relationships and then a possible queer character.

4.1. Familial Dispositions

A total of 139 opposite-sex couples, 35 lone-parent units, and 35 other-parental units were presented across the four texts for a total of 209 families represented. The following table (Table 1) outlines the spread of this below:

The Jīnbù 1 textbook, of the 52 presented parental units presented, 69.23% were 'Opposite Sex Couples', 7.69% were 'Lone Parent' units, and 23.08% were 'Other Parental' units. All four of the 'Lone Parent Units' only mentioned one parent, without any further definition of family size or composition, while all 12 of the 'Other Parental Units' failed to mention any parents, but similar to 'Lone Parent Unit', only mentioned family, without any further definition of family size or composition. Strikingly, no same sex couples were mentioned.

Comparatively higher, the Jīn bù 2 textbook presented 47 parental units; 78.72% were 'Opposite Sex Couples', while both 'Lone Parent' and 'Other Parent' units were each representative of 10.64% of the presented units. However, all five of the 'Lone Parent Couples' were isolated instances where only one parent was mentioned, without further identification of family members or disposition, and largely in single, isolated sentences. In four of the 'Other Parent Units', family was mentioned as a whole, without clarification on parental disposition, while the fifth, Teacher Zhāng, is identified as 'Mrs.' in the English activity question, but is greeted by her grandchildren as 奶奶nǎinai (paternal grandmother)³ in the subsequent activity. Additionally, there are three instances where reference to an 'Opposite Sex Couple' has been made, which could potentially be in reference to the same couple (Robert's parents). Again, there is a lack of same sex couples presented within the text.

The Edexcel textbook presented a significantly higher amount of reference to family, with 53.16% as 'Opposite Sex Couples', 24.02% as 'Lone Parent Units' and 22.78% as 'Other Parental Units'. The majority (17/19) of 'Lone Parent Units' only had either the mother or father mentioned within the context but did not define or elaborate further on family size nor composition. Of the remaining two, one referenced a paternal grandmother, but did not elaborate on the existence of a maternal grandfather, and the other, a reading tasks about Deng Xiaoping, only mentioned his mother. Of the 'Other Parental Units', 14/18 had either the family mentioned, but not define further, or only the siblings mentioned, without further elaboration of family size or composition. The remaining four 'OPU'

³ In Mandarin Chinese, grandparents are denoted by which side of the family come from (see: Appendix B).

Table 1
Representation of family by parental type.

Book	Opposite Sex Couple	Same Sex Couple	Lone Parent Unit	Other Parental Unit	Total
Jin bù 1	36	0	4	12	52
Jin bù 2	37	0	5	5	47
Edexcel	42	0	19	18	79
Mandarin B	24	0	7	0	31

refer only to paternal grandparents, in all cases only one grandparent is referred to and the other, alongside with the family composition and side, are neither describe nor elaborated on.

The Mandarin B textbook presented 77.42% of its 31 couples as ‘Opposite Sex’, with one of them mentioning at one point being a single father, but then eventually marrying another woman. The remaining 22.58% were identified as ‘Lone Parent Units’, with 3/7 only mentioning one parent without describing family size or disposition, and the other 4/7 using the inclusive Chinese phrase “我们men家jiā” (our house(hold)/family), implicitly suggesting the presence of another parent.

4.2. Portrayed Relationships

Throughout the four textbooks, there are five non-familial relationships portrayed in total, all being heterosexual in nature. Alongside a lack of queer relationships, is a lack of openly queer and implicitly queer characters, with only one possible character implicitly displaying queer characteristics in the Mandarin B textbook.

There are five relationships (not including married couples) expressed across the four texts, with all five relating to heterosexual relationships. These occur as follows:

In Chapter 1, Unit 3 of Jin bù 2, there is Chloe, referred collectively in the third person plural ‘they’⁴ amongst other characters, who goes with their boyfriend to the mountains to ski. An aligning picture displays a male figure skiing down a mountain.

In Edexcel Chapter 6, Unit 4 there are two relationships portrayed: 赵京 (Zhào Jīng) who went with their boyfriend to Taiwan during Springtime last year, and who plans to go to Malaysia this year in the Springtime, and 刘海 (Liú Hǎi) who went to Hong Kong with their girlfriend last year during Autumn, and who intend to go to Australia next year. No gendered markers have been given for either of the named characters, however their respective partners were gendered as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ respectively.

In Mandarin B for the IB Diploma, Theme One, Topic One introduces 李戡 (Lǐ Kān) who mentions talking with his father whenever he “meets a girlfriend” (交女朋友). Theme Two, Topic Five introduces Russian Uliya, a bride whose boyfriend came with her to watch and cheer her on as she raced in Guangzhou’s Bride Race as part of the Qixi⁵ (七夕) Festival.

4.3. Potential Queer Characters

Throughout the four textbooks surveyed and analysed, there are no characters that show explicit queer traits, such as self-identification of queer identity (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), usage of gender-neutral pronouns or gendered markers suggesting gender non-conformity or are presented in a non-heterosexual relationship.

The following graph (Fig. 3) visually displays the count of different gendered markers associated with each character. Gendered markers here included the usage of third-person pronouns, presentation within visual texts, and voice used in spoken audio texts. While the frequency and type-frequency were not included, and would be worth investigating in subsequent research, the initial data analysis aimed to assess whether or not characters with conflicting, or non-conforming gender markers existed within the textbooks. Characters without gendered markers were removed from the count. While names were not initially analysed as gender markers due to time restraints, further analysis and research may enlighten this aspect further.

As Fig. 3 displays, 66-67% of gendered characters in the first three textbooks had one instance of gendering, with 44% for the Mandarin B textbook. With the absence of additional gender markers to reinforce confirmation of a character’s gender, these gendered markers act as the sole confirmation of the character’s intended gender. The remainder of the gendered characters exponentially decrease the more gendered markers that are assigned to them; all of these subsequent differing types of gendered markers further agreeing with the initial gender marker, reinforcing the cisgendered nature of each character. While this data highlights a distinct lack of transgender, gender-queer, and gender non-conforming characters, it does not rule out the possibility of cisgendered homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual characters.

In the Mandarin B textbook, while no explicit queer characters are presented, there is one character who shows implicitly queer characteristics: Mulan. Found under Theme Five ‘Sharing the Planet’ in Topic Fifteen ‘Globalisation’, under the sub theme of ‘Peace

⁴ In Mandarin Chinese, there is no verbal distinction between the third person singular masculine ‘he’ (他) and feminine ‘she’ (她) as both are pronounced as ‘tā’. The plural form of both, also lacks verbal distinction, as both ‘她们’ (they - female-only group) and ‘他们’ (they - male only group or mixed male-female group) are pronounced as ‘tāmen’.

⁵ 七夕 (Qīxī) Traditionally held on the seventh evening of the seventh month, it is often associated as the Chinese version of Valentine’s Day. In Chinese mythos, it is the one day a year the separated lovers 织女 (Zhīnǚ), the Weaver Girl/Maiden, and 牛郎 (Niúlánɡ), the Cowherd, are able to cross the Heavenly River (银河 Yínhé – Milky Way) and reunite.

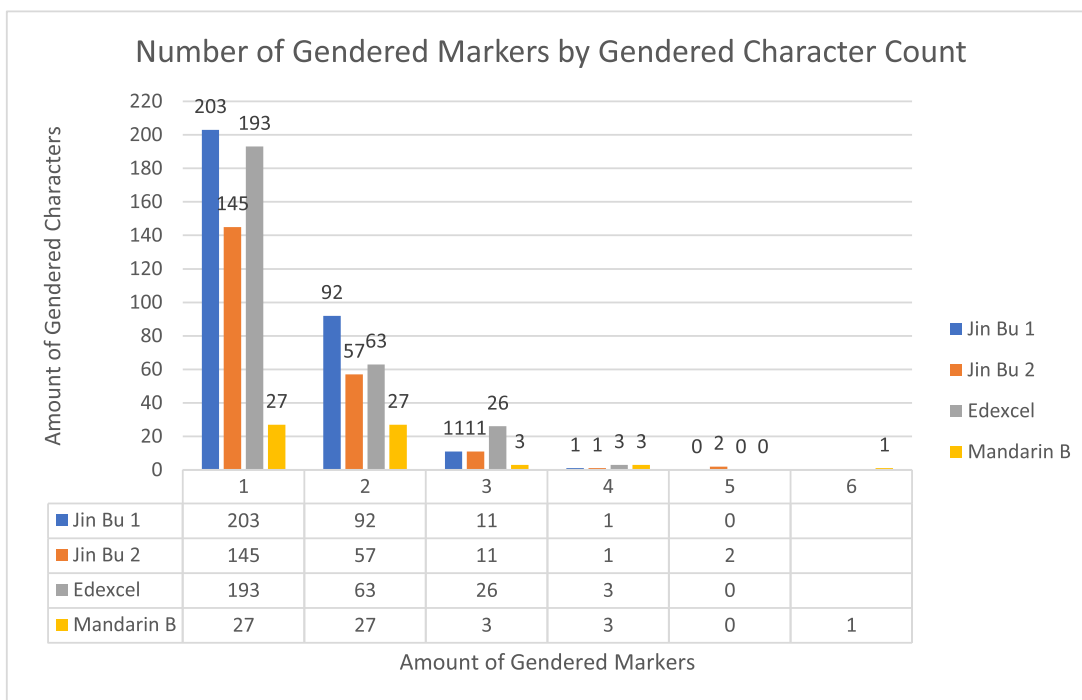


Fig. 3. Number of Gendered Markers by Gendered Character Count.

and Conflict’, the reader is introduced to Mulan in the Ballad of Mulan – a simplified Chinese version of the original Early Imperial Chinese version. Throughout the poem, Mulan is explicitly referred to as: 我 (wǒ -I) assumably by herself, by the author as 木兰 (mùlán/Mulan – her name), and by other individuals as 女 (nǚ - woman, girl), 姊 (zǐ - elder sister), 妹 (mèi - younger sister) and 女娘 (nǚniáng - maiden, young woman) respectively. In terms of implicit queer notions, four sections of the ballad are of particular interest:

- Lines Three and Four discussing her mental and emotional state,
- Lines Six through Eight mentioning her father’s call to war and lack of elder sons,
- Lines Twenty-Seven through Twenty-Nine discussion her change from her soldier uniform into her old clothes,
- Lines Thirty-Two and Thirty-Three where presumably Mulan speaks metaphorically about the limited physiological differences between male and female hares.

It is of note that the content within the original version of the Ballad of Mulan (including the simplified version present within the textbook) differs greatly from subsequent Chinese theatre and films about Mulan, and more recently the 1990s Disney animation and 2020 Disney live adaption “Mulan”. The ballad as it appears in the Mandarin B textbook has been transcribed, and a translation provided by an external source (see: Appendix C).

4.4. Summary

Given the apparent lack of any explicit queer characters, queer relationships, or even queer families, these results seem to reflect the default assumed cisgendered-heteronormative identity expressed within the literature review and a complete erasure of queer individuals. While the character of Mulan does possess some potentially implicit notions of queerness, its presence within the textbook is one of the few tasks that does not entail discussion and acts as a simple retrieval task.

5. Discussion

5.1. Methodology

While the initial study itself found no explicit queer representation within Chinese MFL textbooks, a critical outcome of this study was the creation and application of this conceptual mixed methods framework through a queer lens.

Previous queer studies within the MFL and EFL sector have largely used the ‘queer lens’ as a qualitative methodology to assess the level of queerness within texts largely focussing on relationships (Gray, 2013; Nemi Neto, 2018; Stauffer, 2020). This paper proposes a Mixed Methods approach to assessing the level of ‘queerness’ within educational texts whereby the qualitative queer lens is overlaid

to support a QUAL-QUAN approach, and then brought in during final analysis to give further external understanding to the problem (Creswell, 2009; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2021). By expanding queer research within MFL beyond the assumed explicit gendered imagery or presentation of relationships, and inquiring into the gender identity and expression, as well as emotional and physical attraction, of characters, it allows for the identification of queer characters beyond the cisgendered hetero-homosexual dichotomy (Elizabeth, 2013; McConaghy, 2005), but also assists in decentering the application of queer theory from the assumptive same-sex or gay viewpoint (Oswald et al., 2005). It also provides a framework whereby non-queer, or queer adjacent researchers could implement to assist in further highlighting cisgendered-heteronormative and heterosexism within MFL texts. This methodology however is not only restricted to within MFL and could be applied to other educational sectors.

With regards to other similar studies done within MFL and EFL, Trinh and Tinker Sachs (2023) use a Critical Visual Discourse Analysis (CVDA) as a method, and queer lenses as the framework, however, limit their data to gender representation from three units each chosen at random from each Vietnamese ELF book. Nemi Neto (2018) refers to queer pedagogy, however, contains no description of a methodology, and simply critiques four family structure presented each within one chapter from four selected European-language textbooks (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) with gender assumption made based on character presentation. Both studies only present selected relationships in chosen areas of the textbooks, thus providing a limited snapshot of gender and sexuality respectively.

On the contrary where whole textbooks were assessed Stauffer (2020) relies on three distinctions: nonheteronormative relationships, nonbinary gender, and non-traditional family (including same-sex families), and a criteria-based methodology based on images and texts at the authors discernment, placing the author as the arbiter of what constitutes these. Gray (2013) focussed predominantly on relationships and sexual diversity in terms of same-sex orientation representation within EFL textbooks “with clearly identified LGBT members, families in which the parents may be same sex, or teaching terms such as ‘civil partnership’ alongside words such as ‘marriage’” (p. 47). These studies ultimately reinforce the binary notion of queer relationships being solely same-sex based (Green, 2002).

Alternatively, Ruiz-Cecilia et al. (2020) focussed on two sets of textbooks each comprising a Student’s Book and Workbook currently in use in Spain. Here they evaluated the level of heteronormativity, based on the absence or presence of queer material within the textbooks. Again, queerness was based on the authors assumption, grounded in heteronormative ideas, and could be argued that it plays into the perception of heteronormativity whereby heterosexual is assumed to be the ‘normal’ mode of sexual orientation and identity (Oswald et al., 2005).

Ultimately, this study’s methodology removes the connotation of gender and sexuality being relegated to a single chapter of a textbook, but also ascribes it less as an opposing force or othering to heterosexuality. Instead, it treats all individuals as undetermined, until evidence can be drawn to conclude their gender and sexual standing, rather than treating anything as a default. Thus, allowing for the presentation of a diverse range of individuals over the reliance on distinct stereotypes (Hoffman & Delahanty, 2021).

Throughout the methodology, a range of different gender factors were chosen, over identifying the amount of gender factors used, to give multiple different confirmations of gender. Sexuality, while independent of Gender, is still reliant on knowing and understanding the gender and gender expression of both individuals (Jackson, 2006). Therefore, two individuals in a relationship identified with multiple different masculine markers is more likely to suggest a homosexual relationship, while two individuals, one with masculine markers and one with female, are more likely to suggest a heterosexual relationship.

While it can be easy to focus on heterosexual and homosexual characters, it is often Asexual characters that can be easily missed or erased from text. This lack of inclination or feelings, whether sexual and/or romantic, towards others aligns with conceptualisations of asexuality, as found in Bogaert (2015). Love (2009) further emphasises this, suggesting there is a tendency for queerness to generally be read as an excess of queer desire, but should also incorporate and absence or aversion to sex. While it could be easy to say that any characters that are not explicitly shown in a relationship or to have feelings towards one or more gendered characters are likely to be Asexual, this would only serve to reinforce the notion that sexual attraction is the default while othering the lack thereof (Przybyło & Cooper, 2014). Instead, explicit Asexual representation would rather involve a character expressing their lack of inclination or feelings.

In terms of ascribing gender, one nuance was the ascribing of gender to voice. While studies ascribe a lower pitch indicative of male traits, and higher pitches indicative of female traits (Titze, 1989; Xue et al., 2010), this study rather ascribes a lower pitch as a *more masculine* trait, and a higher pitch a *more feminine* trait. This is intended to remove the direct prescription of gender based solely on vocals to separate *gender expression* from *gender identity* (Browne & Nash, 2010). In this way, it allows for character gender to agree across all factors, to present a cisgendered character, but also allowing for the disruption or subversion of heteronormativity to allow for the identification of a gender queer character (Green, 2002). However, care must be taken in that the use of male/female distinction based on vocal pitch to determine gender or sex, as this not only relies on the binary notion, but also continues to reinforce and restrict to a narrowed concept of sex and gender (Azul, 2013). Yet, all characters in the study that were presented with a masculine sounding voice actor, were also ascribed other masculine gender factors such as appearance and gendered pronouns.

Additionally, while it could be argued that gendered sexuality markers, such as a male-presented character talking about their girlfriend, may not necessarily suggest a strictly heterosexual relationship as Bisexual/Pansexual people may find themselves in heterosexual and homosexual relationships (Rust, 2002), it can only be assumed that it was the textbook authors’ intention to provide a strictly heterosexual relationship due to the lack of further explicit or implicit elaboration. As far as queer practice and pedagogy is concerned, if these characters were intended as Asexual, Bisexual, or Pansexual representation, then this would have been reflected in the text in some capacity (Coletta, 2018). Where heterosexual relationships have been explicitly shown, this same affordance should be given to queer people and relationships.

To ensure that culture was taken into consideration throughout the final analysis, Western and Chinese ideas were brought in to help analyse to provide both a Western and Eastern understanding of characters. To avoid assumptions based on a western-only perspective, these understandings were triangulated by drawing on wider sources such as that found in literature (see: Wu (2003))

and visual media (see: [Berry \(2013\)](#)), alongside consultation with British and Chinese heritage colleagues. Characters within the texts that were real-life individuals were examined and found to be gender-conforming and heterosexual, based on further research using wider resources. Characters within text that displayed any possible queer characteristics were then examined further, with reference to Eastern authors to ensure that any assumptions about gender and sexuality considered research and understanding within Chinese culture. Additionally, names and naming conventions were also analysed to assess the likelihood of characters not-conforming. For English names, this involved looking at historical and societal usage of names, for Chinese, this involved looking at the presented radicals in the names, historical and societal usage of names. As [Liebersen et al. \(2000\)](#) highlights, names most commonly convey gender identity more often than any other feature of the child or their family.

5.2. Represented Families

The lack of any familial structure other than the heteronormative father-mother pairing, alongside the distinct lack of any queer families, presented within these textbooks is very reminiscent of a time in the UK where Section 28 was in effect. Whether intentional or not, the exclusion of queer families effectively erases any notion of queer family structure being presented as equal or normal ([Goldstein, 2021](#)). In addition, this also undermines and erases other familial structures, such as blended families, single parent-households or even non-biological parental units. For children actively using these textbooks, it reinforces the notion of father-mother parents as a norm, while alienating any other parental units. Strikingly, the [Office for National Statistics \(2022\)](#) (ONS) estimates only 82.89% of families currently residing within the UK are opposite sex cohabitating or married couples (see: [Table 2](#)). Of the remaining, 15.37% are lone parent families and 1.22% are same sex cohabitating or married couples. It is of importance to note that same-sex marriage begun being recognised and performed in England in March 2014. Thus, the distinction in the table below between opposite sex and same sex married couples from the 2017 estimates. Prior to this, same sex couples could only apply for Civil Partnership, and only since 2005, but was later opened up to application for opposite sex couples from 2019. Thus, estimates for Civil Partnership from 2019 include both same sex and opposite sex couples.

While it might be suggested that textbooks take a proportional approach to presenting families to more accurately reflect the familial diversity of the UK, [Sunderland \(2021a\)](#) cautions that, proportional representation, while valid, would be difficult for textbook writers as they would only reflect the author's reality at that time and place. As times move on and diaspora change, these textbooks would then no longer represent the present-day realities ([Hartman & Judd, 1978](#)). With this in mind, [Sunderland \(2021a\)](#) does alternatively suggest making equal appearances of characters as a less difficult practice, which would still reflect the familial diversity present, not just in the UK, but abroad as well.

5.3. Relationships and Undetermined Characters

While Chloe within the *Jìn bù 2* textbook had no written, spoken, or visual gendered markers, their name itself is inherently attributed to female persons. Deriving from Greek meaning "blooming" or "fertility", 'Chloe' is also attributed as an epithet of Demeter, Greek Goddess of harvest, agriculture, and the fertility of the earth ([Liddell et al., 1966](#)). According to the [Office for National Statistics \(2010\)](#), 3,676 girls were named 'Chloe' in England alone in 2010, with no boys being named as such. Even research can be seen to use 'Chloe' as a pseudonym for female participants (see: [Angouri \(2011\)](#)). Invariably, the author has chosen to use this name as a gender marker, with no other gender markers present, for the reader to assume the gender of the character based largely on the name. This is also reinforced by the author choosing a distinctly Western name, so that the Western audience is more likely to emphasise the connection to the character's female gendering. As [Liebersen et al. \(2000\)](#) highlights, names most commonly convey gender identity more often than any other feature of the child or their family. This notion is further reinforced in the previous title, *Jìn bù 1*, whereby the author explains Chinese gendered naming conventions: "girls are often called 美 (měi, beautiful), 花 (huā, flower), 月 (yuè, moon); common names for boys include 明 (míng, bright), 强 (qiáng, strong), 龙 (lóng, dragon)." ([Zhu & Bin, 2010](#), p. 30). In addition to this, by assigning this character a boyfriend, the author also relies on the notion of a heteronormative male-female relationship to implicitly reinforce Chloe's gender as nothing other than female.

In Chinese naming conventions, the family name appears first, with the given appearing subsequently as single or double character names ([Edwards, 2006](#)). Within the Edexcel textbook, the characters of 赵京 (Zhào Jīng) and 刘海 (Liú Hǎi) have the common surnames of 赵 (Zhào) and 刘 (Liú), with the given names of 京 (Jīng) and 海 (Hǎi) respectively:

Firstly, 海 (Hǎi), meaning 'sea', is typically masculine due to its association with great landforms and bodies of water ([Van de](#)

Table 2

Families by family type, United Kingdom, 2010-2021 ([Office for National Statistics, 2022](#)).

Number of Families (in the thousands)	2010 Estimate	2011 Estimate	2017 Estimate	2019 Estimate	2021 Estimate
Married Couple	12,287	12,208	12,845	12,740	12,625
Opposite sex married couple			12,811	12,683	12,556
Same sex married couple			34	57	69
Civil Partner couple	45	60	54	46	99
Opposite sex cohabitating couple	2,749	2,863	3,182	3,406	3,430
Same sex cohabitating couple	51	63	100	109	166
Lone mother family	2,562	2,565	2,429	2,452	2,535
Lone father family	381	344	386	400	430

Weijer et al., 2020). However, within the Edexcel textbook, there are 24 characters that either have, or use the character 海 (Hǎi) in, their name. 14 of these characters have between one to three gender markers marking them as male, 4 as female, and 6 where there were no gender markers to determine gender. Three characters had both female and male gender markers; ‘Zhāng Hǎi’ (who is only identified verbally and has no written appearance within the texts) and 李大海 (Lǐ Dàhǎi) had equal male and female gender markers, whereas 陈海 (Chén Hǎi) had two male to one female gender markers. Of the 6 ungendered, the two named 小海 (Xiǎohǎi) and third named 王海 (Wáng Hǎi) all share the same name with other characters marked with male gender markers. The given name 小海 (Xiǎohǎi) is also used in both Jìn bù 1 and 2 textbooks, and both instances are gender-marked as male. Little additional information is given that could link these characters as a singular person. 李海兰 (Lǐ Hǎilán) also shares the same name with another character markers with female gender markers. Additionally, like 张海丽 (Zhāng Hǎilì), both characters have a two-character given name, the second characters of which are associated with beauty, elegance, and flowers, likely suggesting these characters are both female (Van de Weijer et al., 2020).

刘海 (Liú Hǎi) is the final character with an undetermined gender. However, with a majority (64.3%) of overall characters from across the four textbooks using 海 (Hǎi) as a given name, are gender-marked as male, alongside the existence of Hǎi’s girlfriend likely reinforcing a default cisgendered-heterosexual notion, it is highly likely that 刘海 (Liú Hǎi) is intended as a male character.

Secondly, Most commonly associated in Chinese with the capital of a country, 京 (Jīng) in Chinese naming conventions commonly appears as a last name, yet its position within the name suggests it is the given name of the character (Edwards, 2006). While not a common Chinese given name, a similar sounding name, 静 (jìng) meaning ‘quiet’, is often identified as a feminine name, alongside research showing both the vowel /i/ and first and second voiced tones of Mandarin Chinese largely tending towards female names (Van de Weijer et al., 2020). The name ‘Jing’ only appears in three of the textbooks (Jìn bù 1 and 2 and Edexcel), with 赵京 (Zhào Jīng) in the Edexcel textbook being the only one to use the high, flat first tone. Of the ten instances of this name, aside from the one mentioned, six use the rising second tone, with the final three being written in English without tonal markers. Only three of the ten have no gender determining factors, with the remaining seven all with between one and three gender markers suggesting they are female. With all this in mind, and the addition of 赵京 (Zhào Jīng) being presented as going with their boyfriend to Taiwan last spring, likely suggesting a default cisgendered-heterosexual character, it is highly likely that they are intended to be a female character.

5.4. Prohibitive Considerations

Considering Section 28 was only in effect in England until 2003 (Moran, 2001), and the earliest of these textbooks being published in 2010 (see: Jìn bù 1 (Years 7-8): Zhu, X., Bin, Y. (2010)), there is limited information to suggest this legislation had any effect on the publication and its lack of representation. However, further interviews with the authors may help to identify any potential influence this legislation had on their processes.

China’s attitude towards queerness may be a prohibitive factor worth further consideration for research and exploration. From Chinese families’ considerations of the topic of sexuality as taboo (Ulep, 2011) and the stretched-kinship between queer children and their parents (Wei, 2023), to queer research constrained by barriers (Cui, 2023) alongside a lack of protective laws and national political discourse on LGBT+ matters (Jeffreys, 2017). There is a range of personal, sociological, and legislative pressures that may inhibit an author’s, or even communities’, welcoming of such inclusive practices. Three of the studied textbooks, while also written, published, and produced in the UK, are also reviewed by the Peking University School of Chinese as a Second Language. Given the aforementioned points, it is likely that this may act as a deterring factor in the inclusion of queer representation.

However, with the growing community of queer individuals and families and its inclusion within Chinese media (Bao, 2021), there is evidence of growing acceptance of queer individuals, especially within families (Wei, 2023), in addition to the Chinese government accepting recommendations from the Human Rights Council of the United Nations to establish anti-discrimination laws for LGBT people (Jeffreys, 2017). These alone point towards a slow, yet moving, progression forward and a greater likelihood of the acceptance of the publication of more inclusive Mandarin Chinese language textbooks in the future.

Another prohibitive aspect for consideration would be the rising costs of textbooks (Nicholls, 2009) in line with the stretching of school budgets and funding (Williams & Grayson, 2018) reducing likelihood of publishing updated and/or revised versions. However, with an emphasis away from print and towards digital resourcing, would allow publishers greater freedom to adapt and localise content (Benson-Armer et al., 2014), with the possibility of schools reducing textbook costs by up to 50% (Wiley et al., 2012). This is something language textbook publishers have already begun implementing (Pearson, 2024).

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, this study has shown that Mandarin Chinese language learning textbooks in the UK erase the existence of queer people within their pages through the systematic lack of any explicit or implicit representation of characters, relationships, families or themes. This only furthers the notion of a default cisgendered-heterosexual student, even as all four textbooks are written and published in the West. With the absence of any representation of queer people, it now comes down to the educator to create and/or include queer representation if they feel necessary. For a subject area that often attracts queer individuals (Moore, 2019), and is currently undergoing changes with regards to the curriculum for GCSEs taught in 2024 (Cazzoli, 2022), it is paramount that teachers in the UK are given the tools to accurately and effectively represent queer individuals and families, including the use of published material by textbook publishers. As Hoffman and Delahanty (2021) found, queer participants valued the representation of queer content regardless of its reliable queer representations of themselves. Similarly, literature emphasising the visibility and inclusion of queer people and topics as a part of, not separate from, society and education (Pinar, 2003; Shlasko, 2005; Wermers & Lunn, 2018). Highlighting this lack of

representation serves to allow publishers to engage with the transformation of material to include a more diverse representation of individuals beyond the perceived heteronormative.

6.1. Implications and Further Studies

Further studies into historical figures, such as Mulan, with regards to cultural sensitivities and societal and cultural norms at those times, would help to identify historical accounts of queer identity and culture. This ultimately could assist in representation of queer people as then sources can draw upon these historical figures as examples of queer peoples, to assist in supporting representation of queer people, relationships, and identities.

Utilising this methodology to investigate a wider analysis through a queer lens at textbooks within other Modern Foreign Languages, could provide further scope on how queer individuals are represented within school textbooks. Additionally, where perhaps changes could occur to include authentic representation within these areas, but also to provide a wider reaching understanding of queer themes within MFL that may be present in more queer-accepting languages.

Publishers become held accountable for being culturally responsive to the growing population of queer individuals both within Western societies, but also within the Global Majority to provide representation for the diverse peoples of the world. In no way this paper suggesting a replacement of cisgendered heterosexual representation, but rather a reduction at the rate of cisgendered heterosexual representation that serves to reinforce a cisgendered heteronormative default, to ultimately explore the lives and experiences of a variety of individuals alongside their cisgendered heterosexual counterparts.

It is of worth to note that this methodology only assesses the explicit representation of queer characters and relationships. While there is general understanding that there may be implicit characteristics, the author feels that relying on these too heavily could perpetuate stereotypes, but also undermine the understanding that queerness comes in all shapes and forms. That to reduce queerness to a series of identifying stereotypes would do more harm than benefit. The researcher also feels that justifying representation through implicit characteristics only furthers the erasure of queer peoples, relationships, and themes and justifies the use of 'queer baiting' within educational material.

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Statement of Integrity

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Declan Arden: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Mershen Pillay:** Supervision.

Supplementary materials

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