

Reading the Rotten: A Textual Analysis of Chinese *Danmei* and *Dan'gai*

by

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Duke University

Date: March 25, 2021

Approved:

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The concerns and questions in this paper are predicated on what have happened during the past three years in the field of Chinese *danmei* culture. I notice that, on the one hand, the state is cracking down on *danmei* fans' erotic writing by punishing creators who produce "yinhui" works and depriving them of or imposing stringent censorship on media platforms where *danmei* fans share their works; on the other hand, the banned *danmei* dramas adapted from popular original novels are adjusted into "*dan'gai* dramas" to reenter the mainstream market and in this tends, several works have received huge commercial success. Juxtaposing these two phenomena, I divided the paper into two chapters to analyze two groups of texts – the *danmei* erotica which are criminalized or stigmatized by the discourse of "yinhui seqing" and the adapted *dan'gai* drama and its original novel which are permitted and consumed in the market. By closely reading these texts and examining how they interact with media theory, gender/queer theory, and literary criticism, I indicate the disruptive and subversive potential of *danmei* culture and unpack multiple contesting forces in this field to show the complexity, possibilities, and predicaments of *danmei*.

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Introduction

Stories: This is How I Learned about Sex

Let me start this paper about stories and storytelling with some personal stories. When I was young as a middle school student, one day I went to the Xinhua bookstore in my hometown, a small county in China. A friend was waiting for me here and this was the place where we always met. On that day, she took out a magazine having the content of Boys' Love (BL) manga on the shelf of literature, showed that to me, and introduced me what is BL, what is *gong* and *shou*. This was my first time encountering this culture and I responded by "wow, this's cool!" without any resistance or repulsion, even it seemed that, or perhaps because, what she just said to me did not conform to the romance pattern that I usually saw on television or read on books. It seemed that a new world was opening in front of me and something beyond my limited imagination could happen. She also told me that she made an internet friend after she joined a QQ group constituted by fans of this magazine. Then, naturally, I became a friend with her internet friend as well and we even wrote and sent hand-writing letters, which needed to travel from one Chinese province to the other, to communicate with each other later. After that day in the bookstore shortly, the net friend, who became my instructor in exploring this mysterious field, sent me a real person slash fiction (RPS) featuring a male/male pairing from the Japanese boys' band KAT-TUN to give me the first taste of BL. Even now I still remember that after only several lines of the story's beginning, a highly explicit sex scene description

between the two male characters started with very vivid details and fierce intensity. Totally took me off guard. A first-year middle school student. Now I may have the theoretical language to abstract interesting analytical points from this experience: how the development of BL culture in China was to some extent contributed by the popularity of youth magazines at that time; how knowledge is produced and transferred within communities of a more horizontal structure; how taboos are broken in this subculture field to empower women as the suppressed objects of sex, and so on. But at that time, aside from feeling astonished as a person growing up in a conservative environment towards sex, what I thought was that I learned something that I was always confused about: the penetration. This is how men use their genitals in lovemaking and this should be why the mother sleeps with the father can get pregnant while that the child sleeps on the same bed with the parents would not cause the same result – a heteronormative understanding of sexual activities and reproduction but this is what my parents would not tell me.

There was another impressive moment that is relevant to the topic here. Still at middle school, one day I and my classmate – also my friend with whom I shared my “knowledge” of BL – went to the small store on campus, maybe to buy some snacks when we were having our class break. What was special on that day was that we noticed there were several fanzines of the K-pop boys’ band Super Junior on one table of that small store. Then we opened it and what we saw were descriptions about how the character A flirts with the character B and then falls into the arms of the latter. Felt stunned again. Same-sex romance of real figures found in the store on campus. We

both agreed that the owners of the store, who were older adults at our parents' age probably had not realized what was in these books and brought them into the campus without further concerns. Faces brushed but with excitement. We immediately bought and brought them back to the classroom, secretly, as we believed we were the minority in this school who knew what those things actually were. Although it needs more research to confirm if the environment for fanzines publication and circulation was more friendly at that time than the current moment, this story already shows the fissure in heterosexual hegemony which suddenly appeared in my life beyond the supervision of adults and the school.

However, if we return back to the recent years of China and see what *danmei* erotica and fan fiction writing faces, a different storyline will unfold – a storyline full of anger, anxiety, resistance, and plenty of vexing questions.

Historical Moments: A Curious Juxtaposition

This is the migration on platforms for posting fan fiction that I experienced in the past decades: Le quyuan forum — blog — theme forums (Zongheng dao, Suiyuan ju, television forums, etc) — Baidu Post Bar — the Pink Jinjiang (7 Zone, 36 Zone, using “translator for Buddhist texts” for erotic contents) — Bulao ge — Lofter — AO3 — posing pictures and links on Weibo. Don't know where will be the next one. Like homeless migratory birds. Every habitat only has a life of several years. A real exile (@Du Shao).

Largely influenced by Japanese manga and anime as well as American television series and slash fiction, Chinese BL culture is usually called as *danmei* (耽美 indulging in beauty) by its fans.¹ BL or *danmei* refers to male/male romance which is usually considered as primarily produced and consumed by women. Boys' Love is the English translation of Japanese *shōnen ai* culture that was at first nourished by English rock stars and bands, such as David Bowie, Queen, and T-Rex, and the American hippie movement (amuro_1985). Yang Ling notes that, compared to Japanese *shōnen ai* focusing on manga and anime, similar culture in America more surrounds television series at its early stage (“tongren” 46). The Emergence of slash fan fiction can be traced back to the popularity of the 1970s American scientific television series and the 1970s buddy shows featured by the friendship between two male leads, especially Star Trek and Starsky & Hutch (46). The term “slash” in “Real Person Slash (RPS)” originated in the fandoms of these two dramas: for example, fans use the tag “K/S” to remind their readers that the stories are about the love affair between the actor Kirk and Spock while the tag “K&S” suggests stories of friendship (amuro_1985). The term “slash fans” correspondingly refers to fans who favor same-sex relationships between fictional characters in original works or real actors. RPS fiction means fans' writing which uses real celebrities as their objects. The Chinese term *danmei* originated in the Japanese word *tanbi* which denotes one characteristic aesthetics of *shōnen ai* culture: “pure and spiritual aspect of the relationship, depicting it through ‘highly formalized’ artistic codes” (Bauer 81). Meanwhile, the category of

danmei covers both original fiction (原耽) and slash fan fiction (同人 tongren) including RPS.

The 1990s is a significant turning point due to the expansion of the Internet, which engendered three major changes in BL culture as transnational cultural convergence: First, Japanese manga and anime started to flow into the western fandoms and further prompts the spontaneous unofficial translation and “misinterpretation” of the western fans (Sabucco). Second, Chinese tongren emerged and initially engaged with Japanese manga and animation (Yang “tongren” 46). Lastly, how this culture was disseminated was diversified in cyber scape, while, before, fans mainly exploited print media, such as fanzines and mails, to share their works and communicate with each other. Hence, fans possessed more options in terms of the subjects that they would consume. The comparatively isolated and small groups in the pre-Internet era also gained the potential for expanding into more heterogenous and interactive cyber communities.

However, if we look at more recent China, the fan’s account of her personal history of migrating from one platform to another in order to share *danmei* fan fiction at beginning of this session demonstrates the short life of these Chinese online platforms. Several significant incidents that happened in China in the past three years also suggest the more and more restricted environment of danmei erotica writing and publishing.

In 2018, the *danmei* writer Tian Yi (pen name), whose book *Gongzhan* (攻占, Attack and Occupy) sold 7000 copies and earned her 150,000 RMB, was sentenced to

10 years in prison for committing the crime of “producing pornography for making profits” (制作淫秽物品牟利罪). In 2019, another female writer of original *danmei* novels, Shenhai Xiansheng (pen name), was found guilty, by the court, of “conducting illegal business” (非法经营罪) – that is, of illegally producing and selling her books. She was sentenced to 4 years in prison. Because one needs to apply for registration numbers, which are very limited every year, in order to legally distribute books to the public in China, and Shenhai Xiansheng and her team evaded this process – and consequently, evaded the censorship of the Chinese government – her books were published and sold illegally. While both of the authors cooperated with online Taobao stores to publish their works, Shenhai Xiansheng was charged with a different crime from Tian Yi because the court judged the former’s works to be “*seqing*” (色情, erotic) rather than “*yinhui*” as Tian Yi’s novel is defined (淫秽, obscene/pornographic) (Yuan).

If we have a closer look at the legal article 367 in Chinese criminal law which draws the line between what is “*yinhui*” and what is not, we will see that a hierarchy regarding the “value” of different works is established: “If literary and artistic works having artistic value have *seqing* content, they would not be considered as *yinhui* products.” (“PRC Criminal Law”).² In her book *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, Jonna Russ points out that assuming one absolute aesthetic value and prioritizing one kind of sexual expression of ‘normal’ sexuality over others is one way to prohibit women from writing (146-8). Other difficulties faced by women that she discusses in this book, such as lack of models and responses, can exactly be – if not addressed

fully, but at least – mitigated in the *danmei* field where women are the major writers and readers and form communities to respond to, acknowledge, support, and set successful models for each other. Furthermore, the concept of “yinhui” not only establishes a hierarchy of writing of sex but also stigmatizes sex – which is particularly connoted by the term “hui” (秽, dirty/licentious). The binary opposition of jiejing/chunjie (洁净/纯洁, clean/pure) and wuhui/angzang (污秽/肮脏, dirty) constructs people’s attitudes towards sex and generates a sense of shame when people engage in “improper sex,” which appear in all the *danmei* erotica analyzed in the next chapter. Yet, while *danmei* erotica struggles with binary constructions as such, the act of writing and sharing erotica itself challenges and breaks the sex taboo that requires women to speak about sex in a “proper” way and confine their desire into a “safe zone” (Vance 3-4).

However, in addition to creating barriers to disseminate *danmei* works through physical books, last year, the state also cracked down on the other major way that *danmei* fans share their writing and form communities – posing things on online fan fiction platforms. The Chinese government blocked its domestic access to the fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own (AO3) on February 29th. As one cyberspace for transnational convergence of fandoms, AO3 is an online community as well as a nonprofit database for fans and their works. In terms of users’ amount, Chinese users ranked the top 10 in AO3 among all users worldwide (Chen). Confronted with the strict internet censorship in mainland China, many *danmei* authors would post their

works, especially those having explicit sexual depictions, on AO3 which has developed a full-fledged rating system.

This blocking incident was triggered by fandom conflicts between anti-slash fans and slash fans. Wang Yibo/Xiao Zhan has become the most popular man-man pairing in China after they starred in the *dan'gai* series *the Untamed* in 2019. One of their slash fans MaiLeDiDiD wrote a RPS titled *Xiazhui* (下坠, Fall Down) in which Xiao Zhan is depicted as a “transgender” sex worker who performs as a woman while Wang Yibo is an underage high school student living in the brothel as the nephew of the place’s owner. Irritated by the novel’s character premise and plot, Xiao Zhan’s anti-slash fans reported this RPS and the two platforms AO3 and Chinese microblogging media Lofter where the story was posted, to the Chinese government. The reason they utilized for reporting is that this novel has infringed on the celebrity’s image and minors’ mental health by its “yinhui seqing” depictions of prostitution and sexual activities of the minor (Fig. 1). Threatened by the reporting, many subculture communities allied with each other to resist Xiao Zhan’s fans as well as Xiao Zhan himself. Exploded flame war could not prevent the intervention of brutal state power. AO3 was finally banned in China.

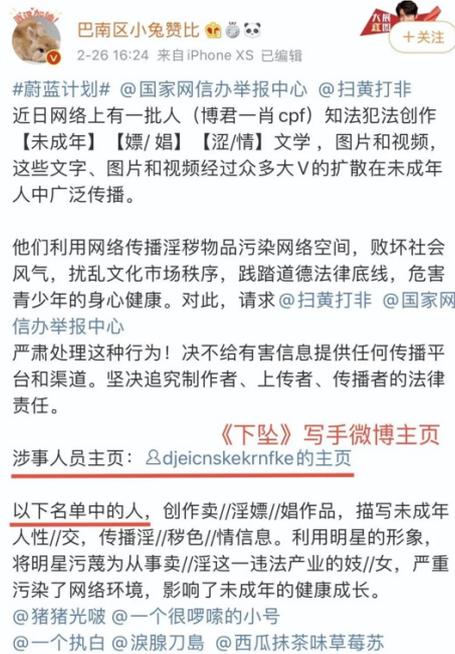


Fig. 1: A weibo post of reporting template from the anti-slash fan who led and organized this report

On the other hand, the commercial success of *The Untamed* and its two leading actors exemplifies that *danmei* fans have become a niche market for web drama adaptation in recent years. This cultural trend started in 2014 and the web drama *Addicted* in 2016 adapted from the novel *Niya shangyin le?* (你丫上瘾了, Are you Addicted) written by Chai Jidan was the first *danmei* drama that became a hit among *danmei* consumers. However, in February 2016, when there remained three episodes of the drama to be aired, all the domestic platforms where this series was streamed removed all the previously released episodes without offering any official explanation. This became a historical turning point after which all the web dramas adapted from *danmei* novels have to self-censor in the first place and adjust their homoerotic contents into what fans joke as “socialist brotherhood” (社会主义兄弟情) (Li and Ng 486). And fans categorize this new type of drama as *dan'gai* (耽改 *danmei* to be adjusted) dramas to differ it from *danmei* dramas produced before the

2016 Addicted incident which have explicit same-sex erotic expression. Those *dan'gai* dramas usually feature two male leads without assigning to them heterosexual romance but highlighting and promoting the interaction between the two. Because these works are always adapted from popular *danmei* novels, the majority of the audience would have the assumption about the “special” but unspeakable relationship between the two male protagonists. Promotion teams and fans would both produce their works to compensate for the lost homosexual dynamics in dramas.

Guardian (镇魂) aired in 2018 and *the Untamed* (陈情令) in 2019 are two *dan'gai* dramas received phenomenal popularity in Mainland China and abroad. According to Zhan'ge Ni, the writers of the *danmei* novels from which the dramas are adapted, Priest and Moxiang Tongxiu, belong to the new generation of authors in the post-2014 Jinjiang Literature City (Ni). In May 2015, Jinjiang's *danmei* writer Zhangzhe chibang de da huilang (长着翅膀的大灰狼 Winged Wolf) is convicted of the same crime as Tian Yi – producing pornography for making profits (Peng). To react to the state policing, the platform changed the name of its *danmei* section into “chun'ai” (纯爱 pure love) and locked novels with erotic contents overnight (Ni). Jinjiang also stopped its service of publishing illegal *gerenzhi* (个人志 personal books) with their contracted authors this year (Ni). Meanwhile, Ni points out that such purification brought a different direction for the authors of the *chun'ai* generation: “unlike *danmei* writers of the earlier decade who mostly wrote out of personal interests and for interpersonal communication, the new generation is fortunate to have been able to make money by clicks, prints, and most significantly, selling copyrights”

(Ni). Priests and Moxiang Tongxiu are celebrity authors in Jinjiang who have published their books in mainland China through formal press and sold copyrights of more than one of their works.

Apart from these two works received massive commercial success, there are another two dramas worthy of attention here. *S.C.I. Mystery* (S.C.I.谜案集) in 2018 is the first *dan'gai* drama adapted from a *danmei* fan fiction -- Er Ya's *S.C.I. Mystery Season 1* featuring the two characters Zhan Zhao and Bai Yutang who are originated from the *Qing* novel *Sanxia Wuyi* (三侠五义 Three Heros and Five Gallants) (Hu and Wang 2). The slash fandom of this pairing was established because of the 1994 Taiwanese TV drama *Qixia Wuyi* adapted from the *Qing* novel. But the *dan'gai* drama renames the characters and changes them into original figures (2). *Winter Begonia* (鬓边不是海棠红) in 2020 adapted from Shuiru Tianer's *danmei* novel with the same title is the first *dan'gai* drama which was aired on Television. It was also shortlisted for the Bai yulan Award of the 26th Shanghai TV Festival and nominated in four categories. As a period drama set in Beiping of the 1930s, *Winter Begonia's* themes of "protecting the family and defending the nation" (保家卫国) and "revitalizing the quintessence of Chinese culture – Beijing Opera" (振兴国粹京剧) to some extent suggest why this work can appear on the platform with more institutional recognition and receive mainstream support. On the other hand, compared to other *dan'gai* dramas using young male actors, *Winter Begonia* deploys already established actors. So far, at least 70 *danmei* novels have sold their copyrights and await to be dramatized or filmized (Wang). Therefore, fans call 2021 the year of "*dan'gai* 101" in

Mainland China, an exaggerated way to describe how saturated this market would be by borrowing the title of the Korean talent show Produce101 which recruits more than 100 contestants for the audiences to vote for a final debut.

Hence, we can see a curious juxtaposition within the field of *danmei*: on the one hand, suffering state policing, the cyberspace for *danmei* erotica writing is continuously shrinking. To publish their work and share with other fans in the community, writers have to consider the risk of being punished by the state; on the other hand, a certain amount of *danmei* works and *danmei* consumers' demands are already captured by media capital. Such interests bring more *danmei* works into the mass market and enable them to receive more visibility and reach broader audience, even by crossing the national boundaries, at the price of their self-purification or appropriation by mainstream ideology such as nationalism. The suppression of “*yinhui seqing*” expression and the allowance for the de-erotized “socialist brotherhood” shows a demarcation between what is improper and what is not from the state's perspective but with very ambiguous or even unspoken and arbitrary criteria. In this sense, this paper is divided into two chapters to explore gender (re)construction, desire expression, and subject formation in these two parts of current *danmei* culture – the prohibited and the permitted.

Reading the Rotten

For the first chapter, I analyze three *danmei* erotica which are involved in the significant incidents mentioned above and considered as either *yinhui* or *seqing* –

“morally rotten” – by the state or fan groups: *Gongzhan* by Tian Yi, *Desaluo Renyu* (德萨罗人鱼 Desharow Merman) by Shenhai Xiansheng, and *Xiazhui* by MaiLeDiDiDi. In this chapter, I propose to read these fictions as the queer transformation projects which first expose the problematics of those male protagonists, such as homophobia and misogyny, and then utilize “se” – the homosexual impulse in the *danmei* context here – as a powerful force to lead the problematic men to transform into more queer subjects. The chapter brings two axes – pornography produced from and for the male perspective and two Ming erotic novellas – to highlight certain features of these *danmei* texts by comparison. Furong Zhuren’s *Chipози zhuan* (痴婆子传 Memoir of a Crazy Old Woman) and Huayang Sanren’s *Ruyi junzhuan* (如意君传 Lord of Perfect Satisfaction) are two Ming novellas regarded by their English translators as “perhaps the earliest pieces of erotic fiction in both Chinese and world literature” (Guisso and Hu 1). These two novellas are similar to the *danmei* erotica selected here in a sense that the gender dynamics in all of them demonstrate a structure of imitating the male dominance/female subjugation pattern in a reversed way. There is also a difference between the novellas and the *danmei* novels. While the novellas directly express female sexuality and engage in heterosexual relationships, *danmei*’s representation of female desire is more circuitous. The circuitry is not only exemplified by female fans’ “displacement” on male bodies and male homosexual romance. I also incorporate the “fuwei-nisu” writing showcased by *Xiazhui* and the rape fantasy in *Gongzhan* and *Desaluo Renyu* to amplify such circuitry. On the other hand, by comparing them with male-dominated

pornography, I examine how these *danmei* erotica actually do not enable readers to escape from but rather still struggle and indulge in the heteronormative pressure in the fantastical world, and how some perspectives in the *danmei* works, again, imitate male gaze but in a reversed manner. In this sense, *danmei* writing has the effect of “yidu gongdu” (以毒攻毒 using the toxic to attack the toxic): by imitating the toxic power asymmetry of the status quo, *danmei* fiction reveals the fictionality of gender performance; as Judith Butler argues in her book *Gender Trouble*, gender itself is imitation without an origin (188).

One common perception in *danmei* studies is that male/male romance offers female consumers who live in a heterosexist society a space to imagine a more equal relationship between two powerful subjects (Russ “Pornography by Women” 84). While the first chapter discovers that there are actually full of imbalanced relationships in the *danmei* erotica selected here and explores the disruptive or even subversive potential of these works, the second chapter switches to investigate a more idealized and balanced romance in – so far – the most popular *dan’gai* drama *The Untamed* and its original novel *Modao Zushi* (魔道祖师 the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation or Founder of Diabolism) by Moxiang Tongxiu. By raising the following questions, I hope to investigate the contesting forces within the story and the process of the drama’s reception and interpretation by different participants: first, what kinds of male ideals do the novel and drama create and how does such creation is embedded in a broader hierarchy of social order that regulates people’s behavior and relationships? Secondly, how does homoeroticism or *se/qing* in the novel further

forms the male subjects and demonstrates a destructive potential of the horizontal relationship between the two characters to challenge the vertical patriarchal structure of suppression? Lastly, after *se* is deleted from the drama and *qing* between the two characters is adjusted into an unspeakable but implicitly tangible representation, what is the divergence between the novel and the drama in terms of their subject formation and world values, what kinds of mainstream ideology do such divergence expose, and how do the official media and fans interpret the subtexts of the drama differently? This chapter's answers to these questions show how *danmei* is a cultural field of back-and-forth that converges multiple tensions. While the same-sex desire in the novel becomes the subversive force to depart the subjects from the patriarchal and bureaucratic system, the "socialist brotherhood" in the drama is legitimized by the force of returning which restrains the subjects by moral responsibilities and heroic aspiration. In terms of interpretation, state media appropriates the mainstream values and disregards personal desire in the drama to make it serve for nationalist projects; by contrast, fans' reading of the drama's homosexual subtexts moves toward an opposite direction by highlighting the interpersonal connections and individual sentiments conveyed by the drama in an affective way.

To sum up, while the majority of academic discussions about the gender expression in *danmei* and slash fiction surrounds media and fan studies, this paper intend to offer examples and amply this heterogeneous cultural field by digging into specific texts and explore what exactly those so-call "rotten" writers, readers, and consumers are romanticizing and struggling with in fictional worlds. And these two

different groups of texts also reveal how *danmei*, as a domain of pleasure and struggle, encounters multiple contesting tensions when confronting self-censoring and state policing. On the other hand, from the *danmei* erotica negotiating with sexual violence, guilt, shame, and pain suffered by women in a heterosexist society to the *dan'gai* drama visualizing women's imagination of male ideals and a more equal relationship, it seems that these "morally erosive" texts denied and criminalized by the state engage more deeply with the experience that is specific to woman as a gender construction than the narrative captured by capitals and recognized by state censorship. Yet, pointing out this possible trend from *danmei* erotica which is pushed into the margin to the *dan'gai* drama that is brought into the consumption center, I would not deny that the act of participating in the *dan'gai* interpretation itself is the new experience of women to affirm their subjectivity and express their voice.

Finally, as a paper discussing a field where fans' agency plays a crucial role in creation, it is a pity that it does not incorporate more voices from the fans' side because of its methodological limitation of a textual analysis. But as the auto-ethnographic stories imply at the outset of this introduction, I hope to point out my position as an aca-fan in this field. My trajectory of encountering *danmei* culture influences but also limits my point of view. And I also brought in several fan-coined concepts, such as *nisu*, *fuwei*, and socialist brotherhood, and fans' comments to highlight their creativity which is helpful for academic analysis. What I observe in fan activities and fan discussion diffused on different platforms in cyberspace has largely shaped the concerns and interests of this paper.

Chapter 1 Queer-Transformation Project: Body, Reversed Imitation, and Circuitous Desire in *Danmei* Erotica

Introduction

What makes *danmei* interesting, at least partly, is the so-called women's "displacement" of their desire onto male/male romance. This is not an uncommon statement to rationalize such displacement: "women need to resort to men, particularly male bodies and male homosexual romance, to experience more equal relationships which are not available for the former in heterosexual power relations." For instance, in her influential article "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love," Joanna Russ highlights the feminist significance of slash fiction and claims that slash fiction's focus on two males as subjects is because "it is more noble" (86). Carola Bauer indicates that Russ's "blatant delight regarding slash fiction" in this article needs to be understood in the historical context of the "anti-pornography/anti-anti-pornography" debates in the late 1970s and early 1980s of America (49). To respond to the debates, Russ intends to differentiate between "a feminist, morally superior, anti-hierarchical erotica" and "a phallic, sexist, male, hierarchical and potentially violent pornography" (Bauer 52). However, as Bauer points out, such romanticization of slash fiction neglects the violent and sexist elements in this type of writing and holds an essentialist tone which assumes a unified womanhood of the writers and readers (52). Meanwhile, Russ's assertion that writing males as the subjects of the erotica/romance is more noble also reflects a misogynist perception and inevitably reproduces the socially constructed power asymmetry of men as the powerful and women as the powerless.

But can *danmei* works be misogynist? My answer would be “Yes.” In her book *Misogyny*, the Japanese sociologist Ueno Chizuko contends that there is no reason to deny the claim that “feminists can also be misogynist” (233). According to Ueno, this is because: first, misogyny is so embedded in the society where women inhabit that no one can be immune to it; secondly, if there existed women who were not infected by misogyny, then feminism for them would merely be “tools for reforming the society” rather than “thoughts for self-liberation,” and feminist struggle would be “imposing justice on Other” by these non-misogynists (233). Borrowing Ueno’s hypothesis and predicted on my observation, I want to admit, at the beginning of this chapter, that fans and critics of *danmei* can always easily find traces of misogyny in this cultural sphere dominated by women. Nevertheless, one intention of this chapter is to some degree to alter the way of articulating such sexist “symptom” found in *danmei* texts and show *danmei*’s intricate “treatment” of misogyny in the fantastical world.

Ueno points out that the essential inquiry of her research on misogyny is “what is man?” Evoking the theory of Masahiro Morioka, she states that misogyny is manifested by not merely men’s hatred for women and women’s self-hatred but also men’s self-hatred which has two dimensions: men’s self-negation and contempt for “body” (233-4). Such contempt prompts men to detach the body from the self and otherize it. Under the binary construction of “subject and object,” “mind and body,” women are deemed as the object of body while men as the subject of mind dominating body. This logic generates another dichotomy of “pure/dirty (干净 ganjing/肮脏 angzang)” which forms the shame towards sex and penetrates the *danmei* texts I will

investigate; carnal desire is perceived as inferior and dirty and can only be satisfied by women who are inferior to men (235). This demarcation between “sexually pure and contaminated” has another variation regarding people’s judgment of women as “madonna sexism” and “whore sexism” proposed by Timothy Beneke (qtd. in Lin, 122-3). Therefore, otherizing body, inferiorizing women, and stigmatizing sex indeed reinforce men’s self-hatred. Ueno also indicates that men’s self-hatred has two symptoms – hating for “being man” and hating for “not being man enough”; the latter suggests a horror generated by “deviating from the masculine normative” (Ueno 235). Ueno’s unpacking of these two symptoms echoes with Lin Fangmei’s contentions in her research on adult movies. Pornography dominated by male-perspective reproduces similar binary demarcations: female characters are represented as the desirable object of sex while male characters/producers/audiences position themselves as the subject whose bodies are undesirable and whose substance is absent (Lin 115). As Gary Day argues, because women are deprived of their “voice” and what they express is what is accepted and demanded by the patriarchal culture, adult movies create a “loop of solipsism” of men: “male desire desires to be desired by male desire” (qtd. in Lin, 96-7) Within this loop, men affirm not only their empty subjectivity but also masculinity by fabricating their capability for bringing orgasm – in their version – to women (Lin 96-7).

Both Ueno’s and Lin’s research reveal how “otherizing body” is closely related to the problematics of “men as the subject.” Meanwhile, Bauer indicates that while men’s interest in “lesbian” porn is taken as normal and does not draw enough attention

from scholars, the academia's excessive investigation of why women could be interested in writing male/male erotica emphasizes the "abnormalcy" of women's "displacement," which is symptomatic of sexism. Therefore, I wish, by following the train of thought of Ueno and Lin, to shift the "problematic subject" in *danmei* research from absent women to those present men in the texts. In other words, this chapter intends to explore possible ways to read *danmei* as texts which do not expose women's self-hatred and women's desire for experiencing the world as a man but provide space for women to "treat" men's self-hatred and imagine men's desire for "being a woman."

On the other hand, Ueno and Lin both highlight "body" as one essential code to interrogate the complex web of gender inequality. While body and bodily experience are the primary focus of erotica, the Chinese words for this writing genre demonstrate a similar dichotomy to the one between body and mind investigated by Ueno. "色情 seqing" and "情色 qingse," although the nuance of their connotations still awaits further discussion, both consist of two components: "se" and "qing," which seems to imply an inseparability between these two components in Chinese erotica. There can be various ways to interpret the concepts of "se" and "qing" and their complicated relationship. In this chapter I would limit "se" to carnal pleasure and "qing" to sentiments. Five female-perspective erotica will be analyzed in the following sessions, including two Ming novellas – Furong Zhuren's *Chipozi zhuan* and Huayang Sanren's *Ruyijun zhuan*– and three Contemporary *danmei* fictions –Tian YI's *Gongzhan*, Shenhai Xiansheng's *Desaluo Renyu*, and MaiLeDiDiDi's *Xiazhui*. Interestingly, all of these texts have manifested a logic deviating from the normative perception that "qing"

underlies and legitimatizes the pleasant experience of “se.” In these fictions, instead, “se” arouses “qing” and plays the leading role in the relationships between characters.

Yet, noticeably, the representation of desire in the two Ming novellas and the three *danmei* fictions is quite distinct. While these texts all depict sex scenes in a rather explicit way, the characters’ acceptance of their sexual impulse and pleasure in the *danmei* fictions is less direct than that in the Ming novellas. Such “indirectness,” and what I will propose as “circuitry,” is what enables these *danmei* novels to confound the brutally constructed binary oppositions regarding gender norms and complicates the way that “women ‘displace’ their desire on male homosexual romance.” The “indirectness” of desire writing in *danmei* is embodied not merely at the two superficial levels of “displacement”—female writers express desire through male bodies and male homosexuality. This chapter will diversify the “indirectness” and “circuitry” of *danmei* by discussing “nisu” (泥塑 to feminize) and “fuwei” (腐唯 rotten girl-solo stan) perspective in the fan fiction *Xiazhui*, and the subgenre “qiangzhi ai” (强制爱 forced love/rape romance) in the original *danmei* fictions *Gongzhan* and *Desaluo Renyu*. In the circuitous *danmei* narrative space, “se” functions as a force mediating multiple conflicts. Meanwhile, I hope to acknowledge the direct embracing of carnal pleasure in *Chipozi Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan* and explore what possibilities they provide for female storytelling if we consider writing sex is an act of empowering women in a society perceiving sex as taboo and shame.

Admittedly, two ways of reading *danmei* that I have proposed so far, namely problematizing “men as subject” and examining the circuitry of desire, are inevitably

caught in multiple binary constructions, including men/women, masculinity/femininity, subject/object, body/mind, *se/qing*, heterosexual/homosexual, gong (攻, to attack or penetrator)/shou (受, to accept or receiver), and active/passive. However, rather than claiming these *danmei* fictions simply reproduces these constructions, I hope to propose a third way to interpret *danmei* by attending to the directionality of these binaries. In this sense, I wonder if *danmei* writing can become an act of reversal, to reverse the directions in these binary oppositions by mimicking, using Homi Bhabha's term, or parodying, in Judith Butler's sense, their asymmetry structures. In other words, if *danmei*'s construction of erotic romance does not necessarily depart from the heterosexual formula but "imitates" the latter, can we excavate something new from the discrepancy of "the almost similar but reversed"?

Overall, combining these three methods to read *danmei*, I intend to argue that, although the binarized mode of perceptions is deeply embedded in *danmei* writing, the fictions examined by this chapter show how their heterosexual male characters, after going through a process of circuiting, vacillating and struggling with their shame and pleasure, become a more queer subject. Consequently, *danmei* demonstrates its power to reverse the two poles of the binaries, disrupt the flow of gender norms, and challenge the authority of a "regulatory fiction" (Butler 192). It also accomplishes a fictional "queer transformation" of these self-hating, misogynist, and homophobic men.

After Reversing: Failed Sex and "Pleasure-Pain" Narrative

What is a passion? Passion is human nature stirred. Human nature, which

reveals itself in the form of passion as it is stirred up, is actually the embodiment of mind. If mind is not upright, human nature deviates, and when it deviates it is not longer restrained and controllable. Guided by a mind which is filled with desires and lacking restraints, passion will burst out, incontinent ... I have observed women of great passion. At the outset, their passion was no more than a single errant thought. However, once they pursued their inclinations, their desires knew no bounds. Some of them fell deeply in love with men who were much older or younger or who were related to them, or were their servants or clergymen. Insane with passion, they indulged themselves in carnal pleasure with no sense of shame or moral principle (Guisso and Hu, 77).

In this preface of *Chipozi Zhuan*, three interesting points are worthy of further attention. First, the narrator claims that “性 xing” is the origin of “情 qing.” R.W.L. Guisso and Lenny Hu translate “qing” as passion and “xing” as “human nature.” Yet, I wonder if we can misread “xing” as “sex” here, although their understanding as “human nature” seems more appropriate for the statement that “xing is actually the embodiment of mind.”¹ If “xing” refers to “sex,” or “carnal desire” here, then the opening argument of the novella would be: sentiment is always motivated by sexual impulse. Sexual desire generates sentiment; sentiment springs from sexual desire.² Prioritizing corporality of female experiences is precisely the theme of this erotica and the ensuing plots also exemplify such logic. When the young married lady imparts her sex knowledge to Shangguan E’nuo, the former asserts that how men and women came to “take pleasure” or have affection “with each other” started from coitus.³ Shangguan’s attachment to the

tutor Gu Deyin also is ignited by the unprecedented sexual satisfaction that the latter provides for her. Secondly, the preface states, “痴 chi” is a mentality caused by deviation (“偏 pian”) from the normative (“正 zheng”) which demands people to refrain themselves from their erotic instinct (“拘 ju,” “束 shu,” “遏 e”). Lastly, “chi” is quite apparent if a woman becomes so obsessed with one man that she decides to devote herself (both emotionally and bodily) only to him (“情有独钟 qingyou duzhong”) and abandons all the hierarchies and rules that she should obey. This claim echoes the scenario near the end of the novella that Shangguan declines to continue affairs with other men after she falls in love with Gu and abandons the hierarchy of the master and employee between them. Hence, we can infer that being normal (“正”) in the novella’s world demands that female not merely refrains from potentially unsatiable sexual desire and then dedicates herself to a sole man but also confines her desire to a certain “safe zone” that structured by multiple rules and hierarchies.

The female protagonist’s introspection and the author’s critique at the end of the novella also adopt a didactic tone to create a moral closure for this transgressional narrative. We can find similar strategies of balancing in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, in which the empress is empowered as a sexually active subject but depreciated by her fatuous political performance and jealous and cruel personality. However, such “balancing” may have undermined the radicalness of these erotica but not overshadow their female perspective and feminist significance. Both female protagonists in the novellas have retrieved women’s deprived ability to be an active subject to “see” and to desire while “the otherized body” is returned to those male characters who now become the object

of women's vision, judgment, and narration. Such reversal of the asymmetrical structure of "look" creates a counter-project to the male-perspective pornography critiqued by Lin Fangmei and the sexist cinema interrogated by Laura Mulvey. The focus of depictions in these novellas is to a large extent shifted from women's faces, legs, or breasts to men's penises and their performance in sexual activities. Although eroticism in these two novellas still highly surrounds the heteronormative pattern of penetration, their embracing of desire and pleasure and abandoning of the sense of guilt and shame are already a gesture to break the sex taboo and gender norms unequally imposed on women.

Inspired by Foucault's theory of sexuality, Ueno offers the concept of "eroticization of power" to refer to the combination of the erotic with asymmetrical power relations (218). In *Chipози Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan*, the sexual relationships between the female protagonists and other male characters exemplify this concept for that they are always located in certain kinds of hierarchy. Shangguan's confession of her illicit sexual liaison with twelve men ironically displays and transgresses those hierarchies:

When I was a maiden I was influenced by a young woman's words and slept with Huimin, which violated the relationships between cousins. Afterwards I seduced the slave, Jun, reducing myself to the status of a servant. After I was married, I slept with Yinglang and then was forced into intercourse with Datu, lowering once more my status as a mistress. I entered into incestuous liaisons with Father-in-law as well as with Elder Brother-in-law, and that violated the

relationship between in-laws. I was sexually intimate with Ketao, which also breached the relationship between in-laws. Copulation with Fei was another type of violation of the relationship between in-laws and by fornicating with an actor and two monks, I profaned my respected status as a lady. Taking Gu as my lover, in effect, equated me with my employee (Guisso and Hu 118).

The twelve relationships show the hierarchy between family members; masters and servants; patrons and performers; monks and people with comparatively high status; employers and employees. Noticeably, the relationships initiated voluntarily by Shangguan herself are always the one in which she occupies higher positions in the hierarchy, including that with cousin Humin and the Brother-in-law Fei (she as the elder sister), the servant Jun and Yinglang (she as the master), the actor Xiangchan (she as the patron), and the tutor Gu (she as the employer). Especially, in her affair with the Gu, Shangguan is the powerful and feeds Gu so fondly that renders Gu arrogant and begets the jealousy of other men.

The reversal of man-dominating/woman-subjugated is more drastic in *Ruyijun Zhuan*, which portrays the relationship between an empress and her male favorites. Power of an empress is coercive and oppressive so those men are willing or have to subordinate themselves to her. For example, when Xue Aocao is summoned by Wu Zetian, he attempts to decline the invitation by debasing himself as “not a worthy person” who “might profane the august virtue of her Majesty,” and considers it a shame if he “use[s]...sexual organ for social climbing” (Guisso and Hu 50). However, by saying that “do you think that you can fly so far and high as to leave the world,” the eunuch

Jinqing successfully forces him to subject to the sovereign's supreme power (50). It is also owing to such eroticizing of power that Wu names Xue after "Lord of Perfect Satisfaction," alters the reign-title, and grants him fortunes and high status, although Xue is depicted as an upright character who always declines the political awards.

Furthermore, if reversing the asymmetry is an act of imitating, then what will emerge from the difference between two seemingly similar structures? Borrowing the title of *Ruyijun Zhuan*, I want to point out that the two novellas share a similar scenario: after having liaisons with plenty of unsatisfying men, the female protagonist finally encounters her "lord of perfect satisfaction" who can fulfill her insatiable sexual desire. Before the appearance of this perfect lord, the female character has experienced multiple disappointing or failed sex with other men. The discrepancy between her expectation and the actual experience demystifies men's phallus. The negative experiences and feelings that these female protagonists encounter and suffer are what is unique in the female narrative but absent in male pornographic fantasy: her confusion, doubt, discontent, discomfort, repulsion, and, most importantly, pain. Take Shangguan's experience with her first sexual partner, the cousin Huimin, as an example. In this part, pain caused by penetration is the primary sensation persisting almost the entire depiction of their coitus. The narrator offers a detailed description of physical pains and it is until multiple times of intercourse – that Huimin insists and enjoys but Shangguan feels that she "has to accept" – that Shangguan ultimately obtains the pleasure.⁵

In her research, Lin points out that male-perspective pornography always

equates pains suffered by female characters with pleasure (95). Such “logic of pleasure” is manifested by adult movies’ scenario formula and actresses’ acting conventions: 1) the female character refuses the man by saying no; 2) the male character uses violence to force her to have sex with him and the female character shows painful and scared facial expressions; 3) the female character reaches her organism and feels satisfied at the end (91-92). In adult movies which do not have the plot of sexual abuse, actresses are also required to perform distorted facial expression and moan in pain (92). Lin argues that not necessarily all male-dominated pornography showcases women’s pain but, based on her survey, male audiences always do not perceive women’s pain in pornography as authentic (94-5). In other words, the meaning of women’s pain becomes women’s pleasure – “pain is pleasure but pleasure is not pain” (95). Lin calls this relationship between pain and pleasure as “unilateral conflation”: pain always slides into pleasure and is deprived of this substance, but pleasure never slides into pain and does not have its own reference (96-7).

By comparison, *Chipози Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan* recognize women’s pain and distinguish it from pleasure. By highlighting this, I do not intend to create a clear-cut or stable binary opposition but stress that the pain in these two novellas offers “a pain in female version”: it exposes the discrepancy between men and women’s experience of sex when the former enjoys the penetration but the latter does not; the unequal power in gender dynamics when men continue thrusting their penis into women’s vagina while women ask to stop; and the possibility of sex’s failure in erotica when women do not receive orgasm or get satisfied.

The novellas also demonstrate various relationships between pain and pleasure. For instance, under some circumstances, pain vanishes and pleasure arrives: after having sex for several times with Huimin, Shangguan finally “suffered no pain and began to enjoy it” (Guisso and Hu, 90). Sometimes pleasure fades and the pain returns: in one scene portraying the sex between Wu Zetian and Xue Aocao, Wu “[felt] a sudden twinge in the very center of her delight” (55). Pleasure and pain coexist in the intercourse of Shangguan and her Elder Brother-in-law Keshe: Shangguan “realized then that pain was perhaps inevitable for heightened enjoyment, and therefore permitted him to thrust as hard as he wished until he exploded” (99). On the other hand, pleasure influences Shangguan’s perception of rape and adultery. In her old age, when Shangguan is retrospectively confessing her sexual liaisons with the twelve men, she defines her relationship with Datu as sexual harassment (“为大徒所劫”) while those with other men who have forced her in the first place but brought her pleasure, including her Father-in-law and Elder Brother-in-law, as adultery (“私”) (118). For the latter cases, the testimony of Shangguan still keeps the details of the psychological threat and the physical violence committed by those men.

Although the relationships between pain and pleasure in these novellas are not as complex as Lin suggests in her research, recognizing of and distinguishing between the two is significant for women to reclaim the subjectivity to interpret their own experience rather than surrender this power to men.

Imitating the Toxic: The Structure of Eroticization

The term “泥塑” – referring to a fan culture originated in contemporary Chinese fandoms, primarily those of male stars – derives from the word “逆苏 nisu.” “逆苏” is considered as the binarized opposite to “正苏 zhengsu.” While “苏,” probably coming from the term “玛丽苏 mali su” (Mary Sue), is usually used to describe stars who are sexually attractive, “zhengsu” means to project the fantasy onto the star in a cisgender way, to view male stars as male or view female stars as female. Conversely, “nisu” refers to the phenomenon that fans fictionally “transgenderizes” the star in their fantasy. A male star would be consumed as a female while a female star becomes a fictional male; and the former dominates this nascent “nisu” culture. Therefore, under major circumstances, “nisu” is the synonyms for “女化 nvhua” (to feminize). When a fan “nisu” her idol, she would call him by titles which are usually assigned to women, such as “姐姐 jiejie”(elder sister), “妹妹 meimei”(younger sister), “女儿 nver” (daughter) or “老婆 laopo” (wife), rather than the male counterparts. But the pronouns are not necessarily changed to “she/her/hers.” Interestingly, when “逆苏” is typed as “泥塑” (clay sculpture) and the latter becomes the widespread umbrella term of this genre, the character “泥 ni” (clay) and “塑 su” (to sculpt, to shape) imply the plasticity of the fan object and fans’ capability and act to shape their object by reconstructing gender. ⁶

Nisu can be an act of consumption, involving how a fan imagines her fan objects and her intimacy with the latter. Nisu is also a category of fan identity, which generates an opposite camp to zhengsu fans. In addition, nisu is a genre of fan fiction writing, including sub-genres such as “小妈文学 xiaoma wenxue” (step-mother literature) and

“妓女文学 jinv wenxue” (prostitutes literature) or “站街文学 zhanjie wenxue” (streetwalker literature). The RPS *Xiazhui* — the controversial text involved in the blocking of the online fan fiction repository Archive of Our Own in China — is an example of the fan-defined category of “prostitute literature.” Yet, the author of *Xiazhui* gives rationality for her “nisu” of the male character into a prostitute: after being hurt by homophobia, the character Xiao Zhan “performs like a woman” and plans to do the transgender operation, to “normalize his homosexuality.” But it is possible in nisu writing that writers do not offer any inner state of their male characters regarding the latter’s “transgender” identification and portray them as female directly. In other words, they “normalize” nisu in their fantastical fan world without justifying themselves and their characters.

In *Xiazhui*, nisu of one of the male protagonist is intertwined with another fandom phenomenon — “腐唯 fuwei.” “腐唯” is the shorthand for “腐女唯粉 nvfu weifen” (rotten girl - solo stan). When considered as a category of fan identity, “fuwei” refers to slash fans who have a bias in favor of one party in a ship or many ships centering around one person who is her fan object. Apart from labeling fans into different identities, the two categories of “nisu” and “fuwei” conceptualized by fandoms also demonstrate different structures of eroticization in RPS writing. When “nisu” means that one character is eroticized into a feminized image, “fuwei” suggests that the fan author invests in eroticizing one character more than the other. In *Xiazhui*, “nisu” and “fuwei” mode of eroticization function simultaneously and generate a reversed imitation of male gaze projected unilaterally onto the “feminized” character

Zan Zan.

In her influential piece *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey unpacks the looks in cinema into three layers: the look of the camera shooting the story, that of spectators watching the film, and that of characters at each other within the screen (843). By investigating conventional Hollywood cinema, she argues that eroticizing and fetishizing women entail filmic strategies to deny the material presence of the camera and the detachment of the spectator from the illusionistic world on the screen; three looks in cinema are conflated and subordinated into the look of the masculine characters (843). If we can perceive novels as an apparatus, there are also three “visions” in the novelistic world: that of the text portraying the characters, that of readers reading the texts and imagining the literary depictions, and that of the characters at each other within the narrative. In the *nisu* depiction of the character Zan Zan, the novel and readers always “see” the feminized Zan Zan from the perspective of the masculinized character Wang Yibo. For example, their first encounter is to a large extent constituted by what Wang Yibo sees when he looks or peeks at Zan Zan.

Wang Yibo carrying his suitcase and speeding up a few steps into the house, just heard her calling a thin and tall woman who was watching TV with her feet up to call “Sister Ali.” Wang Yibo only had time to see the woman walking into the dark corridor with curvy black hair falling on her back... Wang Yibo realized that the thin and tall woman had come out again, leaning on the wooden door frame at the entrance of the corridor. She was born with a small face, but with big facial features, so she looked a little bit gorgeous and charming, especially

those eyes ... which made Wang Yibo read a bit of sorrow from it... She's really a beautiful woman. Wang Yibo couldn't help but take a few more glances...Zan Zan wears a sheath skirt that can just cover her buttocks. Her buttocks are round and big, so the skirt appears shorter. It's hard for her to lift her feet and walk on the stairs without turning aside and easy for Wang Yibo to enjoy the spring scenery under her skirt, the white and smooth thighs wrapped by fishnet stockings and the black lace. Wang Yibo didn't dare to look again... The gauze curtains are semi-translucent. At best they can only hide her shy reactions. Wang Yibo can still see the pink contours of Zan Zan, her thin body, thin waist, and chest where the ribs are clearly visible. Zan Zan raised her hand to fix her hair. She was really white. She had no body hair. Her armpits were clean and same white...When Wang Yibo took it, he saw the red nail polish on her fingertips (MaiLeDiDiDi ch.1).

Before accidentally finding out that Zan Zan is actually a man, Wang's look at "her" is an exemplary male gaze from a heterosexual man to eroticize a woman as his object of desire. The portrait of Zan Zan's body is graphic and detailed while Wang's body is only represented by his penis. There are rare depictions of how other characters perceive this young high-school student. Although this novel uses a third-person perspective, it centers around an almost first-person perspective of Wang for a large part. Even the novel does mention several returned looks from Zan Zan, we only read of "her" act of "looking" but never know what she sees:

She looked at Wang Yibo up and down, from his new sneakers to his short hair

newly cut for the school military training. She looked at him seriously and glamorously (ch.3).

Zan Zan propped up her upper body with her elbow, half-closed her eyes to look at Wang Yibo. Her eyes would sparkle. The red tails of the eyes disguised her rising desire (ch. 4).

He ... found that Zan Zan was looking at him with her beautiful eyes filled with mist, and there were a lot of expressions there that he cannot understand, her longing and forbearance (ch. 6).

Such descriptions serve for eroticizing Zan Zan rather than endowing her with the ability to “see.” Therefore, Zan Zan’s vision is an empty mirror image lacking its own contents.

This asymmetrical eroticization of these two characters and the unilateral look from Wang to Zan Zan generate the similarity between the gender dynamics in this fan fiction and the one in male-perspective pornography. Hence, the question, similar to those raised by *Chipozi Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan*, would be: if this similarity shows that fuwei-nisu writing is an imitating of male gaze, then what has appeared from the difference between “the original” and “the imitator’s version”?

While male gaze in reality suggests men’s prerogatives to eroticize women, *danmei* writing empowers women to feminize, eroticize, and objectify men. Although this reversal imitates the toxic asymmetrical structure between active subject and passive object, women’s writing itself is a challenge to the social suppression of sexuality and disturbs the unilateral flow of gender norms. Arguably, compared to the

two Ming erotica representing female desire with the participation of female body and within heterosexual relationships, *danmei*'s expression of women's desire is less "direct" because of the absence of women and its focus on male homosexuality. "Fuwei" and "nisu" both enrich such "indirectness" of *danmei*. Conceive that there is a triangular relationship between female authors/readers and two male characters. In fuwei writing, authors and readers can project "her desire" to the favored character through the latter's romance with the other character who is a surrogate participant for her; the underinvested character and "his desire" is the mediator between "her desire" and the desired object. When fuwei writing also incorporates nisu elements, "her desire" becomes more circuitous since the desired object is feminized and "transgenderized" in the context of male homosexual romance. When the nisu-ed characters are designated to "imitate" females, they confound the social assignment of masculinity to men and femininity to women and reveal the performativity of gender. There is a moment in *Xiazhui* which satirizes the naturalized association between female, femaleness, and femininity:

Several male parents unabashedly teased Zan Zan by their gazes. Her buttocks wrapped tightly under the skirt and her beautiful legs embellished by the stockings ignited their dirty desires ... What is the difference between the unemployed vagrant who came to the salon after betting some money to buy one night sex and the successful and decent people who sit in the parent-teacher meeting for their children? They both are keen to strip beautiful women naked by their eyes, guessing what is the color of the underwear that she is wearing

under her skirt today; while calling her a slut, they are at the same time eager for the slut's vagina to satisfy their endless phallic desire...A pleasure surged in Wang Yibo's heart that diminished his anger. If they knew that there was a big dick hidden under her unwrinkled suit skirt, that what was covered by the satin-like long hair was the fat-free breasts, and what they assaulted by their obscene gazes was a man, what would these decent men think? (ch.12).

According to gender order serving for patriarchy and heteronormativity, Zan Zan is a sexual deviant condemned and excluded by the mainstream due to his "femininity" and homosexuality. The fiction designates these hetero-masculine, and probably homophobic, men to be sexually attracted by a "feminized" character who turns out to be a homosexual man. Such irony problematizes the social construction of gender and sexuality, although, overall, the novel still holds a rather conservative perception of gender performance and stigmatizes sexual transgression.

Fictive Queer-Transformation: Circuitous Desire and "Pleasure-Shame" Narrative

Readers may encounter fictional pain when reading novels. It can be the bodily reaction of the female protagonists when penetrated by men in *Chipози Zhuan* or *Ruyijun Zhuan*, or the psychological torture inflicted on sexual deviants by heteronormative society as *Xiazhui* depicts. In the latter case, pain is primarily caused by homophobia which the character Zan Zan has suffered since exposing his sexual orientation at high school. This nisu fan fiction, therefore, differs from heterosexual romance, but it is still a misogynist narrative stigmatizing sex and sex workers and

pathologizing sexual minorities.

In the novel, the character Xiao Zhan's decision to do the transgender operation and his performance as a woman is a response to the pathologization of homosexuality that he has suffered and internalized. Consequently, being transgender is a compromise, or a secondary choice for him to normalize his desire for men rather than a voluntary self-identity. While this novel seems to de-pathologize homosexuality and criticize homophobia, it indeed pathologizes transgender by implying that Xiao's longing for transgender is a symptom of his homophobia and self-hatred, which is a "disease" that can be "cured" by his lover's unconditional love which embraces his maleness. Therefore, after accepting his affection to Xiao Zhan, Wang Yibo strives for convincing Xiao Zhan of the legitimacy of Xiao's homosexuality and redeems him from "going astray": "It is the heaven that wants me to pull you back" (ch. 12).

Nevertheless, when Wang realizes he has been "deceived" by Zan Zan whose biological sex is male, he turns to be repulsed and furious but cannot refrain from his sexual impulsion towards this person. It is "se" which he cannot resist that transforms him from a straight man to a "homosexual." His sentiments and body split when "the truth" is exposed, but "se" dominates and leads his "qing" in the conflicts.

However, Wang's attitude towards women and sex is less consistent but far more ambivalent and slippery than his comparatively "smooth" transformation to the "homosexual." Beneke indicates two categories of sexism in terms of men's attitudes towards women and sex: madonna sexism – connecting sex with reproduction, marriage, commitment, and nurturance – and whore sexism – considering that the main purpose

of sex is pleasure and women is the object for men's sexual demands (qtd. in Lin, 123). Men who are madonna-sexist seemingly respect women but, on the other hand, hold strict and dismissive attitudes toward those who do not meet their standard since they confine sex to heterosexual monogamy and disregard women's need and subjectivity (123). Men as such admire women whom they acknowledge and consider "good women" as having a strong sense of morality and capable of leading and elevating men spiritually (122). In the novel, the character Wang Yibo or the author fantasizes an admirable "feminized" figure, Zan Zan, as "天真淫娃 tianzhen yinwa" (innocent and lewd baby) (ch. 4). Such fantasizing is both madonna-sexist and whore-sexist. Zan Zan is a character standing between other dissolute prostitutes and innocent high-school girls. To be admirable like a goddess, she has to differ from but also possesses the alluring qualities of both sides: more innocent than the dissolute and more dissolute than the innocent:

Wang Yibo took two deep breaths hastily, as if holding a fire in his heart. He was actually very happy when Sister Ali told him that Zan Zan would serve customers with her hands only. He is always willing to give Zanzan a staunch, unyielding and involuntary image, so whenever she seems to be dissolute, there is always a kind of inexplicable anger while he is burning with passionate desire. He couldn't help thinking if it is the same when Zan Zan is with those of her customers, being cute and sweet, wrapping her desire by purity, and always being like an innocent and lewd baby who tastes sweet sex for the first time and seduces them unintentionally (ch. 4).

She can work as a prostitute but only serve clients with hands; she can dress like a streetwalker wearing red nail polish and shiny high-heeled shoes but only smell like plain hair-shampoo or magnolia flower rather than cheap perfume; she looks like a naïve young student when wearing school uniform but performs like a whore when disrobed on the bed. Except for being sexually attractive, Zan Zan is also morally “perfect” who takes care of and even redeem people like a Madonna.⁷ In terms of Wang’s attitude towards sex, he berates Zan Zan for being dissolute and becomes paranoid about “her” intimacy with other clients but also voraciously fetishizes her by his voyeuristic gaze and enjoys her sex appeal. When Wang sneaks into the rooms downstairs in the brothel and sees the inside sexual equipment, he feels disgusting about other men’s desire but forgets his own erection after his first encounter with Zan Zan. At the parent-teacher conference, his inner monologue scathingly condemns other men who contaminate his “pure lover” by lewd look: “while calling her a slut, they are at the same time eager for the slut’s vagina to satisfy their endless phallic desire” (ch. 12). But this condemnation almost summarizes the key ambivalence of the entire fiction and his own attitudes towards women and sex.

Implicitly inferiorizing other female characters, constricting Zan Zan’s sexuality, and stigmatizing (commercial) sex show the misogyny of this fiction, and render the queer transformation of the character Wang quite limited. Especially as a problematic masculine subject who is averse to male sexual demands and whose body is only represented by his erected penis and separated from the self, he is still left in the blind spot of gaze and the author does not forcefully transform him into a gazed object of

desire as what she does to Zan Zan. Wang's chaotic and inconsistent perceptions show how this "prostitute literature" vacillates between refusal and acceptance, repulsion and empathy regarding carnal desire and sex workers.

In *Gongzhan* and *Desaluo Renyu*, the queer transformation of the problematic man is intertwined with the shame towards his own body and sexuality and enables him to overcome it. These novels also show their ambivalence and vacillation responding to social norms that penetrate their characters and the texts themselves. Nevertheless, compared to fuwei-nisu narrative where the more masculinized character serves as a surrogate for the authors and readers to feminize and consume the other character, the genre of "强制爱 qiangzhi ai" in these two novels demonstrates a triangular relationship that is quite distinct: female fans of this genre is closer to the feminized "shou" character to experience the intimacy with the "romanticized" masculine "gong."

Far from creating two powerful male characters in an equal homosexual relationship, the novels eroticize the asymmetrical power relations for their two protagonists in heteronormative patterns and sexual harassment contexts. "Forced love" in these novels also shares a high similarity with the above-mentioned "logic of pleasure" in adult movies investigated by Lin. The female object in heterosexual porn is substituted by a man who plays the role of "shou" in the "gong-shou" relationship of the conventional *danmei* character formula. On the other hand, I want to suggest that there is a similar narrative logic of rape romance in *Gongzhan* and *Desaluo*: 1) the misogynist shou character identifies as straight, futilely refuses to have sex with the aggressive gong character, but obtains the carnal pleasure; 2) shou is "trained" to

spontaneously physically desiring gong's body without the latter's intentional seduction and gradually has an attachment to gong – this is the stage of shou's fiercest sentimental vacillation; 3) the love of taboo is affirmed and shou voluntarily performs the feminized role for his lover.

First, I want to suggest two possible ways to interpret this genre of rape romance: as the struggle of “her desire” – “she” as the female writers and readers – and the struggle of “his desire” – “he” as the male protagonists who are the raped “shou.”

At the first stage of this rape romance, the desire of the shou character is passively aroused by the irresistible gong character and at the end of the story, he will actively perform the feminized role, a homosexual shou, in the romance due to his affection to gong. Such transformation from passive to active and the psychological struggling of the shou character reflect the suppressed situation of “her”: women are not allowed to actively desire, which is indeed countered by *Chipozi Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan*, so the feminized character has to go through a circuitous process then accomplishes the legitimatization of “her desire”: The desire does not emerge spontaneously from “her” at the outset but is aroused by the other dominating party; sexual harassment exempts “her” from being blamed for actively desiring someone. The idealization and romanticization of gong are also crucial to render the rape romance irresistible and desirable. Moreover, the sex appeal of shou is constantly confirmed by the extreme obsession from gong with “her.” In addition, as Yang Ling contends, if the violence and power asymmetry are too close to one's reality, then they become less possible to be fantasized about (“nongwan” 224). Consequently, living with rape scare

in the society, women would deploy male homosexual relationship as mediation to distance from the reality to romanticize rape, rather than encounter themselves in heterosexual stories. In this sense, *danmei* writing of “qiangzhi ai” is a fictionally legitimate way for “her” to abandon shame and embrace desire without “her” presence – accompanied by a stronger man’s compulsion and the circuitous affirmation process.

However, such interpretation assumes that “her desire” epitomizes the repressed reality of females as a whole. This paranoid reading not only requires the presence of female authors/readers but also subsumes them into an essentialized and homogenized collective. But the actual mentality of this genre’s consumers not necessarily corresponds with the analysis here. For instance, in 2012, a survey collecting responses from 355 female college students has shown that women who enjoy sex and are willing to explore diverse fantasies also enjoy rape fantasy (qtn. in eatingcroutons and punispompouspornpalace). Therefore, I would like to propose a second way to read *danmei*, as a narrative of the struggle of “his desire” and a fictional queer transformation of these struggling characters.

Reading these novels through “her desire” would interpret *danmei* as a counter project to the sex taboo and oppression imposed on women through the voice of “you should not desire.” If we read them as the narrative of “his desire,” *danmei* becomes a writing to resist the taboo of homosexuality and social construction of masculinity and femininity – the shou character is forced to constantly struggle against the inner voice of “men cannot love men” and “men should not behave like a woman.” A strong sense of shame always overwhelms the harassed characters when these two norms are

violated by their sufferings. For instance, every time Desaluo is harassed by the merman, what dominates him is not physical pain but psychological shame: “The pain is far less irritating than the shame that this pose brings me.” (Shenhai Xiansheng 36). Therefore, compared to “pain” in *Chipози Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan*, “shame” here is the essential code to decipher gender re-construction in these two novels.

As Ueno states, homophobia and misogyny do not merely show men’s hatred of women but also men’s self-hatred, their detachment from the otherized body, and their horror of being the object of desire. In *Desaluo Renyu*, for instance, when the shou characters Desaluo is forced to face his bodies and sensations, shame makes him attempt to escape by closing his eyes: “I bit my lips and teeth, closed my eyes in humiliation, and thought: I have never been touched in that place, and I have no sexual experience, but I feel that my body is as sensitive as an passionate widow” (26).⁸ After being aroused by the merman, Desaluo feels that his body resembles “a passionate widow.” Similarly, in *Gongzhan*, the shou character Han Yuanhang is described as “more lewd than a slut” when his body responds to Feng Xvyao’s penetration (ch. 9).⁹ Here, the aroused body is equated to a female body. Pleasure as the bodily reaction to homosexual intercourse generates the shame of being feminized.

Raped by the gong character and receiving carnal pleasure from homosexual intercourse multiple times, these shou characters are repeatedly forced to practice their interaction with male bodies and gradually acknowledge their sexual demands. “Se” hence plays an indispensable role in transforming these subjects. On the other hand, “qing” also participates in the process since the shou character cannot help falling in

love with the romanticized rapist who possesses a glamorous appearance, robust physique, and, more importantly, “qing” towards him. Moreover, the transformation in the two novels are positioned in eroticized asymmetrical power relations: for Han Yuanhang and Feng Xvyao, the hierarchy between a teacher and a student is replaced by their class gaps. Yet, lacking care from family, especially from his parents, makes Feng become more vulnerable and quest for Han’s love, which can be another irresistible motivation for Han’s surrendering. For Desaluo and Ajia Leisi, the asymmetry is caused by species differences, while the latter as a merman is far more physically powerful.

The novels position the powerless characters in the imbalanced power relations, compel him to confront the seduction and compulsion from an irresistible *gong*, and indulge him in sexual activities. The *shou* character gradually accepts and embraces his desire and pleasure after vacillating between being a “normal” straight man and a “feminized homosexual.” Through a circuitous process, “his desire” is affirmed and the character is transformed by the author into a feminized homosexual at the end. The obligations of “loving a man” and “performing like a woman” which are normally imposed on female are voluntarily borne and “imitated” by a man in the fantastical world. Additionally, in these two texts, the fictional transformation of the previously problematic characters demonstrates two directions of convergence: it is men who attempt to merge into women and the heterosexual into the homosexual. Such transformation destabilizes the naturalized gender construction and sexuality formation.

Conclusion

By analyzing *Xiazhui*, *Gongzhan* and *Desaluo Renyu*, I argue that *danmei* can not merely be read as fantasies about equal relationships and women's redistribution of power for their different characters, but a reverse imitation of the asymmetrical power relation to achieve a toxic balance with the unequal social reality. As a narrative space of struggle, *danmei* does not depart from the heteronormative pattern of romance or violence but is still constructed by the latter. As Butler contends, gender parody does not reinforce the authority of "the original" but precisely reveals its fictionality and how gender performance itself is also an act of imitation (188). By reversing multiple binary structures, *danmei* does not just simply replicate them. Instead, it reveals the problematics of the "original" version and disrupts the flow of the existing gender norms. Fictions of reversing gender dynamics expose the fiction of gender itself. The experience of body and "se" is indispensable for the circuitous process of affirming desire and transforming the problematic men into a queer subject with more fluidity while writing of "se" itself is an act of breaking the taboo and overcoming the guilt of desire expression. Erotica is not only about fantasy and pleasure, but, as *Chipozi Zhuan* and *Ruyijun Zhuan* show, also about pain, shame, and deprived power that women now want to reclaim.

Chapter 2 From Danmei to Dan'gai: Contesting Forces in World Building, Subject Formation, and Subtext Interpretation

Introduction

While the first chapter investigates the *danmei* erotica that is criminalized or causes controversy in the public cybersphere, this chapter will shift to analyze the texts that can be visible on Chinese platforms and circulated in the Chinese market. I select a pair of works due to their commercial success and popularity: the *dan'gai* drama *The Untamed* and its original novel *Modao Zushi* written by Moxiang Tongxiu.¹

Unlike *danmei* dramas before and including *Addicted* in 2016 that possess explicit erotic contents and affirm the same-sex relationship between the two male protagonists, the *dan'gai* drama *the Untamed* released in 2019 has to avoid representing such sensitive content and constructs a fantastical world by taking advantage of its *xiuxian* (修仙 immortal cultivation) genre. *The Untamed* has 45 episodes of around 45 minutes. In addition to the drama which is available both on Youtube and Netflix with the subtitles of 19 languages, *Modao Zushi*, as one of the most successful Chinese IP (Intellectual Property) works in recent years, has a package of derivative products: two spin-off movies, audio dramas in both Chinese and Japanese, an animation in Chinese which is also dubbed into Japanese, a mobile game, and plenty of behind-the-scenes.

Henry Jenkins has indicated that “transmedia storytelling is the art of world making” (21). In the field of *danmei*, we can see how works under this category

interact with other literary genres and build alternative universes. *Guardian* and *the Untamed* are so far the most popular *dan'gai* dramas; the original novel from which *Guardian* is adapted is a crossover fiction of *danmei* and *lingyi* (supernatural horror) while *Modao Zushi* is a *xiuxian* novel. Among the eight most anticipated upcoming *dan'gai* dramas in 2021 selected by fans, seven of them are set in alternative worlds distancing from contemporary China and incorporate elements of other popular genres including steampunk, martial arts, and suspense/detective fiction (Chinese Drama News). It is intriguing to see how these works construct their own systems and social order to position characters and their interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the first purpose of this chapter is to investigate how *Modao Zushi* builds a cultivation world. I find that there are internal contesting forces within the text, especially within its subject formation. On the one hand, the text maps out the world by creating vertical structure while offers the possibilities of horizontal forces to subvert the hierarchal social order. On the other hand, while these male characters are located in the hierarchy system and idealized by their priorities that the system provides for them, they also depart from the mainstream and challenge the patriarchal and suppressive rites by following their homosexual impulse.

Secondly, I analyze the drama's divergence from the novel which mitigates the subversive potential of the two subjects and adds new contents that can be appropriated by nationalist narrative. While the novel's representation of homosexuality and deviant characters creates the outward forces to lead the characters away from the hierarchal social order and bureaucratic realm, the drama generates an

inward force that pulls the subjects seeking individual autonomy back to the vertical system.

The third layer of the contesting forces lies in the interpretative sphere of the drama. As Jenkins states, the convergence in transmedia storytelling is both “a top-down corporate-driven process” and “a bottom-up consumer-driven process” (18). In this part, I show how the adjusted representation of homosexuality in the drama is received by its fans, and how fans’ queer reading of the very detailed visual language of the drama generates affective resonance among them with the softened masculine subject. Moreover, I also examine how state media interpret the drama and go to a quite opposite direction of the fans’ reading. The state is another participant which intends to interfere in this cultural field for its nationalist interest by eliminating individual desire. In this sense, the juxtaposition of the official reading and the fans’ affective interpreting of the drama manifests the complexity of the drama’s reception.

To sum up, by taking these texts as examples, this chapter intends to explore after *danmei* is captured by capital and enters into the mass market with higher visibility, how it will transform in different media and what kinds of contesting forces it will encounter. The queered but also restricted narrative and subject formation in *Modao Zushi* demonstrate a metaphoric structure of *dan’gai* adaptation as a cultural phenomenon: it has the impulse to depart the mainstream but also returns, or to put it oppositely, it bears the pressure of staying with the mainstream but also possesses the potential to disrupt and leave the system.

Modao Zushi and *the Untamed*: Structuring the Xiuxian World

Modao Zushi is a *danmei-xianxia xiuzhen* (仙侠修真 immortal knights-errant and immortality cultivation) crossover fiction.² The novel and its derivative works build a fantastical world by incorporating elements referring to Taoist alchemy, Chinese mythology and folklore, Chinese martial arts, and so forth (“Glossary of Terms”). To structuring the xiuxian world, *Modao Zushi* establishes both vertical hierarchy and horizontal bonds to set the orders for interpersonal relationships and trajectories of characters’ development. First of all, there is a differentiation between cultivation clans and common folk families. Immortals practicing Daoist cultivation are admired by the latter as “favored by God, mysterious yet noble” (K ch. 2). These clans are institutions that maintain the world order and peace; in the specific area taken charge of by every clan, its cultivators protect ordinary people from being disturbed by evil being and demonic creatures. Secondly, there are internal hierarchies within the cultivation world and individual clans. A Chief Cultivator is selected by all clans to lead the cultivation world. For cultivation clans, there are prominent great clans and nameless small clans. Every clan is led by one male leader while female leaders are rare cases. Women can be cultivators and there are also powerful female characters in the novel, but the overall gender imbalance is obvious especially in the family structure: male characters dominate, and female characters either are invisible or serves as the foil of men.

The novel depicts three generations of these cultivation clans. The main characters in the novel are the second generation and some of them — of course, male

— are the heirs to elder leaders and become clan leaders as the story develops. This also suggests the differentiation between direct and collateral line while the former is the central trunk in the arborescent kinship structure and the latter is branches that do not have identical priority and power as the former does. Moreover, there is the master-slave relationship in these clans. For example, one male protagonist Wei Wuxian's father is the slave of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan. With such background, although the clan leader treats Wei Wuxian as equally as his own son Jiang Cheng, Wei is still considered as the clan slave by some other characters. Additionally, outsiders can join the cultivation clans and become their disciples without kinship connections. But the patriarchal family bound by bloodline is still the basic and primary unit to construct this fictional world and order interpersonal relationships.

On the other hand, the novel shows another way to organize cultivators beyond the family structure dominated by males — schools. For instance, Wei Wuxian's mother is a pupil of Baoshan Sanren, a female cultivator who adopts homeless children as her disciples and lives on a celestial mountain secluded from the rest of the world. Cultivators can also live without affiliation with any clans or schools. The character Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan are two examples of youxia (游侠 wandering cultivators).

Modao Zushi highlights Five Great Clans and the name of each clan is constituted by their geographical location and the paternal surname: the Gusu Lan Clan, the Yunmeng Jiang Clan, the Lanling Jin Clan, the Qinghe Nie Clan, and the Qishan Wen Clan. As already mentioned above, one protagonist Wei Wuxian, whose

parents pass away when he is a child, grows up in the Yunmeng Jiang Clan with the leader's son Jiang Cheng and daughter Jiang Yanli. He meets the other protagonist Lan Wangji, the second young master of the Gusu Lan Clan, when young cultivators from different clans go to the Lan Clan to study. And since then they have an “I-hate-you” type of dynamics, in which the righteous and self-retrained Lan Wangji seemingly hates the mischievous and carefree Wei Wuxian who always breaks the rules of the Lan Clan and teases and provokes the former.

In the first life of Wei Wuxian, the primary conflict is triggered by the tyrannical Qishan Wen Clan's ambition to dominate the world. The Wen Clan commits atrocities and prompts the union of the other four great clans to rebel. During the process of the Wen Clan's conquering, the Yunmeng Jiang Clan is massacred because of the conflicts between Wei Wuxian and the Wen Clan. Jiang Cheng loses not only his parents but also his inner Golden Core (金丹 jindan) in this tragedy, which means he cannot cultivate anymore. However, Wei Wuxian offers his Golden Core to Jiang Cheng without the latter's awareness. The people who assist him to accomplish this risky and painful transplantation are Wen Ning — a character who is helped by Wei Wuxian before, and Wen Qing — Wen Ning's elder sister who excels in medicine arts. Although both of them come from one branch family of the Qishan Wen Clan, they are “people whose way of doing things [is] actually normal” with good reputation hence trusted by Wei Wuxian (K. ch.60).

After giving his Golden Core to Jiang Cheng and losing all his spiritual energy, Wei Wuxian is captured by the Wen Clan people. They torture Wei Wuxian

and throw him into the Burial Mounds full of walking corpses and vengeful ghosts to kill him. It is in this place where Wei Wuxian invents his own demonic cultivation by taking advantage of the resentful energy there. This is his only way to survive in this place and cultivate after he loses his Golden Core and the ability to practice swordsmanship. Because of this experience and invention, he is the grandmaster of demonic cultivation as the novel's title presents. When he reunions with Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji who have been looking for him since he disappears, Lan Wangji is discontent with Wei Wuxian's practice of demonic techniques and convinces Wei to abandon the devil path and return to the righteous. Without any explanation of his situation, Wei Wuxian rejects Lan Wangji's suggestion and insists on his own choice. All of them participate in the ensuing Sunshot Campaign to overthrow the Qishan Wen Clan; the Wen Clan's motif is sun therefore to rebel against the Qishan Wen Clan is to shoot the sun. Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation contributes to the campaign and demonstrates its power to the rest of the cultivation world.

However, after this campaign, his invention is coveted by the Lanling Jin Clan that attempts to replace the hegemonic position of the Qishan Wen Clan. Meanwhile, he defends those innocent remnants from the Qishan Wen Clan who have never participated in the Wen Clan's atrocities — Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and other harmless people who come from the same Wen branch family – while the Jin Clan insists that all remnants of the Wen Clan should be killed to avoid the latter's revival. When Wei Wuxian gradually goes to the opposite side of the majority, Lan Wangji is the person who does not explicitly stand with him but always tries to communicate with him and

helps him return to the orthodox path. After Wen Qing seeks Wei Wuxian's help to find her family, they go to Qiongqi path where these Wen Clan members including Wen Ning are abused and killed. Wei Wuxian makes the devastated Wen Ning, who later becomes Wei Wuxian's right-hand man, into a fierce corpse to take revenge on the cruel guards from the Jin Clan who enslave those innocent Wen Clan people. It is worthy of attention that the drama adds a new scenario here: when Wei Wuxian is about to leave with these Wen Clan people from Qiongqi path, Lan Wangji appears and stops in front of them. However, this time, Lan fails again to prevent Wei Wuxian from further straying from the right path. This plot will be further discussed later in this chapter.

After Wei Wuxian takes the Wen Clan people to the Burial Mounds and lives with them there, Jiang Cheng and Lan Wangji visit him respectively. Jiang Cheng opposes his protection of the Wen Clan people and deviance from the orthodox. They arrange a duel, and then Jiang Cheng announces to the world that Wei Wuxian defects from the Yunmeng Jiang Clan and the Clan consequently casts him out. Lan Wangji comes and intends to bring Wei Wuxian to Gusu. Lan's visit, although, does not change Wei Wuxian's mind but brings him the news that Wei Wuxian's shijie (the elder sister studying from the same teacher) Jiang Yanli will marry the young master of the Lanling Jin Clan, Jin Zixuan.

After several chapters of temporal peace, the Jin Clan people ambush Wei Wuxian on the Qiongqi Path. To defend himself, Wei Wuxian manipulates the fierce corpse Wen Ning to fight with these Jin Clan cultivators. Jin Zixuan, now the husband

of Wei Wuxian's shijie, arrives immediately after he is informed of the plan and attempts to stop this fight. However, Wei Wuxian loses his control of Wen Ning for the first time and Wen Ning kills Jin Zixuan. Wei Wuxian collapses in horror, because not only before he is always confident about his ability to control his demonic cultivation but also the person indirectly killed by him is the lover of his shijie. This incident becomes the trigger of the four great clans' peak opposition to him and a subsequent battle between the two sides. In the battlefield, Jiang Yanli suddenly appears, and when a cultivator pierces Wei Wuxian by a sword from his back, Jiang Yanli shoves Wei and is killed by the cultivator instead. Witnessing the unexpected death of his shijie, Wei Wuxian becomes hysterical and loses control for the second time. He completely releases the destructive power of his demonic magic, which commences a bloodbath at the Nightless City. In the drama, Wei Wuxian commits suicide on the battlefield, while in the original novel, Lan Wangji takes him away and hides him in a cave. Lan Wangji passes his spiritual energy to save Wei Wuxian and confesses his feeling. Yet, the traumatic Wei Wuxian loses all of his memory following the bloodbath and is killed in the ensuing Siege of the Burial Mounds organized by the four great clans.

After sixteen years of his death, a man called Mo Xuanyu sacrifices his own life to summon Wei Wuxian's soul back. This is a ritual named xianshe (献舍) — sacrificing one's body: a resenting one can summon a dead person's soul to inhabit in his body and live his life to revenge for him at the price of losing one's life.³ Wei Wuxian soon encounters Lan Wangji after his rebirth and Lan immediately recognizes

him even he is living in a strange body. Someone intentionally leaves a hand from a dead body in the Mo Village. To figure out whom Mo Xuanyu wants Wei Wuxian to revenge on and what this hand is leading them to, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji follow the directions pointed by the hand and start a new journey together to address the mysterious death of many other characters. This time, Lan Wangji determinately stands with Wei Wuxian while the latter is misunderstood and attacked by the world. It turns out that the new leader of the Lanling Jin Clan, Jin Guangyao, attempts to replicate Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation after Wei's death and scapegoats Wei Wuxian for crimes committed by him after Wei's resurrection. As Wei and Lan gradually reveal the truth, people's attitudes towards Wei Wuxian also change from opposition to the willingness to an alliance with him. The process of revelation is also the one of uncovering the inner feelings between the two protagonists, especially Lan Wangji's suppressed but intense love for Wei Wuxian for sixteen years since the latter's death.

The novel ends where they become youxia and roam around together freely. The ending of the drama is more ambiguous and controversial among fans. Lan Wangji voluntarily becomes the Chief Cultivator. There is a shot showing that they walk towards opposite directions after a farewell. But what after this ending-like scene is a close-up showing Wei Wuxian is playing his flute, performing a song made by Lan Wangji and titled "Wang Xian." The last line of the entire drama is Lan Wangji's calling of Wei Wuxian's name from Wei's back, which corresponds to the first line of the drama that is Wei Wuxian's calling of Lan Wangji's name.

Theoretical Foundation: “Confucian Structure of Feeling” and Wen-Wu Masculinity

Before analyzing the male subjects and the subversive potential of their romance, I want to introduce Haiyan Lee’s theory which will help us locate these subjects and their relationship in a broader framework and Kam Louie’s theory of Chinese masculinity of wen-wu dyad which is useful to further unpack subject construction in the novel and drama.

In her book *Revolution of the Heart*, Haiyan Lee proposes the concept of “Confucian structure of feeling” to investigate the discourse of *qing* (情, sentiment) and the late imperial cult of *qing* (情教 *qingjiao*) from the fifteenth to early twentieth century of China. For Raymond Williams, the theory of “structure of feeling” captures the “social consciousness as lived experience in process, or in solution, before it is ‘precipitated’ and given fixed forms” (qtd. in Lee, 10). Drawing on Williams’s theory, Lee explores how the structure of feelings can be analyzed and connected to the changing conceptions of identity and sociality and how different social orders legitimize themselves through signifying the affective dimension (3, 6). Lee realizes that the way she is proposing “Confucian” here is perhaps counterintuitive for that the cult of *qing* that she examines challenges the Confucian hierarchal structure and Confucianist interpretation of the relationship between “qing,” “li” (礼, ritual), “xing” (性, moral nature), and “tianli” (天理, heavenly principle) (38). However, by using the term “Confucian,” she intends to emphasize that the structure of feeling formed by the cult of *qing* does not break with neo-Confucian orthodoxy and the social order that the latter creates; instead, *qing* serves for rendering the practice of

social order more operable for individual subjects (41). The “Confucian” here is not any specific version of Confucianism but “a catchall for the dimensions of the early modern experience that remain unassimilated to the master narrative of modernity and therefore appear archaic, quaint, or incomprehensible to us” (38). According to Lee, the Confucian structure of feeling shaped by the late imperial cult of *qing* is transformed into “the enlightenment structure of feeling” by the May Fourth Movement which pursues “a radical epistemic break with the Confucian structure” and favors the convergence of the discourse of *qing* with enlightenment humanism and nationalism (15-6).

Lee indicates that orthodox Confucianism pushes *qing* to the marginal position in its system and emphasizes *lijiao* (礼教) — ritual principles and social ethics; the Three Bonds and Five Relations (三纲五常 *san’gang wuchang*) is the core principle to govern the social and cosmic order, while the Three Bonds assures the dominant status of the monarch, the father, and the husband and the “unconditional devotion” to their authorities from the minister, the son, and the wife (26). Furthermore, Lee builds two coordinates to locate interpersonal relationships — the horizontal, “rhizomatic” linkages and the vertical, “arborescent” structure of orthodoxy (32). She points out that *qing*, in the form of homosocial associations or heterosexual romance, possesses the subversive potential to “redress the injustices, contradictions, and inadequacies of the dominant social order” (32). Because of the amenability of these bonds to heterodox appropriations, orthodox Confucian interpretation reduces their emotional force and therefore their subversive potential (29-30).

Similarly, in his research on Chinese masculinity, Louie interrogates how *li* in the Confucian sense regulates men's attitudes towards *qing* and shapes their performance of proper wen-masculinity. According to Louie, wen is related to the qualities including "scholarly, civil, mental, and genteel, manifested most commonly in the world of scholars and gentlemen," while wu attributes refer to capabilities in "martial arts, military leadership, physical skills, and power, emphasized typical in the world of warriors and machos" (qtd. in Xiao 176). Both wen and wu masculinities require and embody the ability of control (Louie *Nanxing tezhi lun* 163). In other words, to gain wen-wu masculinity which conforms to the social norms imposed on men is to gain control of the self and others (163). Louie argues that wen men and wu men demonstrate different attitudes towards seduction from women which can become the obstacle to their achievement. While wu men resist women's allure to affirm their masculinity, wen men, in those "scholar-beauty" romance that Louie examines, form intimate relationships with women but have to strictly bear their responsibility for women according to the demand of *li* (27-28). Louie notes, "*qing*, especially *qing* involving sex, is what gentlemen and heroes have to caution themselves against" (91).

However, Lee argues that the imperial cult of *qing* attempts to redefine the function of *qing* and negotiate the tension between the structural order of orthodox Confucianism and those horizontal relationships inhabiting in affect (33). For example, Li Zhi recognizes the wife-husband bond and claims that marital relationship should "be characterized by emotional reciprocity, not domination and

obedience” (34). For those literati of the cult of *qing*, the guidance to practice the heavenly principle is not that “emotion should arrive at ritual propriety” (发乎情，止乎礼), but instead, “*qing* is human nature, the material basis of heavenly principle, the fount of ethical conduct, and the origin of all virtues” and should reclaim the position previously occupied by *xing* or *li* (35). More importantly, Lee wants to draw our attention to the fact that by valorizing the status of *qing*, the intention of the cult of *qing* — Lee takes Feng Menglong’s *Qingshi* (情史 Anatomy of Love) as an example — is not to destroy the social order of orthodox Confucianism or to recognize the significance of an independent subject as the center of meaning, but to reinforce the intersubjective bonds in a more “subjectively meaningful and personally operable” manner rather than by “austere principles” or “imposed obligations” (41). While Lee analyzes the Ming play *Mudan ting* (The Peony Pavilion) to show how *qing* can reconcile with rather than challenge the realm of patriarchy, bureaucracy, and war, Louie similarly discusses *Xixiang ji* (Romance of the Western Chamber) to develop his argument (Lee 45). Louie contends that the male protagonist’s behavioral deviance from *li* and failure to discipline the self in the heterosexual romance does not undermine his social status as a masculine subject, because his wen masculinity can be manifested by his success in the civil service examination and his control over a woman (Louie *Nanxing tezhi lun* 93).

When it comes to horizontal interpersonal relationships, both scholars consider homosocial bonds or heterosexual romance. In *Modao Zushi/the Untamed*, there are homosocial associations and heteronormative marriage between different cultivation

clans to reinforce their social power. Yet, what is special in *danmei* texts is the homoeroticism between the two male protagonists. I draw on Lee's and Louie's theory here not to suggest that the construction of world order and intersubjective relationships in these texts intentionally refers to or closely matches with any specific versions of Confucianism.⁴ Rather, I consider their theoretical frameworks, their focuses on Confucian elements such as "li," "qing," and "yu," and discussion of subject formation and power relation as helpful to further investigate how the same-sex desire between the two protagonists becomes a horizontal force which challenges hierarchal ritual and transforms the suppressed subject but also encounters restrictions in the novel and drama.

Character Genres and Homoeroticism as a Resisting Force

As Louie indicates, *wen* is the result of good education (64). It is exactly when Wei Wuxian goes to the Gusu Lan Clan to study (听学) with cultivators from the Yunmeng Jiang Clan and other clans that the two male protagonists encounter each other for the first time. The teacher who lectures them is Lan Wangji's uncle Lan Qiren – whose characteristics are: "pedantic, stubborn, and a strict teacher who produced outstanding students" (K ch.13) The novel shows that leaders of cultivation clans not only are the administrative head and military leader of clans but also impart *wen* knowledge and *wu* skills to next generations. Master Lan Qiren lectures those young cultivators on clan rules and other historical knowledge about cultivation, and students are required to pass the tests at the end of their studying period. Both of the

male protagonists have outstanding “academic” performance: Lan Wangji is Lan Qiren’s proudest disciple, and he attends the lecture with other peer cultivators as a punisher rather than a student (ch.13). Although Wei Wuxian has conflicts with Lan Qiren in terms of their values choice, he answers Lan Qiren's questions fluently and has his own insights. Moreover, the novel mentions that Wei Wuxian ranks the fourth on the list of cultivator gentlemen of his generation as a “handsome young man and a refined cultivator skilled in the six arts” while Lan Wangji ranks the second (ch. 10). Six arts (六艺 liuyi) here cites the requirement for gentlemen in the Confucian system: rites, music, archery, charioteering, literacy, and numeracy. Both of the male protagonists also excel in wu abilities, exhibited by their performance in an archery competition, horses-riding, and many fighting scenes in the novel and drama.

However, for the masculinity embodied by these male models, wen temperament takes primacy over wu attributes. I consider them as ‘masculine’ models and as wen-dominated ‘masculine’ models based on the contrast that the novel creates between them and the other two male characters: Jin Lin and Nie Mingjue. In other words, these fixed categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘wen-wu’ are implicitly signified by the novel through its character construction. Jin Ling is the son of Wei Wuxian’s shiji Jiang Yanli from the Yunmeng Jiang Clan and the young master Jin Zixuan from the Lanling Jin Clan. He loses his parents in his childhood and grows up with his uncles, the new master of the Yunmeng Jiang Clan, Jiang Chen and of the Lanling Jin Clan, Jin Guangyao. Born in a noble cultivation clan without care from parents, Jin Ling resembles his uncle who is short-tempered and he is often teased by other peers

by calling him “da xiaojie” (大小姐 young mistress) because of his delicate and prideful personality. Such a feminized title implies that his gender performance does not meet the common expectation of how a masculine man should be. Another character Nie Mingjue is the character representative of wu masculinity in both the novel and the drama (Fig.2). Nie Mingjue is the leader of the Qinghe Nie Clan. The Nie Clan differs from other famous cultivation clans for that the weapon used by every generation of Nie leaders is somewhat brutish saber rather than the more



Fig. 2: Nie Mingjue uses saber as his weapon

elegant sword, and the founder of the clan is a butcher rather than a cultivator. In the novel, Nie Mingjue is characterized by his muscular exterior and violent temper. Saber is depicted as dangerous weapon that assembles hostile energy and finally affects its owner’s state of mind. According to the novel, nearly every Nie Clan leader dies out of a *qi* deviation explosion caused by their pursuit of sabermanship and so

does Nie Mingjue (ch 26). By contrast, except for the sword, the weapon used by Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian includes musical instruments — a seven-stringed guqin and a flute, which echoes with the music in the Confucian six arts (Fig.3).



Fig. 3: Lang Wangji plays the guqing while Wei Wuxian plays the flute

Being similarly competent on the almost top level in this fictional world is one prerequisite of the quite balanced relationship between the two powerful characters, but their differences are also obvious and suggest the internal tensions within the characters and of the story. The official label offered by the author describes the *gong* character Lang Wangji as “高贵冷艳 gaogui lengyan” and the *shou* character Wei Wuxian as “邪魅狂狷 xiemei kuangjuan,” both of which are common genres of character formula in Chinese web romance (Moxiang Tongxiu ch 1). “Gaogui” (noble) implies the privilege derived from Lan Wangji’s prestigious and rich family background. By contrast, although the Jiang clan leader treats Wei Wuxian as equally as the former’s own son, Wei Wuxian cannot break away from his subordinated status

as the clan slave until Jiang Cheng announces his defection from the Yunmeng Jiang Clan. Such looser association with and later departure from the clan is one crucial factor of Wei Wuxian's subversive potential. "Leng" (cold) can be interpreted as Lan Wangji's cold masculinity which is closely related to his obedience to *li* of the Lan Clan. When Louie selects Confucius as the symbolic icon for wen masculinity, he contends that the ideal Confucian gentleman is the one who follows the maxim of "restraining self and returning to the rites" (克己复礼) in all aspects of life (*Chinese Masculinities* 2). In *Modao Zushi*, the Gusu Lan Clan's motto is "yazheng" (雅正 elegance and righteousness) (ch.2). The forehead ribbon worn by every Lan clan member means "guishu ziwo" (规束自我 regulating and restraining self) (ch. 2). The clan has more than 3000 clan rules which are inscribed on the Wall of Discipline and also compiled into written books restored in the Library Pavilion; the rules presented by the novel are primarily prohibitive to regulate their disciples' behavior. For example, "causing noise," "sneering for no reason," and "obscenity" are prohibited (ch.13).⁵ One exclusive technique to the Gusu Lan Clan is the Silence Spell (禁言术) which can stop people from speaking by rendering their lower and upper lips inseparable. Lan Wangji casts this spell on the talkative Wu Wuxian multiple times. The clan's regulation on disciples' expression results in the inexpressiveness and coldness of Lan Wangji – as the best practitioner of the clan rules. The regulation on sexual behavior also echoes Lan Wangji's "ascetic temperament" (ch 111). While Louie contends that self-control, especially in the aspect of sex, is the crucial ability to maintain masculinity in the Confucian wen-system, using the term *lengyan*, the author

offers an erotic twist regarding the character's sexuality: cold but amorous. The inaccessibility of the self-restrained character – who is a “high, holy mountain to behold in awe” and cannot be profaned – does not undermine but even contributes to his sexual allure which is suggested by the term “yan” (K ch.12).⁶ This also suggests how this character as an eroticized male object is consumed by readers and audience.

On the other hand, Wei Wuxian's characteristics of “xiemie”, literally understood as “evil (and enchanting)” corresponds to his title of “the grandmaster of demonic cultivation” who practices the “heterodox” (xie). The tension between zheng and xie is the core issue of the novel. Interesting, although it already becomes an internet word and is commonly seen in Mary Sue type of web romance and dramas to create characters such as dominant bosses or alpha males, the term “kuangjuan” can be traced back to *the Analects* to describe a type of people recognized by Confucius: “kuang” refers to the character's boldness to take actions, while “juang” means a quality that confines a person within a certain scope of acts and assures that the person's wildness does not transcend the proper boundary (“Lunyu/Zilu”). This resonates with the motto of the Yumeng Jiang Clan which is “doing the undoable” (明知不可为而为之) — another reference to the Confucianist values. In this sense, both the novel and drama, to different degrees, construct the grandmaster of the demonic arts Wei Wuxian, as the deviant from the normative, in a restricted way: the boldness of doing the undoable – Wei Wuxian's practice of the evil path – should serve for pursuing the achievement acknowledged by the mainstream morals.

Despite the internal tensions of the characters themselves, at the beginning of the novel, we can see how the self-disciplined and cold Lan Wangji who strictly obeys the clan's *li* clashes with the free-spirited and lively Wei Wuxian who values individual autonomy and holds a dismissive attitude towards the Lan clan's rigidity. After he meets Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji is constantly involved in activities of violating the clan rules. For instance, the Lan Clan prohibits liquor, returning late at night, and fighting without permission. Yet, when they just encounter each other, Lan Wangji has a fight with Wei Wuxian for that the latter brings wine back to the Lan Clan's residence at late night. At this moment, Lan Wangji is still the overseer punishing the rulebreaker. But as their relationship develops, he becomes complicit with Wei Wuxian in violating the Lan Clan's minor rules regulating daily behavior and its core principle of "being righteous." Gradually, A sharp contradiction between Lan Sect's *li* and Lan Wangji's *qing/yu* towards the transgressor Wei Wuxian emerges.

The contradiction has three layers. The first two layers are related to the same-sex desire. On the one hand, Lan Wangji's homosexual impulse is deviant from the heterosexual pattern constitutive of the patriarchal family structure. On the other hand, because one of the clan rules is that "obscenity is prohibited" and the novel also portrays Lan Wangji as a frigid prude – it is therefore understandable why Wei Wuxian can irritate Lan Wangji by replacing the book that the latter is reading with pornography – the novel's repeated and detailed description of the two character's

lovmaking from a voyeuristic perspective challenges the Lan Clan's suppression and stigmatization of sex (ch 13, 14, 111).

Furthermore, after Wei Wuxian practices demonic cultivation and becomes the attacking target of the cultivation world, if Lan Wangji follows his heart and stands with Wei Wuxian, he would betray the orthodox path and go astray into the evil. In other words, the conflict between the family's ritual and the individual subject's sentiment is reflected by an external and broader contradiction, which is also the core contradiction of the drama and novel – the dichotomy of zheng/xie (正/邪) or hei/bai (黑/白). Therefore, after Wei Wuxian returns from the Burial Mounds, Lan Wangji continuously attempts to persuade Wei Wuxian to abandon the evil and return to the righteous. The reason used by Lan Wangji is that “this path damages the body and mind nature,” while Wei Wuxian is always confident about his manipulation of the demonic cultivation (ch. 62). However, in the novel, there are two moments when Wei Wuxian does lose self-control. One is at Qiongqi path where the Jin Clan summon their army and ambush Wei Wuxian to kill him. At this time, he accidentally kills Jin Zixuan, the lover of his beloved shiji, which leads to people's crusade against him. The other moment is when the four great cultivation clans attack him at the Nightless City. In this plot, after his shijie's sacrificing death, Wei fully releases the destructive power of his demonic cultivation and initiates a bloodbath. The novel positions Lan Wangji's first confession of his sentiment for Wei Wuxian exactly after this plot. He brings Wei Wuxian to a cave and tries to save Wei by transferring his spiritual power to the latter. When his uncle Lan Qiren, his brother Lan Xichen and

other thirty-three Lan Clan elders who appreciate Lan Wangji's talent and achievement find the two in the cave and witness Lan Wangji's affectionate gesture in front of Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji does not deny anything but fights and injures these patriarchal figures who come to kill Wei (ch. 100). Lan Wangji receives heavy punishment – thirty-three whippings and three years of detention – for this resistance, which does not end his desperate madness triggered by Wei Wuxian's death. One day he gets drunk and ruins the clan library, Lan Qiren compromises and decides to not punish him for that will not change anything of him and he has already received enough of it (ch. 100). Driven by *qing*, Lan Wangji breaks the family hierarchy in his fighting with the male elders and transgresses the Confucian structure of feeling which is advocated by the cult of *qing* to support rather than damage the social order. His enduring of punishment eventually nullifies the effect of the clan discipline.

The thirty-three lifelong whip scars left on Lan Wangji's back and his persistent search for Wei Wuxian during the sixteen years between the latter's death and rebirth affirm that the intimacy imagined here is "passionate love" which is beyond "sensuous love." According to Irving Singer, while sensuous love "relies upon superficial but genuine pleasures of senses," passionate love emphasizes 'intense yearning and emotion upheaval' and "enables the protagonist to traverse the boundary of life and death" (qtd in Lee 44). The intensity of the love here is highlighted by the length of time and disbelief of the lover's demise. After the emotional and somatic suffering of sixteen years, Lan Wangji recognizes Wei Wuxian immediately even Wei now lives in a totally different body of another man.

After Wei Wuxian's rebirth, since Wei is so traumatic when Lan Wangji confesses his sentiments in the cave that Wei lost his memory and does not realize Lan Wangji's inner feelings, the story of the two protagonists' journey to uncover the truth of other characters' uncanny death is also the one to reveal the *qing* between the two protagonists. Such process of revelation resonates with Janice Radway's analysis of romance fiction in her book *Reading the Romance*. Although Radway focuses on the American romance fiction of the 1980s-1990s and the women readers in the specific area of Smithton with specific class and occupation, it is intriguing to see how strategies of idealizing male subjects deployed by those romance fictions and recognized by their women readers also appear in the *danmei* texts of contemporary China that we are reading here. After comparing the ideal and bad romance fictions evaluated by those female readers, Radway finds that all of the texts intend to deal with female fear of unequal sexual arrangements and suggest at their ending that masculinity is benign (168). But the difference between these two types of works is that ideal romances can establish a narrative to convince their readers that the problematic masculinity of male characters – which can be embodied by male reserve and indifference – is “a false or defensive facade that, when removed, ... reveals the true male personality to be kind and tender,” while the bad romances fail to achieve such transformation (168). The omniscient narration of these romance fictions offers their female readers a “double perspective” that allows readers to know and understand better the male character's masculine behavior and his “true feelings and intentions” beneath the behavior (140). In *Modao Zushi*, Lan Wangji only expresses

his inner sentiments once – at the moment near Wei Wuxian’s death. According to Lan Xichen, Lan Wangji is an inexpressive person who does not say anything if others do not ask, and sometimes even others ask him, he would not necessarily answer (ch. 64). Therefore, near the end of the novel, it is Lan Wangji’s brother Lan Xichen who speaks out Lan Wangji’s hidden affection for Wei Wuxian and exposes the truth behinds many mysteries bewildering Wei Wuxian. In addition to those two major plots, the novel also details Lan Wangji’s multiple “abnormal” behaviors to suggests the divergence between his verbal reserve and inner feelings. These “abnormal” moments are always when Lan Wangji loses self-restraint and breaks of rules of *li*. For example, the novel portrays how Lan Wangji “misbehaves” after he gets drunk for three times: he becomes fragile and childish; he steals things and plays with the sacred forehead ribbon; he becomes jealous when he sees Wei Wuxian is with other people; and when he is drunk for the third time, Lan Wangji takes the lead and has his first sex with Wei Wuxian (ch 31,44, 93). This differs from the texts examined by Louie which emphasize that self-control and the control of women are indispensable for the male characters to main their masculinity. According to Radway, it is these moments of losing self-control that reveal the hidden affection and intentions of the character and renders the cold masculinity of the male subject more desirable for female readers.

Additionally, evoking the literary theory about doubles, Xinle unpacks the close relationships between different characters and examines how the storylines of the protagonists’ doubles can reveal various traits of the protagonists and be read as a

realistic allegory (Xinle). In this sense, the love story of Lan Wangji's parents told by Lan Wangji's brother Lan Xichen to Wei Wuxian to a certain extent suggests how 'unethical' romance can damage individuals' prospects. Lan Wangji's father Qingheng-jun falls in love with a woman who murders the former's teacher for an unknown reason and marries her to protect her regardless of the opposition from other clan people. However, the man imprisons himself and his wife separately as punishment after their wedding. According to Lan Xichen, *Qingheng-jun*, who "used to be a famous cultivator" and "had many things waiting for him in the future," therefore "suddenly backed away" and "destroyed his own life" (K ch.64).

It is obvious that there is an analogy between the story here and Lan and Wei's romance, while Lan Xichen accuses Wei Wuxian by saying that "In [Lan Wangji's] whole life he had been honest and righteous and immaculate – you were the only mistake he made" (K ch. 99). But unlike his father's radical breaking-off from the cultivation world and the clan, Lan Wangji lives a comparatively free life as youxia by departing from any institutions including his family without totally abandoning his responsibility as a prominent cultivator. The novel portrays at its ending:

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji roamed around ..., being 'wherever the chaos was' (逢乱必出) as before. They'd visit wherever they heard was haunted by the creatures of the dark and deal with the disturbance, touring the region and getting to know the local customs while they were at it. Three months passed as such, with blissful freedom and no regard to matters of the cultivation world (K. ch.113).

In the stateless *xiuxian* world, they do not need to succeed in the civil service exam and strive for careers as the male characters do in the texts analyzed by Lee and Louie to affirm their legitimate subjectivity and masculinity. By idealizing the male characters and positioning them in the alternative fantastical world, the novel exempts its protagonists from realistic pressures and offers them autonomy as wandering subjects distancing from the patriarchal and bureaucratic system. In this sense, their act of “being wherever the chaos was” and “dealing with the disturbance” to maintain the peace of the cultivation world is not motivated by any external forces but rather originated from personal identification with justice and a sense of responsibility. Moreover, such heroic gesture is mitigated by the characters’ indulgence in emotive and carnal pleasure which is the primary content of the novel’s end.

Nevertheless, the drama represents a force that intends to restrict the characters’ distancing from the mainstream and rewrites scenarios that can potentially serve for certain national discourse.

The Web Drama Divergence and Subtext Interpretation

As discussed above, the conflict between *zheng* and *xie* is the core issue of the novel, and the struggle of the male protagonist Lang Wangji reflects such conflicts. On the one hand, *li* of the Gusu Lan Clan demands him to persist with the righteous path. On the other hand, his *qing* drives him to stand with the ‘evil’ character Wei Wuxian. After Wei Wuxian loses self-control twice and commences the massacre, Lan Wangji finally decides his stance and resists the orthodox, which is demonstrated

by his fighting with the clan authority. In this sense, the novel shows the destructive power of *qing* which can attack the social order and betray the orthodox.

Interestingly, the drama makes two changes in this regard. First, the drama adds extra hints to suggest that it is not that Wei Wuxian loses control but that another villain character Jin Guangyao designates his subordinate to replicate Wei Wuxian's demonic arts, stimulate chaos, and causes these tragedies from behind. Such suggestions are confirmed by Jin Guangyao's confession near the end of the drama when all of his crimes have been exposed. In this sense, the drama constructs Wei Wuxian as a more flawless character and renders the conflicts between *zheng* and *xie* more reconcilable. Or more precisely, the drama conveys that the evil path and righteous path are only a matter of form and should lead the characters to the same destination as long as used properly by righteous people. There is no essential distinction between the motivation of Wei Wuxian's practice of *xie* and Lan Wangji's persistence to *zheng*. Wei Wuxian has to invent the demonic cultivation because he loses his ability to practice the righteous, and his "evil path" does not sacrifice innocent lives but only utilizes dead people and their *qi* of resentment. He is still the representative of goodness /shan, while, by contrast, other villain/e characters who replicate his demonic cultivation for personal interest and desire are punished and killed for their moral but not behavioral deviance. Such adjustment resonates with the character's label of "kuangjuan" – his 'deviance' is confined within the permitted scope.

Second, Wei Wuxian suicide in the bloodbath at the Nightless City, and the ensuing plots of Lan Wangji's confession to him and resistance to the Lan Clan elders are deleted. Instead, Lan Wangji is punished because he prevents cultivators from the Lanling Jin Clan, rather than the seniors from his own clan, from searching Wei Wuxian's residence after Wei's death. When he is reprimanded by Lan Qiren because of his defense for Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji responds by "I dare ask uncle, what is right and what is wrong? What is black? What is white?"; he also says to Lan Xichen that he takes Wei Wuxian as his confidant (知己 zhiji) so he should trust Wei's "integrity" (ep. 43, 11:40-13:10). Yet, in the novel, when faces the charge of the clan members, Lan Wangji responds by saying "that there was nothing to explain, that this was it"; he also states that "he could not say with certainty whether what [Wei Wuxian] did was right or wrong, but no matter what, he was willing to be responsible for all of the consequences alongside [him]" (K. ch 99). Therefore, the driving force is subtly transformed from Lan Wangji's sentiments for his lover beyond any moral judgments to the trust in his zhiji regarding the latter's integrity.

What is more, the drama adds new plots to explain what the recognized "integrity" might mean here. While at the end of the novel the two characters become daolv (道侣 daoist companion) and roam around, Lan Wangji voluntarily assumes the responsibility of the Chief Cultivator in the last episode of the drama. Although its ending leaves the interpretative space for audience to imagine that after Lan Wangji finishes all his works, he leaves with Wei Wuxian as the novel writes, such adjustment actually renders the story more consistent with the purpose of Feng

Menglong's cult of *qing*; it recognizes 'illicit' interpersonal relationships as long as they do not harm families and careers (Lee 42). No wonder fans are discontent with the end of the drama and someone comments that this is like a person who loves freedom but finally enters into the Chinese political system and becomes a civil servant (Sangyu). Wei Wuxian also questions why Lan Wangji would take over the role of the Chief Cultivator, the latter explains: "We made a vow here." Then a flashback shows when Wei Wuxian comes to the Gusu Lan Clan to study sixteen years ago, all cultivators release sky lanterns together and make their vows. The two characters express identical aspiration at that moment: "May I curb the evil and assist the weak (*chujian furuo*) and have no regrets" (EP 50 33:45-34:08).⁷ Interestingly, in another popular *dan'gai* drama Guardian in 2018 which also centers around the conflicts between *zheng* and *xie*, its two protagonists sacrifice themselves to maintain the peace of the world and similarly express their identical pursuit – "Suppress the heart of the evil. Spread the virtue of the good" – at the last moment of their life. (*Guardian* ep 40 10:41-10:55).⁸ Hence, we can infer that the "integrity" of the subjects is related to their determination to "chujian furuo". While the novel, as a *danmei* romance, if not prioritizes then at least celebrates the same-sex desire between the two characters, the *dan'gai* drama has to eliminate this part and highlights the heroic aspiration of the two characters as their principle of behavior and personal choices. While in the novel the homosexual relationship distances the characters from the patriarchal and bureaucratic system and they live as a couple of *youxia*, the drama's ending relocates one of the subjects within the hierarchal order.

Because of the *dan'gai* drama's citing of the mainstream values and Chinese traditional culture, it can be appropriated by the official narrative to serve for nationalist projects. Take two pieces of reports from official platforms as examples. The article *The Untamed: Writing the Beauty of the National Style* on people.cn claims that the drama tells the legendary story of how the protagonist Wei Wuxian and his intimate friend Lan Wangji curb the violent and assist the weak ("chujian furuo"), help "tianxia," and accomplish their self-growth (Hu).⁹ And the article also comments that the story does not limit to private sentiments or romance but relates the personal growth of every character with the love for family and nation and conveys to young audience the spirit of xia and the values of family-nation-tianxia (Hu).¹⁰ Interestingly, the world in the drama is structured by deploying family, the cultivation clans, as the primary units, while the concept of nation does not exist and the concept of *tianxia* is rarely mentioned. Yet, this article seems to read the subtexts of the character's claims of "chujian furuo" as their determination to devote themselves to the nation and *tianxia*. On the other hand, the article states another potential of the drama to contribute to nationalist projects because the drama represents Chinese traditional culture and manifests the "cultural confidence" of China (Hu). The elements of "national style" (国风 *guofeng*) includes traditional costumes, make-up, props, and rites and the textual reference to classics such as *the Analects*. One report from the state Television channel CCTV 6 takes *the Untamed* as one example of Chinese dramas to raise the question of "how to better use dramas and films to export Chinese culture" (Fig. 4). In one interview of *the Untamed*'s director Chang Wai

Man, he also points out that the drama pays homage to the “national style” by incorporating Chinese traditional elements, which increases the popularity of the



Fig. 4: The new report from CCTV6 uses the Untamedas example to raise questions about exporting Chinese culture

drama (“zhuanfang”). According to Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, both the “Core Socialist Values” (CSV) and “the Chinese Dream” declared by the Chinese President Xi Jinping “take traditional Chinese culture as the base” and position the Chinese traditionalism in as “necessary counters to ‘Western’ culture” (483). It is therefore understandable why the article associates the characters’ personal trajectories with the grand narrative of nation and *tianxia*: the narrative of the CVS and the Chinese Dream project – which determines the tone of the articles posted on the state media – “is rooted in societal and national advancement rather than individualist achievements” (Ng and Li 483).

In contrast to the interpretation from the official voice which relies on grand narratives, fans create abundant works that move the implicit homoeroticism between the characters into prominence and highlight the affective dimension of the drama. Dedicated fans do close reading of the novel, drama, and other derivative works of this IP. They contribute collective intelligence to capture nuances between different

versions of the work and dig out the hidden clues which enable them to affirm the relationship between the two characters. For instance, there is a three-minute clip of the drama on the Chinese video platform Bilibili titled “The Oversea Version of *the Untamed*: Zhanzhan and Yibo Really Shot Wang Xian’s Love. Tencent and *the Untamed* are Amazing.” It has been played more than 1.18 million times with 20 thousand likes and 1622 danmu. This clip uploaded by fans visualizes a new scenario added by the drama: When Wei Wuxian saves Wen clan people and is on their way to leave Qionqiu path, Lan Wangji suddenly appears to stop him from going further astray from the righteous path. But Lan Wangji fails to pull him back and cries when gazing into the directions where Wei Wuxian leaves. Fans point out in their comments that the editing of this version is different from the one available on the Chinese platform and this one adds more close-ups of the two character’s faces showcasing their long look at each other and the last shot of Lan Wangji’s tears, which from these fans’ perspective is the proof of the two characters’ mutual love (Fig. 5, 6) (“Chenqing ling haiwai ban”). In another episode when Lan Wangji hears the truth



Fig. 5: Lan Wangji’s crying scene

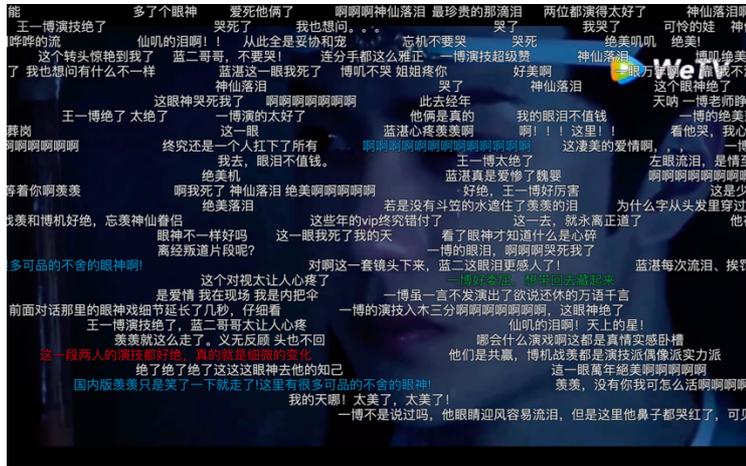


Fig. 6: Fans' danmu as the annotation of their affective close reading that Wei Wuxian transfers his Golden Core to Jiang Cheng, Lan Wangji also cries for unspoken reasons that await the audiences' queer interpretation. While those moments of explicit eroticism and verbal revelation of the sentiments are eliminated from the drama, these newly added crying scenes exemplify how the visual representation of the drama softens the cold masculinity of the male character, transforms him into a sympathetic subject, conveys the intense *qing* in a reticent but expressive and exhibitionist manner, and therefore generates the affective resonance between its audiences.

Conclusion

By analyzing the *danmei* novel *Modao Zushi*, the *dan'gai* drama the *Untamed*, and several examples of official and fannish interpretation, this chapter notes three layers of contesting forces in this *dan'gai* field. First, the original novel itself and its

construction of characters vacillate between the conservative and the subversive. It utilizes hierarchal structure as the main framework of the fictional world and locates the male protagonists at the almost top position of the structure to idealize them by portraying them as the male ideals conforming to Confucianist wen-wu criteria. Meanwhile, same-sex desire can be potentially destructive to the system, challenge the self-restraint requirement to maintain traditional masculinity, and distance the subjects from the patriarchal and bureaucratic realms. However, because Wei Wuxian's deviance from the orthodox does not fundamentally cross the boundary of "goodness" and the opposition between *zheng* and *xie* can reconcile within this character, the two subjects who depart from the social hierarchy as *youxia* at the end of the novel do not necessarily depart from the pursuit of social justice and their fulfillment of social responsibility.

On the other hand, such orthodox identification with the principle of "chujian furuo" is highlighted by the drama. The homosexual force of departing in the novel is transformed into the socialist brotherhood's force of returning to the mainstream social system. The heroic aspiration of the character is the theme of their bonds, and personal *qing* and desire lose their central position. Moreover, because of the ambiguous representation of the male/male relationship, the state media and fans as two interpretive participants in this culture demonstrate two opposite directions in terms of their reading of the drama's subtext. While the nationalist narrative intends to appropriate the *dan'gai* works by highlighting the values of nation and *tianxia* and

disregarding personal desire, the fans' reading reassures intersubjective connections and individual needs in affective terms.

Conclusion

Danmei is a field of fantasy, romance, and pleasure. *Danmei* is also a field of contradictions, struggle, and negotiation. While the term “indulging in beauty” seems to suggest an escapist gesture, my analysis of the *danmei* texts in this paper – no matter the *danmei* erotica or the *dan'gai* drama – shows how writing/reading *danmei* is still an activity of submerging oneself by the heterosexist pressure and negotiating with the normative pattern of gender and sexuality. In the first chapter, the *danmei* erotica demonstrates how sexual desire and pleasure are deeply intertwined with the feeling of shame, guilt, and self-hatred while also entangled with asymmetrical power relations and gender violence. In the second chapter, in the novel and drama built on a pre-capitalist and stateless *xiuxian* world, subjects still need to navigate themselves within social hierarchy and reconcile with moral demands from the outside

In the *danmei* field, there are also multiple platforms involved in content circulation and multiple participants engaging in meaning-making. Noticeably, the three parties of the state, the capital, and individuals form triangular dynamics when culture convergence occurs on media sphere: the state, on the one hand, exercises its power to discipline individuals' gender expression and punishes the transgressors, and, on the other hand, appropriates the subculture to serve for nationalist projects by reducing its subversive forces and eliminating personal desire. Individuals – *danmei* fans particularly in this context – are not passive conformists. Instead, they have their own agency to find fissures in dominant ideologies and rewrite their story of deviant desire by interacting with original resources. The Capital, driven by economic

interests from the niche market, invites the “dangerous” culture into the mainstream and brings these self-purified works more visibility while bearing the risk of state censorship. Meanwhile, it can expedite commercialization, industrialization, and homogenization of the subculture in which process *danmei*’s subversive parts might be removed. The tensions between the three parties are not static but constantly changing. As Jenkins states, in the era of cultural convergence, “no one group can set the terms” and “control access and participation” (23). This paper does not intend to offer an exhaustive investigation of *danmei* – which is an impossible project based on its heterogeneity and broadness – but wishes to offer examples of specific texts to display the complexity and pinpoint different but perhaps contesting forces within the field.

However, although I am aware of multiple binary oppositions that emerge in this field and in my analysis, the framework of this paper is still very much structured and limited by the dichotomy of man/woman and hetero-/homosexuality. Bauer points out that there is an essentialist trend in academic discourse to theorize and normalize male/male fan fiction “as a common dream of gender equality, representing what (heterosexual) women ‘really’ want” (79). In this sense, the concept of “woman” and “man” are taken as natural and singular categories while sexuality is reduced to sexual orientation associated with object-choice. Evoking Sedgwick’s discussion of sexuality and Butler’s radical advocacy for “breaking gender binaries,” Bauer indicates other possibilities to theorize male/male fan fiction. For instance, she draws attention to the desire of female “cross voyeur” for gay men per se and cross-gender identification

such as that of “female to gay male” transsexuals (157). The circuitry of desire expression and its “mismatch” with the heteronormative in *danmei* writing can help us rethink what is sexuality beyond the hetero-/homosexual polarization. While this paper and the texts analyzed by this paper show how these binaries are constructed, *danmei* awaits more queer imagination and interpretations to transcend the current narrative and theoretical limits.

Notes

Introduction

1. In the first session of this introduction, I use the term “BL” because this was how people called this culture when I was first exposed to it. In the following discussion, I will switch to use the term “danmei” (耽美) which is now circulated more commonly in Chinese fandoms.
2. “包含有色情内容的有艺术价值的文学、艺术作品不视为淫秽物品。”

Chapter 1

1. “而性实具于心者也。”
2. “从来情者性之动也。性发为情，情由于性……”
3. “男女相悦之始。”
4. This hierarchies and rules include “亲疏,” “长幼,” “尊卑,” “僧俗,” “纲常廉耻.”
5. “不得已,” “不能拒.”
6. Reassigning gender to fan objects is not an act of reversal, for the demarcation between man and woman is not directional. This relationship can become directional in certain space and actions. For instance, “male gaze” suggests a directional vision from man as subject to woman as object. Therefore, I understand “逆” in “nisu” as “to go against” or “to oppose” “正” (the normative) rather than “to reverse.”
7. “There was a bang behind, and the old glass door made a crumbling sound. The man had finally escaped. He will definitely come back. He is a devout believer who worships the Goddess. He prays regularly and receives salvation from his Lord.

” (ch. 3).

8, 9. The original sentences are “我咬着唇齿，羞 rǔ 得闭起眼，心想：我从没有被人触碰过那种地方，更没有什么性经验，可竟然感到身体像个多情的寡妇一样敏感” and “比荡妇还银荡.” To avoid being deleted and to adjust to censorship requirement, these novels posted online deploys some strategies to transform their obscene languages. The strategies in the version of Gongzhan and Desaluo Renyu I examine include: using punctuation marks and symbols, such as “|” and “-,” within sensitive words to separate their component characters; using pinyin; diving one character into two parts, so, for instance, “米青液” replaces “精液” and “肉木奉” replaces “肉棒”; miswriting characters, such as “银荡” and “乳投.” Because these changes expose the criminality of erotica and the force of censorship, here I cite the initial sentences I have encountered on the websites rather than revise them to “normal language.”

Chapter 2

1. The drama has its official translation while the novel’s English title comes from fans’ translation. To distinguish the texts that I discuss, I use the official English title to refer to the drama and the Chinese pinyin to cite the novel. When the novel is published by formal press in mainland China, its title changes to “无羁” (wuji), so, instead of Modao Zushi, this is the counterpart of the drama’s English title.

2 There are different labels referring to this literary genre, including xiuxian (修仙), xiuzhen (修真), xianxia (仙侠), and xianxia-xiuzhen(仙侠-修真). the last one is

how this type of work is labeled by Jinjiang so used by the author of the novel. In this following discussion, I will use the term xiuxian in that this is most consistent with the genre's English translation: immortals cultivation.

3 The death of Wei Wuxian's first life and his spiritual returning in Mo Xuanyu's body is actually the beginning of the novel and drama. The novel interweaves the past and present by inserting many fragmented flashbacks into the present timeline. The drama presents what happens in Wei Wuxian's first life in a long and complete flashback. Here, to make the storyline more clear to understand, I introduce the story in a linear way.

4 “不可喧哗” “不可无端哂笑” “不可淫乱”

5 “高山仰止、不可褻瀆”

6 “锄奸扶弱，无愧于心”

7 “镇恶者之心，扬善者之德”

8 “锄奸扶弱、匡扶天下，完成自我成长”

9 “家国天下的价值观”

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