

In pursuit of unconditional love

- A study of Boys' Loves novels under the rule of
The Chinese Communist Party



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Abstract

The government of the People's Republic of China since the beginning of its time not only implemented its desired state censorship and strict guidelines to regulate the consumption of mainstream media on every platform possible. As a result, The people of the People's Republic of China are currently facing extreme media surveillance and restriction from the government. Any materials on television, movie theater, or online social media platforms are usually produced and adjusted to be clean of all obscenities before they can be shown to the public. Boys' love novels and TV series in China that are prone to have depictions of homosexuality and eroticism are naturally the main targets of censorship by the party-state. Still, not only are they among the most popular internet literature subgenres but regularly made their appearances on mainstream media as well in the form of TV series adaptations and animated series as well. The market for boys' love novels is so huge that they normally generate huge commercial successes despite stringent media restrictions. Currently, boys' love stories are seemingly largely regarded as homoeroticism, and the target audiences are nothing more than "rotten girls" living their unproductive lives.

This relatively popular boys' love sub-genre in China follows the trend of the Japanese boys' love model in creating stories of male-male romantic relationships that are entirely different from the usual romances. Boys' love novels also appear to offer a different route for some to escape stressful reality and lead some fans to finally identify their gender identity. However, as long as boys' love stories are under watchful surveillance of the party-state they will have to adapt and adjust the way they present male-male romanticism in the media and make them into a more "acceptable" state. Chinese boys' love stories on mainstream media platforms are usually presented to be stories of adventuring brotherhood with several hints and insinuations indicating their romantic relationships as a result. People inside of boys' love community are usually obvious to their romanticism, and original web novels are often written with hints and extra chapters containing abundant homoeroticism that are normally forbidden to be shown on screen.

In this study, I will attempt to understand what exactly is the boys' love sub-genre in the Chinese context. Did China throughout history ever view eroticism or homosexuality as obscene? When do they regard homoeroticism as obscene. To what degree do boys' love stories appeal to their consumers, how do they correspond to LGBT movements in China, and how do boys' love stories usually depict male-male romantic relationships in China.

Abbreviations

CCP - The Chinese Communist Party

LGBT - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

PRC - The People's Republic of China

SARFT - State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television

Table of Contents

● METHODOLOGIES.....	1
● INTRODUCTION.....	2
● Chapter One: The changing perception of homoeroticism in modern China.....	10
● Chapter Two: The Joy of Boys' Love Stories	16
● Chapter Three: Pseudo-gay and hidden homoerotic relationships.....	22
● CONCLUSION.....	36
● LIST OF REFERENCES.....	38

Table of Figures

Figure 1 Kaze to Ki no Uta volume 1 manga cover (1977).....	8
Figure 2 Tian Guan Ci Fu official art for web comic on Bilibili Comics (2021).....	8
Figure 3 Screenshot from The Untamed episode 6 (2019).....	29
Figure 4 Screenshot from The Founder of Diabolism final season ep. 12 (2021).....	29
Figure 5 Screenshot from Heaven Official's Blessing first episode (2020).....	30
Figure 6 Screenshot from The Founder of Diabolism final season ep. 12 (2021).....	31
Figure 7 Screenshot from 19 Days webcomic chapter 384.....	34

Methodologies

The aim and focus of this paper is to find out, as an outsider of the boys' love community, what is the Chinese boys' love literature and where it originated. As well as making an attempt to find an answer to why it appeals to a lot of people, and how they usually depict male-male relationships in boys' love novels under the censorship of the party-state of China by studying picked novels. As such, I have a list of a few chosen boys' love novels and some of their adaptations to discuss. Accordingly, Chinese internet fictionists are very active in their hobby. Many of them are actively putting out their episodic novels daily whenever they are free to write. Some internet novels can consist of around two hundred to thousand episodes long with their authors dedicating more than ten thousand words a day to their novels. Sometimes more than twenty or thirty thousand words a day (Walsh 2022, pp. 54-69). If I have to look into a lot of individual Chinese boys' love novels and conduct a close reading analysis of the novels, the task will be unbearable and exhausting. There are of course novels that focus exclusively on sexuality locked behind a paid membership, accessible only through making contributions to the website or simply well hidden on the internet. Adding that on to the amount of literature I am reading, it is rather exhausting for me to find them. This means I am relying on discussions made by others when I discuss sexually explicit in boys' love novels. I will also be aware of the generalization problem I may have with picking very few specific examples when discussing the boys' love community as a whole. To solve this problem, I decided to pick very popular Chinese boys' love novels to read through while at the same time watching their TV adaptation on official streaming websites along with studying scholarly research on boys' love media. When discussing picked boys' love novels, I have two popular works by *Mo Xiang Tong Xiu* (墨香铜臭) which are *Heaven's Official Blessing* (天官赐福 Tian Guan Ci Fu) from 2017 and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (魔道祖师 Mo Dao Zu Shi) from 2015 with all its animated series adaptations produced by Zhang Shengyuan and Xu Yuanyuan respectively. As well as the TV series adaptation of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation The Untamed* from 2019 produced by Zun Huaizhong. I do also have a TV series *Word of Honor* (山河令 shan he ling) produced in 2021 by Yang Han Yu which I only plan to mention briefly on paper because I did not read the original novel. *Word of Honor* is used in an attempt to give a clearer picture of the common theme in Chinese boys' love novels. It is an adaptation of a novel *Faraway Wanderers* (天涯客 tian ya ke) by an author using the pseudonym *Priest* from 2020. The last name on my list will be an ongoing webcomic *19 Days* (19天) illustrated by an

artist *Old Xian* (old先) published on her own social media platform such as Twitter and Weibo since 2013. Moreover, I was at first intending to conduct a few interviews with the boys' love community members but was advised to just observe their community instead. Although very few compared to others, I am still very surprised by the number of researches and online discussions in this field of media, especially discussions regarding the history of boys' love novels. So I do not have to wander the desert looking for an oasis that much.

I will break this paper into four parts as follows: the introduction discusses what really is the Chinese boys' love literature and where it originates as well as the boys' love community itself briefly. After that, I would like to dedicate chapter one of this paper to the discussion about a little history of anti-pornography doctrine and homophobia in China. It will be an attempt to give a clearer picture of how obscenity that China is against right now is not entirely an alien concept in traditional China which is in contradiction to modern days' usual perception of the masculinity that the party-state aims to build lately (Wang 2021). Chapter two of this paper will be dedicated to the discussion of why boys' love stories are so appealing to certain demographics with a small section in regard to what kind of relationship it has with the LGBT community. Because at first, I thought the boys' love novels sub-genre will be regarded highly by gay people until I discovered that some people in the gay community made critics against it on social media platforms. I intend to discover why that is the case as well. I will then proceed to discuss the boys' love novels and adaptations I have chosen (based on their high popularity) in chapter three. It will be an attempt to give examples of some of the most usual themes in boys' love novels from China which can be accounted as the result of certain aspects of Chinese society and the strict censorship policy of the party-state.

Introduction

Well into the 1980s, The People's Republic of China implemented its state-controlled development and did likewise with its cultural development but much has since changed under post-socialism and the arrival of the internet. A large number of Chinese literature websites have been found in China following the arrival of the internet. Not counting foreign web literature sites by Chinese people staying in foreign countries (Hockx 2015 & Feng 2013). Internet literature is also the result of new technological development in combination with the people seeking entertainment. Accordingly, it was in the 1990s that the first Chinese

online literature website was founded. At first, they were but some overseas sites made by and for Chinese students abroad who wished to have a platform of communication among themselves overseas. Several websites soon followed in China, and they are still widely popular even now (Feng 2013). Though it is hard to say the exact traffic number of Chinese online literature sites, it has been reported that the Jinjiang Literature City website has around 7 million registered users with nearly 750 new literature works published daily. The number may seem small for the total population of the People's Republic of China, but that is not counting ten or even a hundred thousand other sites with all their user bases (Lujubar 2020). It is there in literature websites that individual online publications can be put for either free or paid membership in the hope to generate monetary income. Many writers are independent of having signed contracts with publication companies as well. As the internet became increasingly accessible, online literature has gained even wider popularity and that includes female Chinese netizens. Among the most popular genres of online literature for women is *danmei* literature (Hockx 2015 & Feng 2013).

The term *danmei* (耽美) as it is today is known to have been borrowed from the 1970s Japanese manga *tanbi* (耽美) which can be translated to as “indulging beauty” or “the pursuit of beauty”. That is seemingly due to how male characters in *danmei* novels often will be depicted as possessing unrealistically ideal beauty. Another name that falls into the same literature subgenre category is also a Japanese term, *yaoi* (やおい), derived from the Japanese phrase *Yama-nashi, Ochi-nashi, Imi-nashi* meaning “no climax, no punchline, no meaning”. It could be referred to non-sensical playful stories and mindless fun in depicting male homoeroticism focusing exclusively on sex scenes with little attention to the actual plot and characters' development (Chang 2021 & Feng 2013 & Tian 2020 & Zhang 2016). The identifying line between the terms *danmei*, *yaoi*, and *slash fiction* (or known simply as “/” widely used in the west referring to boys' love as well) is still unclear. They nevertheless refer to the same sub-genre that is boys' love novels and comics. Since some parts of this paper will exclusively be about Chinese boys' love novels and their adaptations, I decided to mainly use the term *danmei* when referring to Chinese boys' love stories or fans and writers. Any other novels mentioned in this paper not originated from China or Chinese authors will simply be referred to as *boys' love* and not *yaoi*, *shōnen ai* (少年愛 “boy love”)¹, *tanbi*, *slash fiction*, or any other terms referring to the work about homoerotic male-male relationships.

¹ The characters may be translated literally as “youth love”, but the word *shōnen ai* itself is widely used referring to the “boys' love” sub-genre.

When discussing boys' love in original terms and not referring specifically to any works, I will use the term *boys' love* as well. Moreover, the term *danmei community* will be employed when referring to the community from China referring to writers and readers, and *danmei fans* when referring to just readers specifically to avoid confusion about whether or not I am discussing the community from what place.

Danmei novels, or boys' love, first arrived in China through Taiwanese translation of Japanese boys' love novels around the beginning of the 1990s (Feng 2013). This new coming sub-genre then gave birth to several dedicated danmei literature websites. Danmei community consists mainly of female youths most of which are heterosexual who, according to Feng (2013) and Zhang (2016), are mostly well educated and well off. Whether or not this could be accounted as feminist writings or not is still unclear to many due to the complexity in terms of feminist expression in literature writings while authors themselves often do not assert their ideas in their works. Nor do they express themselves to be part of feminist movements to the public, although some pointed out that they are unidentified feminists (Lilija 2016). Danmei novels for many are not supposed to be realistic or political and should be escapism tools which will also be the subject of later discussion. To add to that, many boys' love authors are writing either in their free time or doing it simply to seek additional income to combat financial difficulties. In short, the majority of the community around boys' love literature can be summarized simply as male-male fantasy romance for and by heterosexual women which is around ninety percent of the boys' love community (Wang 2021). Or so as it appears to be to an outsider like me while still being arguable as some research results reveal boys' love, in general, can affect personal gender identity and many may not be heterosexual (Galbraith 2011 & Yang 2016).

The fanbase of the danmei genre in China relied heavily on the internet for its continuing maintenance (Feng 2013). Despite the boom of its popularity, the danmei community is at constant risk of termination as the genre contains abundant graphic depictions of homosexuality or sexuality in general. The genre is also highly inclined toward unconventional romantic relationships and their graphical depictions such as incest and masochism for example (Chao 2016 & Nagaike 2012). It naturally goes against the nature of the highly authoritarian one-party state of China that recently aims to encourage traditional male masculinity and traditional Chinese morals based on Confucian family values (Wang 2021). Fans in the danmei community will often become a target for not only official but also social criticism and are accused of extensively producing and consuming pornography and

“poisoning” the young (Yi 2013). To my understanding, danmei fans are often referred to as “rotten girls” (腐女 Fǔ nǚ or *fujoshi* in Japanese) and they even adopted the term themselves in a self-mocking manner (Tian 2020 & Zhang 2016). Danmei fans will almost always conceal their literature consumption from friends and family and appear anonymously with a made-up username when interacting on social media platforms. Despite the odds, the danmei community has a solid long-lasting foundation that appears to be immune to public criticisms and continues to generate profits for creators. The most successful stories can also make their appearances on television in the forms of TV series or animated series (or *donghua* 动画 in Chinese), without the explicit part of the story of course. In that way, they help the genre gain more popularity and reach out even to international fans. To put its popularity into a much clearer perspective, a TV series *The Untamed* (陈情令 Chen Qing Ling) which is an adaptation of the original danmei novel *Founder of Diabolism* or *Founder of Demonic Cultivation* (魔道祖师 Mo Dao Zu Shi) dominated the highest-earning drama of 2019 altogether with other merchandises, fan meetings and music-related income such as concerts and albums (qq.com 2019). The series has reached 6.5 billion view counts on Tencent in 2021 and is currently rated 7.7 on the Douban website (rated by approximately 1.6 million users) (Wei 2021 & douban.com 2019).

The fans are of course very obvious about the male-male homosexual relationship between danmei characters. The community is in large part similar to other anime and gaming communities with people sharing pictures of their arts, collections, and cosplay photos. The danmei community outside of the official production quarters and content creators is very active in online postings. The circulation of fan-made videos, fanart, and fanfiction as well as non-canon shipping (characters’ pairing) fiction can easily be found anywhere on the internet. Despite the government’s effort to limit the presentation of sexual content on different Chinese media platforms, many parts of the population will still use any platform available to discuss what they would like to discuss. If I for example go to any video platform website such as *Bilibili* and type any name of a danmei series like 魔道祖师 (Mo Dao Zu Shi) on the search bar, the search results page will be filled with fan-produced videos ranging from story discussion to fan-made music videos and memes. The contents and comments of these videos generally discuss and admire the romanticism between male characters. Not only do they talk about the main couple, but also side characters as well. The shipping between supporting characters and swapping couples is very common. The amount of enthusiasm shared among the fan base on social media platforms is abundant, whether or

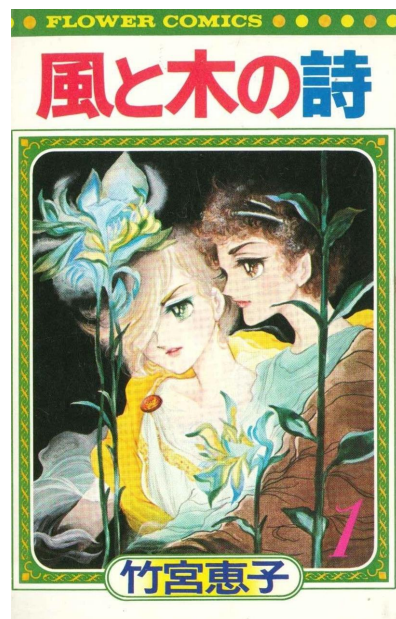
not they are in China or international. Many of the fan-made videos on Chinese websites can show the body of characters and talk about male-male romanticism, but not much of anything extremely sexually explicit. However, one thing that I noticed while exploring Chinese online social media platforms such as *bcy.net*, *gracg.com*, and *zcool.com* for example (they are platforms used mainly to share created pictures) is that none of the fan arts that are made publicly visible are very explicit in terms of eroticism in comparison to international sites such as Twitter for example. On Chinese social media platforms, there are fan arts of characters engaging in physical interaction and even gender-bend male characters into females, but still no sexual depictions. It was either the artist's self-censorship as posting pornographies have serious consequences in China or are they hidden on the internet to avoid getting caught as well.

Danmei community members can be very active to support their favorite actors in real life as well. According to Ng & Li's *A Queer socialist brotherhood* (2020), the self-titled *Guardian Girls* who are fans of the boys' love web series *Guardian* (镇魂 Zhen Hun) engage in various activities in support of actors or the series itself. It is worth mentioning that this series has also reportedly been reworked after its initial removal from Youku.com in 2018 with several scenes cut off when it is reuploaded. Other than making online fan content, the *Guardian Girls* also did crowdfunding projects in June 2018 to raise the popularity of Zhu Yilong (an actor who plays in the *Guardian*). They even pay to have the actor's electronic billboard shown in city landmarks and subway stations in celebration of his birthday as well which is very common practice in East Asian pop idol culture. Though this may say very little in terms of challenging the government's strict regulation against danmei novels, they show the bond of community and their enthusiasm for their hobby. They generally demonstrate their concern for the government's censorship and seemingly "agree" not to mention any romanticism between their favorite characters, although all of them can easily be found on the internet such as on online social media and video platforms as mentioned. Nevertheless, danmei fans generally understand the need to modify any specific scenes that indicate romanticism between male characters. They would often discuss characters' romantic male-male relationship jokingly or divert it to simply just mention them being "best friends" or "brotherhood". The term "*socialist brotherhood* (社会主义兄弟情 Shehui Zhuyi Xiongdi Qing)" for example is often used jokingly to call homoerotic relationships of danmei dramas referring to how the relationship is expressed as just a brotherhood relationship in line with government political ideology, even though there are countless of romantic interactions

between characters. Writers and readers of danmei novels seemingly agree to self-censor themselves whenever they are talking about danmei stories, especially on the public platform. This is reflected in original works that are made popular as well. They generally would have been put under pressure if sex scenes are included when made into published books and adaptations to be watched on screen. As such, most of the popular danmei novels and adaptations will have to show the main couples' relationships as a friendship despite extra chapters in original web novels having abundant sex scenes and hints.

The most notable characteristic of the boys' love is what most fans would call the "position" of characters as *top* or *bottom*. In Chinese danmei novels, they are the *gōng* (攻) and *shòu* (受) or *xiǎogōng* (小攻) and *xiǎoshòu* (小受) referring to *attacker* and *receiver* respectively. In my initial view, they are used to refer to characters' position in their relationship not only in the construction of explicit sex scenes as an insertive and receptive partner but also their role in the relationship as more a masculine party or as a feminine role identical to a heterosexual relationship. To add to that, it seems couples in some danmei novels make characters' roles more apparent by depicting the *gōng* to be more masculine while having *shòu* characters appear unrealistically feminine despite being male. This has been linked to the issue of the Chinese government encouraging male masculinity because several male pop stars appear to be too feminine in their eyes with earrings and makeup (Wang 2021). According to Sandy's work on *Fandom and Sexuality in Archives* (2020) and Jin's *Addicted to Beauty* (2013), some danmei characters that appear to have more feminine characteristics are called *bishounen* which means "beautiful boy" in Japanese. These characters' categorizations have been brought up to criticize boys' love novels for their adherence to heteronormative gender roles within a same-sex relationship. In recent years, however, some boys' love novels abandoned the idea of having one character designed specifically to play any role identical to a heterosexual relationship. As such many authors would design their characters to appear as gender-fluid types (Suter 2013 & Turner 2018). I also observed that many boys' love characters would either appear to be very feminine despite being male or both *gong* and *shou* will have very muscular male body structures. Many characters in early Japanese boys' love manga would often have *shou* male characters appear beautiful with big glitter eyes and blonde hair (Welker 2006). To some extent, they would also have a female breast and no penis as well as have cross-dressing elements involved in the story. Accordingly, female readers of early boys' love mangas often feel encouraged to explore (homo)erotic desires. Fan magazines from the late 1970s and early

1980s would contain personal stories about how readers shared and performed other fantasies derived from identification with beautiful boy characters as well (Welker 2006).



Characters in boys' love writings are usually designed to be unrealistically beautiful that people would normally not be able to tell that they are male without any given context. They are often leaning toward being feminine as in the above figures though they are from different times and countries. Figure 1 is a 1976 Japanese manga cover for *The Poem of Wind and Trees* (風と木の詩 *Kaze to Ki no Uta*) and the figure 2 on the right is artwork for *Heaven Official's Blessing* (天官賜福 *Tian Guan Ci Fu*) from China 2020.

For some, boys' love stories would even affect readers' identity formation. Some boys' love readers, either from China or Japan and presumably anywhere, even admit their boys' love stories help them identify their gender identity. Sometimes boys' love, as in girls' love stories, offer a way to look at the outside of heteronormativity as they offer a different narrative than the usual heterosexual relationship in storytelling. Some researchers pointed out how the crossdressing and gender-fluid elements in boys' love can occasionally be read as lesbian stories as well (Suter 2013 & Welker 2006). This is made apparent by the fact that many fans can be seen writing gender-bending fanfictions or fan-arts that I have personally come across on online platforms. They can easily be found on international social media such as Twitter as well. They will occasionally cross the boundary even further by creating male pregnancy too. Though many characters would still appear to possess masculine male characteristics such as broad shoulders, their gender identity has never been the main focus of the story whatsoever according to my observation. Even if some boys' love novels chose not to have effeminate male characters, their gender identity is often ignored as well. Beautiful boys in boys' love are neither visually nor physically male or female as discussed by Welker

(2006). Their deep affection towards one another is not exclusively homosexual as we normally would think when it comes to male-male relationships. The position of beautiful boys in boys' love stands outside the conventional heteropatriarchal world inhabited by female readers.

Another notable characteristic of danmei novels in China is the variety of settings ranging from mystical novels to school lives and sci-fi fantasy, but typically historical and fantasy which is the most popular literary genre in the sphere of Chinese literature as well. Chinese literature is rooted deeply in the exploration of the past leaning heavily toward the lives of adventurers, bureaucrats, and traditional cultivators. The danmei genre is no exception to this trend (Feng 2013). Accordingly, Chinese web literature often incorporates fantastical elements such as time-traveling, magics, body-swapping, and rebirth. The plot of danmei novels with *wuxia* (武俠 martial arts) and *xianxia* (仙俠 Chinese cultivation) settings will typically circle protagonists' heroic deeds along with sexual promiscuity and moral ambiguity (Feng 2013). Even if it is not *wuxia* or *xianxia*, male characters in danmei fiction are typically portrayed as unrealistically attractive, skilled learners with strict discipline while having questionable hidden affections toward their close friends. There will almost always be elements of tragic departure, past trauma, social pressure, and conflict between characters. But the main characters, also other supporting characters sometimes, will always fight to overcome any issues and find their peaceful lives with their male lovers in the end which will be the topic of later discussion.

The danmei literature in China not only contains original works created by both full-time and part-time writers but also fan production of other popular stories. Most of them are in the form of fanfiction, fanart, and short video clips for temporary entertainment. The fan-produced works can range from rewriting the story to refocusing and pairing different couples. This can also be done to other popular shows such as Star Trek and Star Wars as well as anime or video games. As stated in the book by Frederik L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (2012. pp. 33-62), fan publications in what they would call *doujinshi* (Japanese term for self-published print works) in Japan allow readers to have entertainment value when extra stories are added into their favorite universes or putting favorite side characters into other side story situations and bend the story around it. Even if characters borrowed from other works are heterosexual, they can still be portrayed as homosexual when put onto fanfiction. Fan-fictionists will often simply just add more sex scenes to the story which is freedom sometimes original writers find lacking. Some fanfiction

writers can even express their creative minds by rewriting historical classics such as the parody of the famous *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢 *Honglou Meng*) from the 19th century or *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三國演義 *Sanguo Yanyi*) etc (Feng 2013. pp. 109-136). The fanfiction based on danmei literature is abundant and will most likely include even more explicit pornographies adding even more entertainment value for both fan-fictionists and readers. It is also worth mentioning that though the danmei community in China is heavily restricted compared to Japan where there will be semiannual *Comiket* events for example to sell self-produced writings, I can see the fans in China are still able to actively utilize the accessibility of the internet to serve this purpose granted the platforms are not permanently terminated.

Chapter One: The changing perception of homoeroticism in modern China

This part of the study will be dedicated to the discussion of same-sex homoeroticism in ancient China. Other than that, I would also like to discuss the perception of obscenities along with homosexuality in ancient China and how it changed into the current state. Although not exclusively about danmei literature or pornography in contemporary China, I decided to look into Chou Wah-shan's *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (2000. pp. 13-42). Chou argued that same-sex eroticism and homosexual conduct is nothing alien in ancient China. The word that means "homosexual" or "heterosexual" did not exist. It was however not due to social acceptance of homosexuality either but was largely a result of hierarchical social order in ancient China. Chou argued that a person is often perceived to be an independent being and privacy is a major principle in our modern-day lives. The legal and social system in traditional Chinese society however would regard it otherwise by saying nobody is a discrete isolated being. Everyone is, in summary, a rather full person only in the context of social relationships and family. Everyone is expected to get married and build a large family while the idea of homosexual identity was entirely ignored. Oftentimes, the bride and groom of arranged marriages do not even know each other before their marriage celebration. Therefore many marriages are not done for the love of a couple, but only in fulfillment of their expected social roles. Whether or not one has a romantic desire for one's spouse is not entirely relevant in continuing the family line. Personal identity is neither seen as fixated on a certain psychological or sexual essence. It is instead created and altered in particular social relationships. Same-sex activities in ancient China are therefore

often portrayed in social terms rather than romantic ones. Homosexualities and same-sex activities can sometimes be regarded as a source of emotional support with no need for homosexual connotations and personal deep affection. Same-sex eroticism among friends can also be positively perceived by others such as a male prostitute or favorite male court servant. That being said, the cultural tolerance toward same-sex eroticism behavior does not stem from the thought of human rights or sexual rights. It was the elites within the society that enjoy immense sexual privileges even within the lives of heterosexual marriages. Homosexuality was neither supported nor accepted but was neither treated as sinful. People may gossip about the activities but rarely take action against it openly (Chou 2000 & Shi 2013).

Ancient Chinese depiction of eroticism (either heterosexual or homosexual) can easily be found in several writings, although they are often not being the main focusing point due to several circumstances such as the story of Mizi Xia (彌子瑕) for example where homosexuality has been mentioned in a legalist book Han Feizi (韓非子) but the story is mainly about favoritism in ruling class. Eroticism in the recorded text has never been anything alien in ancient China like homosexuality. Homosexuality has been tolerated most often in the higher stratum of the social hierarchy as mentioned. The recorded tales of male lovers can be found ranging from the ancient Zhou dynasty to later dynasties before the emergence of neo-Confucianism and the arrival of western imperialism where homosexuality started to receive negative public opinions (Chou 2000). To give a few examples of homosexuality in ancient China, the aforementioned tale of Mizi Xia and fickle love with Duke Ling of Wei (衛靈公 Wei Ling Gong) in the ancient philosophic work of Han Feizi is among the first and most famous representations of the homosexual relationship. The name Mizi Xia and the phrase “bitten peach” became a catchword for homosexuality later on despite the main focus of the following text being a discussion of legalist philosophy. The following excerpt derived from Hinsch’s *Passions of the cut sleeve: the male homosexual tradition in China* (1990. pp. 20) reads:

In ancient times, Mizi Xia won favor with the ruler of Wei. According to the laws of the state of Wei, anyone who secretly made use of the ruler’s carriage was punished by having his feet amputated. When Mizi Xia’s mother fell ill, someone slipped into the palace at night to report this to Mizi Xia. Mizi Xia forged an order from the ruler, got into the ruler’s carriage, and went off to see her, but when the ruler heard of it, he only praised him, saying, “How filial! For the sake of his mother he forgot all about the danger of having his feet cut off!” Another day Mizi Xia was strolling with the

ruler in an orchard and, biting into a peach and finding it sweet, he stopped eating and gave the remaining half to the ruler to enjoy. "How sincere is your love for me!" exclaimed the ruler. "You forgot your own appetite and think only of giving me good things to eat!" Later, however, when Mizi Xia's looks had faded and the ruler's passion for him had cooled, he was accused of committing some crime against his lord. "After all," said the ruler, "he once stole my carriage, and another time he gave me a half-eaten peach to eat!" Mizi Xia was acting no differently from the way he always had; the fact that he was praised in the early days and accused of crime later on, was because the ruler's love had turned hate.

To give another example, there is also a tale of Emperor Ai (哀帝) and his favorite official Dong Xian (董賢) from the Han dynasty. It is the story that gave birth to the idiomatic term for homosexuality “passion of the cut sleeve (斷袖之癖 duanxiu zhi pi)”. It is the story of Emperor Ai waking up in the afternoon after spending a night with Dong Xian. He saw Dong Xian still sleeping with Emperor Ai’s sleeve stuck under his head. The emperor then decided to cut the sleeve to let Dong Xian continue sleeping. Dong Xian is also known to have a beautiful appearance and received high official status due to favoritism from Emperor Ai to the point that at the end of Emperor Ai’s life he decided to hand over the imperial seal to Dong Xian. The tale however ends with Dong Xian’s suicide and the throne falling into the hand of a usurper (Hinsch 1990. pp. 34-54). There are several other indications of female homosexuality as well from ancient China. Even though women are married to fulfill their social role to become wives and mothers, sometimes they would engage in homosexual intercourse with another female to fulfill their sexual desire. The telling of Empress Chen of Wu (孝武陳皇后) for example who involved in a homosexual relationship with a witch named Chu Fu (楚服) after falling out of her husband’s favor. She hoped to restore his favor towards her and curse any concubine she disliked. Chu Fu’s witchcraft involved her dressing as a man and they slept together as husband and wife. The history of Empress Chen of Wu ends with her expulsion from the court and Chu Fu’s execution. The punishment did not have much to do with homosexual acts, but it was due to witchcraft conducted in a noble family (Shi 2013).

The negative perception of homosexuality in China arose altogether from the perception of pornography in modern Chinese history. It was at the beginning of the end of the Chinese dynastic cycle that Chinese intellectuals were forced to turn away from their traditional beliefs and started to look to the west for guidance. Chinese intellectuals and public perception of homosexuality since then received negative opinion in part due to

western conservatism. It worked with the combination of nationalistic zeals that the discussion of sexuality and pornography, in general, has been largely ignored in comparison to the rising awareness of political ideas (Chou 2000). When the Chinese Communist Party took over the entirety of mainland China in 1949, the CCP government regards pornography along with drugs, gambling, and prostitution as old unacceptable behavior that corrupted the old China. They are not needed in the plan for the construction of the new China under the Communist Party. A Series of political campaigns were launched to combat these sources of social corruption. They were suspended from appearing in the public sphere in China for decades. China under the CCP would soon again encounter them again in the 1980s when they experimented with opening the country to the outside world under Deng Xiaoping's administration. China was then flooded with western media and new ideas and along with it, pornography that has been dreaded by the government for so long (Chou 2000 & Ng 2020). The emergence of the internet, as it gave birth to Chinese web literature, gave rise to the sharing of pornography and any form of erotic writing. To restrict the circulation of pornography, they have devised laws and regulations against these "cyber crimes". For example, the *Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China* section 9 *The Crime of Producing, Selling, or Disseminating Obscene Materials* states the prohibition of any obscene materials but is very vague on what could be defined as obscene materials and to what extent does it cover (Criminal Law 1979). In 2009, the state-funded State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) of the PRC also detailed a list of media elements regarded as dangerous and needed to be removed from the online community. Part of it is any elements regarded as pornography including any sexually offensive content themes such as extramarital affairs, love triangles, rape, prostitution, masturbation, or any other "sexual hints and suggestions that easily cause people to have sexual associations". The restriction was done to, according to Wang (2021), "disseminate the advanced culture of socialism". This will in turn affect danmei literature due to the inclusivity of homoeroticism that has been regarded as sinful thought-provoking and therefore outlawed. Now, I would like to give an example of the severity of the punishment. This is the story of a danmei novelist under the pseudonym Tianyi.

Tianyi or Liu Tingting as her real name, a spinning factory worker from Anhui has had a part-time hobby as a danmei novelist since 2009. She enjoys spending free time and effort writing danmei romance with explicit love scenes so much so that she became well known in the community (Flood 2018). She used her Weibo account to publish her works

online and printed fiction of her own to be sold on online shopping platforms regularly. According to Bai's *Regulation of Pornography and Criminalization of BL readers and authors in contemporary China* (2020), Tianyi expressed her feeling on personal Weibo stating the fear of arrest for writing and publishing her works and needing more money to be independent in her life. She is the first daughter of a family that has a younger son who almost bankrupted her family due to the penalty of the One Child's policy. The family preferred the younger brother over her. She, therefore, stayed away from home supporting herself by writing and selling danmei romances along with the usual daily work. Her works have however not gone unnoticed by the government. Police officers from Wuhu county in Anhui province detained Tianyi in her residence with over three thousand copies of danmei and confiscated many more at the print house. Tianyi was then sued for producing and selling obscene materials together with four other collaborators who helped her sell her works. Tianyi was sentenced to ten years and six months in prison plus a fine. The final verdict was also based on the number of her works and money made from distribution. If the author sells more than five thousand copies of pornography or earns more than ten thousand yuan, the case will be considered an "especially serious circumstance" that could lead to more than a decade or life imprisonment (Flood 2018). Her fans were shocked by the length of her imprisonment and tried to help her by funding an attorney to appeal. The story of Tianyi was compared in Bai's publication to three other cases of child abuse. All three were only sentenced to serve in jail less than Tianyi's imprisonment. Tianyi's crime for producing and selling fictional danmei novels as female sexual fantasy was measured to be more severe than forced child prostitution, abuses, and distribution of real child pornography (Bai 2020).

To add on to the strict law enforcement against obscene media and pornography, media presentation politics in terms of gay identities are also under China's media censorship systems that are strictly controlled by the party-state. Despite some danmei novels not including anything explicitly sexual that could account for pornography, the work could still be suspended from distribution or become subjects to censorship. With this state-controlled media and CCP's regulation against obscene media, the CCP could hit two birds with one stone. One of which is homosexuality and another being pornography. According to Walsh (2022, pp. 10-23), China under Xi Jinping also began to push forward the idea that artists were instructed to serve the people and the Party which is an echo of Mao Zedong's 1942 *Talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*. Xi Jinping clarified his idea that modern art and literature should aim to promote patriotism and guide people to the "correct" view of

history, country, and culture. As a result, Chinese art and literature will naturally have to go under censorship and make it appealing to the ruling party which is also something that has been done since the founding of the PRC. At the same time, not only do Chinese government officials deliberately target obscenity and homosexuality. They also aim to instill ideal male masculinity in a society where effeminate men are deemed undesirable (Walsh 2022. pp. 10-23). Despite all that, many artists and writers in China often do not obey the rule of promoting patriotism. Postsocialism writers for example chose rather to express the hardship of the people in rural areas and several issues in the society that follow rapid urbanization. Several others simply chose not to reflect on any of those at all, and instead seek escapism through fantasy writings. Many follow the trend of sharing their works online. While many are advocating sharing feminist ideas through their works, some others seek to do otherwise by writing their fantasy, and danmei literature is one of the alternatives. However, they still feel the restriction imposed by the party-state.

Several danmei novelists on online social media platforms would often self-censor their works to have fewer sex scenes or make them available only to VIP paid membership. In comparison to Japan, the boys' love community in Japan enjoys far more freedom in terms of freedom to produce and distribute although with self-censorship guidelines from the government (Santos 2020). The danmei community web boards would also enact their regulation policy to avoid having explicit works circulating on their website such as web administrators overseeing the works before approving them for publication on the website. As well as employing automatic word filtering algorithms to limit writers' publication until they adjust their works. Providing areas accessible only to paid VIP members is also one of the common ways to prevent anything explicit from appearing to the public. One of the largest online literature websites, Jinjiang Literature City (晋江文学城 Jinjiang Wenxue Cheng or jjwxc) includes paid VIP membership since 2008 along with other regulations to help regulate the website's explicit contents as the website itself is naturally abundant in the eroticism of both heterosexual or homosexual novels. Throughout the history of the website, it has been targeted for the crackdown and temporarily shut down on several occasions as well before many systems are implemented to avoid getting shut down. In 2014, the website has implemented a so-called self reader-assisted self-censorship system (三审机制 San shen Jizhi) for content filtering (Chen 2012). If I open up Jinjiang Literature City in its current state, I will be presented with various currently popular works sorted into different categories on the front page. Many works will have a label at the headline indicating if some of the

chapters are only accessible through VIP or whether or not they are boy loves or girl loves etc. Though it may not be surprising as it is another way for novelists to make money from their works. It is however also another way in which content creators could make explicit content without them being easily accessible to the public. To add on to having explicit works accessible only to VIP members, many authors chose the most viable option to avoid stigmatization by employing a self-censorship strategy in their works (Chen 2012). Many popularized works would often not even mention how their main characters feel toward each other, and their narratives will almost always be the story of brotherhood and friendship. Hidden messages and metaphors for male-male homoeroticism are abundant in danmei novels. Readers will however always be able to identify characters' relationships as being much deeper than just friends or brothers. Fans will always be able to tell which one of the main characters will be the *xiaogong* based on character design and personality following the *shipping* (or pairing, to be exact) culture among the boys' love and pop idols fans.

Chapter Two: The Joy of Boys' Love Stories

What do boy loves fans hope to get out of reading and watching boys' love dramas is one of the questions I would like to dedicate this chapter to. According to the *Fantasies of Cross-Dressing: Japanese Women Write Male-male Erotica* (2012) by Nagaike Kazumi, boys' love by and for female audience is often regarded as pornography identical to scopophilic sexual fulfillment from watching people having sex. Or simply just to fulfill their female gaze fantasy by drawing a picture of unrealistically beautiful men conducting sexual acts on the scene such as sexual teasing, masturbating, or simply changing clothes without having any female being an object for sexual acts. It is there that roles are reversed, males are objects for the sexual interactions in boys' love. Many important plot points of boys' love stories involve complicated romantic relationships such as love triangles or incest with an extensive sexual desire of certain male characters where sadism and masochism are included sometimes to the extreme as well (Nagaike 2020 & Chao 2016).

Even though many parts of danmei publications of both novels and comics are nothing more than fulfilling the sexual desire of consumers, the community can also be divided into two categories. According to Jiang Chang's *Girl Power in Boy Love: Yaoi, Online female counterculture, and digital feminism in China* (2020), not all danmei novels

use explicit sex scenes as a selling point of the story. There are two schools of danmei each holding different opinions on whether or not sex should be in the spotlight. One of them is the “clean water party” which prefers not to elaborate on sex scenes in their works or not use sex as the main selling point instead of focusing on the plot and characters’ development. Sex scenes among the clean water party are often treated with ambiguity or subtlety. The other school is no other than the so-called “flesh party” with the words flesh or meat simply used as euphemisms to refer to any danmei works full of graphics fleshy, sexy and juicy in detail (Jiang 2020 & Walsh 2022, pp. 70-85). The line between the two schools is however never clearly drawn and the people of the danmei community never seem to pay much attention to how many sex scenes are considered to be too much. As sex is essential in boys’ love novels, both in form of offering sexual pleasure for readers and artistic appeal depicting characters’ relationships, they are almost unavoidable. Even though danmei novels in China are under heavy state surveillance for being regarded as sexual content and promoting homosexuality, danmei novels continue to offer the aforementioned experiences to their readers.

It is not uncommon for danmei novels to contain creative hidden messages, metaphors, euphemisms, and hints of sexual interaction between characters to carry the narrative. The use of alternative terms is abundant in danmei novels, and arguably in other boys’ love outside of China as well. Other than the terms *gong* and *shou* which they often use to refer to characters’ position, some have borrowed from Chinese gay discourse too such as “1” and “0” to replace the words *gong* and *shou*. The Danmei community is usually very careful when discussing homoerotics explicitly in public discourse. As such, they would sometimes refer to the penis as “cucumber (黄瓜 huanggua)” and “chrysanthemum (菊花 juhua)” to replace the word anus for example (Chang 2021). The line between the “clean water” school and “fleshy school” is barely visible as mentioned, sometimes danmei novels that are known to be clean can have sex scenes in the story but may be way less explicit just to make the novel more acceptable to the public. Any hints of male-male homoerotic relationship would sometimes be put more creatively or used in symbolism which is the subject I will return to in the next chapter.

The fundamental danmei novels’ storylines appear to be romances between male characters, according to my experience. They always depict the story of male protagonists falling in love with each other while dealing with many other problems in their everyday lives. The result is almost always that the main male characters are finally rewarded with justice and unconditional love for each other. Oftentimes, the danmei characters’ relationships

started with one male character falling in love with another male character and pursuing him relentlessly to express deep affection until he is eventually accepted in the end (Chao 2016). This could be in the form of trying to become a close friend or showing any support they could in dealing with everyday life problems with small physical interactions between them such as touching, caressing, and kissing. In the fleshy school that contains explicit scenes, some *gong* characters would even go as far as raping the *shou* characters due to their inability to control their feeling (remember that they are usually unrealistically attractive). Though it seems to be ignoring any real-life sense of moral justice, somehow *shou* characters would enjoy being raped and therefore not take any logical action against it in the story such as report to the authority. The *shou* character would then slowly start to accept the love of the *gong* character as the story progressed. Boys' love novels often go beyond and challenge social taboos with incest as well (Chao 2016). As such, one could easily see that male characters are often not equal in their relationship. The defining line of whether or not this is done in part of female gaze theory or an attempt to subvert heteronormativity is still unclear. Some scholars however agree that the latter is one of the results of a male-dominated patriarchal society because danmei novels could offer readers an opportunity to assert dominance over fictional male characters while ignoring the objectification of any females due to the insignificance of female characters in boys' love novels (Galbraith 2011 & Welker 2006).

As discussed by Jiang (2020) and Chao (2016), some danmei readers in China have been using this cyberspace to escape from the world where media are abundant in male gaze fantasy. Most pornography in China both domestically produced or imported (which are illegal to produce and distribute) is directed toward the male population in which male-dominating and female-submissive patterns became the norm. There is very little room for pornography for the female population in China, as in Japan where boys' loves are first imported from. Similar patterns could also be seen in popular Chinese media such as movies and TV series which are mostly in the male gaze area and are made for the fulfillment of male fantasy. Not to mention the fact that *donghua* (anime/animated series) and *manhua* (manga) culture in China are heavily influenced by Japanese animanga that has oversexualized female characters etc. Chao also argued that female sexuality in China is still defined by male-dominated discourse in patriarchal settings in which women are expected to perform their gender roles even in everyday life. Thus I think the emergence and popularity of danmei literature as an alternative to other usual feminist storytellings may be an attempt

of some demographics to escape or at least seek alternatives, from the heteronormative sphere of influence in the society. In comparing danmei novels with the other popular genres, one could see that many non-danmei Chinese novels are heavily expressing the story of male masculinity while many female characters exist merely to fulfill the role of what is expected from women in the society.

Many popular Chinese TV series are series that tell either a story about family matters, historically themed drama or those that promote the story of high-achieving women searching for satisfying successful urban lifestyles while some others have depictions of the ideal “virtuous wife and good mother” imposed in the storyline. All of which of course would have worldly affairs into the play along with elements of the male gaze on ideal female characters. They are not entirely light-hearted nor do they offer an escape from reality, and some even without a satisfying happy ending. The narratives of danmei literature barely resemble traditional romance novels featuring heterosexual relationships, except for only *xiaoshou* characters replacing females in the couple. Although *xiaogong* and *xiaoshou* characters are just the mimics of the heterosexual relationship the former is an active male counterpart while the latter takes a more feminine role. However, it was done so due to boy love’s tradition of having one party almost always taking the active part when depicting sex scenes and relationship-building sequences. The notion of more masculine and feminine roles for characters in actuality has very little effect when describing characters’ everyday life. Many danmei writers express that in their male-male relationship stories, both partners are treated as equals, unlike the traditional heterosexual relationship stories. Rather than providing emotional and physical domination in romantic relationships, male lovers in danmei novels would often share mutual care and support for each other. A research paper done by Jiang Chang (2020) quoted one interviewee: “For me, the popularity of Yaoi(danmei) symbolizes a literary revolution, the one aiming to overthrow the cliché of all outdated bullshit[...]”. In so doing, a noteworthy feature of danmei fiction in storytelling is that authors tend to blur out or even ignore the socio-economic background of their characters. Characters of danmei novels are often not described in the novel as having any specific gender orientation. Some characters are denying it when called out for being gay, but would later find out themselves in the story by starting to show deep affection for another male character.

I did also take a look at Japanese boys’ love novels, the birthplace of danmei novels. The boys’ love community in Japan is identical to China in terms of demography. The

majority of authors and readers alike are heterosexual females. Looking away from the “fleshy school” to boys’ love stories focusing on the plot and characters, Japanese boys’ love novels do appeal to those who seek purity of love stories as well along with other themes. Accordingly, the boys’ love readers in Japan as in China are also criticized for being attracted to fantasies that are against traditional family values (Galbraith 2011). Just like in China where the danmei community is sometimes attacked, some conservative politicians in Japan also perceived them simply as pornography understandably due to how often they are presented with extensive obscenity. Male homosexual relationships in Japanese boys’ love and danmei novels are positioned as what they would call “pure fantasy” (Galbraith 2011 & Tian 2020). Thus they could be represented as fantastical desires separate from everyday life. Women in Japanese society and their representation in manga and anime culture have been discussed several times to just fulfill the needs of men. Female characters in mangas and other media are overly sexualized and are almost always sexual objects. Either that or they simply live a life of traditional spouses staying home reproducing and caring for children. Beautiful boys in Japanese girls’ manga allow them to divert this cycle and experience unconditional romantic love fantasies separated from the reproductive role assigned to them by society. This is also another reason why many Japanese boys’ love stories are taking place somewhere outside of the Japanese sphere such as in Europe and the US or being anywhere in a pure fantasy world. They sometimes portray the stories of one male protagonist as a victim of sexual abuse finally finding his true male lover identical to protagonists’ adventure in danmei novels (Welker 2016 & Johnson-Woods 2010. pp. 77-92).

Despite the danmei community sometimes being seen as misrepresenting homosexuality (quite understandably due to danmei novels in large part being written by and for heterosexual females and this has also been the case in many places), many authors and readers of danmei novels are openly supporting homosexuality. According to Zhang’s *Loving Boys Twice as Much* (2016), danmei novels sometimes encourage community members to consider serious issues that gay people have to endure in real life, especially in China where the possibility of gay marriage and governmental support are nowhere to be seen. Some danmei community members who were previously unaware of gay rights can sometimes shift their attitude to be more supportive as they relate danmei male couples to real-life homosexual relationships especially because many danmei novels emphasize a lot on true love and loyalty regardless of any difficulties imposed by the real world. Subtle gay dramas or danmei adaptations on Chinese television became a huge success over the past few years

as mentioned, and it is not only successful in China but also among overseas fans which is why official accounts upload them on international providers' websites in the first place to make accessibility easier. This could prove to be problematic for the CCP as they have always been in a position against the representation of homosexuality on media platforms, but they could not ban it entirely either due to monetary profits as well as soft powers for China those series are representing internationally. Danmei media especially TV series and animated series adaptations do incorporate beautiful Chinese traditions like calligraphy as well as Chinese landscape imagery (Zhou 2021).

Another problem danmei novels are currently facing is of course they are sometimes seen as queerbaiting to make money and misrepresentation of homosexuality as mentioned. This has also been the case in Japan (McLelland 1999). Because danmei novels also focus on attractive male characters with immense wealth and ideal bodies. Sometimes people outside of the homosexual community will idealize gay people based on the media they consume and do not truly understand the LGBT community. They would sometimes see homosexuality as a form of entertainment but do not pay much attention to homosexuality at the societal level. Some expressed that novels often do not mention some of the real-world problems such as sexually transmitted diseases among the gay population or gays being seen as sex addicts for example. The problem of homosexuality and boys' love novels occasionally start a topic for some serious discussion. Drawing an example given by Vincent in *A Japanese Electra and Her Queer Progeny* (2007), a gay activist, Sato Masaki, strongly opposed boys' love novels and their community saying that they build their own images of gay people and turn them into their own sexual fantasy. Boys' love novels completely disregard the reality of homosexuality as a whole. This expression by Sato is however changed in the end due to the presence of feministic views in the discussion about boys' love novels as a female fantasy and later became interested in feminism which I think is an important perspective when thinking about gay issues as well because it brings discussion regarding sexual liberation.

Danmei novels and their adaptation to mainstream media can still be considered by some to help represent homosexuality in China to some degree. The thinking is simple, any representation is better than none. Anthony Shen, an interviewee in an article by Vice.com stated that boys' love dramas on television in China may be subtle in their homoerotics, but it could be another driving factor to more acceptance of the LGTB community in China (Zhou 2021). Many viewers under constant state censorship and heteronormativity in China seem to start accepting boys' love as another form of a subculture that ought to stay without

disappearing. Not to mention that romantic stories of lovers who get to live together happily ever after still offer a good message about the purity of love. At first, I thought I should not assume that danmei authors and readers are pursuing this hobby deliberately for any political or any kind of social movements because the biggest point of reading danmei novels is to escape reality (just like reading other genres or gaming or many other hobbies). However, the appearance of danmei novels on mainstream media and other social platforms will still raise a little awareness of homosexuality in combination with offering another form of fantasy as an alternative to the already abundant male gaze fantasy. An interview conducted in *The Performative Force of Cultural Products* (Lilja 2016) did also convince me a bit to start viewing it as another form of movement. Boys' love novels with a heavy emphasis on the male-male romantic relationship were not only/entirely about sex or fantastical pleasure, but they can be another form of resistance. Sexuality in boys' love novels is used as a means to disempower macho heterosexual men and challenge hegemonic masculinity. Boys' love novels in Japan are big in part due to the need for sexual liberation for women, as in the case of China. They offer more possibilities for audiences to identify with something else than what they are born with and what is expected from them.

Chapter Three: Pseudo-gay and hidden homoerotic relationships characters

Given the aforementioned questions, in this paper, I argue that danmei novels in China have been put under governmental pressure by the CCP. Although many original web novels can contain explicit scenes, the popular danmei novel adaptations on mainstream media are left with no other choice than to adjust contents into a more "acceptable state". They can be done by either deleting any obscenity or finding a way around it. Evading official surveillance has always been a part of the danmei web series and their community. As a result, any notion of characters' romantic relationships on screen is either in the form of hints or symbolic representations. All of which are pale in comparison to web novels where they are allowed to partially express their contents more freely. Characters' marriage arrangements for example are often in the form of hints or symbols in the story. Not only could they make their stories appear more acceptable to be shown on screen, they often have another purpose in enhancing the artistic value of the work like what a lot of boys' love novels have done as well.

After much discussion about how the party-state views pornography and homosexuality, I will now discuss how danmei media are shown in China. I will take into account that it is easy to assume the entirety of danmei media by taking a look at only a handful of them. After all, this is from my broad observations on what I have read and seen so far as an outsider that many of them have identical themes. Those are destined lovers and unconditional love. It is undeniable that danmei media are still largely regarded as promoting homosexuality which is highly stigmatized in China despite some danmei writings or drawings do not have any depiction of anything sexual at all. Chinese danmei content creators will naturally have to work around being overly explicit. Oftentimes their beautiful fantasies will include insinuation and hidden messages when depicting characters' male-male relationships. Several examples of insinuation within storylines and descriptions of sex scenes can normally be found in writings diverging from traditional pornography.

Inspired by what Feng has brought into the writing of *Romancing the Internet* (2013) where an example of a sex scene full of euphemism and metaphor was given. I have found that the original work done by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, does consist of an “undying love” and “unconditional love” theme between the main characters. The main character, Xie Lian (谢怜), was introduced to readers as a crown prince who transcended into godhood after his dedication to cultivation and training. The novel starts with him being tasked by the Emperor of Heavenly Realm to solve the mystery of disappearing brides. Xie Lian then plans to wear a bride costume to lure the bride-abducting ghost. During the time of investigation, Xie Lian met a man in red with silver vambraces, black boots, and silver chains. This man who helped him a bit with the mission is the fearsome Ghost King Hua Cheng (花城) that is described to be “oddly charming to the extreme”. The donghua (animated series) version also portrays the same opening scene where two characters walk through a dark forest after Xie Lian was pulled out of a wedding sedan chair. They walk holding hands with dramatic scenery and background music as if they are a married couple. This exact scene is in the original novel, and in my opinion, is a very strong opening to a danmei novel. This otherwise would have been an awkward and haunting wedding during the ghost hunting mission was instead written romantically as:

“[...] This situation and this scenery were both strangely alluring [...] For no reason at all, this made their stroll seem romantic and flirtatious like they were sincerely in love and inseparable. ([...] 斯情斯景，诡魅至极 [...] 却是无端一派妖艳的风月无边，款款缱绻。)”

This introduction to the story gives a clear indication of the main couple being actual male lovers without even telling the audience directly. To add to that, Xie Lian in a bride costume is being made fun of time and again whether or not he enjoys crossdressing. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng would later develop a deeper relationship despite the warning Xie Lian received not to get close to the Ghost King. But this in turn helps Xie Lian understand the envelopment affairs of the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and Ghost. As the story goes on, Xie Lian the exiled from heaven would become more obvious about his eight hundred years of long-forgotten past with Hua Cheng as well. The gods in the world of Heaven Official's Blessing are said to be accumulating merit points to reach higher rank as well as division among themselves. Their competition is not just where they rule mortal realms and how many worshipers they have but also personal query. Xie Lian as an ascended mortal of heaven will spend time with a boy named San Lang, another form of Hua Cheng the Ghost King who is known to be a supreme rank and bringer of four calamities. They should have been natural enemies with each other. Instead, they spend their peaceful time together in the human realm outside of heavenly politics and otherworldly matters. As if their heavenly position is meaningless in their relationship. Hua Cheng is also described to be hoarding countless amounts of treasures, but this richness does not have any meaning whatsoever in the relationship with Xie Lian. It is a story of an unconditional love between male lovers with fantastical elements that is a very common theme in danmei novels.

In the story of Heaven Official's Blessing, Xie Lian's previous kingdom is also thrown into chaos during his transcendence. His reappearance into the mortal realm only worsened the situation and his people started disrespecting him, destroying his shrines and temples. Xie Lian earned a reputation as a God of Misfortune and became the so-called "laughingstock who is famous throughout the three worlds". Still, the characteristic of Xie Lian is portrayed to be kindhearted, even toward other people who show disrespect to him. Comparing him to other male characters, he is very feminine in terms of looks and personality compared to other male immortals and normal humans who are mostly described to be masculine individuals. The main couple is also never described clearly by the author in the story to have any romantical ties in their relationship or show any clear sign of deep affection toward each other as in a heterosexual relationship. This is arguably a matter of writing style as part of building character development, I think it also serves to keep the story of this fated lovers' romantic relationship from being too obvious. It is quite clear that the adapted versions do not show anything explicitly expressing homosexuality due to

ensorship. However, anyone who reads the novel will be able to tell immediately if the main characters have had sex or not. In the final chapter of the novel, the character Heaven's Eye (天眼开 Tian Yan Kai) examined Xie Lian only to find that the essence of evil in Xie Lian is overflowing from inside due to his time spent with Hua Cheng. Xie Lian was shocked beyond words without saying anything to deny it. This would have escaped my attention if I had not thought out that it was because Xie Lian has been having sex as a *shou* character with Hua Cheng for a very long time. The mention of sex and them as a married couple is also abundant in extra chapters which of course could not be shown on screen. In the extra, chapter two hundred and fifty *The Demon King's Bedtime Story*, Xie Lian reads a bedtime story about themselves but made up by local humans where their relationships were exaggerated except for their wedding night. There is also a hint of Xie Lian's sexual preference act in the same extra episode number two hundred and twenty which some fans speculate to be internal ejaculation in the anus. When Xie Lian is reading the bedtime story to Hua Cheng, he comes across a made-up tale of Xie Lian and the Demon King Hua Cheng where the Demon King talks of a couple of houses in a secret place inaccessible to everyone unless the person has a lot of something from the Demon King's body. Even though it is described later as the burning love of Demon King towards Xie Lian, it can also be interpreted another way such as seminal fluid as follow:

[...]鬼王新郎答道：“那是我的秘密，你不必知道。不过，就算你想去也去不了，因为那两座屋子前都设了屏障，必须有我身上的东西才能穿过那道屏障。”[(.]The new groom Demon King replied: “They are my secret, you do not need to know. However, you will not be able to enter should you wish to because those two mansions are protected by my augment spell. You will require something from my body to enter to pass through the augment”)

仙人继续问：“什么东西？”(The mortal proceeds to ask: What thing?)

鬼王答道：“一个屋子里藏了肮脏的废物，要用我身上碰得到、而且很多的东西才能打开；一座屋子里面藏了厉害的法宝，要用我身上摸不到、但是很烫的东西才能打开。”(The Demon King replied: “One mansion stores tainted waste, and you will need part of me to access, and a lot of it to open; another mansion stores powerful magical treasure, and you will need part of me that cannot be touched but searing hot in order to pass through”).

There is an even clearer mention of Xie Lian and Hua Cheng having sex in the next extra chapter where they talk about revisiting the Cave of Thousand Gods. The chapter even started with two of them interacting physically with each other as follows:

笑着将压得自己快喘不过气的花城从身上推了下去,热意情潮尚未褪去,谢怜忽然想起一事,随口道:“对了,三郎,万神窟……”(As he laughs and pushes away Hua Cheng who pressed him down on his body he could hardly breathe, but their mood still have not faded, Xie Lian suddenly thought of something and casually said: “Ah yes, San Lang, the Cave of Thousand Gods……”)

花城的手臂又搭上了他的胸口,一边不知在玩弄些什么,一边懒洋洋地道:“嗯?万神窟怎么了。”(Hua Cheng’s palm lifted up again to rest on Xie Lian’s chest, and as he played with the God-knows-what, he lazily said: “Hm? What is it with the Cave of Thousand Gods?”)

Then the discussion between them continued about revisiting the cave, and the story quickly mentions a sexual scene briefly but really obvious as follows:

[...]花城挑起一边眉,道:“明天吗?好吧。”([...] Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow and said: “Tomorrow? alright”)

他没表示反对,也不多说,但下一刻,又翻了上来。(He did not express any objection nor did he say anything, but he flipped back on top at the next moment.)

不知是不是错觉,后半夜的花城折腾他越发狠了,没过两轮,谢怜便被逼喊了哥哥救命,然后迷迷糊糊昏睡过去。(Not knowing whether or not it was an illusion, but later half of the night Xie Lian was tumbled by the fierce Hua Cheng. In less than two rounds, Xie Lian could not help but cry for mercy before passing out and falling asleep.)

Mo Xiang Tong Xiu’s other famous work, *Founder of Diabolism*, takes place too in another fantasy world where the main characters work with each other to overcome any obstacles in the world full of roaming evil spirits and power mongers. The main male couple Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji can easily be seen as fated lovers despite differences in their personalities. After their tragic departure in a previous life, Wei Wuxian’s soul as a founder of demonic arts has been recalled thirteen years later onto somebody’s body. The two met each other again to right the wrongs in the world. The main couple of Founders of Diabolism is never shown on TVserie *The Untamed* clearly that they have any romantic relationship. They

are only adventuring brothers in arms. In the animated version, however, there are several hints within the story indicating this ever flirting friends are married and even had sex. Even though it is not too obvious that the TV series and animated adaptations refrain from showing homoeroticism to the audience; they do include whatever relationship-building scenes that real human friends would otherwise not do to each other. Many (not all) such scenes are from the original novel such as bathing together in the same pond, a quarrel in the library (which is a sex scene in an extra episode as they “play” rape) or simply raising small rabbit pets together in secret.

The *gong* character, Lan Wangji, is a member of the Lan Clan with a strict rule that requires clan members to wear a white headband. The headband of the Lan clan is described as the most sacred of all personal possessions, and can only be touched either by parents or lovers. The headband would normally be pulled off at a marriage ceremony. Lan Wangji’s headband is however untied from his head on several occasions for his fated lover to use as a symbol for their romantic relationship. The TV-series version named *The Untamed* episode six has two main characters entering the hidden ice cave of the Lan clan by accident. There the legendary Guqin weapon of the Lan clan is found, but nobody outside of the Lan clan could approach the weapon. Wei Wuxian is pushed back by its magical augment due to not being a clan member. The couple gets around this problem by arranging a “marriage” themselves. Lan Wangji wrapped his headband on his wrist and Wei Wuxian’s wrist with a camera angle pointing specifically at their hands tied together. Then they are considered a lawfully married couple, Wei Wuxian can approach the legendary guqin unharmed as a newly appointed clan member through marriage.

The animated series of *Founder of Diabolism* does have the same headband hints as well. Episode seven of the first season for example, when various characters are attending an archery competition. Lan Wangji’s headband loosened due to his action to show his martial prowess, and Wei Wuxian went to help him fix it but ended up pulling it off accidentally. This would have escaped my attention if it was not for the emphasis on the headband in earlier episodes. The dramatic effects put on this scene is a very good indicator of the importance of this event which helps audiences understand the relationship between the main characters better. Even though it has been said that Lan Wangji will hate Wei Wuxian forever with such disrespect, it turns out to never be the case. Their relationship will only tighten as they progress through the story and fight the odds together. Another most obvious point of unofficial marriage between main characters is in episode nine of the final season of the

animated series where they are fighting undead hordes along with many others. Both Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan together came up with a plan to save everyone by luring the undead into attacking only them two, buying time for others to escape. They cast a spell to cloak themselves with blood to lure the undead, turning their robes red identical to wedding attire in China symbolizing their marriage which is depicted differently in the novel. There is no actual clear description of marriage in the original novel. Still, the novel before any mention of their marriage does have the main characters expressing their feelings in chapter one hundred. It started with Lan Wangji first telling Wei Wuxian with “[...]心悦你, 爱你, 想要你, 没法离开你, 随便怎么你。 ([...]fancying you, missing you, unable to leave you, wanting to ‘whatever’ you)”. And Wei Wuxian replied with “还想天天和你上床(I want to sleep with you every day)”.

After that in the novel, readers will see that they refer to each other as husband and wife for the first time. It is somewhere during the time skip between chapter hundred eleven, after their first sex, and chapter hundred twelve. There is also a talk mentioning that they bowed thrice just like in traditional Chinese weddings as well. The bowing scene is shown at the end of the animated series version where they visit the ancestral hall of the Jiang clan and pay respect to the dead. They first bow to the shrine twice and then name themselves before giving the last bow one at a time. Fans and I are speculating that the animation team would like to present their romantic relationship as much as possible while avoiding censorship. The only difference from a traditional Chinese wedding is that they did not bow first to Heaven and Earth but to dead guardians and themselves. Going back to discuss their wedding in the novel, they mention it specifically at the end of chapter hundred twelve that they are husband and wife which is naturally could not be shown on screen as follow:

蓝忘机扑上去, 终于抓住他, 在怀里紧紧抱牢了, 辩解道: “我们三拜拜过, 已经是 [...] 夫妻了[...]. (Lan Wangji plunged over and eventually catch him, holding him tight in his arms as he resisted a bit, “We have kowtowed to each other thrice, so we already are... husband and wife[...])”

As earlier mentioned, this extra chapter contains a sex scene where they finally expressed themselves to each other and started to live together as an average married couple. The author did not describe this explicit scene with metaphor, but rather with a more direct approach. They first flirted with each other before finally making their move to have sex. Lan

Wangji would later demand Wei Wuxian he would like to have sex every day. The following excerpt is the hint of daily sex from the episode one hundred and twelve:

“蓝忘机道：你天天都在求饶。别玩了。魏无羡向他贴过去，轻声道：“这不是你要求的吗……天天就是天天。(Lan Wanji said: You are begging for mercy every day, stop playing. Wei Wuxian stepped closer and whisper: Is it not what you wish for... that every day means every day)”



Figure 3. Captured screenshot from TV series *The Untamed* episode number six showing the unofficial marriage between Wei Wuxian (left) and Lan Wangji (right) with the use of a sacred headband.



Figure 4. Captured screenshot from *Founder of Diabolism* animated series final season episode nine. Wei Wuxian (left) and Lan Wangji (right) cloak themselves in blood turning their robes red. A symbol of their marriage.



Figure 5. The opening sequence of *Heaven Official's Blessing* shows Xie Lian (left) in a bride costume walking through dark woods with Hua Cheng (right). The scene is made in combination with dramatic background music and other special effects.

Moving on from the relationship between Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji from the *Founder of Diabolism*. There is a character in the same novel named Lan Sizhui who is a junior member of the Lan clan. He is often regarded as a kid for the main couple. He made his appearance in the first episode of both the series and the original novel. Our main characters not only take care of him (along with other juniors) with medicine and food when needed but they also help each other throughout the journey. At the end of the story when every major problem is dealt with and the story is about to conclude in chapter hundred eleven, Lan Sizhui comes up to the main couple when they are about to walk off to live together. Lan Sizhui went to greet and hug them both. The main couple of both Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian is no less than the guardian and adoptive family of Lan Sizhui. The boy then revealed his secret about his real name being Wen Yuan, but began to use Lan Sizhui all this time because it was given by Lan Wangji as if the name was given by his father, and called him dad once by accident as originally written below (Hanguang Jun is the title name for Lan Wangji):

“蓝思追的脸越来越红，魏无羡又道：哦对了，那次你还当着大庭广众的面，喊含光君喊爹呢。可怜含光君一个风华正茂冰清玉洁的大好青年，莫名其妙就做了人家的爹……(Lan SiZhui's face started to grow even redder. Wei WuXian added, “Oh right, that time you even called Hanguang Jun ‘Dad’ before everyone’s eyes. Poor Hanguang Jun. What a

fine wholesome young man he was back then, yet he inexplicably became a daddy for someone...’)”



Figure 6. A scene from the last episode of *Founder of Diabolism*. Clan junior Lan Sizhui hugging his “mom” and “dad”.

Suffice to say as well that not only are the main couple enter the wedding ceremony with each other, but also have a child together even if he is the adoptive son. This notion of having male lovers raising an apprentice (or more) can be found in other novels (and series) as well. One of which is *Word of Honor* (山河令 shan he ling), an adaptation from the original danmei novel *Faraway Wanderers* (天涯客 tian ya ke) by Priest. She has a few other popular novels made into TV series as well. The young character named Zhang Chengling becomes a disciple of one of the main characters, Zhou Zishu. Zhou Zishu together with his male couple, Wen Kexing, spend quite some time with their disciple who is also as if he is the adoptive son of this male-male couple. Unfortunately for me, I was not able to read the original *Faraway Wanderers* novel which means the information on the original novel is absent from me. So I decided to discuss only this *Word of Honor* TV series adaptation instead. Of course, the TV series *Word of Honor* could not make their “family relationship” appear to be a family identical to the heterosexual family with an actual child, so they decided to do a pseudo-family relationship with male partners and a young disciple which is probably following the original novel. Not to mention the fact that this TV series does have both main male characters seemingly flirting with each other more than *The Untamed*, ranging from touching one another’s face to hugging from behind and showing signs of jealousy when a female character (or another male character as well) is at a presence. The

amount of physical interactions between the main characters is abundant in *Word of Honor*. The story of *Word of Honor* in summary is also about two different males with entirely different personalities, and they become soulmates aiding each other's redemption of their past.

The element of soulmates and destined lovers overcoming any obstacle to find peace with each other at the end is more common than I initially thought in danmei novels. It seems nothing else along the way to the end of the story matters more than the bond between the main male protagonists. In the plot of *Founder of Diabolism*, for example, Wei Wuxian became what they call the Yiling Patriarch (夷陵老祖 Yiling Laozu) who mastered the Demonic Cultivation and the art of commanding the dead to do his bidding. Throughout the story, we can see that many tales about him have been spun as a result of terrifying populaces. In reality, he did so to fight injustice and protect the innocent. But no one would ever believe him. Wei Wuxian as the Yiling Patriarch also did commit atrocities in his actions unwillingly as well. His newfound power is the cause of the death of his own sworn sister's husband and always feels guilty about using demonic power which results in many deaths. He became a common enemy and was actively hunted by every clan and cultivator as a result. When Yiling Patriarch Wei Wuxian resummoned into the world thirteen years after his downfall, he along with his destined lover Lan Wangji helped each other to right the wrongs of the past. When everything is done they decide to leave everything behind to live together as mentioned above. The story of the Founder of Diabolism concluded with everyone else continuing to conduct their worldly affairs according to their will such as practicing martial arts and politics. The destined lovers Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji together ignore any other affairs in the world and any rumors against them to move on and live as lovers. Although such an assumption is too simplistic and too quick to conclude, it is clear to me that danmei novels tend to demonstrate the purity of romanticism between characters. By looking at *Founder of Diabolism*, I may have shared what danmei fans feel that they express romantic relationships and greater quality than the usual heterosexual stories.

The issue of gender and gender roles in society are rarely brought up in the story nor do they play an important part in the story at all. The Chinese danmei webcomic *19 Days* (19天) illustrated by an artist *Old Xian* (old先) does not set in an ancient fantasy world setting with time travel and magical elements. Instead, it is a romantic comedy comic telling a school life story in the modern world with pursuing *gong* characters and *shou* characters that will accept the love of the former party in the end despite their differences. The wealth difference

and life struggles are hardly an issue for their developing relationship in the story. The everyday lives of those characters as students hardly play any significant role in the plot which focuses heavily on the development of relationships. One character Mo Guan Shan (莫关山) is working at a private convenience store while his “boyfriend”, He Tian (贺天), is a son of a rich gangster family. Little attention is paid to female characters and their stories as well. Both characters’ backgrounds and supporting characters are often just a part of world buildings. They are sometimes presented on screen just to signify how handsome and popular the main male characters are. For example by having female background characters show signs of wanting a romantic relationship with Mo Guan Shan’s “boyfriend”, He Tian, but they are always ignored. Throughout the story and official artworks of 19 Days, the physical interaction between male characters is abundant ranging from small interactions such as hugging to kissing and including any hints of the sexual act. They are often depicted as a joke, as 19 Days is supposedly a romantic comedy, and some characters are outright disgusted by it. But *shou* characters will eventually start to accept *gong* characters who pursue them relentlessly and more openly as the story goes on. He Tian and Mo Guan Shan as I mentioned earlier, are not the main couple of the story from the start (at this point they made their appearances so often it became hard to tell whether or not they are in fact the main couple), they seem to have interaction with each other non-stop with He Tian as a *gong* character pursuing Mo Guan Shan endlessly. Mo Guan Shan himself was disgusted by He Tian’s actions at first and outright deny his physical interactions which could be considered harassment by real-life standards, but danmei novels and stories usually do not address this issue. He will however receive emotional support and gifts given by He Tian and gradually started to change his feeling to a more accepting state. He would even forget how he used to dislike He Tian at first for being an extreme annoyance. Moreover, both characters will never be shown to be playful with anybody else throughout the story except for when being with each other. In comparison to other danmei novels I have discussed so far, 19 Days does not tell a story (or stories because it follows two couples at the same time) with a big world-building full of mystical elements. Neither are male characters very feminine, but still occasionally have crossdressing depictions. 19 Days is still a story of unconditional love between male characters, and the pursuit of true love regardless of any hard struggle they come across. Currently, it is not possible to conclude how the end of 19 Days webcomic is going to be because the comic itself is still ongoing which is the nature of self-publishing artists. But it is nonetheless still a story of male-male romantic relationships with common danmei cliches such as pursuing *gong* and receiving *shou* as aforementioned. As well as

unrealistically beautiful males supporting each other in dealing with problems which will later result in them having peaceful love at the end of the story.



Figure 7. A screencap from danmei webcomic, *19 Days* (19天), shows male characters caring and engaging in physical interactions with each other. The figure depicts injured Mo Guan Shan leaning on He Tian's shoulder after he was asked if he was afraid he might be seen by somebody. The scenes were posted on *Old Xian's* Weibo account on 27.04.2022.

The main theme for many danmei novels of course involves the main male couple, despite their differences, supporting each other and overcoming any odds to be with each other at the end. Though danmei novels do not present any message or bear any meaning to help the LGBT community push forward their gay rights. Danmei novels are in some ways misrepresenting the LGBT community as they do not explicitly discuss the real issues gay people are facing whether it be discrimination or sexually transmitted diseases (Vincent 2007 & Zhang 2021). Still, I think the theme of male-male couples finding peaceful lives with each other despite everything feels very appealing to me personally. They are almost identical to the story of some homosexual relationships combating social prejudices and several misunderstandings of homosexuality. My opinion as an outsider of this community is, however, still coming from viewing a few danmei novels with a more “friendly” approach to sexuality offered by the clean water school. I feel they make a really good work at offering romance between male characters even if it is done with several mentions and hints of eroticism, in combination with on-screen series that contain no explicit scenes as they are not even allowed. I do also feel that production teams of adapted versions are doing their best to offer the essence of male-male romanticism of danmei stories while avoiding the ban.

At this point, I think it is also very important to mention that I also recalled having personally talked with my friend who is a very active danmei reader and fanart creator on the internet. She grew up in a very traditional family and was expected to be religious. She expressed herself that seeing a gay partner in real life outside of danmei novels makes her feel happy and grateful for them for being able to express themselves for who they truly are and be happy with each other. However, some community members who are readers of danmei novels would still reject homosexuality in their own family and stay on the side of the traditional family (Zhang 2016). This may be problematic to some degree because danmei novels are often about true love between characters, but homosexuals in reality are sometimes regarded as choosing to be gay due to sexual desire. I think that part could also be a result of living in a homophobic environment where negative stories about a gay relationship can easily be heard and homosexuality is misunderstood as being based entirely on sexual desire but not out of the affection between two people. Moreover, gays in China also face the pressure of being seen as living unproductive lives against traditional Chinese family values in combination with the lack of proper sex education in China (Burki 2017 & Chou 2000).

CONCLUSION

Chinese danmei, or boys' love, novels that arrived in China from outside since the postsocialist era seemingly shows no sign that they will even begin to fade away from Chinese media platforms anytime soon. As I have found out with this study, the people of China are put under pressure by the Chinese Communist Party with their pursuit of nationalism. As such, many arts and literature are deemed as poisonous to the people of China, no different than gambling and drugs. Literature categorized as obscene such as danmei novels for example is stigmatized by some parts of the society and the government. This is generally a sub-genre of novels made by and for women. Danmei novels, for many, appear to not only fulfill the personal desire to consume erotic contents that are lacking for some demographics but also encourage sexual liberation and gender identity. The people of the danmei community do also pose a challenge against heteropatriarchal discourse by diverting into a form of fantastical romances. They offer an alternate entertainment platform that is free of male gaze discourses. Although many do not identify themselves as a feminist or express it publicly to anyone because people of the danmei community usually stay anonymous. Still, they formed resistance themselves against the oppression and promotion of traditional social and family values backed by the party-state. The story of women finding alternative ways to create artistic works and support themselves with secondary sources of income has a lot to say about the highly male-dominant society as well. The mentioned case of Tianyi for example who was put on trial for self-publishing danmei novels to support herself while trying to stay independent from the family is a compelling story regarding lives under the heteropatriarchal society that I feel needs to be discussed and expanded further.

This study was also done from an outsider's perspective in an attempt to try to find the answer to the question of how danmei novels are usually consumed in China under pressure from the governmental level. Though I have yet to look into very explicit danmei contents that contain extensive depictions of sex, the key conclusion to this question through a handful of media observations from me would be that danmei novelists and creators of adaptations are usually very aware of the content they are making. In order to tell the male-male romantic relationship story to the public, they will have to do it through creative hidden messages, hints, or euphemisms. I hereby not saying that all danmei novels have them, but the discussed novels I have chosen do contain quite a lot of them. The destined unconditional love between male characters, which is sometimes depicted as genderless or

genderbend, overcoming obstacles to obtain peace with each other at the end is a very common theme in danmei novels. Danmei fans are usually very obvious about the romantic relationship between characters as well and they occasionally tell the joke that it is just brotherly love and comrades-in-arms so the party-state has nothing to stress over as the *Guardian Girls* did. It is part of the self-censorship mentality to avoid exposing obscenities of danmei novels to the public. It is also highly likely that the general public and the party-state are aware that danmei novels depict homoeroticism consistently, but they chose not to take any action against it as long as eroticism does not make its appearance in the mainstream. It could be another reason why TV series and animated series adaptations are continuously being produced despite being made from danmei novels which is also another topic I wish I have more time to touch upon and discuss even further. Although danmei literature is generally supposed to offer an escapism experience to its intended audience, the thereby romantic male-male relationships between characters are often unrealistic on top of unrealistically beautiful males. This leads some parts of the LGBT community to question whether or not danmei novels are queerbaiting for money on top of misrepresenting gay lovers. As aforementioned, danmei literature still leads to quite a few discussions regarding gender identity and raises the awareness of gayness in a society that some people are unaware of. Parts of the critics against danmei literature by the people of the LGBT community may be because they have not taken into account that danmei literature is a female sexual fantasy and thus is it appealing to the female audience where heteropatriarchy is dominant as Vincent discussed in the work *A Japanese Electra and Her Queer Progeny* (2007) among others as well such as the need for sexual liberation and mainstream media made for women.

Nevertheless, I think the topic regarding boys' love novels and media consumption in heteropatriarchal society is very interesting and could be expanded much further. In comparison to other media study fields, boys' love and girls' love literature are not brought into serious discussion as much. This is what I feel in my experience so far when looking for articles and news for this paper, and I hope to see the discussion of this topic expanded even further and draw more people into this field.

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