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# *Danmei* Meets Fandom: A ‘Popularity Bubble’

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## ABSTRACT

In this article I illustrate the evolution of the marginalised *danmei* (the Chinese equivalent of Japanese Boys Love) into a fandom-like subculture in contemporary China. I investigate *danmei* writers and their fanbases by analysing works and rankings on the leading female-oriented literature website Jinjiang and discussions on social media platforms represented by Weibo. *Danmei* writers are frequently correlated with (accused) overhyping and smear campaigns, and their fans contribute financially and in a form of maneuvering public discourse on social media, which is attributed to fangirls’ psychological and social pressure, as well as the prevailing capitalism and consumerism. Therefore, I argue that such a fandom-like phenomenon is only a ‘popularity bubble’, which by no means indicates an embrace of *danmei* as a literary genre and subculture or homosexuality as minority sexual orientation in China. Worse still, since some *danmei* fans demonstrate toxic fan practices such as cyber manhunt and online harassment and abuse, this ‘popularity bubble’ impinges upon *danmei* in a detrimental manner by imperilling its reputation and hindering its (fan) creation.

## Keywords

boys love; Chinese fandom; cyber manhunt; Jinjiang; toxic fan

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, there was a piece of unconfirmed breaking news regarding 耽美 *danmei* (the Chinese equivalent of Japanese Boys Love) on China’s social media: it is stated that on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2020, a *danmei* writer pseudonymised 墨香铜臭 Moxiangtongxiu (Lit. ‘fragrance of ink and odour of money’, henceforward Mo)<sup>1</sup> was sentenced for the crime of illegal operation in Hangzhou, though details have not been exposed (Sina Entertainment 2020, Zhang 2020). Upon the release of the news on Weibo, a leading Chinese social media platform with approximately 586 million monthly active users (Lai 2023), it expeditiously received more than 57 million clicks, and a hashtag ‘Moxiangtongxiu’ ranked among top ten on Weibo’s ‘hot search’, viz. a list showcasing real-time

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<sup>1</sup> In China, *danmei* is subject to censorship and surveillance, so producers write and publish under noms de plume for self-protection (Xu & Yang, 2013).

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updates on China's trending topics drawing public attention (Wang, 2021). Mo's loyal fans censured the 'smear campaign' for calumniating Mo and fabricating a court verdict, while anti-fans and non-fans celebrated on a range of social media platforms, stating that their celebration was a backlash against the deeds of Mo and her committed fanbase.

Mo has only released three *danmei* narratives so far, yet she is one of the most famed and contentious online writers in China. Parallel to the vast majority of *danmei* writers, her writing has been published on a leading, iconic female-oriented website called Jinjiang Literature City (henceforward Jinjiang), whose female readers account for 91% of approximately 60 million registered users (Jinjiang 2023). On Jinjiang, Mo's chef-d'oeuvre *天官赐福 Tian Guan Ci Fu* 'Heaven Official's Blessing' used to rank the highest on readers' voting list, receiving an average of 2,496,554 views per chapter and 2,027,407 comments on Jinjiang since its release in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Mo, therefore, was voted and nominated as the '2017 Most Popular Jinjiang Writer' and ranked 14<sup>th</sup> among the '2017 Top 50 female Internet writers in China' (Shen 2017). The popularity of *Tian Guan Ci Fu* and her other magnum opus, *魔道祖师 Mo Dao Zu Shi* 'Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation', has dispersed to social media. On Weibo, the 'super topic' dedicated pages for *Tian Guan Ci Fu* and *Mo Dao Zu Shi* have respectively attracted about 70 billion and 17 billion visits by April 2023. Upon Mo's impressive achievements on Jinjiang and visibility on Weibo, she has obtained commercial success, exemplified by the extortionate price of *Tian Guan Ci Fu*'s copyright, which exceeds 40 million RMB (Sohu 2018). The print copies and anime serials of both novels have been released, along with fiction-themed products such as posters and figurines, as well as commercial collaborations with businesses such as KFC and Cornetto. Even Mo's least known debut, *人渣反派自救系统 Renzha Fanpai Zijiu Xitong* 'Scumbag System', has been published in hard copies and adapted into an anime serial and a radio play. It is notable that after expurgations of homosexual/erotic content in the original novel, *Mo Dao Zu Shi* has been adapted into a phenomenal online serial *陈情令 Chenqingling* 'The Untamed' that is interconnected to the earthshaking '227 Incident' and the blockage of Archive of Our Own (AO3) in Mainland China (see Wang, 2021 for detailed discussion). These *danmei* writings have also inspired a myriad of fan works, represented by fanfiction published on AO3 and audiovisual creations published on *哔哩哔哩 Bilibili*, one of China's pioneering entertainment websites for video sharing and streaming, which is celebrated for the contextualised scrolling *弹幕 danmu* 'bullet comments' (see Wang, 2023 for detailed discussion).

Consequently, Mo has attracted legions of fans on Weibo: she has approximately 3.3 million Weibo followers by April 2023, and her latest post received more than 927,000 comments and 651,000 likes.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, following her surging popularity, Mo is chastised by anti-fans and potentially paid smear campaigners for accumulating extremely enthusiastic fans who have been adulating her as 'the light of *danmei*' and conducting online toxic fan practices to attack other *danmei* writers, such as *西子绪 Xizixu*, and their fanbases. Moreover, Mo's novels are disparaged as overhyped commercial products, especially her forthcoming novel *死神没有休息日 Sishen Meiyou Xiuxiri* 'God of Death is Never on Leave' (Trans. Mine) that used to rank topic five on Jinjiang's voting list owing to her fans' paid voting tickets, even if she has not published a single word yet. Mo's fan readers, of course, decry the animadversions for casting aspersions on Mo. In defence of herself, Mo has pinned a detailed post on her Weibo account, elaborating her responses to charges concerning plagiarism, cyber manhunt, marketing campaigns on Weibo and Jinjiang, etc, which has been facilitated by her committed fans.

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<sup>2</sup> It is notable that all Mo's three novels have been indefinitely locked on Jinjiang due to their 'violation of regulations'. Mo made an announcement on her Jinjiang column that she had been living in seclusion, so as to solace her concerned readership. The data regarding *Tian Guan Ci Fu*'s popularity on Jinjiang was collected while it was still accessible.

<sup>3</sup> Mo's last Weibo post was sent on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019, yet she was moderately active before that date. This fact is frequently used by Internet users as evidence to verify Mo's prison sentence.

The conspicuous similitude between *danmei* readers on Jinjiang and fangirls in the entertainment industry in terms of acts and mentality illuminates the overlap between the *danmei* subculture and fandom. Nonetheless, the evolvement of *danmei* is by no means the embodiment of a social embracement of *danmei* as a literary genre and subculture or homosexuality as minority sexual orientation in China.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Danmei in China*

Since entering China's niche market in the mid-1990s as a Japanese cultural export, Boys Love novels and comics have attracted an enormous and ever-growing fangirl readership, the vast majority of whom are heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women nicknamed 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girls' (Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015, Chao 2016, 2017). In addition to female-oriented narration featuring male-male romance between pubescent or mature men, the *danmei* genre frequently entails graphic homoerotic descriptions, rendering it subject to moral scrutiny and official censorship in China (see Xu and Yang 2013, Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhang 2017, Wang 2019, among many others).

*Danmei* discourse and media representation are deemed as social taboos under the surveillance of the party-state, so supposedly homosexual and pornographic content must be eradicated from officially approved versions of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhao et al., 2017), via stringent censorship and 'top-down expurgation' (Wang, 2019). *Danmei* content is disastrously impinged upon by anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government in the past decade (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b), exemplified by the deletion of posts with homoerotic and obscene implications from Weibo (Dalton 2018, Huang 2018), restrictions on and rectifications of Jinjiang (Ying 2019), as well as the crackdown on a phenomenal online *danmei* serial 上瘾 *Shangyin* 'Addicted' for featuring 'abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours, such as incest, same-sex relationships...' (Ellis-Petersen 2016, China Netcasting Services Association 2017). The restrictions on *danmei* fiction and its audiovisual adaptation also extend to *danmei* producers, and one of the most contentious case is regarding a pseudonymous writer 天一 *Tianyi* who was sentenced to a ten-year prison term in 2018 for selling about 5,000 copies of a self-published *danmei* novel that 'obscenely and in detail described gay male-male acts' (Flood 2018, He and Zhang 2018, Shepherd 2018). Another *danmei* writer, 深海先生 *Shenhai Xiansheng* (Lit. 'Mr Deep Ocean'), was imprisoned for four years in 2019 for 'creating pornographic content that sabotages teenagers' mental health' (China Central TV 2019). It is worth mentioning that the legal case was initiated by online quarrels between *Shenhai Xiansheng* and another *danmei* writer, who accused each other of plagiarism (Li 2019).

### Chinese Fandom

Chinese fandom displays properties of trans-fandom, in which individuals display mobility across multiple fanbases and perform fan identity in consuming various fan objects (Hills 2014, Hills and Greco 2015, Yin 2019, 2020).

Chinese fandom is constituted of a considerable portion of underage fans. As revealed by the '2020 Report on the Development, Status Quo and Prospect of Fan Economy in China', fans born after the year 2000 account for nearly 70% of the entire cohort (Zhao and Qin 2020). According to a survey conducted by China Comment, a magazine established by China's official state news agency, Xinhua News Agency, 42.2% of middle school students aged between 12 and 18 have been engaged in fandom activities since primary school, and 52% of them have over three years' experience in fandom (China Comment 2020).

Although more than half of Chinese fans are students (Zhao and Qin 2020), they are featured by an inclination to spend money on stars: 69.04% of fans have made financial support to their idols, and 36.36% of fans used to have single transactions of above 2,000 RMB; even among underage fans born after the year 2000, there are 14.89% of them who spend more than 5,000 RMB per month for their idols (Li 2018).

Parallel to its Western counterparts, Chinese fandom also abounds with toxic fan practices, represented by cyber manhunt, Weibo account hacking, IP theft as well as online harassment and abuse (China Daily 2020, The Paper 2020a, Zhao 2020, Zhou 2020). Fans' deeds concerning Internet violence, along with their irrational overspending and fake traffic generation, are sometimes organised and incited by well-paid professional 'core fans' who are sponsored and manipulated by legal or illegal businesses (Beijing News 2019, Ju 2019, Li and Li 2019, Zhang and Negus 2020).

Some fans' inordinate passion for celebrities might be attributed to a construal of their idols being 美强惨 *mei qiang can* 'beautiful, powerful and pitiful': fans believe that on the one hand, their idols are blessed with outstanding appearance and/or talent, viz. being 'beautiful' and 'powerful', yet on the other hand, their idols are exploited by the avaricious show business and besmirched by abhorrent competitors and their fanbases, viz. being 'pitiful'. Fans' misconstrual of celebrities is triggered by their own sense of alienation and powerlessness as well as psychological and social pressure in the real world, so by means of facilitating their idols' struggle for stardom, fans can obtain a sense of achievement and pride as martyrs. That is to say, fans have established a quasi-sufferer-martyr relation with their idols and regard them in a religious mode—fans are eager to worship and dote on their idols and voluntarily fall prey to capitalism and consumerism, reflected by a well-spread fandom mantra, i.e. 'I'm not even entitled to spend money for such a perfect person in real life' (Xie and Zhang 2020). There is a neologism coined by Chinese netizens to decry the conduct and mindset of excessively zealous fans, viz. 邪教式追星 *xiejiaoshi zhuixing* 'heresy-style star worship', including spending beyond means as 'atonement', brainwashing and exploiting underage co-fans, shaping and maneuvering public opinion via social media, defaming administrative agencies, mainstream media and anti-/non-fans, etc.

### 'Fandomised' *Danmei*

In *danmei*-themed communities, such as Jinjiang's online discussion sections, *danmei* fans envisage and hence idolise their preferred writers in an analogous fashion, namely, construing them to be 'beautiful, powerful and pitiful'. The interaction between producers and consumers is characterised by fandom expressions. For instance, 太太 *taitai* 'Mrs' is a neologism employed as a well-established title of veneration addressing female *danmei* writers: its etymological origin is 大佬 *da lao* 'big mogul' and afterwards 大大 *da da* 'big big' for affection, yet due to the masculinity implied in *da da*, the more feminine title *taitai* is adopted in the *danmei* circle. As a versatile expression, *taitai* can alternatively function as an honorific second person pronoun to substitute 'you', thereby elevating the status of the addressee and exhibiting the addresser's reverence and politeness as a fan. Furthermore, fandom practices are attested in *danmei* communities. For instance, writers and/or their fans may besmirch other writers' reputation, driven by covetousness of their literary aptitude and commercial success, and professional smear campaigners may fabricate writers' scandals, driven by profit. Fan readers, therefore, feel obliged to protect and facilitate their 'sufferers'.

*Danmei* readers used to be perceived as being characterised by 'three highs', viz. high salary, high level of education and high social status (Feng 2009, Yang 2009), within a few years since *danmei* was imported from Japan in the 1990s as a niche cultural product. Nonetheless, by virtue of its development and increasing coverage, *danmei* has been attracting younger female readers: by 2016, fans under the age of 22 has accounted for 78.43% of *danmei* readers, and 82.35% of fangirls start consuming *danmei* fiction before the age of 18 (Zheng 2017). Moreover, *danmei* reading has become a trend among adolescent fangirls: middle or even primary schoolgirls publicly declare their *funü* identity as much-trumpeted mental superiority. These underage 'rotten girls', however, are void of profound understanding of Boys Loves or homosexuality, so they prefer seeming *danmei* works that fundamentally feature heterosexual relationships (see Wang 2023 for detailed discussion). To accommodate the preference of this cohort of fangirls, a considerable portion of current *danmei* fiction complies with heteronormative ideologies, analogous to stereotypical heteropatriarchal relationships, albeit from a homosexual perspective (Zhao and Madill 2018, Zhou et al 2018). Furthermore, immature 'rotten girls' are prone to harass homosexual men and matchmake heterosexual men in real life (Song and Wang 2011).

The 'fandomised' process is also ascribed to Jinjiang's intentional cultivation and promotion of its contracted writers. Jinjiang pinpoints illustrious contracted writers who have demonstrated both

renown and potential, and further hypes them up, thereby enhancing the amount of paid readers as their devoted fans (Zuo and Wang, 2018). In order to establish and maintain rapport between writers and readers, Jinjiang has created distinct dedicated forums, one of which is to accommodate discussion on/with authors specifically, thereby allowing users to express their subjectivity, scepticism and desire for participation. Apart from being fans, users simultaneously assume the roles of monitors and critics, and demonstrate corresponding attributes and responsibilities when analysing works' traffic volumes and rankings, as well as authors' narrative strategies, marketing techniques and even private lives and morality. Even though writers may refrain from engaging with readers online, the latter may still act as 'fan inspectors' and take initiative in interfering in work/author-related controversies and disputes. On Jinjiang forums, readers are simplistically and subjectively labelled as 'fans', 'anti-fans' and 'non-fans' by each other, accompanied by frequent quarrels and conflicts between sub-groups formed based on certain works or authors (Xiao 2016). Additionally, parallel to China's show business, the *danmei* field also has a trans-fandom, which means fan readers are mobile and flexible in terms of consuming multiple audiovisual and textual *danmei* works (Wang, 2018).

### Influence of Fandom on *Danmei*

Despite the fact that the 'fandomised' process of the *danmei* field may have rendered it more visible, I postulate that it cannot contribute to the development of *danmei* or the embracement of *danmei* by a wider audience. Worse still, the integration of fandom culture and *danmei* (fan) creation may be detrimental to the latter as a marginalised subculture.

To begin with, the *danmei* genre fails to serve as a tool to promote male-male homosexuality, because *danmei* characters cannot be regarded as being 'homosexual' or even 'male'. Instead, as implied by the literal meaning of *danmei*, viz. 'addicted to beauty', *danmei* characters encapsulate the 'beauty' of a third gender that is irrelevant to the activities of gay men (McLelland 2005). As pointed out by the gay activist Satō Masaki, Boys Love literature has a deleterious effect on the promotion of social tolerance towards homosexuality (Mizoguchi 2008: 178-180), in that male-male sexual encounters are depicted in a distorted manner in those fantasies. In addition to castigating *yaoi*, which means 'no climax, no plot, no meaning', viz. male homoeroticism in a sexually explicit form (Wim 2006, Fujimoto 2015, Hitoshi 2015, Suzuki 2015, Welker 2015), Satō Masaki also posits that the abnegation of Boys Love characters' gay identity illustrates that Boys Love is merely deployed as an escapist genre and source of private entertainment for female consumers (Mizoguchi 2008: 181-182), rather than a medium leading to a social embracement of sexual minorities, in which homosexual men are not portrayed as objects of the female gaze (Mizoguchi 2008: 186).

Therefore, *danmei* writing cannot embody positive feminist thinking or contribute to LGBT rights (Zhu and Zhao 2015). Disparate from its Western counterparts, Chinese digital feminism implied in *danmei* tends to establish feminist awareness via literary and discursive constructions, in which femininity is politicised into an aesthetic privilege; heteropatriarchy, therefore, is subverted during the celebration of cultural taboos, instead of vocalisation of gender equality (Chang and Tian 2020). Moreover, as indicated by a survey targeting pubescent *danmei* fangirls, 53.3% of them prefer *danmei* text with obscene depictions, and 47% of them are intrigued by explicit eroticism involved in *danmei* writing (Zheng 2017). It can be inferred that analogous to their Japanese counterparts, Chinese 'rotten girls' also consume *danmei* for escapism and the female gaze.

In China, *danmei* is inextricably intertwined with fandom, whereas the interweavement of *danmei* and fandom may not only impose deleterious effects on writers, but also jeopardise the public image of *danmei*.

A *danmei* writer pseudonymised 肉包不吃肉 *Roubaobuchirou* (Lit. 'meat bun doesn't eat meat'), whose chef-d'oeuvre is the celebrated online narrative 二哈和他的白猫师尊 *Erha He Tade Baimao Shizun* 'The Husky and His White Cat Master', has a prodigious fanbase. Nevertheless, given the audiovisual adaptation and hence expeditious visibility of the novel, it has been inextricably intertwined with fandom, which ineluctably leads to censure of the writer by anti-fans and paid smear campaigners for plagiarism, media hype and connections with slash producers and entertainment sponsors. By virtue of online abuse and harassment, after publicly rebuking anti-fans

and paid smear campaigners on Weibo, the writer declared an indefinite withdrawal from social media for the sake of her own mental health (Tencent News 2020a, 2020b).

Public opinion on *danmei* as a subculture would be misled if it was assumed to be connected to toxic fandom and online violence, which might render the status of *danmei* further marginalised. A paradigm pertaining to cyberspace violence is concerning Mo's fandom which is marked by typical operation modes and strategies of show business fandoms. Mo has been urged to conduct fan management, as her fans are anathematised for cyber manhunting a netizen who used to question the artistic value of *Mo Dao Zu Shi* and causing the latter's attempted suicide. This malign event has been chastised by party-state departments and media such as the Communist Youth League of China and China Central TV (Wang, 2018, The Paper, 2020b).

## CONCLUSION

As a marginalised subculture, *danmei* has been subject to official censorship and moral scrutiny, so audiovisual and textual *danmei* works are prone to stringent expurgation and even crackdown. *Danmei* producers, therefore, are presumed by their fan readership as being 'beautiful, powerful and pitiful', analogous to idols in the entertainment industry. As a consequence, devoted fan readers, especially those underage fangirls, are inclined to construe that they are able to and obliged to shield the writers they dote on from government surveillance and calumnious personal attacks imposed by covetous competitors and paid smear campaigners. Driven by a sense of alienation and powerlessness as well as psychological and social pressure in real life, *danmei* fangirls have established an imagined quasi-sufferer-martyr relation with authors they idolise, so as to obtain a sense of achievement and pride by means of making financial contributions and resorting to toxic fan practices. Moreover, such a 'fandomised' process of *danmei* is also attributed to Jinjiang's deliberate hype of its contracted writers, thereby inciting readers to voluntarily fall prey to capitalism and consumerism.

There is no denying the fact that the interweavement of *danmei* and fandom seems to have rendered the former more visible on social media and to the public. Nevertheless, such a phenomenon does not manifest that *danmei* has been embraced by a larger amount of audiences or more social groups—in other words, the seeming popularity of *danmei* is merely a bubble. The evolvement of *danmei* into a fandom-like industry cannot improve its status as a marginal subculture, but might further marginalise it or even accelerate and intensify the official crackdown on it. Owing to distorted depictions of male-male emotional and sexual entanglements and portrayals of homosexual men as objects of the female gaze, the *danmei* genre fails to enhance the status quo of homosexuality in China. Furthermore, fandom operation modes and strategies may deleteriously impinge upon *danmei* literature and its audiovisual adaptation, along with fans' secondary creation, in that toxic fan practices not only deter producers, but also imperils the reputation of *danmei* through triggering prejudice and disgust among the general public.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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