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Feminisation in Chinese *Danmei* Literature

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ABSTRACT

耽美 danmei, the Chinese version of Boys Love (BL), literally means 'addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty', and it denotes a literary genre featuring male-male romantic/homoerotic relationships produced for and consumed by 腐女 funü 'rotten girls'. Although danmei literature and subculture emerged in China's cyberspace in the 1990s, quasi-danmei depictions can be attested from works composed during the imperial period when male-male homosexuality involving feminine elements was embraced by elite culture. As a controversial, transgressive subcategory of Internet literature, danmei is attaining visibility and critical attention, yet more academic research is needed to comprehensively analyse this relatively new literary genre in a holistic manner. In this paper, I hermeneutically scrutinise a range of danmei fiction and investigate the phenomenon of feminisation prevalent in danmei writings. Currently, a prodigious amount of danmei narratives are characterised by feminisation of uke (bottom) and even seme (top) protagonists, embodied by characters' epicene appearance, effeminate manners, transvestism and male pregnancy. Feminisation in danmei, however, is discrepant from fangirls' act of nisu (泥塑/逆苏) that depicts male idols as adolescent girls and youthful women. The rationale for feminisation in danmei is partially attributed to female writers' (un)intentional deviation from partner preferences of homosexual males, impinged on by the prevailing aesthetic trend of 'soft masculinity' and readers' taste. More significantly, feminising male characters enables danmei creators to manipulate traditional gender roles and intensify the female gaze. Potentially, feminisation is the result of the increasing attention and readership of danmei literature in contemporary China.

Keywords

Online literature, contemporary China, Boys Love, *nisu*, *duanxiu*

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INTRODUCTION

Boys Love, aka BL, denotes a well-established international literary genre with its provenance in Japan, featuring male-male romantic relationships or homoerotic encounters between pubescent or mature men (McLelland 2000, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Suziki 2015, Welker 2015, Miyake 2016). BL applies to both textual and visual media, appearing in the form of novels, anime, manga, audio dramas and video games. BL is for mass production and circulation, predominantly consumed by female audiences, and is hence regarded as feminist-utopian pornographic fantasy (Wood 2006, McLelland 2009, Hartley 2015, Otomo 2015, Zsila and Demetrovics 2017a, 2017b).

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Since the era of socio-economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, overseas media and cultural products have been imported into Mainland China through both legal and underground channels (Zhao 2017), including BL that is dubbed 耽美 *danmei* in Chinese. The literal meaning of *danmei* is ‘addicted to beauty’ or ‘indulgence in beauty’, in which ‘beauty’ is exclusively limited to that of male characters in BL narratives (Feng 2009, Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Chen 2017, Wang 2019, Sun 2020). In China, female *danmei* readers are referred to as 腐女 *funü* ‘rotten girl’, a loan from the Japanese terminology *fujoshi*, viz. heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women who are fascinated with female-oriented narratives regarding male-male romantic and erotic relationships trespassing social and ethical norms and ethos (Berry 2007, Xu and Yang 2013, Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015, Chao 2016, 2017, McLelland 2017). Nonetheless, owing to its dual interconnection with homosexuality and pornography, as well as its presumed desecration of the conservative traditional norms prescribing women to be chaste and subservient, *danmei* literature is subjected to moral scrutiny and severe control and surveillance of the party-state (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhang 2017, Zhao et al 2017, He and Zhang 2018, Wang 2019). Therefore, for the purpose of self-protection, all Chinese *danmei* practitioners write and publish under pseudonyms (Xu and Yang 2013).

Stereotypical BL narratives feature two protagonists who perform seme (top) and uke (bottom) roles respectively according to their personal and personality traits: the former is typically an older, dominant man with masculine physical characteristics, while the latter is predominantly depicted as a younger, submissive partner with relatively more feminine physical attributes (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2011, Galbraith 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015, Welker 2015). The seme character, therefore, assumes a penetrator role in sexual intercourse, and the uke character assumes a penetrated role (Suzuki 2015), yet both characters may exhibit a mixture of masculine and feminine properties attributed to both genders (Yukari 2015).

Notwithstanding the prevalent seme-uke dyad and a clichéd strong seme × weak uke bipartite dichotomy (see Wang (2021a), (2021b) for detailed discussions), there are legions of Chinese *danmei* writers, such as Priest, 淮上 Huaishang, 骑鲸南去 Qijingnanqu and 西子绪 Xizixu,ⁱ who are eminent for constructing a so-called 强强 *qiangqiang* (Lit. ‘strong-strong’) pattern, in which both seme and uke protagonists are independent, mature men with an exemplary degree of self-reliance and adamant will; a well-received writer 巫哲 Wuzhe, in particular, is competent in creating versatile/switching characters who do not fall into a stereotypical seme-uke pattern. These writers tend to convey an idea that the protagonists might not be gay, but they happen to fall in love with a soulmate of the same sex; the romantic/erotic relationships in these novels are enriched by mutual support and self-salvation. Nevertheless, there is a cohort of *danmei* writers who are marked for depicting uke characters, and sometimes seme characters, as being both psychologically dependent and physically vulnerable.

In this paper, I explore the phenomenon of feminising seme and/or uke characters in *danmei* writings, and shed light on its rationale and related practice.

METHOD

In this research, I analyse *danmei* fiction and choose an online platform, Jinjiang Literature City (www.jjwxc.net), as the corpus. Currently in China, the vast majority of *danmei* narratives are released in the form of fiction, published on websites pioneered by Jinjiang Literature City, known as Jinjiang. As the largest and most successful female-oriented literature website in Mainland China, Jinjiang has developed into an organisation consisting of an e-bookstore, a discussion board and a user feedback forum, enabling users to obtain entertainment, satisfy creative impulse and derive emotional nourishment (Feng 2009, Zheng 2019). Since launched in 2003, Jinjiang has hosted a prodigious and high-quality group of *danmei* works: in February 2012 only, approximately 199,100 stories were published on Jinjiang, among which 145,600 were original, i.e. non-fanfic. By virtue of the quality and quantity of works, along with its easy access services, recent years have witnessed an upsurge in Jinjiang’s commercial success and popularity among a broader fanbase (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013): by June 2022, this multi-functional platform has hosted over 4.98 million narratives and attracted 54.81 million registered users (Jinjiang Literature City 2022). Jinjiang, therefore, has

established the biggest, almost exclusively female readership well-known for enthusiasm, loyalty and power of articulation (Xu 2002, Linder 2005, Yin 2005, Yang 2009, Wang 2019). Apart from registered readers, Jinjiang has also attracted an immense wealth of contracted writers, the vast majority of whom are part-time and have occupations outside writing (Feng 2009).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Early feminisation in male homosexuality can be embodied by a fictional character 东方不败 Dongfang Bubai created by a martial arts novelist 金庸 Jin Yong (aka Louis Cha), one of the world's most influential and most-read writers in contemporary China (Wang 1999, Watt 2018). Dongfang Bubai plays a supporting role in Jin's masterpiece *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (笑傲江湖 *Xiao Ao Jianghu*) serialised between 1967 and 1969, yet this character is extraordinarily popular among Chinese communities throughout the world, in that in Jin's heterocentric martial arts world, he is the only queer character who castrates himself and falls in love with another man (Zhou 2017).

In Jin's original narrative, in addition to the author's criticism of Mainland China's party politics, Dongfang Bubai embodies male homosexuality and functions as a representation of male political leaders of the Chinese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 (Ng 1998: 109, Chen 1999). In a Hong Kong film *Swordsman II* (笑傲江湖之东方不败 *Xiao Ao Jianghu Zhi Dongfang Bubai*) by 徐克 Xu Ke (aka Tsui Hark) in 1991, the character was presented via transgender casting as a 'cross-dressing goddess', generating a split between the fictional male character and the real female star. As a consequence, the love story permits two disparate types of spectatorial pleasure simultaneously, viz. gay love between characters and heterosexual romance between the actress and her co-star, perceived by distinctive audiences. Alternatively, there is another interpretation of Dongfang Bubai in the film, namely, a transgender woman with gradually self-fashioned subjectivities (Shih 2000, Yau 2005: 85-91, Leung 2008: 65-84).

Nevertheless, in a hit TV drama produced by 于正 Yu Zheng in Mainland China in 2013, this fictional character is exempt from explorations of formal politics or gender politics, and Dongfang Bubai is adapted into a woman played by an actress. Currently in Mainland China, potential gay-themed media representation is strictly monitored by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, and the visibility of homosexuality must be eliminated via the officially sanctioned adaptation, viz. 'top-down expurgation' (Dong 2005, Lim 2006, Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Wang 2019, Zheng 2019). Albeit being fully aware of the state censorship, entertainment industry practitioners and fan community members still endeavour to imagine and articulate queer possibilities of the character. As a consequence, Yu's TV drama demonstrates three queer reading positions, i.e. gay readings, heterosexual readings and lesbian readings. The gay reading, in particular, is linked to activism about gender politics and gay issues in fandom, whereas the association between popular culture and politics may trigger animadversion on homosexual representations in mainstream media. Moreover, the online video industry harnesses the gay reading in order to garner attention in China's cyberspace, which sabotages male homosexuality in media discourse, owing to the implication that a male-male relationship entails one party's adoption of the opposite gender (Zhou 2017).

Looking from a different perspective, I posit that since 'rotten' fans of Dongfang Bubai embrace the gay reading, it indicates that these *danmei* readers embrace the feminisation of gay men and the mindset that the uke role in a male-male same-sex relationship is essentially female.

In more recent *danmei* fiction published on Jinjiang, the feminisation of uke and even some protagonists is demonstrated in a variety of ways. For instance, in a novel entitled 男神男神你掉了一个男朋友 *Nanshen Nanshen Ni Diaole Yige Nanpengyou* 'Prince Charming Prince Charming You Left Your Boyfriend Behind',ⁱⁱ the seme can sing falsetto and the uke is a cross-dresser. In Example (1), expressions 'school belle' and 'fair skin, beautiful looks and good temperament' are commonly employed in the Chinese language to depict youthful women, yet they are used in this novel to describe the uke protagonist.

(1) 宋子期刚刚入学的时候,就因为“肤白貌美气质佳”被G大校园论坛某评选帖评为他们系的系花。

When Song Ziqi just went to university, he was voted as the ‘school belle’ on the University’s online forum, due to his ‘fair skin, beautiful looks and good temperament’.
(*Prince Charming Prince Charming You Left Your Boyfriend Behind*. Chapter I. Trans. Mine)

Similarly, in 樱桃树下 *Yingtao Shu Xia* ‘Under the Cherry Tree’, the uke protagonist is portrayed as a 娘炮 *niangpao* ‘nance’ (Example (2)) who likes biting his lips in a girlie way and going *yingyingying* (onomatopoeia mimicking girls’ lovey-dovey or whiny weep in a *sajiao* manner).ⁱⁱⁱ In 死亡万花筒 *Siwang Wanhuatong* ‘Kaleidoscope of Decease’, it is the seme character who enjoys wearing women’s clothing and going *yingyingying* (3). Although feminised uke characters are less frequently attested in *danmei* fiction, there are indeed myriads of works featuring feminised virility in *danmei* literature, the characters in which can be further subcategorised into 少女攻 *shaonü gong* ‘maiden seme’,^{iv} 软萌攻 *ruanmeng gong* ‘soft cute seme’, 哭包攻 *kubao gong* ‘crybaby seme’, 奶油攻 *naiyou gong* ‘cream seme’, etc.

(2) 忙于工作的颜先生发现儿子不对劲的时候, 颜旭已经成为了说话声音尖细发嗲, 走路摆小腰的美美哒小娘炮。

By the time the busy Mr Yan noticed his son’s abnormality, Yan Xu had already become a beautiful little nance who spoke in a soft girlie voice and walked with his waist twisting.
(*Under the Cherry Tree*. Chapter I. Trans. Mine)

(3) 身上穿着身不合时宜的长裙, 眼睛里裹着充盈的泪水, 姑娘轻轻抽泣着。

The girl in a long skirt was weeping softly, with her eyes full of tears.
(*Kaleidoscope of Decease*. Chapter I. Trans. Mine)

Apart from transvestism, effeminate manners and epicene appearance, feminisation in *danmei* is also characterised by mpreg which is short for ‘male pregnancy’ as a plot device occurring also in slash of male-male pairings. For example, in 怀了豪门老男人的崽 *Huailie Haomen Laonanrende Zai* ‘Pregnant with A Rich Old Man’s Baby’, the 18-year-old uke is pregnant. It is notable that the mpreg storyline is not designed exclusively for uke characters. For instance, in 我让渣攻怀了我的孩子 *Wo Rang Zhagong Huailie Wode Haizi* ‘I Made the Wicked Seme Pregnant with My Child’ under a subgenre dubbed 快穿 *kuai chuan* ‘quick transmigration’,^v it is the seme protagonist who is impregnated and delivers a baby boy. Having said that, seme characters’ childbearing is only attested in a small number of *danmei* narratives.

Although some *danmei* writers and readers may embrace feminised characters, feminisation in *danmei* is by no means universally accepted.

A representative paradigm is regarding the contentious ‘227 Incident’ pertaining to a Chinese singer-actor named 肖战 Xiao Zhan and his fanbase. Xiao expeditiously rose to mega-stardom in 2019 after starring in a hit TV period drama 陈情令 *Chenqingling* ‘The Untamed’ adapted from a popular *danmei* novel 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* ‘Master of Demonic Cultivation’ initially published on Jinjiang. However, Xiao’s supporters became aware of a piece of fanfic entitled 下坠 *Xiazhui* ‘Falling’ depicting their idol as a cross-dressed prostitute with gender dysphoria, who pursued a relationship with a school boy named after Xiao’s co-star from *The Untamed*. In *Falling*, the character named after Xiao is characterised by feminine attraction and is referred to by a feminine pronoun 她 *ta* ‘she/her’, as in Example (4).

(4) 她生得一张巴掌脸, 五官却都大, 所以显得有几分艳和媚...穿包身裙, 堪堪遮住屁股的长度, 她臀部浑圆挺翘, 因此裙子显得更短些。

She had a small face and fine features, which made her quite tender and enchanting...She was in a short skirt that fully exposed her figure and bare thighs; her firm and round buttocks made the skirt even shorter.

(*Falling*, Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

Dissatisfied this fanfic, Xiao's devoted fans filed large-scale, systematic and well-planned complaints to government authorities for online obscenity (The Economist 2020, Wu 2020, Yu 2020). Although Xiao's fans defended their whistle-blowing act as protection for their idol's reputation and image, as a consequence of their mass-reporting, Archive of Our Own (AO3), a non-commercial and non-profit open-source repository for transformative works contributed by users, became blocked in Mainland China on 29 February 2020. Enraged by the inaccessibility of AO3 that had been deemed as a virtual comfort zone and spiritual home for a range of subculture groups since 2009, AO3 users anathematised fans' vicious calumny against AO3 and disparagement of AO3 users, and thus initiated a comprehensive online campaign and boycott against Xiao (Global Times 2020, Hall 2020, Jiang 2020, Romano 2020, South China Morning Post 2020). As the cyber war between Xiao's fans and AO3 users (and afterwards netizens of a wider social spectrum) deteriorated persistently, it developed into a phenomenon of societal, cultural, ideological, and economic impingement, and was referred to as the '227 Incident'.^{vi} The 227 Incident has set off a perilous chain reaction, and one instance of the aftermath is that the application of Lofter, a free open space for transformative works and subculture communities, was pulled off the shelf for 'rectification' in June 2020, though Xiao's solicitor denied the correlation between the two incidents (Bi and Wen 2020, Cai 2020, China Comment 2020a, 2020b, China Daily 2020, Global Times 2020, Gong 2020, He 2020, C. Liu 2020, H. Liu 2020, Lu 2020, Mahyuni 2020, Sohu News 2020, Wang 2020, Zhang 2020, Zhu 2020).

Although homosexuality-themed discourse and media representation have been a social taboo since the Chinese Communist Party came in power, male same-sex intimacy and desire used to be embraced by pre-modern elite culture in imperial China (Hinsch 1992, Song 2004, Wu 2004, Dong 2005, Lim 2006, Wang 2019).

Male homosexuality can be referred to as 断袖 *duanxiu* 'cutting sleeve' in a literary manner (Li 2009), and this terminology stems from Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty (27-1 BC), who cut off his sleeve to get up so as not to disturb his sleeping same-sex partner, and hence started a courtly revolution in fashion regarding sexual preferences (Gil 1992). In ancient China, the tolerance of male homosexuality by the elite royal members, upper classes and illustrious intellectuals was reflected in a veritable cornucopia of sources, such as classical literature, folk literature and dialects, sex manuals, traditional sexual jokes, erotic art and vernacular novels, which inspired the growth of a literary tradition lasted until the mid-Qing (1644-1912) period. Imperial China was characterised by a tendency of regarding homosexual behaviours in terms of social relationships, rather than sexual orientation, which illuminates the power of sexual favourites and sexual rationale for official appointments. The emergence of intolerance and sexual conservatism during the Qing dynasty, however, was resulted from the new morality in twentieth-century China impinged on by the Western sexual discourse (Lau and Ng 1989, Ruan 1991, Hinsch 1992, van Gulik 2002).

According to Hinsch (1992), *duanxiu* in Imperial China can be divided into four categories: 1) trans-generational, which is between active older and passive younger men; 2) trans-gendral, which entails men dressing as women; 3) class-structured, which refers to the rich purchasing the poor; and 4) egalitarian, that involves partners of the same status. Male transvestism driven by various motivations has existed in China for over two millennia, and trans-gendral homosexuality, namely cross-dressing of gay men, abounds in both history and classical literature (Jiang 1988, Ruan 1991, Zhang 2008, 2013).

Classical Chinese literature is replete with *duanxiu* of feminine elements. For instance, in 金瓶梅 *Jin Ping Mei* 'The Plum in a Golden Vase' of the Ming (1368-1644) dynasty, homosexuality involving men from both ends of the social spectrum is portrayed (Cheng and Lei 2014, Zhang 2014), such as depictions of a pederast's pretty boy who likes wearing makeup and red hair decorations (Roy

2013). Analogously, in *红楼梦 Hong Lou Meng* 'The Story of the Stone; Dream of the Red Chamber' which is an encyclopaedic portrayal of life and elaborate observation of the social structure of Qing China, a range of homosexual or bisexual men are depicted implicitly and explicitly (Zhu 1986, Edwards 1990, 2001, Zhou 1993, 1998), and they prevalently exhibit feminine attributes, as shown in Example (5).

(5) 自宝, 秦二人来了, 都生的花朵儿一般的模样, 又见秦钟腴腆温柔, 未语面先红, 怯怯羞羞, 有女儿之风; 宝玉又是天生成惯能作小服低, 赔身下气, 情性体贴, 话语绵缠。...更又有两个多情的小学生, 亦不知是那一房的亲眷, 亦未考真名姓, 只因生得妩媚风流, 满学中都送了他两个外号, 一号“香怜”, 一号“玉爱”。

The two new boys, Qin Zhong and Bao-yu, were both as beautiful as flowers; the other scholars observed how shrinking and gentle Qin Zhong was, blushing almost before you spoke to him and timid and bashful as a girl they saw in Bao-yu one whom nature and habit had made humble and accommodating in spite of his social position, always willing to defer to others in the interest of harmony; they observed his affectionate disposition and familiar manner of speech....Among them were two amorous young creatures whose names and parentage escape us but who, because of their glamorous looks and affected manners, were universally known by the nicknames of 'Darling' and 'Precious'.

(*The Story of the Stone*. Chapter 9. Trans. Hawkes 1973)

It is worth mentioning that feminisation in *danmei* is discrepant from a fandom neologism 泥塑 *nisu*, though they share similitude. 泥塑 *nisu* literally means 'clay sculpture', and it is the homophone of 逆苏 *nisu*, the literary meaning of which is 'to reverse charm'. The verb 苏 *su* 'to wake up' is used innovatively in fandom as an adjective describing male celebrities' charisma or a verb describing their acts to charm fans. However, it is prevalent among some fangirls to create narratives in which they are men, while idols, whether featured by masculinity or not, are young, beautiful and vulnerable women or adolescent girls who are typically imaginary girlfriends or wives of fangirls. Functioning as a sexualised way of looking, the deed of *nisu* empowers fangirls as fictitious men and objectifies handsome male stars as fictitious teenage girls, so this counterfactual scenario is referred to as being 'reverse'.

Nisu is inextricably intertwined with the male gaze, but it does not completely correspond with the specification of the male gaze. To be more specific, in terms of hegemonic masculinity and objectification or the film/psychoanalytic theory, the male gaze entails women's bodies being visually positioned as objects to be surveyed and to satisfy masculine scopophilia, heterosexual male desire and erotic basis for pleasure (Mulvey 1975, Griffin 2017, Chandler and Munday 2020). Nonetheless, *nisu* places more emphasis on romanticisation and fantasisation. In *nisu* text, roles assigned to male idols are not limited to girlfriends—they can be daughters, sisters and even stepmothers as well; but all roles are equipped with youth and beauty. These unrealistically glorified female images reflect Chinese fangirls' aesthetic expectation and standard that are closely correlated with their age- and appearance-related social anxiety. Moreover, fangirls proscribe aged roles like aunts and grandmothers, who have lost sexual attraction to the opposite gender, and they regard such roles as humiliation on and smears against their idols. Therefore, although fangirls claim that their *nisu* act accords with the latest feminist thought and incarnates contradictory aesthetics, they conduct *nisu* strictly based on appearance rather than feminist thinking, and their aesthetic criteria are saliently narrow. That is to say, fangirls' claimed identity as feminist 'pioneers' and superiority in feminist insight do not hold (Xie and Zhang 2020).

The resemblance between *danmei* feminisation and *nisu* literature lies in that they both manifest writers' strategies to accommodate fan readers. As suggested by Otomo (2015), sexual desires can be conveyed by producing and consuming narratives and images as a self-expression and performance. I assume that in addition to sexual desires, *danmei* and *nisu* writers can also convey romantic and erotic fantasies in their text.

Nevertheless, *danmei* feminisation and *nisu* are by no means identical. The core idea of queer theory indicates that when consuming BL narratives, readers escape from their own gendered body and float away from a fixed identity (Vincent 2007, Otomo 2015). Following this analysis, I propound that the disparity between *danmei* feminisation and *nisu* lies in creators' point of view. When creating *danmei* fiction, writers, similar to readers, locate themselves outside plots and relationships as spectators. Creators of *nisu* text, however, construe themselves as active participants who interact with their co-actors in imaginary settings; furthermore, deliberately assigning themselves a male gender, *nisu* writers play a dominant, conspicuous and possibly penetrator role in the imagined relationship and enjoy being relied on by their submissive and vulnerable co-participants.

In terms of the rationale for *danmei* feminisation, I posit that feminisation of male characters in *danmei* works may be attributed to writers' lack of understanding of typical images or partner preference of gay men.

Masculinity, constituted of both male-typical appearance and comportment, functions as a salient factor in partner preference for gay men (Sanchez and Vilain 2012), which is justified by the fact that gay men are more attracted to individuals possessing properties such as a muscular and athletic shape and a masculine voice (Hatala and Predhodka 1996, Bailey et al 1997, Bartholome et al 2000, Halkitis et al 2004, Swami and Tovee 2008, Valentova et al 2013).

This seemingly universal observation applies in a Chinese context as well: notwithstanding the popularity of trans-genderal homosexuality in ancient China, in the contemporary era, Chinese homosexual and bisexual men demonstrate consistent preferences for masculinity across faces, bodies and personality traits (Zheng and Zheng 2015, 2016, Zheng et al 2016, Zheng 2019a, 2019b).

Of course, it is equally possible that *danmei* writers, or at least some of them, are aware of typical appearance and partner preference of gay men, but they create femininised characters intentionally. As pointed out by Omoto (2015), enjoying beautiful male characters in BL has become formulaic and clichéd, so I postulate that being members of 'rotten girls' themselves, *danmei* writers are fully aware of the preference and taste of *danmei* readers who are their counterparts sharing the same collective identity, and besides, 'rotten girls' may have a dual individual identity of both a producer and consumer. Therefore, regardless of actual partner preferences of gay men, as 'rotten girls', *danmei* writers create beautiful, feminine characters for their 'rotten' readers and for themselves.

It is worth mentioning that the popularity of young, epicene male figures is not exclusively limited among 'rotten girls'. Currently, Chinese fangirls outside the *danmei* arena are also fascinated by effeminate-looking, delicate-featured and makeup-clad male idols who are collectively labelled as 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* 'little fresh meat' (Buchenbacher 2018, Gao 2019). Luo (2017) defines 'little fresh meat' as young men possessing attractive appearance yet little social experience or career achievement, but they act as a new type of male aesthetics, i.e. 'soft masculinity' that signifies the increasing (purchase) power of women and consumption culture (Jung 2009, 2011: 39, Louie 2012, Hu 2017, Wang 2017). A shift from consuming female sexuality to the 'consumption of sexualised men', or from the male gaze to female gaze, intensifies the patriarchal control of women and reflects a trend towards gender equality in China and post-feminism that focuses on female agency (Zhou 2017, Li 2020).

Impinged on by the prevailing aesthetic trend and challenged traditional role of masculinity in contemporary China, *danmei* writers hence display a higher tendency to feminise characters in their works.

More significantly, feminisation in *danmei* allows 'rotten girls' to re-define gender and sexuality. As an element beyond the hegemonic discourse constructing gender and/or sexuality, BL falls into a domain that permits agency, a critical gaze and a resistance to the authority of a singular narrative (Hartley 2015, Otomo 2015). In an American context, slash fiction serves as an approach to retool masculinity for contemporary women, in that fanciful male figures in slash fiction combining masculine power with feminine nurturance are the incarnation of ideal masculinity (Penley 1991). In a Chinese context, the complicated process of character identification in the reception of *danmei* narratives is not only marked by readers' fantasisation about ideal masculinity, but also their imagined empowerment or agenthood to manipulate and 'impersonate' idealised masculinity (Feng 2009).

BL enables women to escape from the male gaze that perceives women as sex objects. Furthermore, the gaze women return imbues homosocial male bonding with sexual implications, and women can thus build a world of thorough blending of gender and power dynamics without biological gender division (Fujimoto 2007, 2015, Junko 2007). Feminising characters in *danmei* narratives, therefore, enables 'rotten girls' to obtain an extra layer of gender equality: depicting uke or even seme characters in a feminine manner renders men in the real world sex objects of *danmei* creators' fantasies.

The process of feminisation enables *danmei* creators to manipulate traditional gender roles. Homoerotic representation of beautiful men permits women to express emerging sexual identities without according with oppressive hegemonic paradigms of sex and gender (Hartley 2015). The essence of BL lies in that both seme and uke entail dual meanings, forming a complex combination of desire and disappointment: women's desire to be in a mutual relationship with men is accompanied by painful awareness of the incompleteness of their bodies. To be more specific, seme represents women who have taken and applied men's reproductive organs and turned themselves into subjects of desire; uke embodies men who are ostracised by women yet have been transformed from subjects to objects of desire. Moreover, uke signifies women's desire to be blindly loved, while seme serves as the person who fulfills women's unsatisfied wish (Hitoshi 2015).

Feminisation in *danmei* writing, therefore, leads to a question: do works with feminised gay characters fundamentally concern homosexuality or heterosexuality? In Chinese, novels featuring heterosexual relationships are traditionally called 言情小说 *yanqing xiaoshuo*, and in cyberspace it is given a modern equivalent, viz. a neologism BG 文 *BG wen* that stands for 'boy-girl text'. BG and BL frequently occur on literature websites as tags signposting the genre of novels or on social media as terminologies deployed by netizens during their online interaction, and these two terminologies are mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, over-feminisation in some *danmei* works blurs the distinction between BL and BG which are supposed to be disparate from each other. In some BL narratives, if the uke's gender was switched to female, the plot or even specific portrayals would not be affected, which leaves readers an impression that they are reading BG novels instead.

I propound that such a phenomenon may be caused by the surging popularity of *danmei* in China. As pointed by Xu and Yang (2013), there is increasing visibility of BL in China, and the effective dissemination of *danmei* to a broader fanbase is facilitated by Jinjiang that helps to mainstream this previously marginalised subculture (Feng 2009). On 知乎 Zhihu, the Chinese version of Quora, there are myriads of discussions concerning *danmei* fiction, anime and manga, as well as radio plays and online serials adapted from *danmei* works. Since 2015, there have been questions on Zhihu regarding the eclipse of BG overshadowed by BL, such as 'Why BL is now more popular than BG' that attracted hundreds of identified and anonymous answers, the most popular of which received over a thousand 'likes' and comments. Additionally, leading *danmei* writers have legions of fans on Weibo, China's largest social media platform: 墨香铜臭 Moxiangtongxiu, the author of *Master of Demonic Cultivation*, has attracted 3.1 million Weibo followers by July 2022, and her latest post received over seven million comments.

The popularity of *danmei* unsurprisingly brings about commercial success, in that apart from income from paid users of literature websites, well-read online *danmei* works have opportunities to be published in print and/or adapted into audio and visual works. Driven by commercial prospect and to accommodate a larger cohort of audiences, more writers join *danmei* creation. Take Jinjiang as an example: a number of writers specialised in BG writing have turned into BL writers motivated by more profit and attention; these writers, however, might still preserve their original writing style, expressions and plots typically employed in BG stories.

Additionally, for some heterosexual female readers, being a 'rotten girl' is deemed to be 'cool'. Despite its popularity among some Internet communities, *danmei* is still a marginalised subculture that has not attained official acknowledgement from mainstream media or authorities such as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. As pointed out by Wang (2019), officially sanctioned adaptation of *danmei* fiction, in which romantic and erotic relationships between protagonists are eliminated and replaced by pure brotherhood, ignites 'bottom-up

subversion' from *danmei* fans as their rebellion against the (post)socialist ideology of China that condemns homosexuality for breaching patriarchal heteronormative ethos. I hence propose that for some fangirls who are not indeed 'rotten' but only read *danmei* for 'little fresh meat', this kind of claimed superiority in terms of perceptive insight and rebellious spirit bears a resemblance to that regarding fangirls' *nisu* act. In other words, readers, especially teenage readers, boast about an identity of 'rotten girls' as an incarnation of their compatibility and willingness to embrace unconventional subcultures that challenge the conservative traditional norms prescribing women's chasteness and subservience. Therefore, it is not impossible that these readers (and even the writers themselves) cannot accept realistic depictions of male homosexuality, so in order to accommodate their preference, writers choose to create highly effeminate-looking and delicate-featured characters with diluted masculine attributes.

CONCLUSION

Danmei, as a literature genre, exists predominantly in the form of fiction published on online platforms represented by Jinjiang. A considerable proportion of *danmei* narratives are featured by feminisation of uke or even seme characters, whereas such feminisation is discrepant from the *nisu* act of fangirls who imagine young male idols as their girlfriends. Despite the fact that *danmei* is currently an easy target of moral scrutiny and state censorship owing to its dual correlation with homosexuality and eroticism, male homosexuality has been existing in China for millennia and was embraced by the imperial and elite classes. Analogous to their modern counterparts, literary works in ancient China also feature feminised men in homosexual romances and sexual encounters.

Although gay men demonstrate a preference for partners possessing masculine appearance and comportment, *danmei* writers intentionally or unintentionally depict characters with epicene looks, effeminate manners, cross-dressing and mpreg, thereby minimising their masculinity. One of the reasons is that *danmei*, as reflected by its name 'addicted to beauty' or 'indulgence in beauty', is to convey women's aesthetic expectation and standard, which can be further reinforced by the prevailing trend of 'little fresh meat' as the embodiment of 'soft masculinity' in contemporary China. More importantly, feminisation in *danmei* enables 'rotten girls' to re-define gender and sexuality and manipulate traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, the over-feminisation of *danmei* renders it almost indistinguishable from BG, which might be triggered by the surging invisibility of *danmei*. While *danmei* is attracting a larger number of audiences, some of them regard the identity of 'rotten girls' as expression of rebellion against conservative traditional creeds and deviation from social and ethical norms. Therefore, to accommodate readers who might not be authentic 'rotten girls', *danmei* writers resort to feminising fictional characters. Additionally, switching from BG to BL writing can bring authors more attention and profit, but this cohort of writers inevitably keeps their previous BG style and elements in their newly started BL writing.

In future research, I would like to investigate the officially sanctioned adaptation of *danmei* fiction into online serials, as well as the self-expurgation strategy adopted by *danmei* creators and platforms so as to circumvent censorship. More in-depth research could be conducted to further explore the *nisu* act as well.

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Endnotes

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- ⁱ As mentioned previously, in contemporary China, *danmei* literature and subculture are subjected to government censorship and moral scrutiny, predominantly owing to their correlation with homosexuality and obscenity (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhang 2017, Zhao et al 2017, He and Zhang 2018, Wang 2019). Therefore, all names of *danmei* writers in this paper are their noms de plume.
- ⁱⁱ In this paper, all titles and citations of *danmei* novels are translated into English by myself.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Wang (2021c) for detailed discussions on *sajiao*.
- ^{iv} See Wang (2021c) for detailed discussions on 'maiden seme'.
- ^v See Wang (2021d) for detailed discussions on 'quick transmigration'.
- ^{vi} See Wang (2020) for detailed discussion on the '227 Incident'