



CONTEMPORARY DANMEI FICTION AND ITS SIMILITUDES WITH CLASSICAL AND YANQING LITERATURE

Fiksi Danmei Kontemporer dan Persamaannya dengan Sastra Klasik dan Yanqing

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Abstract

Danmei, aka Boys Love, is a salient transgressive genre of Chinese internet literature. Since entering China's niche market in the 1990s, the *danmei* subculture, predominantly in the form of an original fictional creation, has established an enormous fanbase and demonstrated significance via thought-provoking works and social functions. Nonetheless, the *danmei* genre is not an innovation in the digital age, in that its bipartite dichotomy between seme 'top' and uke 'bottom' roles bears similarities to the dyad in *caizi-jiaren* 'scholar-beauty' anecdotes featuring masculine and feminine ideals in literary representations of heterosexual love and courtship, which can be attested in the 17th century and earlier extant accounts. Furthermore, the feminisation of *danmei* characters is analogous to an androgynous ideal in late-imperial narratives concerning heterosexual relationships during late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Besides, the depiction of semes being masculine while ukes being feminine is consistent with the orthodox, indigenous Chinese masculinity, which is comprised of *wen* 'cultural attainment' epitomising feminine traits and *wu* 'martial valour' epitomising masculine traits. In terms of modern literature, *danmei* is parallel to the (online) genre *yanqing* 'romance' that is frequently characterised by 'Mary Sue' and cliché-ridden narration.

Keywords: *danmei* genre, 'scholar-beauty' fiction, *yanqing* romance, feminisation, 'Mary Sue'

Abstrak

Danmei, alias Boys Love, adalah genre transgresif yang menonjol dari sastra internet Tiongkok. Sejak memasuki ceruk pasar China pada 1990-an, subkultur *danmei*, terutama dalam bentuk kreasi fiksi orisinal, telah membangun basis penggemar yang sangat besar dan menunjukkan signifikansi melalui karya-karya yang menggugah pikiran dan fungsi sosial. Meskipun demikian, genre *danmei* bukanlah inovasi di era digital, karena dikotomi bipartit antara peran seme 'atas' dan uke 'bawah' memiliki kesamaan dengan angka dua dalam anekdot *caizi-jiaren* 'cendekiawan-kecantikan' yang menampilkan cita-cita maskulin dan feminin dalam representasi sastra cinta heteroseksual dan pacaran, yang dapat dibuktikan pada abad ke-17 dan catatan yang masih ada sebelumnya. Selanjutnya, feminisasi karakter *danmei* analog dengan ideal androgini dalam narasi kekaisaran akhir tentang hubungan heteroseksual selama dinasti Ming akhir dan Qing awal. Selain itu, penggambaran para seme menjadi maskulin sementara para uke menjadi feminin konsisten dengan maskulinitas ortodoks Tionghoa asli, yang terdiri dari *wen* 'pencapaian budaya' yang melambangkan sifat feminin dan *wu* 'keberanian bela diri' yang melambangkan sifat maskulin. Dalam hal sastra modern, *danmei* sejajar dengan genre (online) *yanqing* 'romance' yang sering dicirikan oleh 'Mary Sue' dan narasi yang sarat klise.

Kata kunci: genre *danmei*, fiksi 'scholar-beauty', roman *yanqing*, feminisasi, 'Mary Sue'

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INTRODUCTION

Production and consumption of internet literature in China's cyberspace emerged in the 1990s. They proliferated circa 1995 to 1997, accelerated by the permeation of internet and digital media as well as the marginalisation and retreat of serious literature (Zhang 2003: 230-255, Ouyang 2011, Tian and Adorjan 2016), the virtuality of which enables non-professional creation composed by legions of obscure amateur authors with an enormous readership and commercial profits as well as proactive online interaction and participation in a form of commodities (Rifkin 1998: 177, Zhang 2011, Bai 2013). In the digital age, the emergence and popularity of internet literature, along with its commercial success via substantial production and massive consumption, were inspired by an amateur writer pseudonymised Pizizai (1969-), who initially posted his creation on a local Bulletin Board System and received unexpected positive feedback in 1998 (Liu 2004: 154, Chao 2012: 14). Thus, the advent of the 21st century witnessed a prodigious amount of web-based works hosted by pioneering literary websites and virtual communities for commercial and non-commercial purposes (Yin 2005, Chen et al. 2008, Tse and Gong 2012), which has supplanted official cultural offerings as mainstream Chinese popular literature (Li 2007, Ren and Montgomery 2012). According to the latest data released by the China Internet Network Information Centre, by June 2020, there have been approximately 940 million netizens in China, 49.7% of whom have experience consuming digital literature (China Internet Network Information Centre 2020). The most well-established genres of Chinese internet literature are 玄幻 *xuanhuan* 'Eastern fantasy', 都市 *dushi* 'urban', 仙侠 *xianxia* 'Chinese immortal swordsman' and 网游 *wangyou* 'online game' (Chao 2012: 114-149), accounting for approximately 50% of all published fiction on a leading literary website named 起点 *Qidian* 'Starting Point' (Chao 2012: 34-49).

In the realm of Chinese internet literature, the most salient transgressive genre that has been attaining renown and embracement is dubbed as 耽美 *danmei* (Zheng 2014, Hockx 2015: 114) that literarily means 'indulgence in beauty; addicted to beauty' and concerns male-male same-sex romance and homoeroticism between attractive pubescent boys and youthful men (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Zhang 2016). Chinese *danmei* literature evolved in the early 1990s from a marginalised niche market (Liu 2009, Yang and Bao 2012, Zhu and Zhang 2015) as a Japanese cultural export of *shōnen'ai* 'Boys Love', aka BL or *yaoi*, which draws on the tradition of profoundly romanticised comics featuring 'beautiful young men' for female target viewers since the 1970s (McLelland 2000, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015,

Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). Albeit stringent government censorship and surveillance imposed by the party-state (Yi 2013, Ng 2015, Wang 2019) owing to its homosexual essence and interconnection with obscenity (Suzuki 1998, Nagaike 2003, McLelland 2005, 2016, 2017), *danmei* has managed to accumulate legions of fan producers/consumers (self-)referred to as 腐女 *funü* ‘rotten girls’ (Chao 2016, 2017), following the Japanese terminology *fujoshi* (Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015). However, owing to its nature as female-oriented, gender-inflected fantasies, the vast majority (91-93%) of *danmei* fans are surmised to be heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women (Xu and Yang 2014, Zhou and Li 2016, Zeng 2017), prominently those underage fangirls (Zheng 2017, Wang 2018).

Danmei subculture entered a stage of rapid development circa the year 2000 via media such as literary websites and forums, reflected by a salient upsurge in both (young female) producers and consumers (Wei 2014, Xu and Yang 2014, Zhang 2016). *Danmei* texts are preponderantly accommodated by a leading literary website called 晋江文学城 *Jinjiang Wenxue Cheng* ‘Jinjiang Literature City’ (henceforth *Jinjiang*), which has been hosting a prodigious amount of (non-)fanfiction *danmei* writing since its launch in 2003 (Yin 2005, Feng 2009, Zheng 2019). The surging popularity and visibility of *danmei* writing can be justified by the substantial industrial success of *Jinjiang*. In 2012, numbers of registered users and contracted writers amounted to approximately 5,000,000 and 300,000, respectively (Xu and Yang 2013), yet these figures have impressively surpassed 43,980,000 and 1,650,000 respectively by December 2020 (*Jinjiang* 2021a).

According to the writer’s observation, driven by the ever-growing, gigantic size of fan readership and its corresponding profit and fame, a considerable proportion of producers specialised/interested in other genres and themes have willingly or unwillingly transformed into *danmei* writers and ingratiated themselves with readers. Early 2013, a celebrated male online writer pseudonymised 南派三叔 *Nanpaisanshu* (Wang 2020), chef-d’oeuvre of the illustrious, award-winning adventure novel series 盗墓笔记 *Daomu Biji* ‘The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles’ stated that 一个腐女百万兵, 得腐女者得天下 *yige funü baiwan bing, de funü zhe de tianxia* ‘one *funü* equals millions of soldiers; whoever wins the heart of *funü* conquers the world’.¹ It reveals a direct and bidirectional author-audience interaction and its significant commercial ethos (Feng and Literat 2017).

¹ Unless specified otherwise, all quotations and fiction titles are translated by myself.

Nonetheless, the leap in *danmei*'s quantity inevitably leads to its deteriorating quality, embodied by the clichéd characterisation, narration, and representation. Although both Japanese BL and Chinese *danmei* are constituted of textual and visual materials in the form of ACG (Anime, Comic and Games) (Toku 2007, Louie 2012, Aoyama 2015, McLelland 2015), in the Chinese market, fiction is the most-consumed *danmei* subcategory (Wei 2014), and original fictional creation massively outnumbers its fanfiction counterpart (Xu and Yang 2014). Therefore, in this research, the writer exclusively investigates non-fanfiction contents on Jinjiang, the largest and most successful platform accommodating *danmei* fiction in China.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Significance of *danmei*

There is no denying the fact that the *danmei* genre assumes a preponderant role in Chinese internet literature and popular subculture, and there is a considerable proportion of *danmei* fiction that is thought-provoking and invites hermeneutic and interpretive scrutiny.

As mentioned previously, fangirls comprise an overwhelming majority of the Chinese *danmei* fanbase; parallel to male consumers; male producers are also in a trivial minority compared with their female equivalents (Zhao 2015). An exemplary, prolific male *danmei* writer publishes under a pseudonym 非天夜翔 Feitianyexiang and arguably a few others such as 顾雪柔 Gu Xuerou, whose writing is renowned for magnificent standpoints, vivid imaginations as well as a wide range of themes. One of Feitianyexiang's representative works is a realistic-oriented novel 北城天街 *Beicheng Tianjie* 'Paradise Walk' which is an exception to stereotypical *danmei* fiction overly fantasising male-male romance, in that it boldly reveals promiscuity, one-night stands, AIDS, and decease (Zhao 2015). Another best-selling book 二零一三 *Erlingyisan* '2013' is an apocalyptic novel enriched by complex, multi-faceted characters, which outperforms mediocre web-based pulp fiction through evoking film-like imagery of landscapes and figures as well as conveying values such as heroism, patriotism, and humanism (Xiao 2019). The artistic value of Feitianyexiang's writing is also demonstrated by profound historical and literary allusions as well as an integration of the traditional 演义 *yanyi* 'popular explication; the exposition of the meaning of events in history' (McLaren 2006, Ge 2007) and 武侠 *wuxia* 'Chinese knighthood; martial chivalry' (Liu 1967: 2, Teo 2009: 2, To 2019), as in 天宝伏妖录 *Tianbao Fuyao Lu* 'A Chronicle of Subduing Demons in the Tianbao Period' (Xiao 2018). What is noteworthy is that in Feitianyexiang's historical stories

exemplified by 破罐子破摔 *Poguanzi Poshuai* ‘To Smash a Cracked Jar’, female characters are not depicted as men’s possessions, but intelligent and independent participants and creators of history (Xu and Yang 2014). There are, of course, myriads of outstanding *danmei* narratives composed by female authors. For instance, 天官赐福 *Tianguan Cifu* ‘Blessing from Heavenly Officials’, the chef-d’oeuvre of a contentious Jinjiang writer pseudonymed 墨香铜臭 Moxiangtongxiu, has been ranking the highest on readers’ voting list on Jinjiang since its release in 2017 and has received an average of 2,396,071 views per chapter and 1,955,548 comments by January 2021 (Jinjiang 2021b). Notwithstanding controversies and fan quarrels, and conflicts, the writer has argued that this work exhibits ethic-religious ideologies, feminist thinking, and the complexity of human nature (Author 2020).

In terms of *danmei* media representation, apart from commercially-targeted and officially-expurgated online dramas such as 陈情令 *Chenqingling* ‘The Untamed’ and 镇魂 *Zhenhun* ‘Guardian’ (Wang 2019), there are reality-oriented and materially-grounded visual contents. That the exploration of neoliberalism, queer sexuality, and social disparity are exemplified by films 双程 *Shuangcheng* ‘A Round Trip to Love’ and 不可抗力之男仆的秘密 *Bukekangli Zhi Nanpude Mimi* ‘Uncontrolled Love’ (Wong 2020), and an online serial 上瘾 *Shangyin* ‘Addicted’ that has been banned for ‘exaggerat[ing] the dark side of society’ and ‘[show]ing abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours’ (Campbell 2016, Ellis-Petersen 2016).

The significance of *danmei* fiction lies in a variety of aspects. Female ‘rotten’ readers are impinged upon by negative self-image induced by gender-related anxiety, which can be mitigated by *danmei* writing through fictionally constructed masculinity and expression of repressed sexual carnality (McLelland 1999, Wood 2006, Kamm 2013, Zsila and Demetrovics 2017). That is to say; female *danmei* consumers are permitted to exhibit and share their fascination for youthful male bodies in an uninhibited fashion (Greer 2003: 10, McLelland 2005, 2017, Zsila et al. 2018) and delight in aberrant and transgressive acts and sexual ecstasy by means of identifying with male characters (Nagaike 2003, 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015), with reduced apprehension while consuming scenes of sexual violence (Fujimoto 2004, 2015). In a word, *danmei* fiction enables readers to attain aesthetics, escapism, voyeurism, gender equality, as well as the release of normative gender prescriptions and norms (Chou 2010, Zhang 2016, Lilja and Wasshede 2017). Therefore, *danmei* literature is construed quintessential as an ‘oppositional discourse’ that is deviant from orthodox genres and conventional cultural institutions (Martin 1986: 44-45, Wei 2008, Xu and Yang 2013).

***Caizi-jiaren* vs seme-uke**

In an iconic masterpiece 红楼梦 *Hong Lou Meng* ‘The Story of the Stone; Dream of the Red Chamber/Mansion’ that chronicles prosperity, travails, and catastrophic perishment of a populous aristocratic clan, the author Cao Xueqin (1724-1764) expresses incisive animadversions regarding clichéd 才子佳人 *caizi-jiaren* ‘scholar-beauty’ anecdotes surrealistically overemphasising non-arranged romantic and matrimonial relationships, via a sagacious character Grandmother Jia (Zhang 2012) (Example (1)).

(1) 开口都是乡绅门第, 父亲不是尚书, 就是宰相。一个小姐, 必是爱如珍宝。这小姐必是通文知礼, 无所不晓, 竟是“绝代佳人”, 只见了一个清俊男人, 不管是亲是友, 想起他的终身大事来, 父母也忘了, 书也忘了, 鬼不成鬼, 贼不成贼, 那一点儿像个佳人? 就是满腹文章, 做出这样事来, 也算不得是佳人了。比如一个男人家, 满腹的文章, 去做贼, 难道那王法看他是个才子就不入贼情一案了不成?
Kai kou dou shi xiang shen men di, fu qin bu shi shang shu, jiu shi zai xiang. Yi ge xiao jie, bi shi ai ru zhen bao.

Zhe xiao jie bi shi tong wen zhi li, wu suo bu xiao, jing shi ‘jue dai jia ren’, zhi jian le yi ge qing jun nan ren, bu guan shi qin shi you, xiang qi ta de zhong shen da shi lai, fu mu ye wang le, shu ye wang le, gui bu cheng gui, zei bu cheng zei, na yi dian er xiang ge jia ren? Jiu shi man fu wen zhang, zuo chu zhe yang shi lai, ye suan bu de shi jia ren le. Bi ru yi ge nan ren jia, man fu de wen zhang, qu zuo zei, nan dao na wang fa kan ta shi ge cai zi jiu bu ru zei qing yi an le bu cheng?

‘Invariably, we are told how well-born they are. Their father has been a Prime Minister or a First Secretary at the very least. They are always their father’s only child and the apple of his eye. They are always amazingly well-educated, a model of decorum, a regular paragon of all the virtues—that is, until the first presentable young man comes along. As soon as he appears on the scene—it doesn’t matter who or what he is—all their book-learning and the duty they owe their parents fly out of the window and the next moment they are “making their plans for the future” and generally carrying on in a way that would bring blushes to the cheek of a cat-burglar—certainly not in the least like respectable, educated young ladies. You would hardly call a young woman who conducted herself like that a “paragon”, however many books she might have read—any more than you would acquit a young fellow charged with highway robbery on the grounds that he was a good scholar.’

(*Hong Lou Meng*. Chapter 54. Trans. Hawkes 1973)

Caizi-jiaren ‘scholar-beauty’ fiction serves as a terminology of multiple connotations, epitomising masculine, and feminine ideals in literary representations of heterosexual love, courtship, and sexuality in pre-modern China, in which the heroes are portrayed as fragile scholars indicating a cultural discourse and self-representation of Confucian literati based on their social and political anxiety and narcissism (Song 2004: 19, 41). *Caizi-jiaren* fiction prominently appeared in the 17th century. However, extant records can be attested in anecdotes regarding the love affair between Sima Xiangru (179-117BC) and Zhuo Wenjun (150-115BC) of the Han (202BC-220AD) dynasty and 莺莺传 *Yingying Zhuan* ‘The Biography of Yingying’

in the Tang (618-907) dynasty (Huang 2001: 206). As illuminated by the name, *cai* ‘literary talent’ is the defining property of *caizi*; the other indispensable component of *caizi* is *qing* which entails sensibility and subversiveness (Song 2004: 3, 104), so *caizi-jiaren* fiction highlights romantic elements, e.g. celebration of poetic talent, secret rendezvous between lovers in rear gardens, the adamant pursuit of happiness albeit hindrances, etc. (Huang 2003).

Contemporary *danmei* literature, in stark contrast to the Western slash marked by versatility (Xiao 2018), tends to demonstrate a patent, non-reversible bipartite dichotomy between 攻 *gong* ‘seme’ (top; insertive) and 受 *shou* ‘uke’ (bottom; receptive) roles, rather than the so-called 互攻 *hugong* ‘versatile’ mode, partially owing to the aesthetics and conventions of Japanese BL products (Yang and Xu 2017b). Such a conspicuous seme-uke dyad defines the seme as the dominant penetrator. However, as the passive receiver, the uke is prone to display physically and emotionally feminine stereotypes, so it is anathematised to reproduce the patriarchal gender hierarchy (Pagliassotti 2010, Zhang 2016) and comply with a heteronormative frame (Zhao and Madill 2018).

Danmei narratives featured by a well-defined top-bottom discrepancy frequently adopt a strong seme × weak uke bipartite dichotomy, in which the uke characters are fundamentally *jiaren*-like, comprising a heterosexual *cai-jiaren* pattern with the semes. In *danmei* fandom, enfeebled and feminised ukes are affectionately referred to as 娘(炮)受 *niang(pao) shou* ‘sissy ukes’, who are stereotypically paired with virile semes labelled as 强攻 *qiang gong* ‘strong seme’ or 流氓攻 *liumang gong* ‘hooligan seme’, as in novels 樱桃树下 *Yingtao Shu Xia* ‘Under the Cherry Tree’ and 精英攻和伪娘受的故事 *Jingyinggong He Weiniangshoude Gushi* ‘Story between an Elite Seme and a Fake-Girl Uke’. For instance, in 娘娘腔 *Niangniangqiang* ‘Nancy’, the characterisation of the seme and that of the uke are discrepant, as in Example (2) and (3) respectively.

(2) 他想起了第一次见到邵群时的场景, 那时候邵群看上去就是一个高贵优雅的小王子。后来才知道邵群除

了那层骗人的皮囊外, 实际上根本是个不折不扣的小流氓, 什么打架斗殴聚众闹事欺负老师同学的事他都掺和。

Ta xiang qi le di yi ci jian dao shao qun shi de chang jing, na shi hou shao qun kan shang qu jiu shi yi ge gao gui

you ya de xiao wang zi. Hou lai cai zhi dao shao qun chu le na ceng pian ren de pi nang wai, shi ji shang gen

ben shi ge bu zhe bu kou de xiao liu mang, shen me da jia dou ou ju zhong nao shi qi fu lao shi tong xue de shi ta

dou chan huo.

'He recalled his first impression of Shao Qun, who looked like a noble, elegant little prince. Then he found himself deceived by Shao Qun's looks: he was an absolute hooligan initiating all sorts of troubles like fighting, bullying fellow students and hectoring teachers.'
(*Niangniangqiang*. Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

(3) 一个年近三十的男人, 瘦弱得跟高中生似的, 怎么形容呢, 就是弱不禁风。一个男人啊, 让人觉得弱不禁风, 还有救吗。这也就是了, 讲话声儿小得让人恨不得给他嘴上安个喇叭, 一副低眉顺眼的娘们儿样, 就这样, 穿个裙子走出八里地, 都不带有人看出不对劲儿的。他知道他们酒店有些年轻的小工, 爱背地里学他说话和走路姿势, 还要额外配个兰花指吊吊眉角什么的。
Yi ge nian jin san shi de nan ren, shou ruo de gen gao zhong sheng shi de, zen me xing rong ne, jiu shi ruo bu jin feng. Yi ge nan ren a, rang ren jue de ruo bu jin feng, hai you jiu ma. Zhe ye jiu suan le, jiang hua sheng er xiao de rang ren hen bu de gei ta zui shang an ge la ba, yi fu di mei shun yan de niang men er yang, jiu zhe yang de, chuan ge qun zi zou chu ba li di, dou bu dai you ren kan chu bu dui jin er de. Ta zhi dao ta men jiu dian you xie nian qing de xiao gong, ai bei di li xue ta shuo hua he zou lu zi shi, hai yao e wai pei ge lan hua zhi diao diao mei jiao shen me de.
'He was in his late twenties yet still as scrawny as a teenager. The word "emaciated" could best describe him—he was so frail that he could be knocked down by a puff of breath. Wasn't this "man" hopeless! Worse still, others wished to install an amplifier on him in order to hear his murmur. He was such a meek sissy that even if he walked in a skirt for miles, nobody would notice anything wrong. Some young kitchen staff enjoyed mimicking the way he spoke and walked behind his back, and they always exaggerated by crooking little fingers and making eyes.'
(*Niangniangqiang*. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

Apart from the heterosexual essence, the similitude between *caizi-jiaren* and *danmei* also lies in their analogous theme and plots. Although early in the 18th century, Cao Xueqin disdained the overemphasis on love in *caizi-jiaren* romances, some modern *danmei* novels may still treat romance as the sole theme. Given the fact that *danmei* fiction enables readers to identify with the uke role, in this sense, *danmei* tales bear resemblance to 爽文 *shuangwen* 'feel-good writing' that enhances reading enjoyment by means of unrealistic storylines and depictions. To be more specific, although being female-oriented, some *danmei* products are parallel to male-authored, blatantly-presented and Web-based fantasies that are unflatteringly coined as 种马文 *zhongma* 'stud fiction' (Feng 2013: 10). Male protagonists in time-travel 'stud fiction' are always blessed by an authorial 金手指 *jin shou zhi* 'golden finger' to conquer

the past with modern technologies and reverse history completely; more importantly, these heroes possess stud-like virile prowess to obtain numerous beautiful women simultaneously, and hence the name of this subcategory of writing (Feng 2013: 38, 93). As a consequence of this common attribute, some Chinese Internet novels are nicknamed YY 小说 *YY xiaoshuo* ‘YY fiction’, in which YY denotes 意淫 *yiyin* ‘lust of the mind’, viz. explicit exploration of mental lascivious fulfilment (Chao 2012: 225, Hockx 2015: 112).

Feminisation in Classical literature and *danmei*

In late-imperial Chinese literature during late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, works depicting heterosexual relationships, including both romantic and historical novels (Wu 2003), are replete with an androgynous ideal concerning heroes with a feminised appearance (Louie 1999, Louie and Edwards 1994, Hodge and Louie 1998:129-130). For instance, the typical feminised image of *caizi* in Ming-Qing fiction is marked by ‘rosy lips, sparkling white teeth, jasper-like face’, embodying conventional aesthetics of males; although the effeminacy of *caizi* is not attributed to homosexuality, it indeed encapsulates social tolerance towards homosexuality and the lack of homophobic discourse in traditional China, so the fragility of scholars does not undermine the gender order (Song 2004: 125-126). Similarly, in a late Ming erotic tale highlighting graphic sexual depictions and valorisation of feminised males, 浪史 *Langshi* ‘Tales from a Life of Indulgence’, the lascivious seducer’s feminised demeanour acts as irresistible attractiveness to both experienced women and innocent maidens: ‘[a]s her ladyship gazed upon Langzi she found him to be just like a beautiful woman, sporting an ivory complexion and fine features, returning her look with a dreamy smile. Uncontrollable passions flooded over her’ (Wu 2003: 22).

The orthodox, indigenous Chinese masculine ideal is constituted of two facets, viz. 文 *wen* ‘cultural attainment’ signifying feminine traits, and 武 *wu* ‘martial valour’ signifying masculine traits (Louie 2002), with the former deemed as the embodiment of power and privilege, and hence superior to the latter (Louie 2000, 2014). The civil *wen* is inextricably intertwined with Confucian masculinity and its creed of 君子 *junzi* ‘gentleman’ (Louie 1991, 2003), and the preponderance of *wen* can be reflected by epicene, fragile 才子 *caizi* ‘scholars’ and 文人 *wenren* ‘literati’ epitomising exemplary masculinity in premodern China (Song 2004: 157-158, Louie 2013, 2014).

In contemporary China, the restructured masculine ideal subtly yet preponderantly departs from the orthodox zeitgeist, thereby becoming more ‘softened’ and feminised (Louie 2000, 2012). The ‘soft’ masculinity functions as a novel form of male aesthetics and trend of ‘consumption of sexualised men’ under the female gaze (Hu 2017, Zhou 2017, Li 2020). Impinged upon by media and industry promulgating a gender ambiguous popular culture, Chinese adolescents adore 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* ‘little fresh meat’, viz. effeminate-looking, delicate-featured and makeup-clad youthful male idols (Buchenbacher 2018, Keegan 2018, Gao 2019), whose emergence and popularity indicate the increasing (purchase) power of women and consumerism (Jung 2009, 2011: 39, Zhang and Negus 2020). In *danmei* fiction, both seme and uke characters are conventionally featured by androgyny and effeminacy. For instance, in 鬓边不是海棠红 *Binbian Bushi Haitanghong* ‘Begonias on Sideburns’ themed on Peking Opera, the feminised seme and uke are depicted in Example (4) and (5) respectively.

(4) 秀眉俊目的一张瘦长脸儿, 奶白的肤色, 睫毛太长太浓, 显得有些脂粉气。

Xiu mei jun mu di yi zhang shou chang lian er, nai bai de fu se, jie mao tai chang tai nong, xian de you xie zhi fen qi.

‘He had a diamond-shaped, delicate-featured face with stunning eyes and eyebrows. The eyelashes were too long and too thick, rendering this fair-skinned young man somehow feminine.’

(*Binbian Bushi Haitanghong*. Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

(5) 商细蕊跟个姑娘似的娇娇柔柔弱弱不禁风。

Shang xi rui gen ge gu niang shi de jiao jiao rou rou ruo bu jin feng.

‘Shang Xirui was as feeble as a delicate girl who could not even stand a gentle breeze.’ (*Binbian Bushi Haitanghong*. Chapter 5. Trans. Mine)

There is no denying the fact that in vernacular fiction of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, there are male protagonists who are 文武双全 *wenwu shuangquan* ‘distinguished in both literary and military arts’ (Huang 2003). In *danmei* literature, since the tale naturally contains two male protagonists, it is also common to divide the *wen-wu* dyad by depicting a masculine seme encapsulating *wu* and a feminine uke encapsulating *wen*. For instance, in detective novels *SCI 谜案集* *SCI Mianji* ‘Collection of Cases from Special Criminal Investigation’ and 犯罪心理 *Fanzui Xinli* ‘Criminal Psychology’, both authors make the *wu* semes policemen while the *wen* ukes psychologists; in Feitianyexiang’s historical stories such as 鹰奴 *Yingnu* ‘Eagle Slave’ and 相见欢 *Xiangjianhuan* ‘Ecstasy of Encounters’, the semes are routinely equipped with martial arts, while the ukes are analogous to fragile *caizi* with intellectual aptitude. Nonetheless, according to Li (2017), the masculinity of heroes in

Classical and modern literature lies in their spirit, yet *danmei* literature places an emphasis on visual aesthetics.

Yanqing vs danmei

In late Qing, the traditional *caizi-jiaren* genre evolved into 鸳鸯蝴蝶派 *yuanyang hudie pai* ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School’ that narrates sentimental stories pertaining to unfulfilled romantic encounters with bad endings and sorrowful, bitter, miserable, wronged or chaste love (Link 1977: 22, 332-333, Chow 1991: 51, Tan 2016). Despite the censure accompanied by the May Fourth Movement, ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ had sustained popularity for decades in multimedia forms (Hsia 1982, Chow 1986, 1991: 36-38) and contributed to Chinese popular literature (Li 2012).

In the modern age, *caizi-jiaren* romance has been rejuvenated into 言情 *yanqing* ‘romance’ since China’s economic reforms in the 1980s, represented by works of a phenomenal writer 琼瑶 Qiongyao (Chao 2012: 159, Hockx 2015: 112). Qiongyao (1938-) is an illustrious mainland-born Taiwan romance writer who is acclaimed as the ‘Queen of Romance’ and reigned the Chinese popular romance field for over three decades. Although her writing attracted legions of fans in the 1980s and 1990s and her works are still adapted for television serials and films, Qiongyao has been consistently ridiculed and disdained by critics, peer writers, outspoken readers and scholars of modern literature (Lee 1980: 25, Nielsen 2000, Lang 2003). Moreover, in the current cyberspace, Qiongyao is overwhelmingly castigated in moralistic discourses by Chinese women for her melodramatic narrative style, glorification of extramarital affairs and authorial misguidance deviant from traditional Chinese values; her heroines are also anathematised for feigning vulnerability and naivety and ingratiating themselves with patriarchal power in order to monopolise resources (Feng 2013: 7-10). In online fandom, the terminology *yanqing* can be substituted by a neologism BG (boy-girl) to denote heterosexual-oriented literature within a heteronormative and patriarchal frame.

The terminology ‘Mary Sue’ is deployed by producers and consumers of fanfiction to pejoratively denote idealised and flawless female fictional characters of beauty, power and courage (Pflieger 1999, Chander and Sunder 2007), which is perceived to be thinly disguised versions of authors’ idealised self and narcissism (Smith 1973, Collins 2018: 19). Although ‘Mary Sue’ has been adopted and transliterated into 玛丽苏 *malisu* since the advent of the 21st century, this terminology has been Sinicised in China’s Internet literature market, in that it more

pertains to *yanqing*, rather than fanfiction; more importantly, ‘Mary Sue’ elements are not imported, as they can be attested in indigenous works such as those composed by Qiongyao (Sun and Shi 2016, Zheng 2017). Chinese ‘Mary Sue’ textual and audio-visual works are characterised by claimed feminist thinking (Liu 2018), in that heroines’ attainment of success, fortune and status is fundamentally bestowed by heroes and supporting roles, all of whom adore heroines (Zheng 2017) and are disposed to sacrifice themselves so as to protect or facilitate the heroines (Zhang 2015, Liu 2017). Moreover, Chinese ‘Mary Sue’ intensifies the stigma and repression imposed on women by the patriarchal system through promulgating idealised femininity or an enriched image of ‘Cinderella’ (Wang 2017), and it links women’s independence with their obligation to attract men and obtain love (Sun and Shi 2016).

The phenomenal 2015 TV serial 琅琊榜 *Langyabang* ‘Nirvana in Fire’ was initially published as a *danmei* narrative and later converted into a historical one with heterosexual romance; since the protagonist was initially designed as a uke, the novel has been treated as a male version of a ‘Mary Sue’ story, viz. 杰克苏 *jiekesu* ‘Gary Stu’ (Guan 2016, Wang 2017). In *danmei* fiction with a ‘Gary Stu’ pattern, in order for protagonists and deuteragonists to fall in love with each other at first sight or to charm other characters, they are equipped with stunning appearance, as in 势不可挡 *Shibukedang* ‘Invincible’ and 睡我上铺的男神 *Shui Woshangpude Nansheng* ‘The Prince Charming Sleeping on the Top Bunk of My Bed’; the attractiveness of heroes is also embodied by their multiple suitors, as in 不死者 *Busizhe* ‘The Immortal’ and 乱世为王 *Luanshi Weiwang* ‘The King of Turbulent Times’. Furthermore, an updated characterisation can be summarised by a neologism 高富帅 *gao fu shuai* ‘tall, rich, handsome’, as in 图灵密码 *Tuling Mima* ‘Turing’s Code’, 默读 *Modu* ‘Subvocalisation’ and 残次品 *Cancipin* ‘Defective Products’. Furthermore, to stress the profoundness of love, *danmei* characters may unwaveringly wait for decades in an immortality cultivation setting, as in 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* ‘Grandmaster of the Fiend Dao’ and 阴客 *Yinke* ‘The Underworld’.

Furthermore, online *yanqing* tales marked by ‘Mary Sue’ attributes are chastised by the mainstream literature for being ‘vulgar’ by virtue of the clichéd storyline of 霸道总裁爱上我 *badao zongcai aishang wo* ‘a domineering boss falls in love with me’, which may deploy other occupations such as doctors, professors and army officers yet still adopt the same nature as feel-good writing (Wu and Zhang 2018). Similarly, *danmei* fiction is replete with such a ‘domineering boss’ pattern, as in 总裁酷帅狂霸拽 *Zongcai Ku Shuai Kuang Ba Zhuai* ‘The

Cool, Handsome, Arrogant and Domineering Boss’, 总裁和他的秘书 *Zongcai He Tade Mishu* ‘The Boss and His Secretary’, 写实派玛丽苏 *Xieshipai Malisu* ‘Realistic Mary Sue’, etc. Additionally, ‘Mary Sue’ *yangqing* and ‘Gary Stu’ *danmei* share other similitudes.

- (1) In both types of Internet literature, characters featured by 美强惨 *mei qiang can* ‘beautiful, powerful, pitiful’ are comprehensively embraced by readers. In Chinese fandom, devotees’ overwhelming passion for celebrities is attributed to a construal of their idols being *mei qiang can*: fans believe that idols are blessed with outstanding appearance and talent, i.e. ‘beautiful’ and ‘powerful’, whereas they are exploited by the avaricious show business and besmirched by abhorrent competitors and their fanbases, thus being ‘pitiful’. As a consequence, fans have established a quasi-sufferer-martyr relation with stars in a religious mode (Xie and Zhang 2020). Similarly, in *yangqing* and *danmei* fiction, protagonists are frequently portrayed as being *mei qiang can*, thereby attracting fan readership, as in a *danmei* novel 反派他过分美丽 *Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili* ‘The Antagonist is Excessively Beautiful’ and its sequel 全道门都欠我一个人情 *Quandaomen Dou Qianwo Yige Renqing* ‘The Entire Taoist Cultivation World Owes Me’.
- (2) Parallel to *yangqing*, *danmei* fiction tends to emphasise 双洁 *shuangjie* ‘both purity’, an Internet neologism coined to refer to the chasteness of both partners in hetero- or homosexual relationships. On Jinjiang, if some and/or uke protagonists have sexual encounters with other people, in the 文案 *wenan* ‘introductory/summary page’ authors may choose to post warnings, and such an act is metaphorically referred to as 避雷 *pailei* ‘to clear mines’. For instance, in 一生锦衣 *Yisheng Jinyi* ‘Lifelong Sumptuous Clothing’, the author warns readers that 双不洁, 慎点 *shuangbujie, shendian* ‘neither protagonist is chaste; think twice before reading’; in 无路可退 *Wulu Ketui* ‘No Way Back’, the warning is as explicit as 小受菊不洁 *xiaoshou ju bujie* ‘uke’s anus is unchaste’. I postulate that one of the reasons accounting for fan readers’ preference for *shuangjie* characterisation lies in their age. In China’s cyberspace, 38.2% of netizens are under the age of 30, and 18.3% of them are under 20 (China Internet Network Information Centre 2020); in the online *danmei* community, fans below the age of 22 amounted to 78.43% of the entire readership in 2016, and 82.35% of fans started consuming *danmei* fiction before 18 years old (Zheng 2017). To accommodate young readers with relatively less sexual/life experience, *danmei* narratives with modern settings need to justify the fact that those attractive protagonists in their twenties or even thirties are still void of sexual and/or love experience: in a detective novel 破云 *Po Yun* ‘Breaking Clouds’ and its sequel 吞海 *Tun Hai* ‘Swallowing Oceans’, the explanations are designed to be busy work, undercover duties and determined revenge. In campus narratives, since protagonists are younger, readers’ *shuangjie* preference is easier to be satisfied, as in 过门

Guomen ‘Passing the Gate’ and 狼行成双 *Langxing Chengshuang* ‘A Pair of Wolves’.

- (3) Analogous to *yanqing*, *danmei* writing abounds in the so-called storyline of 追妻火葬场 *zhuiqi huozangchang* ‘chasing the wife to the crematorium’, which is an Internet neologism indicating the clichéd plot that the hero/semi initially ignores or hurts the feelings of the heroine/uke and later strives to win the latter’s heart back. In these *danmei* works, callous semes are labelled as 渣攻 *zhagong* ‘bastard seme’, represented by the contentious series novels nicknamed ‘188cm band’ by 水千丞 *Shuiqiancheng*, in which most semes emotionally and physically abuse the ukes yet eventually realise their love and have happy endings.

Owing to the homosexual nature, plots appearing in *yanqing* stories such as social acceptance, marriage and childbearing might not always be applicable in *danmei* narratives. *Danmei* writers, however, still manage to create plots that accord with the heterosexual framework. In contemporary China, most people hold conservative attitudes towards homosexuality: according to data from the Chinese General Social Surveys 2013, approximately 78.53% of the respondents deemed seme-sex sexual intercourse wrong (Xie and Peng 2018). Therefore, in *danmei* writings with a modern setting, writers tend to create orphan protagonists, thereby circumnavigating the hindrance from parents, as in 大哥 *Dage* ‘Elder Brother’ and 山河表里 *Shanhe Biaoli* ‘Mountains and Rivers’. Additionally, pregnancy or childbearing is portrayed in period and modern *yanqing* fiction to manifest the completeness of a patriarchal family with male heirs, and such depiction also occurs in a *danmei* subgenre dubbed as 生子文 *shengzi wen* ‘childbirth writing’ that features male pregnancy and childbearing and is increasingly visible on Jinjiang and online discussion forums (Tian 2015). Uke’s pregnancy and childbirth appear not only in stories with an omegaverse (aka ABO) setting that surrealistically concerns blurred biological roles, but also in fantasy, time travel and ‘realistic’ contexts, exemplified by 穿成 Omega 后发现自己怀孕了 *Chuancheng Omega Hou Faxian Ziji Huaiyunle* ‘Becoming a Pregnant Omega After Time Travel’, 提灯映桃花 *Tideng Ying Taohua* ‘Peach Blooms Illuminated by a Lamp’, 怀了豪门老男人的崽 *Huaile Haomen Laonanrende Zai* ‘Pregnant with a Rich Old Man’s Baby’, etc. Alternatively, *danmei* partners are depicted to comply with the heteronormative norms and patriarchal structure via surrogacy (as in 离婚 *Lihun* ‘Divorce’) or adoption (as in 乱世为王 *Luanshi Weiwang* ‘King of Turbulent Times’), and there may be substitutes for offspring, such as pets (as in 死亡万花筒 *Siwang Wanhuatong* ‘Kaleidoscope of Death’), cultivation apprentices (as in 六爻 *Liuyao* ‘Hexagram’),

supernatural beings (as in 我五行缺你 *Wo Wuxing Que Ni* ‘You Are Missing From My Five Elements’), etc.

CONCLUSION

Danmei genre falls under the category of internet literature, yet it bears a resemblance to classical literature. The patent, non-reversible bipartite seme-uke dichotomy in *danmei* narratives coincides with the masculinity-femininity dyad and heteronormative norms indicated in *caizi-jiaren* anecdotes. Moreover, the fragile scholars in *caizi-jiaren* romances demonstrate androgynous demeanour, parallel to feminised *danmei* characters and the ‘soft’ masculinity prevailing in contemporary China. In terms of fiction of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in which male protagonists are equipped with both *wen* and *wu* attributes, it is analogous to *danmei*, in that the *wen-wu* dyad is divided into a masculine seme embodying *wu* and a feminine uke embodying *wen*.

In the field of popular romance, *danmei* bears similitude with *yanqing*, though the latter pertains to heterosexuality and complies with a heteronormative and patriarchal frame. In particular, *danmei* fiction, similar to its *yanqing* counterpart, abounds in cliché-ridden storylines and depictions as well as ‘Mary Sue’ and ‘Gary Stu’. Apart from idealised masculinity and homoerotic intimacy, *danmei* narratives frequently enable protagonists to possess chasteness and ‘beautiful, powerful, and pitiful’ properties and deploy clichéd plots of ‘chasing the wife (uke) to the crematorium’. Additionally, *danmei* is on a par with *yanqing* in terms of depictions manifesting the completeness of a patriarchal family with male heirs through substitutes for offspring or the ‘childbirth writing’ subgenre entailing male pregnancy.

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