

# ***‘Rotten’ Boy Readers of Danmei Fiction: Masculinity and Escapism***

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## **Abstract**

In contemporary China, *danmei*, aka Boys Love, has evolved into a literary genre and subculture with legions of fan producers and consumers, the vast majority of whom are presumed to be heterosexual adolescent girls and youthful women referred to as ‘rotten’ girls, yet the male ‘rotten’ readership of *danmei* fiction tend to be overlooked. Given the fact that Chinese *danmei* narratives are prominently featured by a non-reversible seme (top) × uke (bottom) bipartite dichotomy, I propound that fanboys may either identify with the seme or uke role. The identification with virile seme characters, whose penetrated partners are enfeebled, accords with an orthodox masculine ideal, as manifested by Classical literature and the web-based ‘stud fiction’ and ‘feel-good writing’. When identifying with uke characters, *danmei* fanboys can still comply with the indigenous Chinese masculine ideal, in that it is constituted of two interwoven components, viz. *wen* embodying feminine attributes and *wu* embodying masculine attributes. Literati during the Wei and Jin dynasties and Northern and Southern dynasties resort to androgynous demeanour so as to escape from the status quo and social responsibilities. Similarly, *danmei* readers may identify with ukes and seek a sense of security and protection from the potent, invincible semes in a fictional world, thereby mitigating the social pressure in the real world.

**Keywords:** *Danmei*, ‘rotten’ boys, seme-uke dichotomy, masculine ideal, wen-wu dyad, escapism

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## Introduction

In contemporary Chinese literature, there is a marginalised genre dubbed as 耽美 *danmei* 'indulgence in beauty; addicted to beauty' featuring male-male same-sex romance and homoeroticism between pubescent boys and youthful men (Chao 2016, Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Zhang 2016), which permeated a niche market in mainland China during 1990s (Liu 2009, Yang and Bao 2012, Zhu and Zhang 2015). As female-oriented, gender-inflected fantasies, *danmei* fiction equips readers with aspirations for aesthetics, voyeurism, gender equality, as well as escape from gender constraints and traditional gender norms and zeitgeist (Chou 2010, Zhang 2016, Lilja and Washhede 2017). Moreover, *danmei* literature enables readers to delight in male characters' aberrant, 'transgressive' conduct and sexual ecstasy (Nagaike 2003, 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015), and to mitigate negative self-image induced by gender-related anxiety via fictionally constructed masculinity and expression of repressed sensual desire (McLelland 1999, Wood 2006, Kamm 2013, Zsila and Demetrovics 2017).

The *danmei* genre, therefore, has attained a quintessential status as an 'oppositional discourse' deviant from its orthodox counterparts and conventional cultural institutions, rendering *danmei* a subculture of ever-growing visibility (Martin 1986: 44-45, Wei 2008, Xu and Yang 2013). Despite the fact that owing to its homosexual essence and interconnection with obscenity (Suzuki 1998, Nagaike 2003, McLelland 2015), *danmei* is subject to stringent government censorship and surveillance from the party-state (Yi 2013, Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Wang 2019), the marginalised *danmei* subculture has still attracted legions of producers/consumers who are (self-)referred to as 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girl(s)' (Chao 2016, 2017). By virtue of the sensitivity of *danmei* content and the widely dispersed nature of its online communities, there is void of official data regarding the accurate size of *danmei* readership, whereas there has been a salient increased number of young female fans (Wei 2014, Zhang 2016).

In the field of slash, although a well-established conjecture about the average slash fan is being heterosexual and female (see Lichtenberg et al 1975: 222, Russ 1985, 2011, Penley 1992, Cicioni 1998, Jones 2002, Jenkins 2012: 191, among many others), the archetypical image of heterosexual women as fans fantasising male characters might be complicated (Salter and Blodgett 2017: 160) and has been evolving since the advent of Internet fandom (Hellekson and Busse 2014). Nonetheless, in Chinese *danmei* fandom, the vast majority of producers and consumers are still believed to be heterosexual females (Louie 2012, Yi 2013, Xu and Yang 2014, Zhou and Li 2016, Zeng 2017), accounting for 93% of the fanbase (Nanyang Siang Pau 2019), and adolescent girls and youthful women aged below 26 years old occupy 95% of the *funü* cohort (Wang 2018).

Additionally, Chinese ‘rotten’ girls are predominantly audiences, rather than creators, in that the latter identity entails sufficient time and literary aptitude (Wang 2011, Xu 2015), and all *danmei* producers have to write and publish under pseudonyms for self-protection (Xu and Yang 2013, Zeng 2017).

In sharp contrast to female *danmei* audiences who are in an overwhelming majority, male fans only occupy a trivial proportion. The leading and most illustrious female-oriented online platform for *danmei* literature is called 晋江文学城 *Jinjiang Wenxue Cheng* ‘Jinjiang Literature City’ (known as Jinjiang), which has been hosting a prodigious amount of (non-)fiction *danmei* writing since being launched in 2003 (Feng 2009, 2013, Xu and Yang 2013, 2014, Zheng 2019). The vast majority of Jinjiang’s registered users are female (Feng 2013, Zheng 2016, Guan 2017): according to latest statistics released in December 2020, among over 43,980,000 readers, 91% of them are female (Jinjiang Literature City 2020), and the percentage used to be 93% (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013, Wei 2014). Analogous to male readers, male *dannmei* writers also occupy a trivial minority, compared with their female counterparts (Zhao 2015).

In addition to literary websites exemplified by Jinjiang, the low profile and minority of ‘rotten’ boys is reflected by their status on social media platforms. For instance, in Baidu Tieba, a keyword-based forum service provided by a Chinese multinational technology corporation, there is a 腐女吧 *funü ba* ‘rotten girl forum’ which has attracted approximately 4,651,000 registered users and more than 100,000,000 posts by January 2021. However, its equivalent accommodating male fans, i.e. 落坑成腐男吧 *luokeng cheng funan ba* ‘falling into a pit and becoming a rotten boy forum’, has only 799 participants and 12,233 posts, and another one exclusively for *danmei* ACG (Anime, Comic and Games) fanboys named 动漫腐男吧 *dongman funan ba* ‘ACG rotten boy forum’ receives even less attention. Similarly, in the ‘Super Topic’ discussion board function offered by Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like micro-blogging social network with 550 million monthly active users (Lai 2020), a dedicated 腐女大本营 *funü dabenyong* ‘base camp of rotten girls’ has hosted 44,000 visits and 2,651 posts, yet there is lack of any corresponding page for ‘rotten’ boys. On Zhihu, a Chinese socialised Q&A website parallel to Quora, there are 21,423 followers and 7,337 questions under the tag *funü*; the *funan* cohort, however, has no dedicated tag, and there are only 29 questions addressing or merely pertaining to ‘rotten’ boys.

Therefore, in this paper I explore the marginalised cohort of ‘rotten’ boys in the already marginalised *danmei* subculture, who are in an absolute minority and hence are overlooked and under-analysed.

## **Fanboys of Japanese BL and Chinese *danmei***

*Danmei* is the equivalent of the Japanese Boys Love (aka BL) that is constituted of commercial and fan-created, textual and visual materials in the form of fiction and ACG (McLelland 2009, 2017, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2015). Japanese *shōnen'ai* 'boys' love', also commonly known as *yaoi*, draws on the tradition of highly romanticised depiction regarding *bishonen* 'beautiful young men' in comics directed at young women, which first arose in Japan in the 1970s (Toku 2007, McLelland 1999, 2000, 2005, Fujimoto 2004, Galbraith 2015), and has dispersed mainland China since 1991 as imported cultural products (Liu 2009, Louie 2012, Feng 2013, Welker 2015). It is noteworthy that since BL characterisation simply signifies a third gender that is virtually irrelevant to male-male homosexuality (McLelland 2005), the gay activist Satō castigates that BL literature is detrimental to social tolerance towards homosexuality owing to distorted depictions and abnegation of characters' gay identity (Mizoguchi 2008: 179-182).

In Japanese BL subculture, a specific label *fudanshi* 'rotten boy' is deployed to denote self-identified heterosexual as well as gay and bisexual male audiences, who comprise a considerable proportion of BL audiences (Welker 2006, Hester 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). In terms of BL media consumption motives, there is no salient distinction regarding fans' gender (Zsila et al 2018). Particularly, a substantial number of heterosexual male viewers/readers declare an interest in BL, which indicates the escapist potential of BL texts in terms of bounds of conventional masculine identity and norms. That is to say, the fascination of *fudanshi* is not triggered by the sexual orientation of BL characters, but rather the freedom to express vulnerability and passivity, namely, the embodiment of qualities that have been traditionally gendered as feminine and hence been stigmatised when expressed by males (Yoshimoto 2008, 2010). Furthermore, heterosexual *fudanshi* demonstrates a subconscious psychological male intention to self-feminise via male consumers' identification with the images of seemingly homosexual men, thereby abnegating the socially imposed construal of a typical masculine ego (Nagaike 2015). Alternatively, *fudanshi* 'plays' with BL and its gender representation, so as to obtain entertainment or autonomous subjectivity in a non-patriarchal genre (Nagaike and Aoyama 2015).

An entertaining yet thought-provoking Japanese work concerning *fudanshi*'s practices, emotions and thoughts is Atami Michinoku's 2015 manga *Fudanshi Kōkō Seikatsu* 'Rotten Boys' High School Life' that has been adapted into TV anime; the protagonist is a Japanese schoolboy fascinated by BL romance and endeavouring to discover fellow fanboys to share his passion (Haley-Banez 2016, Loo 2016). In *Fudanshi Kōkō Seikatsu*, the *fudanshi* protagonist is dissatisfied

with the modifying/defining expression 女性向け ‘for women’ preceding BL (Episode 1 ‘The Daily Life of a *Fudanshi* High School Student’), but his mindset shares similitude with that of a *fujoshi* ‘rotten girl’: for instance, the *fudanshi* protagonist chooses to attend a mixed-gender school, because he perceives that male-male intimacy in boys’ schools is prone to be induced by lack of choice, rather than true love (Episode 2 ‘My Classmates’). This construal bears resemblance to a Chinese cyberspace motto that 异性恋是为了传宗接代, 同性恋才是真爱 *yixinglian shi weilie chuanzongjiedai, tongxinglian caishi zhenai* ‘heterosexuality is for reproduction, yet homosexuality is for love’,<sup>2</sup> which is frequently promulgated in ‘rotten’ communities and adopted as the chapter title of an online novel 王者老公: 老婆求别坑 *Wangzhe Laogong: Laopo Qiu Biekeng* ‘King Husband: Darling Please Don’t Hold Me Back’ (Chapter 925).

In terms of *funan* in Chinese *danmei*, they are substantially less active and visible compared with their female counterparts who have been nurturing a prosperous transnational literary industry (Wang 2011, Wei 2014, Xu 2015) and have established interactive online and offline communities (Xu and Yang 2014). According to my scrutiny of *luokeng cheng funan ba* ‘falling into a pit and becoming a rotten boy forum’, amongst the 12,233 posts, only less than 10% of them appertains to *danmei* works, whereas the remaining contents are predominantly constituted of advertisements and friend/partner-seeking posts, as well as occasional complaints about the unpopularity of this forum. Furthermore, as pointed out by Xu and Yang (2014), in dedicated Baidu forums exclusively for *funü*, there are heterosexual men who pretend to be ‘rotten’ and post their sexually suggestive selfies and photographs with their ‘boyfriends’, so as to seduce young girls intrigued by the ‘rotten’ allusions.

Apart from disparate fanbase demographic constitutions, another discrepancy between Chinese *danmei* and slash lies in the top-bottom dichotomy. In stark contrast to slash that is characterised by versatility (Xiao 2018), *danmei* manifests a preponderant and patent distinction between 攻 *gong* ‘seme’ (top; insertive) and 受 *shou* ‘uke’ (bottom; receptive) roles, impinged upon by the Japanese BL (Pagliassotti 2010, Zhang 2016, Yang and Xu 2017b), and the so-called 互攻 *hugong* ‘versatile’ pattern, which literally means ‘mutual seme’, are attested in an acute minority. For instance, on Jinjiang, there are over 149,000 narratives marked by a well-defined seme-uke chasm, yet only 14,579 works concern versatile protagonists. In terms of the size of readership, the most popular novel involving a clear top-bottom discrepancy is 天官赐福 *Tianguancifu* ‘Blessing from Heavenly Officials’, the chef-d’oeuvre of a renowned yet contentious contracted Jinjiang writer 墨香铜臭 *Moxiangtongxiu*, which has been ranking

<sup>2</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all extracts and fiction titles are translated by myself.

the highest on readers' voting list on Jinjiang since its release in 2017, and has received an average of 2,370,429 views per chapter and 1,930,241 comments by January 2021. In contrast, the most-read narrative with a *hugong* mode, viz. the celebrated 撒野 *Saye* 'Act Wildly' by another author pseudonymed 巫哲 Wuzhe, has only received 1,455,054 views per chapter on average and 418,970 comments in total.

Therefore, when investigating 'rotten' boys' mentality, I focus on fiction entailing a seme-uke bipartite dichotomy by analysing two circumstances: when 'rotten' boys are identifying with the seme role, and when they are identifying with the uke role.

### **Identifying with semes**

I postulate that identifying with the seme role does not contradict the heterosexual orientation of 'rotten' boys or impose psychological pressure regarding gender identification.

The embracement of male-male emotional and erotic bonds in traditional Chinese culture can be encapsulated both socially and biologically. The terminology 'homosexuality' is not employed here, in that this expression is non-indigenous and was adopted from Western sexology through Japanese translation (Sang 2003: 100-106). The long-standing tolerance towards male-male intimacy in imperial China was not devastated by the process of Westernisation until the Qing (1644-1912) era, during which the educated elite was impinged upon by Western sexual discourse and sexology notion (Hinsch 1990, Ruan 1991, Van Gulik 2002) as well as scientific determinism marginalising and pathologising non-reproductive sexuality (Dikotter 1995: 145, Kong 2016).

In traditional Chinese society, orthodox masculinity was regarded as societal and familial duties of establishing and maintaining matrimonial relationships, instead of sexual identity or orientation (Sommer 2002, Song 2004: 91, Kong 2016). That is to say, the orthodox sexual ideal in imperial China was constructed based on social hierarchies in a patriarchal system rather than homo-hetero binarism, so male-male same-sex sexuality was construed as well-established social, rather than erotic, relationships (Kong 2016), and manhood was perceived homosocially (Song 2004: 173). Biologically, conventional Chinese culture also held a neutral attitude towards male-male same-sex intimacy and carnality (Chou 2011, Wang 2011): traditional Chinese medicine did not treat homosexuality as a sexual perversion or sickness, and the traditional Taoist cosmology suggested that an individual was naturally an integration of both the feminine *yin* and the masculine *yang* (Furth 1988, Vitiello 1992), so the *yin/yang* framework functioned as a

gender matrix expounding the absence of homophobia in pre-modern Chinese culture (Song 2004: 59-60, 129-131).

These pivotal perceptions account for a fact that emotional bonds and sexual intercourse between men were comprehensively tolerated during numerous historical periods in pre-modern China (Ruan and Tsai 1987, Hinsch 1990, Ruan 1991, Louie 2002, 2012): according to 阅微草堂笔记 *Yuewei Caotang Biji* ‘Jottings from the Grass Hut for Examining Minutiae’ composed by an elite politician and philosopher Ji Yun (1724-1805) (Chan 1993, 1998: 8, Riegel 2010, Chang 2013), the extant record concerning the custom for men to have kept boys can be traced back to the iconic, semi-mythical emperor Huangdi circa 2700 BC; during historical periods such as the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), 40% of emperors had same-sex bondservants (Zhu and Zhang 2017). The pervasion of male-male love and homoeroticism can also be embodied by the existence of a myriad of relevant literary and slang terminologies, e.g. 断袖 *duanxiu* ‘cut sleeve’ (Hinsch 1990: 53, Gil 1992), 分桃 *fentaο* ‘share peach’ or 余桃 *yutao* ‘remaining peach’ (Wu 2003, Kong 2016), 男风 *nanfeng* ‘male trend’ (Vitiello 1992, Chou 2001), 龙阳之好 *longyang zhi hao* ‘passion of Longyang’ (Stevenson and Wu 2013: 13), etc.

That is to say, as long as the erotic acts abided by Confucian power hierarchies, family-kinship institutions and filial obligation of procreation (Volpp 2001, Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002, Kang 2009, Feng 2013), and men could refrain from excessive sexuality, male same-sex encounters and relations were not censured (Kong 2016).

More significantly, anal penetration between males accorded with classism and ageism (Sommer 1997), so men could sexually penetrate and dominate social inferiors of both genders as a manifestation of social superiority, without being subjected to stigma of homosexuality or bisexuality (Chou 2001). Therefore, epicene, youthful men of an inferior, subservient position, such as female impersonators of Peking Opera (Brook 1998: 231-233, Goldstein 2007: 39-40), fell prey to homoerotic carnality and lust of members of aristocratic and moneyed classes in feudal China (Van Gulik 2002, Song 2004, Wu 2004), but there was no deleterious effect on the morality or masculinity of men assuming the penetrator role—such audacious defiance against normative sexual norms even highlighted the elite status of the upper classes and escalated affluent literati amongst their peers (Brook 1998: 231-233, Goldstein 2007: 39-40, Kang 2009: 116).

As a consequence, when consuming *danmei* literature and identifying with the dominant seme, males are immune from apprehension or anxiety about their masculinity or superiority. In *danmei* fiction featured by a specific, non-reversible top-bottom dichotomy, (pubescent) uke characters are prone to be depicted as

being youthful, yet effeminate-looking and delicate-featured in a clichéd fashion. The seme protagonists, however, are typically characterised by virility and masculine demeanour, especially in writing composed by male authors. For instance, although male writers are in a trivial minority (Zhao 2015), there is an exemplary and prolific male *danmei* writer published under the pseudonym 非天夜翔 Feitianyexiang and arguably a few others, who is disposed to create characters demonstrating a higher degree of masculinity. To be more specific, the seme characterisation created by Feitianyexiang is frequently marked by 'stallion-like' sexuality including a tanned skin tone, bulging muscles, martial strength and indomitable personality, exemplified by novels 鹰奴 *Yingnu* 'Eagle Slave' (Chapter 1), 王子病的春天 *Wangzibingde Chuntian* 'Spring of Prince Syndrome' (Chapter 1) and 国家一级注册驱魔师上岗培训通知 *Guojia Yiji Zhuce Qumoshi Shanggang Peixun Tongzhi* 'Training Announcement of Level-One State Registered Exorcists' (Chapter 1). It is notable that Feitianyexiang's aesthetic preference for men's masculinity in terms of faces, bodies and personality traits accords with that of homosexual males in contemporary China (Zheng and Zheng 2015, 2016, Zheng et al 2016, Zheng 2019a), in contrast to Chinese heterosexual women who typically prefer feminised male faces (Liu and Wu 2016, Zheng 2019b).

Classical Chinese literature also abounds in depictions regarding feminised masculinity of men assuming a penetrated role in male-male anal sexual intercourse. Take the literary writing during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) era as an example: given the fact that in 1880, the literacy rate of Qing males was 30%-45%, while that of females was only 2%-10% (Rawski 1979: 23, Jin and Liu 2010: 155), it can be presumed that both the producers and consumers of fiction narrating male-male homoeroticism were predominantly male in the Ming and Qing dynasties. It is noteworthy that in these works, men assuming an insertive role in anal sexual encounters tend to have female partners simultaneously, rendering their masculinity unscathed.

Therefore, I propound that when identifying with a virile seme whose partner is enfeebled, feminised or androgynous, 'rotten' boys are consuming BG (boy-girl, viz. heterosexual-oriented) literature within a heteronormative and patriarchal frame. In *danmei* fandom, feminised ukes are affectionately referred to as 娘(炮)受 *niang(pao) shou* 'sissy uke' and paired with dominant semes labelled as 强攻 *qiang gong* 'strong/powerful seme' or 流氓攻 *liumang gong* 'hooligan seme', as in novels 樱桃树下 *Yingtao Shu Xia* 'Under the Cherry Tree', 娘娘腔 *Niangniangqiang* 'Nancy', 就是吃定你 *Jiushi Chiding Ni* 'Win You Over', 附加遗产 *Fujia Yichan* 'Added Inheritance', etc.

In a sense, this subcategory of *danmei* writing bears similitude with the unflatteringly-called 种马文 *zhongma wen* ‘stud fiction’, which, according to Feng (2013: 10), is male-authored, blatantly-presented and Web-based male fantasy. Male protagonists in ‘stud fiction’ are equipped with supreme prowess to reverse history and simultaneously attain numerous beautiful women (Feng 2013: 38); additionally, in time-travel ‘stud’ romances, male protagonists are blessed by an authorial 金手指 *jin shouzhi* ‘golden finger’ that enables them to conquer the past via modern technologies (Feng 2013: 93). I posit that fundamentally, both ‘stud fiction’ and *danmei* narratives exaggerating a strong-weak seme-uke dichotomy are male-oriented web 爽文 *shuangwen* ‘feel-good writing’ that encapsulates the conventional heteronormative system and patriarchal structure.

There are, of course, *danmei* works featured by a strong-strong seme-uke bipartite model, such as the fantasy-styled 提灯映桃花 *Tideng Ying Taohua* ‘Peach Blooms Illuminated by a Lamp’, the immorality cultivation tale 六爻 *Liuyao* ‘Hexagram’, the horror-themed 死亡万花筒 *Siwang Wanhuatong* ‘Kaleidoscope of Death’, the detective novel 破云 *Po Yun* ‘Breaking Clouds’ and its sequel 吞海 *Tun Hai* ‘Swallowing Oceans’, etc. In particular, in a zombie-themed narrative entitled 不死者 *Busizhe* ‘The Immortal’, the author adopts an omegaverse (aka ABO) setting that surrealistically entails blurred biological roles, yet the omega uke, who is supposed to be frail for being in the lowest position in the hierarchical system, demonstrates palpable physical and mental strength like alphas, rendering the alpha-omega pair-bond an atypical strong-strong one. I propound that when identifying with semes in *danmei* fiction marked by a strong-strong seme-uke pattern, male ‘rotten’ readers can perceive the dominance in a more intense manner, because to be the active partners of ukes who are already enriched by robust masculine attributes, ‘rotten’ readers can feel even more virile. Such a strong-strong mode is analogous to Radway’s (1984: 101, 125) finding on some heterosexual romances, in which heroines possess both independence and feminine characteristics and pursue partners of stereotypical masculinity (Chao 2016, Zhou et al 2018).

An escalated subcategory accommodating *funan*’s identification with virile seme characters is 年下 *nianxia*, which literally means ‘age below’ and denotes the younger age of semes. The label *nianxia* may unexpectedly overlap with incestuous narratives including 父子文 *fuzi wen* ‘father-son writing’ and 兄弟文 *xiongdì wen* ‘brother-brother writing’ that feature biological or adoptive relationships in both period and modern settings, e.g. 杀破狼 *Sha Po Lang* ‘Killing, Devastation, Wolf’, 大哥 *Dage* ‘Older Brother’ and 快穿之完美命运 *Kuaichuanzhi Wanmei Mingyun* ‘Perfect Destiny of Quick Time Travel’. In genres of immorality cultivation and *wuxia* ‘Chinese knighthood; martial chivalry’, partners of *nianxia* semes are frequently their senior apprentice-brothers and masters, as in 反派他

过分美丽 *Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili* 'The Villain is Excessively Beautiful' and 人渣反派自救系统 *Renzha Fanpai Ziji Xitong* 'Arch-Villain's Self-Rescue System'. These *nianxia* protagonists are supposed to occupy an inferior position in the social hierarchy, prescribed by ageism, but they manage to take an active role in male-male sexual intercourse, which subverts the homosocial system. The subversion, therefore, intensifies *funan*'s reading pleasure as an element of 'feel-good writing'.

### Identifying with ukes

In Japanese BL fandom, a considerable proportion of *fudanshi* exhibits a strong attachment to the penetrated uke role and an inclination to identify with the sexually passive uke (Yoshimoto 2010), which might be attributed to the fact that BL narratives predominantly adopt the perspective of uke protagonists (Nagakubo 2005). Essentially, such psychological sympathy towards and identification with uke characters illuminate a fundamentally playful attitude of *fudanshi* towards well-established gender conceptions, as well as their desire for self-feminisation. The self-feminisation desire is justified by the discourse on androgyny underlying *fudanshi*'s affection for BL products, in which most male characters are feminised, or rather, androgynous (Nagaike 2015).

Parallel to Japanese BL literature, *danmei* on Jinjiang is primarily constituted of works adopting a uke's perspective: among stories with specified narrative perspectives, there are approximately 100,000 of them adopting the perspective of ukes, whereas only 48,700 narratives are from the perspective of semes. I argue that when consuming *danmei* literature, Chinese 'rotten' boys may identify with uke characters, by virtue of the traditional masculine ideal and the 'soft masculinity' in the contemporary society.

Disparate from the Western ideology that differentiates masculinity from femininity as the inverse of each other, the orthodox, indigenous Chinese masculine ideal is constituted of two components, viz. 文 *wen* 'cultural attainment' encapsulating feminine properties, and 武 *wu* 'martial valour' encapsulating masculine properties (Louie 2002). These two masculine identities are not mutually exclusive, and are deemed superior to normative manhood (Hinsch 2013: 91). The *wen-wu* dyad illuminates that traditional Chinese culture prioritises *wen* (the mind) over *wu* (the body), so cultural attainment takes priority over physical prowess, and is construed as the embodiment of power and privilege (Louie 2014). Brutes with brawn but no *wen* are disdained as 'macho eunuchs' who are essentially impotent for failing to fulfil the ethos of Confucian masculinity (Louie 1991). The preponderance of *wen* is also reflected by Confucius, who, as the god of *wen*, has been serving as a potent epitome for complying with the Chinese creed

of 君子 *junzi* ‘gentleman’ for millennia (Louie 2003), as well as the terminology 文人 *wenren* ‘literati’ that is frequently interchangeable with that denoting government officials (Louie 2014). More importantly, since in both archaic and modern periods, the vast majority of literary writings are composed by *wenren*, ideals of masculinity can hence only be perceived from the perspective of the civil *wen* (Louie 2013). Consequently, effeminate, fragile 才子 *caizi* ‘scholars’ are regarded as the epitome of exemplary masculinity in pre-modern China, and Chinese masculinity is fundamentally constructed in a homosocial network, not with the opposite gender (Song 2004: 157-158). In the literary realm, feminised characters are also warmly received by an intellectual readership owing to an integration of a fashion for high aestheticism and a literati rejection of mainstream social conventions (Wu 2003).

In *danmei* literature, it is clichéd to divide the *wen-wu* combination by means of characterising a masculine seme representing *wu* and a feminine uke representing *wen*. For instance, both *SCI 谜案集* *SCI Mianji* ‘Special Criminal Investigation’ and *犯罪心理* *Fanzui Xinli* ‘Criminal Psychology’ portray a policeman seme and a psychologist uke; in period stories such as *乱世为王* *Luanshi Weiwang* ‘King of Turbulent Times’ and *相见欢* *Xiangjianhuan* ‘Ecstasy of Encounters’, the semes are analogous to *wuxia* heroes, while the ukes remind me of the traditional image of fragile, effeminate *caizi* ‘scholars’ who demonstrate *wen* ‘soft’ masculinity (Louie 2002: 59) and all eulogised masculine attributes in the literary discourse of ideal heterosexual love and courtship (Song 2004: 19-20). Given the long-existing embracement of *wen-wu* integration in masculinity, male *danmei* readers can delight in the identification of uke characters.

In contemporary China, although the restructured masculine ideal still manifests essential qualities of a *wen-wu* dyad, it is more ‘softened’ and feminised. The popular culture industry has produced icons with blurred gender boundaries across East Asia, inducing youth culture and media to accept an updated ideal of Chinese masculinity that departs from the orthodox norms subtly yet preponderantly (Louie 2012). Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *wen* has undergone reconstitution from scholastic learning to monetary power, and by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this transformation has become explicit (Louie 2000). In the post-Mao era under a global context, a Chinese ‘crisis of masculinity’ occurs accompanied by economic reform and opening up as well as productivist and consumerist values, which undermines the Confucian model of manhood and replaces the selfless and asexual Maoist revolutionary heroes (Song and Hird 2013: 8). Intrigued by the ‘soft’ masculinity as a new type of male aesthetics as well as a novel trend of ‘consumption of sexualised men’ via the female gaze (Hu 2017, Wang 2017, Zhou 2017, Li 2020), Chinese adolescent boys and girls are palpably impinged upon by the gender ambiguous pop culture and thus idolise

effeminate-looking, delicate-featured and makeup-clad youthful male stars who are collectively labelled as 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* 'little fresh meat' (Wu 2016, Buchenbacher 2018, Keegan 2018, Gao 2019). The emergence and popularity of 'little fresh meat' as a cannibalistic metaphor imbued with sexual innuendo signifies the increasing (purchase) power of women and consumerism (Jung 2009, 2011: 39, Louie 2012, Zhang and Negus 2020).

Therefore, given the well-established and long-existing embracement of the integration of *wen* and *wu* in traditional Chinese culture, as well as the tolerance towards 'soft' masculinity in the contemporary society, male readers can freely identify with the feminised uke role in *danmei* literature, without dreading their male identities or masculinity.

Furthermore, when identifying with ukes in *danmei* writing with a strong seme × weak uke dyad, *funan* audiences can easily, and maybe subconsciously, comply with Confucian societal and familial hierarchies. In the Chinese ethical system, the superiority-inferiority dichotomy underpins two of the three essential relationships, viz. emperor and subject, father and son, as well as husband and wife, in that even an emperor is in the son and subject role at puberty. Therefore, men marked by a soft, gentle and deferential disposition accord with social norms and hence are morally acceptable (Gu 2015, Zhao and Madill 2018). Under the palpable Confucian moral codes and precepts, 孝 *xiao* 'filial piety' functions as a pivotal virtue that encompasses material and emotional components of both parent-child and authority-subordination relationships, as well as social structures, ethical requirements and power dynamics (Yao 1995, Hwang 1999, Ikels 2004: 187-191, Larm 2012, Bedford and Yeh 2019, Van Norden 2019, Yeh and Bedford 2020). Apart from filial piety, the 'five constant human relationships' (五伦 *wu lun*) underpinning Confucian ethical teachings also entail another role-based virtue 悌 *ti* 'fraternal reverence; brotherly love' that prescribes veneration of elder brothers (Hsü 1970, Fang 2012, Harbsmeier 2015).

I postulate that the parallel between a malleable, subservient uke and an obedient son/younger brother lies in their submissive status in familial and societal hierarchies. The strong seme × weak uke mode may indeed overlap with a familial hierarchy: on Jinjiang, incestuous love stories account for approximately 6% of *danmei* works, which are predominantly comprised of father-son narratives theming on control, imprisonment, escape and final reconciliation. In these stories, potent fathers typically play the seme role and the fatherhood is sometimes explicitly equated to statehood, while the uke sons are impotent, possessing sex appeal as a substantial leverage (Xu and Yang 2013). Therefore, whether consciously or subconsciously, these young *funan* consumers indeed comply with the conventional Confucian values as filial sons and possibly also as fraternal younger brothers.

Additionally, identifying with ‘soft’, feminised uke characters enables *funan* readers to escape from reality, analogous to the literati during Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420) and Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589). This historical period is prominently renowned for aesthetic preference for men’s androgynous physical properties and deeds, including transvestism, remaining beardless, perfuming wardrobes, as well as wearing makeup, scented sachets (Zhu and Lu 2014, Chen 2017, Li 2017) and feminised clothing featured by extravagant styles, flamboyant colours and elaborate embellishments (Zhao 2015, Guo 2016, Wang and Li 2018). In a collection 世说新语 *Shishuo Xinyu* ‘Recent Anecdotes and the Talk of the Age’ recounting unrestrained conduct and illuminating cultural ideologies and social practices among the elite (Felt 2014, Sanders 2014), there is a dedicated chapter entitled 容止 *Rongzhi* expatiating gorgeous appearance and epicene demeanour. Among all thirty-nine anecdotes in this chapter, there are seventeen accounts adulating male personages’ androgynous attractiveness caused by their resemblance to women (Han 2004, Tang 2013, Xie 2017). The rationale behind the feminised aesthetic preference lies in scholars’ escapist mindset triggered by their incompetence in enhancing the status quo of the turbulent age. As a consequence of their frustration, those literati resort to the opposite gender role that is exempted from social responsibilities in feudal China, by means of adopting feminine qualities in a superficial fashion (Zhu and Lu 2014).

In contemporary China, youngsters, including both students and those in their early career, are plagued by social and peer pressure, as reflected by the ten Words of the Year 2020 released by 青年文摘 *Qingnian Wenzhan* ‘Youth Literary Digest’. Among the ten Internet ‘hot words’, five of them are directly correlated with the identity and hence the economic and psychological pressure of young Chinese people, viz. 打工人 *dagong ren* ‘gig person’, 尾款人 *weikuan ren* ‘balance payer’, 工具人 *gongju ren* ‘cat’s paw’, 后浪 *houlang* ‘Gen Z’, as well as 双节棍 *shuangjie gun* that literally means ‘nunchaku’ yet is a contracted neologism denoting one who is still a 光棍 *guanggun* ‘bachelor’ after the couple-oriented 双节 *huangjie* ‘double festivals’. Another listed ‘hot word’ appertaining to young people’s mental stress is 网抑云 *wangyi yun* which is a homophone of 网易云 *wangyi yun* ‘NetEase Cloud’, a music streaming service developed by NetEase, yet innovative netizens substitute the character 易 *yi* with its homophone 抑 *yi* ‘depression’, rendering the service ‘NetEase Depression Cloud’, so as to refer to the prodigious amount of sentimental and dismaying comments on the platform. Additionally, there are other 2020 words pertaining to (victimised) identities of young generations, such as 做题家 *zuoti jia* ‘person of (only) book smarts’, 社畜 *shechu* ‘corporate slave’ and the metaphorical 韭菜 *jiuca* ‘(reaped) chives’, as well as those reflecting their job anxieties, such as ‘996’ which denotes a working hour system requiring employees to work from 9am to 9pm for six days per week,

and its deteriorated version of '007'. Therefore, I posit that male readers may resort to *danmei* as 'feel-good writing' by identifying with uke characters who are exempted from overwhelming social responsibilities and can always seek a sense of security and protection from their invincible seme partners in the fictional world.

## Conclusion

Analogous to the Japanese BL subculture, Chinese *danmei* fandom is also predominantly comprised of 'rotten' girls, rendering 'rotten' boys in an acute minority. *Danmei* literature is prominently featured by a clearly-defined, non-reversible seme-uke dichotomy, so parallel to their female counterparts, male 'rotten' readers may either identify with the seme or uke role. The identification with virile seme characters in narratives concerning a strong seme × weak uke dyad is not deviant from an orthodox masculine ideal, which is embodied by depictions in Classical literature, so *funan* readers are immune from apprehension about their masculinity or superiority. On the contrary, it enables male *danmei* readers to attain enjoyment from consuming feminised or androgynous partners as a type of 'feel-good writing', especially if the relationship adopts a strong-strong mode, or falls under the subcategory of *nianxia*, viz. when the enfeebled uke partners are older and hence socially more superior. In terms of identifying with uke characters, it is compatible with the indigenous Chinese masculine ideal integrating the feminine facet of *wen* and the masculine facet of *wu*, which is also epitomised by the 'soft masculinity' in contemporary China; the identification also complies with the conventional Confucian hierarchies prescribing filial sons and fraternal younger brothers. More significantly, parallel to historical literati promulgating androgyny by superficially imitating the gender that is exempted from social responsibilities, *funan* readers may identify with the uke characters, attributed to an escapist mentality in face of social pressure, thereby seeking a sense of security and protection from the potent, invincible semes in a fictional world.

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