

Boys Love (Danmei) Fiction: A Critical Content Analysis of Heteronormativity and
Performativity

By

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ABSTRACT

Danmei is a Chinese fiction genre depicting male-male romance and erotica that is widely accessible across the internet (Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2021; Yu, 2021). Researchers are divided on whether the Danmei genre is a form of women's empowerment (Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2021; Zhang, 2017; Yu, 2021), queer literature (Ge, 2021), or a combination of both (Zhou, Bryant & Sherman, 2018). This research explores and analyzes aspects of heteronormative standards as well as deviations from traditional Chinese gender norms within the male-male romance depicted within these novels. This research is significant due to the current negative social climate within Mainland China regarding the LGBTQ+ community despite Danmei novels' focus on MxM romantic relationships. Several themes identified from the data gathered from twenty Danmei novels suggest that heteronormative standards as well as traditional Chinese gender norms are widespread throughout the main characters' romance despite both partners being male. Of the few deviations from traditional norms, the majority were regarding the submissive partner. Results are further analyzed using Judith Butler's (2015) theory of performativity for further discussion on social implications for the Danmei genre, its authors, and the queer community in Mainland China.

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INTRODUCTION

Danmei is a Chinese fiction genre depicting male-male erotica and romance that is assumed to be consumed primarily by women (Coury, 2022; Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2021; Yu, 2021). The genre has recently risen into popularity in the United States with multiple novels appearing on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list (Coury, 2022). Danmei, literally meaning ‘indulging in beauty,’ falls under the umbrella term that is BL or “Boys Love” that comes in various forms such as artwork, manga, novels, online installments, live action series, and films (Chan, 2017; Madill & Zhao, 2021). The genre itself is largely influenced by Japanese manga and anime as well as American TV series and slash fiction due to the genre stemming from the original Japanese cultural imports in the 90s (Chen, 2017; Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2021; Yu, 2021).

The Danmei genre is important to study for various reasons. It is a genre primarily written by women for women and that has become its own subculture as a way of empowering a widely marginalized group (Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2021; Zhang 2017; Zhou, Bryant & Sherman, 2018; Yu, 2021). Additionally, it is a seemingly queer fiction genre that is being utilized in a form of women’s empowerment but largely excludes the LGBTQ+ community in both intentional and unintentional ways (Ge, 2021; Zhou, Bryant & Sherman, 2018). It is important to research due to the lack of consensus from past research on whether it is or can and should be viewed as a form of both women’s empowerment and of queer literature. The research also can provide knowledge that informs how popular culture in the media potentially serves to challenge and to alter dominant and oppressive prescriptions for gender.

Given this genre is created by women for women it potentially places problematic standards on the increasing number of male readers. If, as many researchers believe, the Danmei genre helps women to reverse the gender narrative to cope with an unequal standard (Feng, 2009; Madill & Zhao, 2022; Wang, 2021; Zhang, 2017), this seemingly does nothing to include members of the LGBTQ+ community through the continued use of heteronormative standards such as differing “feminine” and “masculine” social roles. Alternatively, some researchers believe that despite the Danmei genre’s ability to encourage sexual agency in women, it most importantly uses male homoeroticism for the purpose of disrupting the existing patriarchal gender system within China which ultimately benefits both women and sexual minorities (Ge, 2021; Ye, 2022; Zhou, Bryant, & Sherman, 2018).

Despite this, based on the societal resistance to the LGBTQ+ community (Zhang & Zhuang, 2023) and recent events in Mainland China regarding the crackdown on ‘effeminate men’ (Press, 2021), the Danmei genre is often presented in non-inclusive ways of the LGBTQ+ community despite its main characters being in a MxM relationship. Societal resistance is often in the form of anti-homosexual sentiments justified by various aspects of nationalism, collectivism, and patriarchy in addition to the limited legal protections that the LGBTQ+ community have access to (Zhang & Zhuang, 2023). The heteronormative standards placed on these characters exemplify accepted norms such as relationships that lead to marriage and childbearing, that could undoubtedly further the avid discrimination and ban on nonheteronormative relationships that, as one example, could lead to various mental health issues within the LGBTQ+ community in Mainland China (Rossi, 2016; Winderman & Smith, 2019; Ye, 2022).

In this analysis, I will be investigating the ways in which heteronormative standards are reflected in the male-male (MxM) relationships within a sample of Danmei novels for the purpose of exploring the presented romantic relationship and any potential diversions from the traditional Chinese gender norms. I will be using Judith Butler's theory of performativity in which Butler suggests that gender is a performance, both bodily and linguistically, that establishes the identity asserted rather than the actions of a pre-existing gendered subject (Butler, 2015). My research questions are: 1) To what extent are authors placing exaggerated 'feminine' characteristics on the 'Shou' or bottom characters and exaggerated 'masculine' characteristics on the 'Gong' or top characters in the MxM relationships? 2) To what extent are these 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics presented as inferior or superior? 3) To what extent do these relationships match or diverge from traditional and/or current heteronormative Chinese standards?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Danmei as a Fiction Novel Genre

The Danmei genre can be seen as subdivided into two types of novels, like Japanese manga and anime. One type is *qingshui wen* 清水文 literally meaning clear-water fiction with the other side *rou wen* 肉文 literally meaning flesh fiction (Chen, 2017). These two sides are divided due to the amount of explicit sexual content included in the novels. Despite the subdivision due to sexual content, there are about ten main subgenres that can be seen in most novels. These subgenres are romance, martial arts or adventures in Jianghu 江湖, fantasy, Daoist fantasy and chivalry, online games, legends, sci-fi, fairytales, horror, and detective stories (Chen, 2017). Fans of the Danmei genre

often call themselves or are called Fu nu 腐女, a term that is derived from the Japanese fujoshi 腐女子 or ‘rotten girls’ who consume BL (Chen, 2017).

Despite the various subgenres in the Danmei genre, including the ones not mentioned above, the majority of Danmei novels include a patent dichotomy between the gong ‘seme’ 攻 and the shou ‘uke’ 受 (Wang, 2021; Ye, 2022). In other words, the couples in most Danmei novels follow the masculine top and feminine bottom dichotomy. The shou or bottom role often exhibits a feminized masculinity rather than the sole femininity of many heterosexual couples in other genres (Wang, 2021; Ye, 2022). This dichotomy not only describes the sexuality of the characters but can also describe gendered positions and power differences (Ye, 2022). In addition to this, some novels exhibit a feminized masculinity in the gong or top role which is often seen in tropes such as 哭包攻 kubao gong or ‘crybaby seme,’ 软萌攻 ruanmeng gong or ‘soft cute seme’ and 奶油攻 naiyou gong or ‘cream seme’ (Wang, 2021).

Danmei is often consumed both on and offline. One popular website is Jinjiang Literature City (www.jjwxc.net) and is one of the earliest and most influential women’s literature sites within China (Feng, 2009). Although seen as a safe space for women, the website has been subject to widespread auto-detection software censoring with reported words or phrases being blurred out or even the chapter being ‘textually locked’ and labeled as inappropriate. For example, in Tangerine Boat’s (2019) novel *Supporting Role’s Aura*, a chapter was locked during the descriptions of the couple’s wedding night. The sentence is as follows: “So when Du Yao walked out of the bathroom holding Ye

Yao, both of them were __” (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021e, Ch. 35). As seen by the dashes, the word or words were two characters, but given that it was auto censored, the words are unknown, and the chapter was locked.

The auto censoring has become more widespread since the 2014 ‘Jingwang Xingdong’ (Internet Cleansing Movement) that created a nationwide crackdown on pornographic content (Chen, 2017; Wang, 2020). This is due to the extra-legal sanctions by the Chinese Communist Party (Wang, 2021) as the Danmei genre is an easy target for moral scrutiny due to its associations with homosexuality, pornography, and the assumed defilement of conservative gender norms (Wang, 2020; Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Authors have created ways in which to circumvent these censors such as the use of neologisms, metaphors for sexual behaviors, code-switching or the use of the English words, and satire (Wang, 2020).

Although this genre is extensive on online platforms, it is still stigmatized in Chinese society due to the explicit sexual content that many novels contain (Feng, 2009). Because of this, many of the authors and fans of this genre, often female, experience public pervasive criticism and accusations of poisoning young minds due to the creation and spread amongst fan groups (Feng, 2009). Oftentimes there is even backlash from the LGBTQ+ communities due to unrealistic depictions of homosexual relationships as well as even some homophobia amongst fans (Coury, 2022).

Currently, there is still a widespread ban on sexually explicit material in China, yet mainstream entertainment platforms saw a flourishing in depictions of relationships between men through livestream adaptations of novels such as *Guardian* by Priest and

The Untamed by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (Madill & Zhao, 2021). During the final month of *The Untamed's* broadcast there were 200 million views per day and over 70 million yuan (9,618,819 US dollars) in viewing fees on Tencent, its streaming platform (Baecker & Hao, 2021). This trend began in 2014 with the 2016 web drama *Addicted* becoming the first live action series to become popular (Yu, 2021). Although it was popular, it seemingly attracted too much attention thus causing many later adaptations to take the form of dan-gai or depictions of a 'socialist brotherhood' (Ye, 2022; Yu, 2021). Despite this, there are cases of authors being sentenced to prison for 'producing pornography for making profits' as was the case for Tian Yi in 2018 and Shenhai Xiansheng in 2019 (Yu, 2021).

Much like online censoring, Danmei live action adaptations have the same if not more censors they must encounter before publication. The dramas need to navigate both the platform's commercial interests as well as the political demands from the national radio and television administrations (NRTA) (Baecker & Hao, 2021). The NRTA upholds a ban on any 'abnormal sexual relations or sexual behavior' thus causing a romantic relationship between two men to transform into a 'bromance' (Baecker & Hao, 2021). According to Ye (2022), the limited visibility that can be seen through the 'bromance' genre is offered to the marginalized groups only to the extent that it can further the acceptance of existing norms. In this case, these norms would be the heteronormative standards portrayed through the 'bromance' relationship.

Recently, the censors have become much more problematic. After the 227 Incident, in which *The Untamed* actor, Xiao Zhan, experienced a boycott due to a popular

BL fanfiction exhibiting a homosexual relationship with his costar Wang Yibo, censorship for live action Danmei's became much more difficult to navigate (Basu, 2022). After the 2021 drama *Word of Honor* was released, all other Danmei live actions that were in the process of filming or censorship were blocked, including the very high budget Tencent drama *Immortality* based on the novel *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun* by Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat and two other novels by Priest and Mo Xiang Tong Xiu mentioned previously (Zhang & Zhang, 2022).

Other depictions of Danmei novels such as donghua series or animated series, and audio dramas have been heavily censored if not removed from their platforms entirely. This change in censorship is most likely due to the 2021 governmental ban of effeminate men on TV in which President Xi Jinping called for a tightened control over businesses and society as well as a widespread enforcement on 'official morality' (NPR). Zhang and Zhang (2022) describe this ban as an attempt to 'correct' women's sexual orientation and encourage them to bear more children through the 'saving' of women from the 'toxic Japanese cultural invasion.' Even more recently, the Danmei live action *Justice in the Dark* has been released since President Xi Jinping's ban following the novel of Priest's *Mo Du* or *Silent Reading* (J. A, 2023). This has led to multiple planned live action dramas trending on popular social media sites, creating hope for many fans.

Since 2019, the Danmei genre has become more popular in the West, particularly in the United States (Coury, 2022). Fan favorites such as *Heaven Officials Blessing* and *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, also known as MXTX, have even made it onto the New York Time's Best Sellers list in addition to

multiple official translations internationally (Coury, 2022). In addition to this, despite the primary audience in China consisting of young women, Madill and Zhao (2021) discovered the audience in the West consists of more men, diverse sexual orientations with less heterosexual identification, and a wider range of ages.

Defining Gender

From a sociological standpoint, gender is socially created such that the ways in which society creates, subdues, and rewards the understandings of what is described as masculine and feminine in addition to how these are assigned to ‘men’ and ‘women’ respectfully (Shaw & Lee, 2020a). ‘Femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are produced by social practices, rather than biology, that reveal the workings of power in society, thus explaining the ways in which its meaning can be different within different societies as well as change with the progressions of a specific society (Shaw & Lee, 2020a). This idea is the same for gender as its meanings change based on the time and location of the mentioned society through the culture and forms of knowledge within that one community. As described by Shaw and Lee (2020b), gender and in turn ideas of femininity and masculinity are performed by bodies in ways often seen as natural. These repetitive acts are commonly referred to as ‘doing’ gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These actions also intersect with other identities such as race, class, age, etc. and in doing so create a multifaceted sense of self (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

Given the social setting presently, it is important to acknowledge and consider the ways in which differing global cultures interact in addition to the various forms of media that may influence the ideas of each society’s definitions of femininity and masculinity.

For example, the actions performed by bodies mentioned previously can be interpreted and contextualized in various ways through differing ideas of gender and other social identities. Many of these ideas can stem from contemporary and global media through popular culture (Shaw & Lee, 2020c). Given that bodies are viewed as cultural artifacts, beauty is one broad example of how gender and other identity performances can contribute to a global objectification of bodies in addition to other societal and cultural objectifications. Certain media platforms such as internet spaces are often reproducing the traditional and popular social standards and ideas about various contexts such as gender (Shaw & Lee, 2020c).

Chinese Gender Norms

Chinese gender norms are often mixed with the umbrella term for Confucianism within the Chinese context without any regard to the wide range of beliefs that are within it such as Taoism or Buddhism to name a few (Zhan, 1996). Traditional Chinese cultural values, social contexts, class, and socio-cultural changes are influenced by the changes throughout Chinese dynasties and their primary concerns. For example, compared to the Tang dynasty's (618-906 A.D.) sexual aesthetics for middle aged men with long beards, the late Ming and early Qing (ca.1550-1750) dynasties valued the aesthetics of young androgynous men (Zhou, 2003).

Chai et al. (1994) points out that despite the archaeological records of life in the early Chinese dynasties, they are of little help when explaining what people thought of men and women and their places in their society. Confucian classics, for instance, are often referenced to identify a woman's place in society due to limited definitions

established throughout history after the early dynasties (Cheung, 1997). The reliance on such dated transcripts and definitions can confound history and the present by adhering to traditional stereotypes that most likely are not followed within all Chinese societies both historically and in the present. Additionally, most modern research on masculinities focuses on hegemonic masculinities that are commonly associated with the Western white heterosexual man (Song & Liang, 2019). Of the studies focusing on Chinese masculinities, many used a Western-based instrument (Kwai-Cheung, 2006; Song & Liang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015) or focused on the various Western influences seen on Chinese gender norms throughout history (Chai et al., 1994; Louie, 2012; Tang & Tang, 2001; Zhang, 2014).

Masculinities

According to Song and Liang (2019), masculinities are defined as cultural belief systems established by society about masculinity and the male gender regarding the structural relationships between two biological sexes. Most research on masculinities have been focused on the idea of hegemonic masculinities that was posited by R.W. Connell as the independent, competitive, dominant, and non-emotional manhood that is idealized by the West (Song & Liang, 2019; Zhang, 2014). Specifically, the changing of Chinese cultural values creates various gender roles for men and women within different social contexts throughout history.

Despite the limitations in focusing solely on historical transcripts and definitions, when describing the modern and more contemporary gender norms regarding masculinities and femininities, it is important to establish the histories that might have

had a hand in creating such norms. Dating back as far as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 A.D.), the books of the highest prestige for men throughout most Chinese dynasties were “The Four Books” and “The Five Classics” which were loosely connected to Confucius and his disciples (Zhan, 1996). These books influenced the changes seen in the definition for *yin* and *yang*. In ancient times, earlier than the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050-256 B.C.E.), women and men were considered equal due to the *yin-yang* dyad in Taoism which balanced feminine and masculine properties (Song & Liang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2015). It was not until the Zhou and later the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 A.D.) that *yin* and *yang* no longer just represented ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ rather it began to represent the physical separation of men and women and considered this separation as virtuous (Song & Liang, 2019; Zhou, 2003). This is also when Confucianism gradually created the gender hierarchies that continue to privilege men due to specific moral characteristics that men possess (Song & Liang, 2019).

During the Tang (618-906 A.D.) and later Song dynasties (960-1279), reputation became an important trait for men within China’s honor culture (Song & Liang, 2019). The Song dynasty is also when the emergence of *wen* and *wu* became prominent. The idea of *wen* describes men’s cultural and academic endeavors while *wu* describes a man’s physical strength and military prowess (Kwai-Cheung, 2006; Song & Liang, 2019). During this time, the merging of *wen* and *wu* in one man became the highest ideal of masculinity (Kwai-Cheung, 2006).

During the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties there was a vast change towards the gender fluid ideal of the scholarly beauty. Although this was not the earliest trace of a

male feminization in Chinese history, it is the most prominent (Zhou, 2003). The word ‘androgyny’ is often understood through its Greek roots describing a ‘union of the sexes within one individual’ (Zhou, 2003). During the Ming and Qing dynasties the term was not related to any negative connotations as it was in ancient Greece, rather it referred to one’s capacity for dual sex roles in addition to a form of rebellion for cultural and politically imposed gender arrangements (Zhou, 2003). The late Ming saw a society where homosexual men and couples were visible in various classes and a time where male prostitution was popular (Zhou, 2003). Early Qing was also the birth of the Beijing or Peking Opera where male performers often took female roles and acted out theater plays divided between the *wen* and *wu* plots storylines (Mackerras, 1994).

The beginning of the ‘modern’ Chinese society began with the creation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Zhang, 2014). Due to the increasing levels of globalization, Western and Chinese cultures have seen instances of merging—for instance, in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Zhang, 2014; Zhang, et al., 2015). During Mao Zedong’s political reign, the nationalist ideal focused on representations of the working-class strength while slowly changing back towards a more dichotomized and rigid gendered ideal (Zhang, 2014). As mentioned by Louie (2012), the new forms of global media have had a huge impact on Chinese masculinities through the ideal of the metrosexual. The metrosexual is defined as a masculine ideal that is seen especially among the wealthy. This ideal is aesthetically softer than the stereotypical ‘macho’ male but also inhibits the ‘hard’ and competitive core that would be seen in the traditional *wen* ideal (Louie, 2012). This ideal of the metrosexual man is like Ye’s (2022)

description of *nuan nan* 暖男 or “warm men” who are both “beautiful and powerful” while also being “caring and loving.” This contributes to the modern masculine ideal of the responsible working man assisting his family (Cheung, 1997; Song & Liang, 2019, Ye, 2022). These trends are often attributed to promotions of the “core socialist values” reinforced through the ideals and morals of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Ye, 2022).

Femininities

One of the most fundamental principles of Chinese society for women was the authority of tradition and the husband and father (Lau & Cheung, 1997; Zhan, 1996). As mentioned, the representations of women as submissive and powerless is commonly attributed to Confucianism. In addition to the Four Books for men, there were a set of four books meant for women. These books were ‘Women’s Precepts’ (ca. 45-116 A.D.) by Ban Zhao during the Han dynasty, ‘Analects for Women’ (780-804) by Song Ruoshin and Song Ruozhao during the Tang dynasty, ‘Instructions for Inner Courts’ (1362-1418) by Empress Ren Xiao during the Ming dynasty, and ‘Short Records of Exemplary Women’ by the mother of Wang Xiang during the late Ming early Qing dynasties (Zhan, 1996). Although these texts were not as ancient as their male counterparts, they were followed for almost 1,600 years by both women in the palace as well as the commoner women (Zhan, 1996).

The Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 A.D.), as noted, saw the emergence of the separation of men and women due to the changing definitions of the *yin-yang* dyad. While men were posited in a status above women due to the possession of certain moral

characteristics, women were confined to domestic and familial duties with the labels of being unreliable and deceptive (Song & Liang, 2019). In this way, daughters were considered commodities that were sent to live and serve their husbands after marriage where they were expected to bear sons and live in subordination to the males and other women in the family (Lau & Cheung, 1997). This led to the Tang dynasty's (618-906 A.D.) masculine ideals coinciding with women's chastity which in turn strengthened the patriarchal domination of women (Song & Liang, 2019). In addition to this, it became legal to divorce one's wife for reasons such as failure to serve well, failure to give birth to a son, and jealousy which was originally developed during the Han dynasty (Lau & Cheung, 1997).

The rapid change occurring throughout the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) saw a decline in the gender fluidity. Although the androgyny of the time was mostly seen in men's lives, it was present in the lives of many women to the point that many would cross-dress as a form of resistance and freedom (Zhou, 2003). During the late part of the Qing dynasty there was a reconstruction of traditional Chinese masculinities due to changes regarding women. Elite women first gained the right to an education through various movements and later working-class women followed due to pressure from the communist party (Song & Liang, 2019). Due to this, society saw women closing the educational gap and taking more responsibilities outside the home. Nevertheless, the four books for women were still assigned readings in all the new women's schools (Zhan, 1996).

Despite the People's Republic of China's including gender equality within the national constitution, gender inequality has remained a prominent issue (Lau & Cheung, 1997; Qing, 2020; Wang, 1998). Gender roles change with time in the ruling societies and are enacted through socialization. Socialization begins early in life and continues throughout life through all social institutions and medias (Cheung, 1997; Lau & Cheung, 1997; Qing, 2020; Tang & Tang, 2001; Wang, 1998). Lau and Cheung (1997) and Tang and Tang (2001) identified the traditional qualities expected of girls and women in traditional Chinese society as "kind and approachable," "conforms to and is sensitive to other's needs," as well as "generous and presentable." These traits are associated with the stereotype of the typical Chinese wife who is "good to her husbands' parents," "liked by his mother," "talked rarely," "agreed to everything," and "always did as she was told" (Cheung, 1997).

In present times, women have access to more economic opportunity and a more liberal social climate, yet many traditional Chinese values persist within society (Qing, 2020; Tang & Tang, 2001). Tang and Tang (2001) observed that most of these values coincided with attitudes towards the proper 'place' for women. For example, with women allowed to get an education, they were also allowed to enter the work force thus creating a new 'double burden' on women in the work force and with families (Ye, 2022). Although women are allowed to work outside the home in present times, masculine characteristics are still preferred over feminine characteristics (Lau & Cheung, 1997). Lau and Cheung (1997) and Tang & Tang (2001) identified the favorable masculine traits to include "being active," "ambitious," "brave," "career-minded," and "persevering."

Despite the prevailing values, recent literature indicates that attitudes towards women have changed over time and are often shown to be more modern and egalitarian towards social sectors such as marriage (Chai, et al., 1994; Lau & Cheung, 1997). Despite this, in instances within the family, traditional forms of gender inequality such as gendered divisions of labor and patriarchal characteristics and values have been preserved. For example, the expectations towards women to focus on housework and engage in traditional feminine skills and occupations is heavily prevalent (Ma, 2015; Qing, 2020). Even more recently, due to the current declining population growth rate in Mainland China, various efforts have been made to “incentivize” women into having more children such as the three-child policy (Zhang & Zhang, 2022). As mentioned by Zhang and Zhang (2022), the existing and prevalent misogyny has intensified various other factors such as rising domestic violence that has made women even more vulnerable to the existing social problems.

In addition to this, certain media forms such as BL literature (Louie, 2012; Ye, 2022) have been created by women and in turn allow them to define what it means to be the ‘sexy man’ due to women doing the primary ‘image making’ and looking. This seems to be strongly connected to the aesthetic of the metrosexual family man mentioned previously.

In addition to women’s traditional place in society and the family, physical appearance is just as important to the feminine model thus causing more women than men to conform to the cultural standards of beauty (Jung, 2018). Traditional East Asian beauty ideals have been known to include round faces and somewhat plump bodies (Jung,

2018). Given that contemporary Chinese media has been influenced by Western media and other entertainment industries from various Asian countries, the focus of feminine beauty has changed from the traditional focus of facial features to an all encompassing ideal of facial features and a thin body (Jung, 2018). According to Jung (2018), the specific features of a modern beauty are a slim body, small face, big eyes, and white skin.

Performative Theory in Perspective

In the book *Gender Trouble* (2015), Judith Butler develops a conceptual framework on gender understood as a performance, arguing that gender is not naturally connected to one's sex. Rather gender is a created effect derived from a performance of repeated acts and bodily gestures that are designated by an individual's culture and society. Like Rubin's (1975) earlier understanding of the sex/gender system, Butler (2015) says that gender is "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (125). The process that creates gender does not originate from one specific place, but rather the systems that regulate gender performances both precede and go beyond the individual, yet do not confine one's agency in daily life.

Consequently, it seems that our society and culture dictate what gender means, and although it does not dictate what must be performed, society will constrict what should be performed through the ideal of what signifies a 'man' and 'woman.' One example mentioned by Butler (2015) is the "heterosexulization of desire." This heterosexulization creates and makes mandatory the asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine' that in turn create the understandings of what it means to be

‘male’ and ‘female.’ In other words, this heterosexualization of desire posits it is ‘natural’ to desire the opposite sex.

Butler also mentions that heteronormativity illudes and leads to a connection between a ‘natural’ sex and the natural desire for the opposing sex (Butler, 2015). Which in turn leaves any performances of gender and queerness out of the binary and essentially the norms and reality of society. Butler (2015) identifies this exclusion of society’s acknowledgement of gender being socially constructed despite holding onto to the idea that there is a natural gender core with an additionally consistent normative heterosexuality. In other words, when these categories are brought up, it becomes difficult to establish what is ‘real’ and what is not through society’s heteronormative standards and beliefs of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, Lerner’s (1986) argument against a naturalized male dominance over women directly aligns with Butler’s ideas of the difficulties of establishing ‘realness’ through biological standards. Through this, it becomes possible to identify that what society has deemed to be natural and real regarding gender is alternatively a very malleable reality.

Butler (2015) identifies drag as an example of how the ‘natural’ and ‘original’ gender norms are essentially a parody of the idea of what is natural and original. “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual origin. Thus, gay is to straight not as a copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of ‘the original’... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the ideas of the natural and the original” (Butler, 2015 p.43). Through this, drag is exposing the fact that

'heterosexually ideal genders' are both performances of gender in differing ways and through this, drag is challenging the originality and power of heteronormativity (Butler, 2015). Coles (2007) argues that Butler's take on drag is not strong enough as "not any drag will due" given that Butler's analysis fails to consider the reality and consequences of the binary's hierarchy of power. Alternatively, Coles (2007) argues that drag can not only be utilized in feminist theory for the creation of more progressive gender norms but also be utilized in critiquing compulsory heterosexuality without being used to simply "colonize female sexuality."

Although prescribed gender scripts shape human performances, Butler highlights that agency is possible despite society's gendered norms. Norms that both create and constrain gender not only 'regulate' but also 'produce' the possibilities of rebellion of the established gender norms (Butler, 2015). In addition to this, Butler (2015) specified that the 'structuring presence' of heterosexual constructs seen within queered sexualities does not indicate a determined form of sexuality set up through those constructs. Rather, these heteronormative norms form and subdue queer sexualities while also providing the content for challenging gender norms through parodic displays in performing drag.

In Judith Butler's book *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler goes into more detail on the performative aspects of gender connected to the body as an entity within a specific social world. Through the example of drag and the theory of performativity, Butler emphasizes that we live with preconceived notions of reality explaining which kinds of bodies and sexualities are to be deemed 'real' and 'true' and in addition to this, which kind will not. Specifically with the example of drag, Butler (2004) explains that through

the practicing of gender performativity, it is exemplified how the norms that govern reality are reproduced and altered. Through this drag is explained to not be a pleasurable spectacle but rather it is allegorizing the ways in which ‘reality’ regarding gender and gender norms are both reproduced and challenged.

THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the current study, I assess and analyze the heteronormative standards written within a sample of novels for the purpose of exploring the presented romantic relationship and any potential diversions from the traditional Chinese gender norms. The following questions arise from past literature and guide the project: 1) To what extent are authors placing exaggerated ‘feminine’ characteristics on the ‘Shou’ or bottom characters and exaggerated ‘masculine’ characteristics on the ‘Gong’ or top characters in the MxM relationships? 2) To what extent are these ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ characteristics presented as inferior or superior? 3) To what extent do these relationships match or diverge from traditional and/or current heteronormative Chinese standards?

Methods

The research design utilized is a critical content analysis of Danmei novels. Content analyses are the study of texts, images, and expressions as they were created to be seen and can include already produced texts or data produced for the study itself (Strunk, Shelton, & Crawley, 2022). Specifically, researchers conducting content analyses often analyze books, films, newspapers, social media, policies, photographs, interview transcripts, etc. and can focus on one single text or multiple (Strunk et al., 2022). Critical content analyses utilize a theory or theoretical framework in the analysis

(Strunk et al., 2022). By using a critical approach in the analysis, the researcher is analyzing what the text(s) are about and the larger meanings produced rather than just the actions within a text(s).

Sampling and Data Collection

For data collection, I selected novels on the internet using the NovelUpdates website. NovelUpdates is a website that functions as a search engine for Asian novels. Through this website you can access book reviews, plot synopses, release frequencies, fan made novel lists and links to the translated novel itself in addition to a forum that allows readers to access announcements from the site and a discussion section amongst registered members. The discussion section includes each registered member's custom title and avatar where they can post threads, follow other members, and earn 'nuffies,' the forum currency. Member registration is free as well as the forum currency as it is not actual money and just serves as a way for members to interact.

To answer the proposed research questions, I analyzed twenty randomized Danmei novels using identified aspects of Judith Butlers theory of performativity. Novels were randomly selected using the NovelUpdates website 'Random Novel' generator. Novels were filtered using the tabs 'Shounen Ai,' 'Yaoi,' and 'Chinese' to include only Danmei novels in the randomization. Tabs 'Shounen Ai' and 'Yaoi' were used with the bracket 'OR' to widen the randomization pool. Novels were automatically excluded if they were historical in nature as the focus of this analysis is modern or postmodern settings. Additionally, novels were also excluded if they were still being written (ongoing) with less than fifty chapters. It was assumed that in these works, relationships

may not yet be fully developed. Novels written before the ‘Internet Cleansing Movement’ in 2014 were also excluded to keep the data within similar social time frames. Historically based plots within the Infinite Flow novels, or novels with multiple worlds or plots in one, were not included in the analysis. In the case that the exclusion of the historical subplot reduced the chapter count to below fifty, the full novel was excluded. Filters that were excluded were ‘Historical,’ ‘Wuxia,’ and ‘Xianxia’ as these genres often take place in various forms of feudal China.

After identifying twenty novels using the randomizer with the identified filters, each novel was assigned a number for easier categorization and coding. Then each novel’s webpage was explored to identify the most likely subgenre. The recategorization of each novel was conducted after each novel was coded and the subgenre was identified including Romance, Drama, Mpreg, Comedy, Fantasy, Online Games, Sci-fi, Horror, and Mystery. Given that Infinite Flow novels’ subgenres are dependent on the subgenres exhibited in each world, the subgenre chosen represents most of the included subplots. Categories were identified through the attached Tags some of which were Childhood Love, Depression, Modern Day, Hidden Abilities, etc. in addition to the knowledge gathered during the reading process. Given that the Danmei genre exhibits a MxM relationship, romance was present in all novels, therefore, to be recategorized under the Romance category depended on the focus of the relationship to the plot. Novels were only recategorized as Mpreg if the male pregnancy was the primary aspect to the novel’s plot. In Table 1, I provide information on the subgenre, rating, author, release date, status in COO, translation status, and time read to provide a descriptive analysis of each chosen novel.

Data Analysis

For the first stage of my research, I analyzed the descriptions of each main character and coded them by their physical characteristics as well as household and sexual mannerisms to identify the perceived ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ role of the character. I then used an original coding instrument created by Zhou, Paul, and Sherman (2018) for analyses of the ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ of characters in Danmei novels which was originally modeled after Ivory et al.’s (2009) coding method for their content analysis of gay men in television programming. This coding method exhibits two separate scales for ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ using twenty-one items to measure masculinity and twenty to measure femininity. Example items are ‘masculine appearance,’ ‘had a job,’ ‘protected his partner,’ and ‘skillful in sexual behaviors’ for the ‘masculine’ scale and ‘feminine appearance,’ ‘was a homemaker,’ ‘was protected by his partner,’ and ‘clumsy in sexual behaviors’ for the ‘feminine’ scale. I assigned one point for masculinity or femininity for each item or sub-item associated with the character on the scale. Table 2 depicts the final scores of each character.

Table 3 is included to identify the power dynamics presented between the two main characters to analyze the commonalities and discrepancies between the ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ individual within the relationship. I then further analyzed the results with the identified sexual role, Gong or Shou, that the main characters exhibited within the relationship. In the case that the Gong and Shou identities were not explicitly established within the first fifty chapters, I utilized the comments on the novels NovelUpdates page to identify the roles.

The next stage of the research included an in-depth narrative analysis of the selected novels. I conducted a detailed content analysis of the heteronormative standards placed on the characters and relationships within the novel. I then further analyzed the most utilized themes using Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Themes were subcategorized according to the 'feminine' or 'masculine' attribute with an extra category as "counter" for the nontraditional Chinese characteristics identified. Additional subcategories revolve around the identified social and relationship life according to traditional Chinese standards. To ensure as much security within the analysis as possible, I double or even triple checked the results of each category and subcategory. Finally, in certain sections, I identified key words to check the accuracy of the initial categorizations.

I utilized word documents saved on my personal laptop in recording relevant notes that were further used to identify the main themes amongst the twenty selected novels. I specifically identified each novel separately to not confuse or merge the notes for each novel.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the Danmei genre is a fiction genre, there are certain risks in confounding the relationship between literature and 'reality.' Literature does not always accurately reflect the real world in straightforward ways. Despite this, there are certain themes within fiction that indirectly promote and describe current cultural trends and paradigms such as various norms within society. For this reason, I exercised caution when making assumptions about the identified themes as they were created and analyzed.

Researcher as a Person

As an avid consumer of the Danmei genre residing in the West, it is important to me to explain how I became a fan of this genre as well as to acknowledge any potential biases that may arise throughout the analysis and discussion. I am a white female who lives in the global West. My only connection to the Danmei genre, or any Asian media, is what I have seen and consumed on the internet and other media sources. I was introduced to my first piece of Asian media in high school when my friend introduced me to KPOP and Korean dramas, all of which were initially introduced to her by her neighbor. Before becoming an avid KPOP and Kdrama fan, I primarily listened to country and alternative rock music and watched a plethora of supernatural based movies and TV dramas.

I was a fan of the all-encompassing “Boys Love” genres long before discovering the Chinese Danmei novel genres. When I was in my Korean drama and KPOP phase, I began branching out by watching some Japanese BL dramas in high school. This was a very short time as it only consisted of the *Takumi-kun* series which I discovered was ‘too much for me’ to watch completely. My readings then shifted to Thai BL dramas which were, seemingly, less graphic. In hindsight the process is comical as I would later become a fan of some very explicit Asian BL graphic novels during my time as an undergraduate student.

It wasn’t until 2019 when the hit drama *The Untamed* was released that I began my deep dive into all things Danmei. I first was introduced to *The Untamed* due to one of its main leads, Wang Yibo, given my penchant for the Korean/Chinese boy group UNIQ. Once I realized that the drama itself was a live action depiction of a novel, I instantly

hunted the novel down. Currently I have developed a very long “Finished” reading list of Danmei novels, and an even longer “To Read” list. I cannot exactly put into words why I love this genre so much. Perhaps my enjoyment is for the same reasons I enjoy KPOP so much; it is vastly different than when I was younger.

FINDINGS

Chosen Novels

Of the twenty books coded after randomization, two novels were written by the same author with the remaining authors differing. The primary genre identified was romance with eleven novels falling under this category. The remaining genres identified were mystery, drama, comedy, online games, and horror. The ratings gathered from the NovelUpdates website were averaged together to find a total average rating of 4.1 out of 5.0. Given the date restrictions, the years ranged from 2016-2021, with the majority being written after 2018. Out of all twenty novels, only one is currently still ongoing and twelve are completely translated. During the analysis process, the minimum and maximum reading times were identified and then averaged for a total of 5-11 minutes per chapter. Reading times were found by timing myself as I read each chapter while also considering instances such as ability to copy and paste direct quotes or manually typing during the note taking process. In addition to this, minutes per chapter may be skewed as some translators divided the longer chapters into two separate translated chapters.

Table 1*Novel Identifications*

Book	Author	Subgenre	Rating/5.0	Year	Status in COO	Translation Status	Skips	Time
1.	妖精本妖	Romance	3.5, 52 V	2021	70 C, COM	COM	7	2-6 MIN
2.	Ling Yi	Romance	4.0, 43 V	2020	53 C, COM	COM	2	5-10 MIN
3.	Zi Jin	Comedy	4.4, 194 V	2020	55 C, COM	COM	0	3-6 MIN
4.	阿阮有酒	Romance	3.8, 40 V	2019	98 C, COM	50 CT	2	3-6 MIN
5.	Di Yu	Romance	3.7, 157 V	2020	76 C, COM	COM	9	4-8 MIN
6.	恭十一	Romance	4.2, 157 V	2019	103 C, COM	78 CT	0	4-10 MIN
7.	咬猫耳朵	Romance	3.9, 67 V	2019	90 C, COM	77 CT	7	5-16 MIN
8.	Jin Gang Quan	Mystery	4.0, 158 V	2021	124 C, COM	COM	13	3-6 MIN
9.	Tangerine Boat	Romance	3.6, 102 V	2019	98 C, COM	82 CT	0	5-11 MIN
10.	Jiàng Zi Bèi	Online Games	4.7, 755 V	2020	143 C, COM	COM	3	8-14 MIN
11.	天良永动机	Mystery	3.7, 18 V	2017	76 C, COM	50 CT	5	3-9 MIN
12.	Xī Zìxù	Drama	4.1, 624 V	2016	157 C, COM	COM	2	8-20 MIN
13.	Little Baldy	Romance	4.4, 356 V	2020	104 C, COM	COM	6	8-17 MIN
14.	Sang Wo	Horror	4.6, N/A V	2021	456 C, ON	80 CT	8	9-23 MIN
15.	Yan Ye Li	Mystery	4.3, 188 V	2020	371 C, COM	COM	2	7-15 MIN
16.	Xu Qingrang	Romance	4.4, 49 V	2020	48 C, COM	COM	6	5-9 MIN
17.	Metasequoia	Romance	4.4, 793 V	2018	90 C, COM	COM	1	3-9 MIN
18.	咸鱼大西瓜	Drama	3.5, 145 V	2021	194 C, COM	78 CT	4	4-10 MIN
19.	Hanmen Yatou	Romance	4.2, 614 V	2019	87 C, COM	COM	13	5-11 MIN

20.	Sang Wo	Mystery	4.3, 81 V	2018	255 C, COM	107 CT	8	3-10 MIN
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During the randomization process, a total of twenty-five novels were gathered to prepare for any exclusions. During the analysis process four novels were excluded leaving one novel unused. Of the exclusions, one novel was excluded due to the translation being split between two different translators, one of which used machine generated translations with the other translating themselves as a native speaker. Both translations were previewed and were found to have distinct differences covering the same content. The remaining exclusions were due to the historical arcs in the infinite flow novels. As the historical sections were excluded from the analysis, the remaining chapters were not enough to continue with the analysis.

Character Analysis

Scale Analysis

Each main character was analyzed according to the scale created by Zhou, Paul, and Sherman (2018). They were then further compared with their sexual ‘role’ in the relationship such as ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ during sexual intercourse as the ‘top’ is often associated with masculine traits and the ‘bottom’ associated with more feminine traits. All characters who scored higher on the masculine scale were the ‘top’ or Gong in the sexual relationship with the ‘bottom’ or Shou scoring higher on the feminine scale. Six

novels did not include a confirmed romantic and/or sexual relationship within the fifty analyzed chapters and were thus marked as incomplete. Despite this, the 'top' role was still ranked higher on the masculine scale and the 'bottom' on the feminine scale, but to a lesser degree.

Of the characters identified as the 'top' the lowest masculine scale score observed was a 5 whereas the highest score was a 24 out of 25. When excluding the incomplete novels, the lowest score was 12 on the masculine scale. The 'top's' feminine scale scores included a low of 1 and a high of 8, with no difference found once excluding the incomplete novels. The average masculine score was 13.95 out of 25, whereas the average feminine score was a 3.05 out of 22. When excluding incomplete novels, the average masculine and feminine scores were 16.93 and 3.41 respectively.

Of the characters identified as the 'bottom' the lowest feminine scale's score was a 5 with the highest an 18 out of 22. The lowest score with the exclusions was 10. The 'bottom's' masculine scores included a low of 0 and a high of 7 with no differences after exclusions. The average feminine score was 12.6 while the average masculine score was 3.45 out of 22. After exclusions, the average feminine and masculine scores were 14.21 and 3.43 out of 22.

Table 2

Masculine/Feminine Scores of Main Characters

Book	Character #1	Character #2
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shen Yu <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 17/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feng SiRui (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 19/25 ○ F: 4/22
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yin Han <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/ 25 ○ F: 18/ 22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheng Jingsen (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M:24/ 25 ○ F: 3/22
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ning Yan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 12/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lin Rong (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 17/25 ○ F: 8/22
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lin Ye <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 2/25 ○ F: 12/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jiang Lian (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 15/25 ○ F: 1/22
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shi Yu <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 1/25 ○ F: 17/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jiang ChengLi (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 18/25 ○ F: 3/22
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xie Ning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 15/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zhuang Yan (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 19/25 ○ F: 4/22
7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zhu Qing'an <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 3/25 ○ F: 14/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qin Hengyi (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 17/25 ○ F: 4/22
8.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Xia Wennan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 13/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ming Luchuan (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 16/25 ○ F: 4/22
9.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ye You <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 16/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Du Yao (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 21/25 ○ F: 3/22
*10.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jian Rong <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 8/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lu Boyuan (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 2/22
*11.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ji Fanyang <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 8/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lu Hui (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 9/25 ○ F: 3/22
12.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chen Liguo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 2/25 ○ F: 16/22 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zhou Yi (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 18/25 ○ F: 3/22
*13.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lan Yu <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 3/25 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lu RanKong (Top) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ M: 8/25

	○ F: 10/22	○ F: 2/22
*14.	• Wen Jianyan ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 5/22	• Wu Zhu “God the Father” (Top) ○ M: 6/25 ○ F: 2/22
*15.	• Cui Zuojing ○ M: 4/25 ○ F: 7/22	• Dong Zheng (Top) ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 2/22
16.	• Shi An ○ M: 0/25 ○ F: 12/22	• Yan Liang (Top) ○ M: 12/25 ○ F: 6/22
17.	• Rong Mingshi ○ M: 2/25 ○ F: 11/22	• Aojia (Top) ○ M: 13/25 ○ F: 2/22
18.	• Xu ChengYan ○ M: 5/25 ○ F: 16/22	• He Yang (Top) ○ M: 15/25 ○ F: 3/22
19.	• Su Ling ○ M: 7/25 ○ F: 10/22	• Gu Liheng (Top) ○ M: 13/25 ○ F: 4/22
*20.	• Mo Yi ○ M: 1/25 ○ F: 5/22	• “SQ” The Mist (Top) ○ M: 9/25 ○ F: 2/22

Note. Incomplete is marked * to represent a lack of romantic/sexual relationship.

Power Dynamics Analysis

To compare the perceived masculine and feminine roles with the perceived superior and inferior dynamics within the main relationships, each novel’s main characters were analyzed and identified as the more powerful or less powerful within the relationship. In total, nineteen ‘top’ roles were in higher positions of power than their relationship partner with one alternate ‘bottom’ role in a higher position of power. In this

instance, power relations are defined as wealth and status of the individual. Six of the twenty novels had more complex power relations between the two characters. The final differences in power identified were assigned based on my knowledge of the characters and situations analyzed within the novel itself. To distinguish the more powerful party, differences in power were identified and compared to distinguish the character who was potentially the most beneficial to that society. For example, some comparisons included one party being more wealthy or even physically stronger than the other party but still inhabiting an uncontrollable subordinate position to the other party. Based upon these results as well as for easier comprehension, from this point on, the masculine ‘top’ will be referred to as the Gong whereas the feminine ‘bottom’ will be referred to as the Shou.

Table 3
Power Dynamics

Book	More Powerful	Less Powerful
1.	Feng SiRui (<i>Top</i>)	Shen Yu
2.	Cheng Jingsen (<i>Top</i>)	Yin Han
3.	Ning Yan	Lin Rong (<i>Top</i>)
4.	Jiang Lian (<i>Top</i>)	Lin Ye
5.	Jiang ChengLi (<i>Top</i>)	Shi Yu
6.	Zhuang Yan (<i>Top</i>)	Xie Ning
7.	Qin Hengyi (<i>Top</i>)	Zhu Qing’an
8.	Ming Luchuan (<i>Top</i>)	Xia Wennan
9.	Du Yao (<i>Top</i>)	Ye You
10.	Lu Boyuan (<i>Top</i>)	Jian Rong
11.	Lu Hui (<i>Top</i>)	Ji Fanyang
12.	Zhou Yi (<i>Top</i>)	Chen Liguó
13.	Lu RanKong (<i>Top</i>)	Lan Yu

14.	Wu Zhu (<i>Top</i>)	Wen Jianyan
15.	Dong Zheng (<i>Top</i>)	Cui Zuojing
16.	Yan Liang (<i>Top</i>)	Shi An
17.	Aojia (<i>Top</i>)	Rong Mingshi
18.	He Yang (<i>Top</i>)	Xu ChengYan
19.	Gu Liheng (<i>Top</i>)	Su Ling
20.	The Mist (<i>Top</i>)	Mo Yi

Note. Power pertains to wealth, status, etc., not physical strength.

Performativity in Danmei

The dividing line between what is deemed feminine and what is masculine within the Danmei genre, and potentially in modern Chinese society can be seen within the examples describing acting ‘like a girl’ and how to ‘be a man.’ As Butler (2015) describes, what is considered masculine through the ‘be a man’ is directly against the female body or the ‘like a girl’ examples given throughout the Danmei novels. Alternatively, perceptions of what signifies a feminine identity is set against the male body. Throughout the twenty novels what was defined as acting ‘like a girl’ was often explained in a disdainful or teasing attitude such as being weak and fragile (Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 妖精本妖, 2021; 阿阮有酒, 2019), taking care of looks (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 阿阮有酒, 2019), talking too much (Di Yu, 2020; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; 天良永动机, 2017), or being shy (Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 天良永动机, 2017). When

describing how to ‘be a man’ descriptions included being physically and mentally strong (Ling Yi,2020; Yan Ye Li,2020; Zi Jin,2020; 妖精本妖,2021; 阿阮有酒,2019), not caring about physical appearance (Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; 阿阮有酒, 2019), and having good sexual prowess (Xī Zǐxù, 2016).

Although the intensity of the masculine and/or feminine descriptions among the authors, this practice is consistent across Danmei novels. The dynamic is often also strengthened using metaphors. Although not directly relevant to the current study, the most used metaphors were connections to animals as well as references to the colors black and white. Through the references of animals, masculine and feminine characters were reinforced using the hunter and the hunted dynamic with the masculine characters described as the hunters such as wolves (咬猫耳朵,2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019) and lions (Xī Zǐxù, 2016; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019) and the feminine as the hunted such as cats (Di Yu, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Zi Jin,2 020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 妖精本妖, 2021) and rabbits (Di Yu, 2020; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019).

Although not as common as the hunter and the hunted dynamic, depictions of both the Gong and the Shou as a dog were mentioned (Di Yu, 2020; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Sang Wo, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017). This metaphor was most often used to describe the characters as being blindly obedient to their partner.

In addition to this, the dominant and submissive dynamic was further strengthened by attributing the feminine characters to the color white (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019) to represent purity and innocence as well as, with the combination of the masculine character as the color black (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019), a direct reference to the *yin-yang* dyad. Although not as prevalent, there were a few cases in which the Shou was attributed to the color black (Di Yu, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019) and the Gong to the color white (Di Yu, 2020; Xī Zǐxù, 2016) with the Shou's being reversed more than the Gongs.

Descriptions of Beauty

Danmei characters often follow a specific standard of beauty for both characters. The Shou often follows the feminine ideal beauty standards in China, which are thin body, small face, big eyes, and white skin while the Gong inherits a few of those beauty standards combined with a more masculine description. This can also be seen through the covers of some novels in which, despite both characters, if included in the cover, being beautiful, one is very obviously more feminine than the other following the Chinese

beauty standards. Oftentimes, the more feminine character of the two also is very obviously depicted as younger as well. Figure 1 shows a few examples of the covers of the Danmei novels used within this study.

Figure 1

Examples of Danmei Novels Covers



In many instances, the Shous are being described as ‘as beautiful as a woman’ or even ‘more beautiful than a woman’ while the Gongs are described as ultra-masculine and the ‘man above all men.’ In Ling Yi’s (2020) novel *New York Memoirs*, the Shou is described as more beautiful than female models:

Yin Han's beauty outshined all the people present, making the blond and fair-skinned models feel overshadowed. With every step that Cheng Jingsen took with him, he received countless envious gazes (Ling Yi, 2020/2022, Ch. 8).

In addition to this, in Xu Qingrang's (2020) novel *It Seems There is Light*, the Shou was described as not only a "boy who could be described as beautiful" but also as "the beauty itself." (2020/2021a, Ch.24). Descriptions of beauty this strong seem to be almost ethereal in nature, as if the individual is so beautiful it is completely out of this world.

Alternatively, the ultra-masculine Gongs are often described as 'beyond' handsome and are commonly paired with their wealth and status to become the 'man above all men'. In *The Sickly CEO Asks For Hugs Everyday After Obtaining The Ability To Read Minds* by 妖精本妖 (2021), Feng SiRui is described:

Not only was he on the top of the rich list, but he also has a super high-grade appearance. Even if he was already married, he was still elected as one of the men who women most want to marry every year (妖精本妖, 2021/2022a, Ch.5).

Compared to descriptions of the Shous, the Gongs are often less focused on descriptions of appearance and more likely to be described as handsome in name with more focus on descriptions of a particular aura combined with their descriptions of power.

During the coding process, specific code words were identified as a feminine or masculine beauty ideal and used to double check the previously identified beauty categories. The identified words and attributing characters are described in Table 4. The most common physical attribute associated with feminine beauty was Fair Skin (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zìxù,

2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019) followed by descriptions of Delicateness (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), Bright Eyes (Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zìxù, 2016; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), and Thin Body (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Little Baldy, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 恭十一, 2019). The less common attributes were Innocent looks (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 恭十一, 2019), descriptions of Likeness to the Moon (Di Yu, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Xī Zìxù, 2016; 恭十一, 2019), and Smooth Bone Structure (Di Yu, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020). Common physical attributes describing masculine beauty include Muscles (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019) and descriptions of Handsomeness (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 恭十一, 2019), followed by Cold Eyes (Di Yu, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Xī Zìxù,

2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), and Height (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021). The less common attributes are Sharp Face (Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), Fierce Eyebrows (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Xī Zīxù, 2016; 恭十一, 2019), and Attractive Hands and Fingers (Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Xī Zīxù, 2016).

Table 4

Descriptors of Beauty

Feminine Beauty			Masculine Beauty		
Beauty Ideals	Shou	Gong	Beauty Ideals	Shou	Gong
Fair/Pale Skin	18/20	6/20	Muscles	4/20	14/20
Delicate	10/20	1/20	“Handsome”	7/20	13/20
Bright/Watery Eyes	9/20	-	Sharp/Cold eyes	3/20	9/20
Thin/Slender Body	9/20	8/20	Tall	1/20	9/20
Long Eyelashes	8/20	-	Sharp Face	1/20	6/20
Pure/Innocent Look	5/20	1/20	Fierce Eyebrows	-	4/20
“Like the Moon”	5/20	-	Attractive Hands	3/20	3/20
Smooth Bones	2/20	-			

Note. Number of novels that included physical attribute/total number of novels.

In total, nine Shous exhibited solely feminine physical characteristics (Di Yu, 2020; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 恭十一, 2019) with eleven exhibiting both feminine and masculine descriptors (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021; 阿阮有酒, 2019). Of the examples gathered, ten examples did not fall under either category (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017). In addition to this, ten Gongs exhibited solely masculine descriptors (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2018; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 恭十一, 2019) with only six exhibiting both masculine and feminine descriptors (Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Zi Jin, 2020; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019). Three characters' descriptions did not fall under either category and were categorized as Undefined (Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020).

The undefined categories lacked all the identified descriptors for masculine and feminine beauty. The characters are often described as beautiful in name without any specific feature descriptions. In some cases, characters were described using metaphors that could not be identified as a masculine or feminine descriptor. For example, in *Five*

Cases by 天良永动机 (2017), the Shou was described as exhibiting “the looks of dazzling sunshine” as well as how the sunlight caused him to look “remarkably like an angel” (天良永动机, 2017/2022a, Ch. 6; 天良永动机, 2017/2022b, Ch.11). Although the placement of all the identified descriptors were based on my discretion as the reader and researcher, those placed within the unidentified categories did not have additional descriptors needed to be identified as either feminine or masculine based.

Among both the Shous and the Gongs, nine novels showed descriptions of characters as “like a painting” or “as beautiful as a piece of art” (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Ling Yi, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019). These metaphors were interpreted as the characters’ beauty being so perfect that they could have walked right out of a painting. Of the total nine novels that exhibited this description of beauty, only three were describing the masculine Gong and of these three, two were describing supernatural characters, one of which was a god who was “transcending the boundaries of gender” (Sang Wo, 2021/2022a, Ch. 18). This makes this descriptive metaphor seem to be a primarily feminine descriptor, despite art and beauty being subjective in nature.

The inclusion of beauty in both the Gong and Shou is like Butler’s (2015) idea of drag being a parodic performance of gender that then challenges the cultural power through heteronormativity. Not only is the feminine Shou character often described as more beautiful than a woman while also exhibiting ‘masculine’ attributes, the masculine

Gong is often described in ways that are not solely ‘masculine’ in nature. Obviously, beauty can be both feminine and masculine but often the word beauty is attributed to feminine attributes. Through the mixing of both feminine and masculine beauty on both the Shou and the Gong this blurs the dividing line on what is considered beautiful and handsome while also challenging the originality and power of traditional heteronormative standards much like drag does.

Danmei “Gender” Norms

Danmei character norms often posit the feminine Shou character as being fragile, delicate, and submissive while the masculine Gong character is cold, aggressive, and dominant like the traditional heteronormative standards mentioned previously. Butler (2015) implies that the regulatory power of society both naturalizes and designates the consistencies we see in sex, gender, and sexuality and as a direct effect causes masculinity to represent men while femininity represents women. Additionally, the traditional representations of masculinity and femininity can be seen throughout the feminine Shous and the masculine Gongs despite both characters being male.

Table 5 describes the most common actions associated with the Gong and the Shou characters as well as the most common actions that deviated from the assumed Danmei character norms. Among the Gongs, the most common actions were identified under the term Oppression (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一

, 2019). This category held the descriptions of the Gong that were deemed intimidating and dangerous but not to the extent of physically violent actions. For example, in *After my ex-boyfriend's white moonlight proposed to me* by 恭十一 (2021), the Gong's aura is described below.

There was a thinly veiled layer of anger on his face and his sharp eyes were raised, carrying a sense of overbearance. The explosive force was strong, and even though he knew that the anger wasn't directed towards him, Xie Ning still felt his back soften. But he had to say. The Zhuang Yan right now looked more handsome and attractive (恭十一, 2019/2021d, Ch. 34).

Not only is Zhuang Yan giving off a dangerous aura, but this is also something that makes him more attractive in Xie Ning's eyes despite feeling some fear. This coincides with the Danmei norms that combine looks with wealth and status for the Gong to be deemed masculine enough as well as the 'man above all men.'

Table 5
Danmei Character Norms and Counters

Gong		Shou	
Oppression	13/20	Obedience	11/20
Reliability	7/20	Well-behaved	11/20
Smoking	5/20	Coquettish	9/20
Emotionless	5/20	Other	6/20
Other	3/20		
Counter Danmei Norms			
Fragility	4/20	Fighting	9/20
Submissive	2/20	Temperament	9/20
Coquettish	1/20	Dominant	4/20
		Smoking	1/20

Note. Novel's descriptions used/total novels.

Oppressive aura is followed by the descriptor of Reliability (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021) and followed by the least common descriptions of Smoking (Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 恭十一, 2019) and Indifference (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Little Baldy, 2020; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017) to represent masculinity. The subcategory Reliability describes both reliable looks and feelings that the Gong gives off such as a strong back or the aura of being calm and mature. In Hamen Yatou's (2019) novel *Rebirth to Become the President's Omega Wife*, the Gong is described as reliable due to taking responsibility for his spouse despite being unwilling.

Although his male god didn't like the cannon fodder shou, he has always born the responsibility of his partner and was very reliable. Su Ling keeps telling himself that such a person doesn't exist in the real world and that the author only created him to increase the cannon fodder shou's power. Still, Su Ling was attracted. No love, yet no abandonment; no intimacy, but the responsibility won't be pushed away. It seems that no matter what happens, he is always there, very powerful. (Hamen Yatou, 2019/2020b, Ch. 4)

Although this is only one example, most of the descriptions of reliability stem from the Shou identifying the Gong's reliable qualities for the purpose of a stable relationship and in some cases protection, which is often connected to marriage.

Among the Shous, the two most common descriptions of Danmei norms were Well-behaved (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy,

2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 恭十一, 2019) and Obedience (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019) followed by acting Coquettishly (Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Zi Jin, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019). The Well-behaved category includes descriptions of the Shou exhibiting a specific temperament such as being considerate, virtuous, and mature all of which are values of being a good wife in traditional Chinese culture. In *The Virtuous Omega Disguised as the Vicious Colonel* by Little Baldy (2020), Lan Yu's inner thoughts are described:

“He had given himself one rule, not to have any excessive behavior, and this often made him selected by magazines as the most elegant and sensible Omega. He was modest and courteous, and always kept his poise when things went wrong. Both the ideal partner in the hearts of the majority of Alphas was also the study of all Omegas” (Little Baldy, 2020/2021a, Ch.7).

Lan Yu is described as being both an ideal partner for Alphas, often ultra-masculine Gongs and a role model for Omegas, often ultra-feminine Shous. As both an ideal partner and role model, this makes Lan Yu a perfect example of a well-behaved wife in traditional Chinese culture.

Like the Well-behaved subcategory, Obedience is another factor attributed to the perfect wife. Amongst the examples gathered, this subcategory consists of instances in which the Shou is listening and doing what they are told by the Gong. These instances

include obedience often by choice in which the authors are explicitly stating that the Shous are listening to the Gong. For example, in *The Sickly CEO Asks for Hugs Everyday After Obtaining the Ability to Read Minds* (2021), when Shen Yu asks himself if he has a right to speak up against the CEO Gong, he decides that he “better just go along with him” (妖精本妖, 2021/2022c, Ch.48). Additionally, in *The Virtuous Omega Disguised as the Vicious Colonel* (2020), Lan Yu was told not to move so “he also sat there and didn’t move” despite the following sentence describing how much he wanted to run around (Little Baldy, 2020/2021b, Ch.34).

Despite obedience being a trait valued in traditional Chinese wives, this obedience could also be connected to the imbalance of power within the Danmei genre’s relationships. Not only are the Shou’s often the submissive party in the relationship but combined with a lower wealth and status compared to their partner, acts of agency when deciding to listen and follow along with the Gong could just be an illusion of choice created by a more powerful partner.

The Coquettish category describes examples in which the Shou is acting in a coquettish manner. Depending on the way it is written, acting coquettishly can be interpreted in different ways such as flirting, acting spoiled like a child, etc. Regarding the Danmei genre, the Coquettish category is divided between intentional coquettish actions as a means to an end or unintentional coquettish actions which the Shous often deem shameful. For example, in Zi Jin’s (2020) *After Being Turned Into a Dog, I Conned My Way Into Freeloading at My Rival’s Place*, the Shou is described as someone whose charm is irresistible to both men and women (Zi Jin, 2020/2020, Ch.2). More specifically

in *The Sickly CEO Asks for Hugs Everyday After Obtaining the Ability to Read Minds* (2021), the Shou uses his coquettish actions to achieve certain goals or turn a conversation into his favor, as for example:

“Rui-ge, I’m just testing you to see if you still have any feelings for Yan Ruiqing...” He suddenly looked resentful as his eyes turned misty with water. He really looked like a grieving woman crying in a boudoir. “You were so indifferent before. Now you show a lot of love... Anyone else would find it strange, right?” (妖精本妖, 2021/2022b, Ch.47)

In this example, the Shou is intentionally acting coquettishly to lower the Gong’s anger towards himself. Alternatively, in *Supporting Role’s Aura* (2019), the Shou is intentionally putting on an act for others, but once he realized the Gong was present, he felt ashamed with how he had acted in front of him.

“If there was anything that he did not anticipate today, it was Du Yao’s sudden appearance. When he met Du Yao again, he still couldn’t understand his mood, but even he himself was shocked that he actually complained to Du Yao in a coquettish tone, when he came to realize what he had said, he felt surprised and annoyed” (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021b, Ch.14).

Given that acting coquettishly can be interpreted differently due to the writer and the translator, the category of Coquettish can be challenging to analyze accurately and is widely based on the writer and readers discretion. The coquettish actions can solely be examples of flirting between potential and actual spouses, or it can be analyzed much deeper. Given that another explanation of acting coquettishly is attributed to acting like a spoiled child, within the Danmei genre, this can be strongly attributed to another category that posits the Shou as a child being taken care of by their Gong. This could further be

attributed to the power dynamics between Danmei couples in which there is a definite line between the dominant and submissive party.

Counter Danmei Norms.

Butler describes drag as one form in which the ‘heterosexually ideal genders’ are performances in different ways, thus challenging the power of heteronormativity through the norms that both regulate but also produce possibilities of rejection. In this sense, an individual’s agency can be used to mold specific rejections of heteronormativity. Despite the limited examples of counters to the identified Danmei norms, these counters themselves are similar to the use of one’s agency to reject heteronormativity both literally in the novels themselves and in reality, through the author who created such counters.

Of the outliers identified, those that describe the Shou were much more prevalent compared to the Gong’s. The most common counters regarding the Shou are Fighting (Di Yu, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xī Zixù, 2016; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021), Temperament (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zixù, 2016; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), and Dominant (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Tangerine Boat, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017). Of these three, the most prevalent was examples in which the Shou was physically fighting with “such powerful force” despite descriptions of fragility and weakness (Yan Ye Li, 2020/2020, Ch.5). In the following example from *Supporting Role’s Aura* (2019), this is

the first instance of violence seen from the Shou who is viewed by others as physically and mentally weak.

Ye Chen didn't expect that Ye Yao had such great strength. He easily dislocated his arm. His hand was so painful. Just now he clearly felt the sensation of his bones falling off, and he felt a very incomparable fear and pain, [which] made him even more alarmed. (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021c, Ch.24)

Such examples of physical violence and strength from the Shou's can be seen as direct rejections of the weaknesses attributed to feminine bodies both within the Danmei genre as well as in reality. Despite this rejection, the adherence to feminine beauty standards that glorify descriptions of feminine fragility and weakness create a striking contradiction to the earlier rejection.

Following Fighting is the category of Temperament which attributes specified 'masculine' qualities onto the Shou. These examples describe the Shou as cold, emotionless, and indifferent while also adhering to specified feminine beauty standards. Within the Danmei genre, Shous that are described in this manner are referred to as a 'cold beauty.' For example, in *Welcome to the Nightmare Live* (2021), the Shou is described below.

In the depths of those amber eyes, the docility and sweetness of the past had all disappeared, and only the cunningness and deviousness of being a swindler remained; no love, no obedience, only cold calculations, and biting viciousness (Sang Wo, 2021/2022b, Ch.39).

When comparing aspects such as temperament within Danmei novels, it is important to remember the identified subgenre as this could potentially be less of a comparison of all Shous and more of the bias within a genre. For example, the Shou described previously is

the main character of a horror novel, in which his occupation is a swindler. Much like in reality, only focusing on one single aspect of an individual makes it easy to forget outside influences that could help in the analysis.

The final category identified was Dominant, in which the Shou took on the role of provider and protector. The examples in this category were limited not only in commonality but also in that the Shou took on this role as a last resort due to the Gong being physically unable or where the Shou was allowed by the Gong to retain this role. In *Supporting Role's Aura* (2019), after the Gong was physically disabled the Shou describes their future with himself as the main provider.

After the two cuddled quietly for a while, Ye You looked at Du Yao and said, “I can make a lot of money. I will support you in the future.” ... “Yes, I’m going to make money and support you. We can go to a lot of places to play or build a big villa on the mountain. We live in the mountains, and I will cook for you every day. If we get tired of living in the mountains, we can just come back to the city again. I want to build a big house. You and I, our children, our parents, and your grandparents all can come live there.” (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021d, Ch.26)

Interestingly, despite the Shou taking on the role of primary provider, his thoughts on the future still place him in the traditional feminine submissive role where he is placed in the home.

Alternatively, there were very few identified counters describing the Gongs within the Danmei novels which adhere to the image of the ultra-masculine man with few flaws. Of the descriptions of the categories Fragility (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Ling Yi, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Yan Ye Li, 2020) and Submissive (Xī Zìxù, 2016; Zi Jin, 2020), examples of these were only directed towards the Shou or the Shou’s parents or guardian

and never in front of outsiders. This further adheres to the description of the metrosexual man who is masculine while also remaining caring towards his family.

Butler (2015) says that the changes we see within the fixed binary gender system are embodied within various discontinuities and breakdowns in the repetition of the enforced heteronormative power. While acknowledging the Danmei norms in which one individual within the relationship is assigned the feminine role, the various counters such as fighting, having a cold temperament, and taking on the dominant role in the relationship while retaining the feminine traits would be directly drawing on the known performative practices to reject the assigned feminine identity thus rejecting the regulatory powers. This does not seem to apply to the identified counters for the Gong as a masculine man who solely cares for his spouse and family as a modern ideal for Chinese masculinity.

Posited as a Child

The vast majority of all twenty novels included some aspect of the Shou being posited as a child in various ways. Table 6 describes the four different subcategories that the examples were grouped into which are Descriptions (Di Yu, 2020; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Sang Wo, 2018; Sang Wo, 2021; Xī Zìxù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), By Lover (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019; 阿阮有酒, 2019), Milk (Hanmen

Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Xī Zǐxù, 2016; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 恭十一, 2019), and *By Friend* (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; 恭十一, 2019). The most common subcategory is Descriptions which describe the treatments of the Shou as if they were children or the child-like actions they exhibited such as sleeping with a teddy bear, facial expressions like a lost child, etc. The following excerpt from *After My Ex-Boyfriend's White Moonlight Proposed to Me* (2019), is potentially an example of how alluding to the Shou as a child is more likely to be a metaphor for describing the Shou as an individual in need of care and protection.

“Slow down,” Zhuang Yan said leisurely. “There’s too many people, be careful to not fall.” Xie Ning was very speechless for a while. “How come I feel like...you treat me like a child?” Zhuang Yan got up and, going along the sleeve, very naturally held Xie Ning’s hand. Wang JianJian just happened to walk past the two of them and heard these words. He couldn’t help but complain, “Not a child, but he clearly protects you like a porcelain doll.” Zhao Yang felt the same in his heart. “Isn’t it, though? Holding you in his palm, afraid that you’d fall, or holding you in his mouth, afraid you’ll melt...” (恭十一, 2019/2021e, Ch.39).

The interpretation of Zhuang Yan treating Xie Ning as a porcelain doll is like the treatment of children when understanding that both children and porcelain are described as fragile and in need of extra care. This is also in line with the traditional Chinese femininity as well as a previous Danmei norm of the Shou’s acting coquettishly to their spouse. In addition to this, when Xie Ning is acting like a spoiled child, Zhuang Yan’s response is described below.

Xie Ning’s behavior right now seemed like he was acting like a spoiled child. Zhuang Yan’s chest rose wildly twice and he suspected he was going to go crazy. Why was he torturing himself so much! He stared at Xie Ning fiercely and

thought, *If you keep acting cute like this, I really can't stop myself anymore.* (恭十一, 2019/2021c, Ch.22).

Zhuang Yan's response of finding coquettish actions attractive makes it less likely that there is a literal view of Xie Ning as a child and more of an attraction towards a submissive partner with themselves as the dominant provider. If this is the case, this aligns directly with Chinese traditional norms.

Table 6

Posited as a Child

Shou	
Descriptions	13/20
By Lover	12/20
Milk	8/20
By Friend	4/20
Gong	
Descriptions	4/20

Note. Novel's descriptions used/total novels.

The following category describes the examples directly involving the Gong when describing the Shou as a child. Many couples in Danmei novels have an age gap leading to some Gongs viewing the Shou as a child and caring for them as children. Like the previous category, this could be connected to the Shous acting coquettishly and relying on the Gong as the dominant of the relationship. Similarly, this could also be attributed to

conflicting power dynamics regarding age given that respecting those older than oneself is considered being courteous. In Metasequoia's (2018) novel *Number One Lazy Merchant of the Beast World*, the Shou directly attributes being treated like a child by their partner as love, despite not liking it and regarding it as shameful.

Rong Mingshi was held by Aojia and felt slightly indignant about being called Rong Rong. It was too shameful. It felt like he had been turned into a three year old child. The little leopard wanted to bite a certain someone but the things Aojia had done for him were thousands of times better than his unknown duke father and it was even beyond his relatives in his previous life. The name was nothing but an outside thing. What was a name of love? (Metasequoia, 2018/2019, Ch.13)

Some Shous find acting coquettishly shameful, being treated like a child can also be seen as shameful and annoying. Despite this, such treatment is consistently tolerated.

Consistent with the two previous categories, the descriptions of drinking milk are solely attributed to Shous and children within Danmei novels for the purpose of bodily growth. Consistent with Chinese cultural norms, specific dishes can represent different groups of people and traditional events within society. When explaining the meaning of "milky but fierce" (Xu Qingrang, 2020/2021b, Ch.45) in *It Seems There is Light*, the translator attributed milk to a child or little animal trying to be fierce but only being adorable instead. By using milk as an indicator of the Shou as a child this continues the insinuation of the relationship dynamics mentioned previously. It should also be mentioned that the usage of milk could also be a metaphor for sexual acts.

The illuding of the Shou to a child is not just between the Gong and Shou but also between friends. Throughout the Danmei genre, friends are seen calling themselves someone's dad when they're looking out for them, as a joke, or in a form of thanks. It can

also be used as an insult towards someone by posing themselves as their father or grandfather, thus being higher in the familial hierarchy. In all examples mentioned previously, by illuding to someone as a child it is setting them lower in the familial hierarchy which creates an unbalanced power dynamic. Interestingly, in the few instances where the Gong was posited as a child, they were acting naughty or directly being reprimanded by the Shou. Compared to the ways in which the Shou was described as a delicate child in need of protection, there is still a difference in the ways in which they are being described which is like the treatment of female versus male children in the familial unit.

Homemaking

The Homemaking category was grouped together based on all aspects within the chosen novels that surrounded what could be included when building a home between two people such as taking care of the home, marriage, children, etc. Of the twenty novels, thirteen included pieces of marriage and/or cohabitation. Of the thirteen, ten (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zīxù, 2016; Zi Jin, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019) included marriage and/or cohabitation between the two main characters with the remaining three (Little Baldy, 2020; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xu Qingrang, 2020) mentioning or planning for cohabitation and/or marriage. Table 7 describes the categories discovered following traditional Chinese homemaking norms as well as the found counters to said norms.

Table 7***Homemaking***

Traditional Norms		
	Shou	Gong
'Wife' Duties	10/20	-
Husband Provider	-	3/20
Children/Fertility		9/20
Marriage		11/20
Managing their Partner	4/20	13/20
Counter Traditional Norms		
'Wife' Duties	-	7/20

Note. Merged cells represent a total count of novels used/total novels by both Gong/Shou.

The traditional Chinese cultural norms regarding homemaking heavily revolve around the dynamic of the wife taking care of the home while the husband is the provider who takes care of the social aspects outside of the home. In traditional Chinese culture the perfect wife would be well-behaved, virtuous, mature, and polite. In *Supporting Role's Aura* (2019), Tangerine Boat describes the skills of a perfect wife exhibited by the Shou.

If this was said before, I really don't believe that there can be such a perfect person in this world. Naturally, there is nothing to say about appearance and education. Just the good cooking skills alone, you have nowhere to find it now. Moreover, in the Cultural Regiment, he is also the one that is most valued, excellent performance in everything. This is the real ideal wife. (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021f, Ch.44)

In sum, the perfect wife is graceful when entertaining guests and is great in the kitchen. This passage mentions education, but the mentioned education is knowledge and skill

regarding singing, dancing, and musical ability rather than the formal education we would associate with the word.

Within the Danmei genre, oftentimes the Shou is regarded as the wife and takes on the roles that a wife would traditionally perform such as the cooking and cleaning within the home as well as show an attentiveness towards their spouse. Within the Wife Duties category, the most prominent example would be Cooking (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Yan Ye Li, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019), Cleaning (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Little Baldy, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019), and then Attentiveness (Little Baldy, 2020; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019). Oftentimes, when cooking, the Shou is preparing food for the Gong. *After My Ex-Boyfriend's White Moonlight Proposed to Me* (2019) provides an example of one of the cohabitation relationships between the two main characters.

Usually at this time, Xie Ning was either done making dinner and was waiting in the living room or was still busy in the kitchen. When he saw Xie Ning like that, Zhuang Yan occasionally thought that they were just like a married couple. For the past couple of days, in order to be able to eat the food that Xie Ning made himself, he got off of work and went home as soon as it was time. He pushed off all other schedules, leaving right away, leaving Zhao Yang to wonder out loud if he had an earnest, hardworking girl at home waiting for him (恭十一, 2019/2021b, Ch.13).

The author directly alludes to a traditional homemaking relationship in which the more dominant husband goes out to work while the submissive wife stays to guard and care for the home.

The following subcategory is Cleaning and was divided into two parts one of which was chores directly related to their partner and illuding to a wife's position (Di Yu, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021) and home chores that when mentioned had no connections to the Gong (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Little Baldy, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019; 天良永动机, 2017; 恭十一, 2019). Of the examples in this grouping, none mentioned how a Shou was cleaning or cooking for themselves and was often explicitly mentioned that it was the life of a bachelor.

Within traditional homemaking norms, the role of the husband is associated with providing for their spouse and family. Despite this, and the seven novels that described the Gongs as reliable, only three novels explicitly placed the Gong in the role of a provider and directly associates starting a family as becoming a responsible adult (Little Baldy, 2020; Xu Qingrang, 2020; 恭十一, 2019). This is similar to how marriage is viewed regarding women. In *Supporting Role's Aura* (2019) when an elder is talking to the Shou, it is explicitly stated that marriage was “a major turning point of a lifelong event” and following this major event to just “work hard and feel at ease to advance bravely” (Tangerine Boat, 2019/2021a, Ch.9).

Children/Fertility.

Of the twenty total novels analyzed, nine included some aspects of the main couple having children. Within this category, the examples were further divided into Ability to Give Birth (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Little Baldy, 2020;

Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019) and No Ability to Give Birth (Ling Yi, 2020; Sang Wo, 2021; Zi Jin, 2020; 咬猫耳朵, 2019). The most common Danmei subgenre where men can give birth is the ABO genre which introduces three new genders: Alphas, Betas, and Omegas. Hanmen Yatou (2019) better explains the more detailed specifics of the ABO genre below.

In this world, people have six genders, male Alpha, Beta, Omega, female Alpha, Beta, Omega. Simply put, no matter male or female, the Alpha ones will be the gong, will not be pregnant; Beta can be gong and shou, but their fertility rate is not high; Omega is purely shou, with the highest fertility rate. Beta has the largest number of people, A and O are very rare, A is more than O, the strongest of the three, with O being the weakest in terms of strength (Hanmen Yatou, 2019/2020a, Ch.2).

Although not all ABO novels follow this dynamic, the vast majority do. This also enables the characters to subscribe to the more traditional family dynamics. In addition to this, the Alpha/Omega comparisons subscribe to a more extreme case of the Shou being weak and the Gong being ultra-masculine. This combined with the existence of pheromones makes it natural for Alphas and Omegas to be together to the point that is highly unnatural for other pairings such as AA, OO, AB, BO, etc. This exhibits strong comparisons to the gender traditionalism we see in reality.

Butler (2015) uses the example of the heterosexualization of desire to explain the mandatory division between feminine and masculine that then creates the naturalized idea that ‘masculine’ should be with ‘feminine.’ Given the socialization that automatically posits men as masculine and women as feminine, it becomes natural for one another to pair together. In the case of ABO novels, A and O are the ultra-feminine and ultra-

masculine characters that become natural to be together regardless of their male or female status since the ABO genders are more valued. Of the five ABO novels analyzed, all subscribed to the traditional heteronormative dynamic of homemaking with the ‘feminine’ Omega staying at home and taking care of children.

The grouping of No Ability to Give Birth included four novels in which the subject of children was brought up during sexual intercourse or compared to animals, plants and even ghosts in the place of human children. An example in *Stimulating to be Raised by a Virtual Lover*, by 咬猫耳朵 (2019) substituted the potential children of the main pairing with a cat and a rabbit. The Gong further viewed this preparation of two pets as his and the Shou’s two children. This also creates a potential connection between the animal metaphors placed on the two main characters mentioned briefly. Given that the ‘two children’ that were prepared were both submissive in nature could further connect the aspects of submission, children, and the Shou’s given attributes.

Marriage.

Given that aspects of marriage were included in eleven of the twenty total novels (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; Ling Yi, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Zi Jin, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), it can be assumed that marriage is relatively important within the Danmei genre and fan community. This category of marriage includes all aspects revolving around a marriage such as meeting the parents, proposing, preparing for the wedding, a dowry, wedding procedures and the wedding night which is further connected

to future children. The most prevalent idea within the example's regarding marriage is the connection between marriage and a stable relationship (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 恭十一, 2019). Once the proposals have occurred the next most prominent step is the marriage procedures which include a dowry and dowry gifts (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Tangerine Boat, 2019; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019). The procedures seen within the Danmei genre regarding marriage are traditional and thus automatically put the less dominant party, the Shou, in the position of a daughter who is being married off to her husband's family. Additionally, when speaking the titles of the Shou and Gong begin to change. Six novels included instances where the Shou is directly referred to as a daughter-in-law and/or wife (Metasequoia, 2018; Tangerine Boat, 2019; Zi Jin, 2020; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019) with only three where they are referred to as son-in-law or husband (Di Yu, 2020; Jin Gang Quan, 2021; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021).

The following major category is that of Management. This category is describing the instances in which one party in the relationship is 'managing' the other. Despite the strength implied with the use of the word managing, not all groupings are as strong as the word itself. The most likely to be managing their spouse is the Gong managing the Shou. This can be seen in three main ways such as Caring (Di Yu, 2020; Hanmen Yatou, 2019; Jiang Zi Bei, 2020; Little Baldy, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; Xī Zixù, 2016; Xu Qingrang, 2020; Zi Jin, 2020; 妖精本妖, 2021; 恭十一, 2019), Jealousy (Jin Gang Quan, 2021;

Ling Yi, 2020; Metasequoia, 2018; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 妖精本妖, 2021), and Abuse (Ling Yi, 2020; Xī Zìxù, 2016; 妖精本妖, 2021). The Caring category includes instances such as “don’t drink anymore,” “be obedient,” “stay warm,” “rest,” “eat,” etc. This could be viewed as furthering the Gong’s treatment of the Shou as a child, or it could just be showing love to their partner. Following the Caring category is Jealousy which includes more harsh actions such as dragging them away, demanding information, etc. and then Abuse includes even more extreme acts of forcing sexual acts, physical abuse, etc. Two novels contained extremely toxic relationships whereas the third novel included in the Abuse category included a Gong who was overly possessive and was deemed too intense to be included in the Jealous category.

Instances of the Shou managing the Gong were only of the Caring (Hanmen Yatou, 2019; 咸鱼大西瓜, 2021; 天良永动机, 2017; 妖精本妖, 2021) grouping. These actions were like the previous actions of care such as “don’t drink so much,” “stay warm,” etc. Within the novels that included this, one explicitly refers to the Shou as a “mother hen” (天良永动机, 2017/2022c, Ch.49) which continues the placement of the more submissive partner being placed within traditional female roles. The only significant counter to traditional Chinese norms was instances of the Gong knowing and being good at cooking and house chores. Given the current norms when describing modern Chinese masculinity, this is a counter to traditional norms but is perfectly describing the modern norms of the metrosexual man.

DISCUSSION

This study followed three guiding questions interpreted within the framework of Judith Butler's theory of performativity during the analysis process. The questions are as follows: 1) To what extent are authors placing exaggerated 'feminine' characteristics on the 'Shou' or bottom characters and exaggerated 'masculine' characteristics on the 'Gong' or top characters in the MxM relationships? 2) To what extent are these 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics presented as inferior or superior? 3) To what extent do these relationships match or diverge from traditional and/or current heteronormative Chinese standards?

Femininities and Masculinities

The first question asks the extent to which the MxM pairings are being assigned ultra-masculine and feminine qualities. According to the previous findings, this is occurring quite extensively within descriptions of beauty and the identified Danmei "gender" norms that posit the Shou as delicate and submissive and the Gong as strong and dominant. Any divergences of the ultra-masculine and feminine dynamic almost solely occurred to the Shou character in which they were depicted as both delicate but extremely strong with great physical defensive ability. Regarding beauty standards, the Danmei genre means 'indulging in beauty' so the presence of overly beautiful main characters was expected. It's important to mention that despite beauty not being constricted to feminine ideals, the Danmei genre posits beauty as being feminine in nature. Despite the Gong being described as beautiful as well, descriptions were combined with outside influences such as wealth and power to make them more attractive

whereas the Shou's physical qualities were described in great detail which implies notions of a feminine beauty is solely confined within the body whereas the masculine beauty is both in the body and in society.

I previously identified a similarity between Butler's (2015) examples of drag as a parody of heteronormative performances and the beautification of both feminine and masculine characters in the Danmei genre. Butler also explains that the parodic repetition of heterosexual constructs within queer cultures describe the constructed nature of the "so-called heterosexual original." In this, the assumed naturalization of heteronormativity is just another copy of what is assumed to be original thus making all other repetitions copies of the original copy. Using drag and the beautification of both genders within the Danmei genre as examples of this both makes known the faulty reality as well as rejects the perceived norms that govern said reality. Specifically, by mixing the naturalized assumptions about feminine and masculine beauty within both drag and the Danmei genre, the authors reject the 'reality' of what bodies and bodily practices can be considered masculine and feminine thus creating a blending of what is considered "feminine" and "masculine." This blending of femininities and masculinities can impact social change by challenging the boundaries regarding gender and even sexuality norms which could then create spaces for readers to explore, embrace, and enact change.

Regarding the ABO genre in which men can give birth, Butler's (2015) heterosexualization of desire posits the ultra-feminine and ultra-masculine characters as natural pairings regardless of the male or female gender. In the other novels that do not adhere to the ABO subgenre, there is still an obvious divide between the feminine Shou

and the masculine Gong which, if following Butler's assumption, still follows the naturalized heterosexualization of desire that posits a perfect pair to be between feminine and masculine. This seems to be conflicting with the authors' rejections of such naturalized identities given that the stronger and less submissive the feminine Shou character is, the more masculine they become and thus becoming a less naturalized pair between two masculine characters. Unless this in its entirety is a rejection of such naturalized assumptions.

Power Dynamics

Question two follows the balance of power within Danmei couples. Table 3 describes the power dynamics between each main couple within the twenty gathered Danmei novels which shows a commonality between the Gong being superior in wealth and status than the Shou. This not only represents the unbalanced status of gender within a relationship with the man viewed as naturally more superior than a woman but also potentially represents class conflicts within society. When positioning one individual within a relationship as drastically more wealthy and powerful this could easily spill over into the relationship itself leading to questions of consent. Given the differences in power, any choices made by the inferior partner could just be an appearance of choice given the more limited option to exercise free will of the weaker partner. Regarding wealth, parallels of these 'choices' could draw from the capitalist society in which the rich have the power of voice and the greater freedom of action.

Additionally, in the novels that included marriage and discussions of marriage, the Shou served the role of the woman within a marriage in which they were married into

another family. Among those novels that also included the ability for men to give birth, all emphasized the next step after marriage was having children. Regarding homemaking, the Shou was often the one who took care of cooking, cleaning, and their partner all the while being managed in some form from the other party which strongly adheres to the ideals of what makes a perfect wife mentioned by Cheung (1997). Since the perfect wife is continuously described as virtuous and obedient, this furthers the traditional ideological practice that puts women in an inferior position in both society and in relationships. Given this, since the Shou in Danmei novels is consistently being placed within women's roles in society and in the home, this places these male characters in the same inferior positions.

In China, the assumed audience for the Danmei genre is young females. This strong adherence to traditional norms within this assumed form of social resistance to oppressions faced in reality is perplexing. Why not place both characters in equal positions of power rather than continue the oppressions faced in reality onto their fiction, submissive male character? Neville (2007) and Wang (2021) found that women's likeliness towards MxM erotica, not just the Danmei genre, allows more expressiveness between two men's sexualities than between a man and a woman. Neville (2007) attributed this due to how relations between two men were often less oppressive and were easier to consume due to a possible equalness in status rather than the common adherence to differences in power exhibited through relations between men and women. In this case, the women authors may be using this placing of men into women's oppressions in society for the purpose of rejecting Chinese traditional masculinities in men as well as allowing any male readers to potentially understand and acknowledge such oppressions.

Traditional Chinese Norms and Divergences

The third question focuses on the divergences from traditional Chinese norms. Despite more instances of matching Chinese cultural norms such as the traditions in homemaking, there were still instances of divergences from the traditional gender norms that could potentially serve as a catalyst for social change. One example of this could be seen within the descriptions of the Gongs and the adherence to modern masculine norms. The Gong's described traits adhere to the *wen* and *wu* (culture, education, and physical strength) ideals for men. The combination of both as well as the addition of wealth, is what creates the one ideal man above men that is often seen in the Danmei genre describing the Gong. With the addition of a more androgynous beauty that can be seen in some of the Gong's, this becomes like the metrosexual described by Louie (2012) and the 'warm men' who are both hardworking and caring of their families. This connects to the only homemaking counter identified in which the masculine Gong took care of the cooking and household chores.

The idea mentioned by Louie (2012) and Ye (2022) that women are the image creators of the ideal man connects to this well. When looking solely at the Danmei genre, the ideal man created by the female authors would be a merging of both the *wen* and *wu* ideals and the ideal of the metrosexual. If these creations were to be taken even more literally, when looking at the ideal man's partner, it would be a somewhat feminine individual with equal rights with men. Yet these creations would still adhere to the traditional roles set *for* women within the home. In this way, Danmei is challenging the boundaries of gender norms with a blending of traditional beauty ideals while also

acknowledging the inequalities faced in reality only in the case of Danmei, placed on male bodies.

Additionally, as mentioned by Butler (2015) and much earlier by Ruben (1975), the changes we see within the fixed binary gender system are embodied within various discontinuities and breakdowns in the repetition of the enforced heteronormative power. Within the Danmei genre, the identified counters to the compulsory powers are direct examples of using one's performative practices to reject the naturalized identities brought about by society. If researchers are correct and women are writing these novels for the purpose of female expression and exploration of gender, sexuality, and class, are these women using their performative counter to the gender binary system by 'becoming' men within this genre despite still following other specific heteronormative standards or are they questioning the normative power of society in name only and not actually rejecting the heteronormative standards set at all? If this is the case, where does this leave the male readers and other sexual minorities? By reading novels in which queer couples are strongly adhering to the compulsory heteronormative standards are they themselves adhering to these practices by default or are they also rejecting changing aspects of the gender binary by creating the discontinuities of the heteronormative power of society? This also leaves the question of which heteronormative standards should be rejected. Who decides which heteronormative standards are oppressive and which could be considered empowering?

Butler (2015) also mentions that the normative practices placed onto queer sexualities and relationships do not mean that they are determined by those constructs nor

are they 'reducible' to those constructs. To Butler (2015), the presence of these constructs within queer sexualities constitutes levels of power that cannot be denied, but alternatively become ways in which heterosexual norms can be contested and denied. In addition to this, just because queer sexualities and relationships adapt to heteronormative constructs does not confirm the naturalized state of heteronormativity nor do they deny the existence of other emerging norms. For example, the commonality of marriage and children as a form of fulfillment in life within the Danmei genre does not necessarily confirm potential harm in queer sexualities. The idea of 'naturalized' heteronormativity or some 'gender core' as Butler (2015) describes does not come from the natural order of the world but from political and cultural beginnings that have been shaped and altered according to the dominant society's whims (Rubin, 1975; Lerner, 1986).

The subject of agency is interesting when regarding Butler's assumptions of heteronormativity. Butler (2015) explains that society's gendered norms both regulate and produce the possibilities of rebellion through an individual's agency despite the societal pressures directed at conformity. This is seemingly obvious considering that is what agency is – i.e., a control over one's body used to express one's identity (Shaw & Lee, 2020b). Regarding the Danmei genre, the women authors could be conforming to societal pressures in real life while also utilizing their author identity to construct a merging of reality and fantasy. This construction of fantasy could be used to further reject heteronormativity through descriptions of queer relationships, while also adhering to the traditional norms such as homemaking. In this way, they are the creators of a new set of societal norms which following Ye (2022) could be intentionally or unintentionally rejecting the entire patriarchal system through the use of the taboo homoeroticism. If this is

the case, an originally feminist genre in nature could be utilized by other communities through similar forms of resistance. As Butler (2015) emphasizes, the promise of fantasy can only go as far as to challenge what is deemed reality. It allows us to reimagine ourselves and others outside of reality, but it is not until it is embodied does it become 'real' (2015). Given this, this does little to explore any potential harm such strong heteronormative standards could have on the readers given that despite the potential for Danmei media to be a stage for rebellion, Chinese politics are still denying and attacking any form of resistance to tradition.

In addition to this, despite the previous negative placing of harms towards men and the queer community does not exempt the possibilities of an all-encompassing social change enacted through the Danmei genre. As mentioned previously, although the majority audience for this genre is believed to be solely women in China, this is not the same for the audience in the West that is much more diverse. Such a diverse audience allows for the blending and challenging of social gender norms in addition to the allowance for spaces dedicated for exploring sexualities and the society by all ages included youth who are just beginning to learn about themselves and the world around them.

Analyzing the sample of Danmei novels through a sociological lens reveals a combination of adherence to traditional Chinese gender norms as well as a limited divergence away from select norms. The research presented in this analysis identifies the prevalence of this adherence to tradition while also identifying the ways in which the female authors have resisted against select gender norms as well as how these rebellions

could impact the exploration for gender and sexuality amongst all readers. Several themes identified from the data gathered within the sample of Danmei novels suggest that, despite most of the evidence linking the Danmei MxM relationships to traditional Chinese heteronormative standards, there is still divergences that suggest a quiet social resistance to select norms that have the potential to create opportunities for creative social explorations of gender and sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Calling attention to the prevalence of heterosexual norms within the Danmei genre has the potential to limit both the author's agency and the readership. Despite its fiction status, fiction novels have the potential to both reflect aspects of society as well as contribute to society through the shaping of people's attitudes and beliefs. The Danmei genre is believed to be written primarily by women for other women regardless of its content exhibiting a relationship between two men. Despite the limited evidence of divergences away from the traditional heteronormative standards identified within this analysis, the potential for this genre to impact social change is immense through the bending and challenging of boundaries regarding gender norms, Chinese societal social inequalities, and sexualities.

The Danmei genre, and largely the BL genre, is a media that allows its creators and readers to push at the boundaries of gender norms. Despite the prevalence of the Danmei genre's reliance on a standard gender ideology through the identified beauty standards and homemaking ideals, aspects of the identified categories still exhibit

divergences from the norm thus creating a blending of the traditional gender norms to challenge these norms as well as create spaces for change both in the present and in the future.

The blending of gender and other traditional norms create larger implications for both Chinese and Western societies. The blending of femininities and masculinities seen in the Danmei genre has caused widespread pushback from the Chinese government. This can be seen through the recent ban on all Danmei live actions and audio dramas as well as the recent ban on “effeminate men” by President Xi Jinping for the purpose of putting an end to “abnormal aesthetics” and promoting “excellent Chinese traditional culture” (Press, 2021).

Although not directly related to the Danmei genre, censorship of what youth can and cannot read for various reasons have become prevalent within American society. Given that the Danmei genre has recently become popular in the West, its blending of traditional heterosexual norms could have similar implications as in Chinese societies through the challenging of tradition and the result of government censorship. Eroticizing MxM relationships, both opens opportunities for learning sexualities as well as limits ideas of reality within heteronormative standards. These opportunities are explored by both youth and adults and following the established literature on readership of the Danmei genre, would allow women in China to explore their own sexualities and oppressions while also allowing the men, women, and other sexual minorities of all ages to explore similar issues. As mentioned by Spallaccia (2022) youth readers especially can

discover and learn new potential models to life and reality that allow them to better understand themselves and the society they live in.

In addition to this, this blending and challenging also creates the likelihood for the binary of “submissive” and “dominant” within relationships and further within society to be challenged with the creation of spaces for exploration and experience. This is similar to what Neville (2023) and Wang (2021) discovered about women’s likeness towards MxM erotica rather than heterosexual pairing due to the allowance of more expressiveness within the sexualities between two men rather than what is often seen between a man and a woman.

Not only is the Danmei genre a catalyst for challenging gender norms and creating spaces to explore sexualities, but also for women in Chinese society to escape from the gender inequality and societal pressures placed on them through the challenging of traditional norms and rebellion against feminine stereotypes. Through this, authors and readers of Danmei fiction are creating new norms that allow for the challenging of existing beauty standards, gender norms, and oppression of Chinese masculinity.

Despite this, the women authors could do more in and with their creative abilities through the enactment of social change. Danmei as it is now has the potential to facilitate resistance against the male gaze and other oppressive traditional norms for women as well as create space for the exploration of gender and sexuality for women, men, and other sexual minorities. Danmei as it is now has this potential but this resistance is quiet. It needs to become loud. Despite extensive research, there is no way to confirm that only women are consuming this genre in Chinese society. Danmei as it is written now imposes

many heteronormative expectations within relationships that could potentially misrepresent queer communities in China. An exploration of relationships between two partners who have both submissive and dominant traits could potentially help diversify relationship representations within both heterosexual relationships and LGBTQ+ relationships. Thus, these authors have the ability to create more positive change as well as more inclusive plots. They have the power, as the creators, to disrupt the boundaries of tradition even further through literature and more effectively affect real life changes in the social world.

Limitations

Limitations of content analyses often depend on the quality of the data of interest. The quality of the research depends on the quality of data. The Chinese language does not always translate into English absolutely, thus leaving it up to the translator's discretion in what to use in the English language as a substitution. For example, in *After My Ex-Boyfriend's White Moonlight Proposed to Me* (2019) by 恭十一, “欠操” was translated as “I want him” whereas it could also be read as “needs a fucking” (恭十一, 2019/2022a, Ch. 1). In addition to the translator's discretion in wording, novels are unable to provide clarification in the case of confusing wording that may come from the author themselves or the translator. Given the genre's status as web-based novels that are heavily censored, both the authors and translators are often navigating ways in which to skirt around the automatic censors. This could further confound any discrepancies within the writing and translating processes.

One major limitation is the connections made between the heteronormative standards within the Danmei genre and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. There are no absolute connections between the two, only my assumed connections as the reader and researcher. Also, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, in addition to queer theory itself, often follow a "deconstructionist" method towards a "prosocial" self, making empirical analysis more difficult (Green, 2007). While Butler's implications of doing gender and sexuality may be an anchor for queer theory in such an empirical world, it does so narrowly to the point of "desubjectification" that often rejects the self (Green, 2007).

As the researcher, any unintentional biases that may arise as a fan and consumer of this genre should also be acknowledged and considered. As someone who resides in the West, it is important to acknowledge the potential for unintentional confusions between traditional Western and traditional Chinese society. One such example could be the points of analysis that were determined due to the use of my discretion such as placing certain examples in their categories. Some examples could have easily been placed in a category due to aspects that were believed to be Chinese norms but were in fact stereotypes or Western norms entirely.

Another limitation is the use of the scale created by Zhou, Paul, & Sherman (2017) as a primary identifier of masculinity and femininity. Despite this scale being modeled after Ivory et al.'s (2009) scale for coding gay men's masculinity and femininity and specified according to aspects of the main characters within the Danmei genre, it only allows for the coding of heteronormative standards with no regards to any

nonnormative standards presented. It has also categorized all Danmei novels into one subgenre without thought to the vast subgenres within one main genre. It assumes the presence of sexual intercourse in all novels, leaving subgenres such as horror and apocalypse novels unable to be fully analyzed. Due to this, many characters did not exhibit many of the items included within the scales and were thus marked as incomplete.

Future research could focus on comparisons between the Danmei genre and other international fiction genre, possibly comparing Chinese heterosexual fiction couples to the couples found in Danmei novels. This could pinpoint specific masculinities and femininities that are attributed to men and women as well as amongst other LGBTQ+ couples in fiction genres. Similarly future research could explore the similarities and differences in the gender and sexuality norms exhibited amongst Chinese and Western societies and how these norms and potential challenges to these norms could be both included and derived from various forms of fiction.

Finally, due to the nature of Judith Butler's theory of performativity and largely, queer theory, future research might take a less deconstructionist approach towards gender. Using a more pragmatic approach such as following West and Zimmerman (1987) may yield greater empirical promise in future analyses.

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