

BOYS' LOVE (DANMEI) FICTION ON THE CHINESE INTERNET:
WASABI KUN, THE BL FORUM YOUNG NOBLEMAN CHANGPEI, AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF AN ONLINE LITERARY PHENOMENON

by

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Abstract

This study is a brief history of the development of danmei 耽美, or Boys' Love (BL) fiction on mainland Chinese websites. Focusing on Gongzi Changpei 公子长佩 (Young Nobleman Changpei) – a danmei forum –and writings by the danmei author, Wasabi Kun 芥末君, it conducts a case study of danmei as a literary phenomenon, encompassing factors such as industry, aesthetics, and community, including reader response.

In sketching the ecology of one type of online literature, this study draws on primary literary texts, online reader responses by so-called fu nǚ 腐女 (“rotten girls”), industry data, and previous scholarly studies. This thesis contains a glossary of terms and two non-exhaustive tables (in the appendices): one details the main websites/forums where the writing, reading, discussion, and circulation of danmei fiction takes place; the other lists representative novels from 2001 to 2015.

Chapter 2 offers an introduction to the Chinese BL forum Gongzi Changpei (Young Nobleman Changpei), detailing the subgenres on offer, analyzing a selection of popular novels, and describing the forums' operations. Chapter 3 offers a detailed analysis of the career and reception of author Wasabi Kun 芥末君, as well as of Kun's serialized novel *If You Have Been Through Winter* 如你走过冬天 (2015-2016). Through analyzing Kun's work, I show a line of development in the genre. I argue that Kun tries to avoid creating simply a hybrid combination of various genre elements or a series of utopian but improbable cute stories. Instead, Kun's novel emphasizes romance and individual growth, refined language and emotional realism.

In tracing a broader history of the genre, I argue that danmei fiction is being influenced by Japanese and Western models at a time when Chinese women are pursuing non-traditional gender roles and becoming comfortable discussing and reading about sex. Yet after a dozen

years of development, the mainstream of online writing shows that even as the novels become more entertaining, fewer focus solely on homosexual relationships. More authors are writing novels with hybrid genre elements, in which the familiar Boys' Love tropes of sex and pleasure are becoming more or less sidelined.

Lay Summary

This study draws on previous scholarly studies, industry data, and online sources to revisit the history of and trace recent developments in the online development of Chinese-language danmei (BL, or Boys' Love) fiction. The origin, growth and popularization in mainland China of this category of literature is closely tied to the growth of internet culture, and the main sites of its production and consumption are online.

Danmei, literarily “addicted to beauty,” is the Chinese term for a category of comics, novels, and other stories that focus on romantic and erotic encounters between male characters. Danmei fiction is largely written by and for females.

This study analyzes the literary and cultural values associated with danmei through a case study of a specific online forum Gongzi Changpei (Young Nobleman Changpei) and the popular author Wasabi Kun. It contains a glossary, and the appendices include and two non-exhaustive tables: one details the main websites/forums where the writing, reading, discussion etc. of danmei fiction take place; the other lists representative novels from 2001 to 2015.

Preface

This thesis is original and unpublished work by the author, Xin Chen. All secondary sources used are identified in footnotes and listed at the end in “Sources.” Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Terms in bold are explained in the Glossary.

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Glossary

- **BE**, abbreviation for Bad Ending (of novels and short stories). The opposite of **HE**, or Happy Ending.
- **Blx**, acronym for boli xin (玻璃心), literally “heart made of glass.” Used to describe people with an overly sensitive ego and hence easily hurt.
- **Boys’ Love**, or **boy-love**, **BL**, used as an umbrella term that addresses contents of male-male romance and erotica, mostly by and for females. The word contrary to this is **BG**, **boy-girl**, referring to heterosexual oriented.
- **BT**: abbreviation of biantai (变态), meaning “pervert,” “perverted,” or “abnormal.”
- **Chuanyue** 穿越, time travel. Internet time travel fiction usually features a protagonist who has left the era that s/he lives in, and breaks certain natural laws to travel to a different time.¹ The genre of time travel could be further divided: spiritual travel is referred to as hunchuan 魂穿, meaning the protagonist’s spirit travelling to a different time or place. Shenchuan 身穿 means the body and the spirit travel together to a different time or place. The newest subgenre of “chuanyue” is the protagonist becoming a character in a book (穿书), or a video game etc.
- **CP**: an abbreviation for “coupling” or “character pairing”, borrowed from Japanese; an English approximation would be “shipping” (from “relationship”). The scope of the pairing ranges from characters in fiction, comics, other media (film and television) to real persons. The relationship (romantic or sexual) is either explained or hinted as romantic by the creator,

¹ Li, Peiqian 李佩谦, “网络穿越小说局限性反思” [Reflections on limitations of the internet literature genre of time travel fiction], *Chuangzuo yu pinglun* 创作与评论, issue 20 (2014): 34.

or imagined by fans. The nature of the relationship could be homosexual or heterosexual.²

Fan fiction featuring real-life persons are the so-called RPS (real person slash).

- **Dada, taitai** (大大, 太太): General internet lingo. In online literary forums, used to address anyone capable or knowledgeable, especially an author or an active user who has expertise in the topic. 大大 is often used to address males, and 太太 females.
- **Danmei** (耽美), literally “addicted to beauty.” Danmei fiction refers to “romantic same-sex encounters between male protagonists, often accompanied with more or less explicit yet highly aestheticized descriptions of sexual activity” (Hockx, 2015). Japanese terms that refer to similar content include shōnen-ai (少年愛) manga, yaoi and the Boys’ Love (manga and novels) genre.³ The Chinese Danmei market distinguished between qingshui wen 清水文 [clear-water fiction] and rou wen 肉文 [flesh fiction], which corresponds to fiction contains few or many descriptions of sex. Most danmei stories fall somewhere in between the two categories.
- **Drama CD**: See **Guangbo ju**.
- **Erci yuan** (二次元): two-dimensional space, in the narrow sense means ACGN (Anime, comic, games and light novels). Erci yuan wenhua 二次元文化 [literally, 2D culture] is based on and spread through the novels, manga, anime and games featuring a “fictional world view 架空世界观.”⁴ In the broad sense, anything that happens on the internet and does not relate directly to reality can be called *erci yuan*.

² Selectively translated from the entry in Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, “女性向 耽美文化” [Female-oriented Danmei Culture], *Frontiers* 天涯 Issue 3 (2016), 181.

³ Ibid 175.

⁴ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), “2015 年中国青少年上网行为研究报告” [2015 Annual Report of Youth and Young Adults’ Internet Usage Behaviours],

- **Fanwai** (番外): Side story. A loan word from Japanese, refers to a story that follows the development of the main story but is not directly related to its development or conclusion. Fanwai could feature a non-leading character in the fiction, or give out extra information on leading characters.⁵
- **Fu nǚ** (腐女), deriving from Japanese *fujoshi* 腐女子, both the Chinese and the Japanese terms translate as “rotten girls.” The Japanese term refers to “females who are enthusiastic about *yaoi*, a genre of fan-produced fiction and art, usually manga, that places established male characters from commercial anime, manga and video games into unintended romantic relationships.”⁶ In the Chinese contexts, *fu nǚ* has a broader meaning – females who read either (or both) fan works and original works featuring male-male romance and erotica, or those who fantasizes about unintended romantic relationships between males.
- **Geren zhi** (个人志), often abbreviated as *gezhi* (个志). Sometimes the term **Tongren zhi** 同人志 is used to express the same meaning. It means self-published works without official book numbers, circulating within a circle of fans.
- **Gong/top/semi** (攻), **shou/bottom/uke** (受): a distinction of sexual roles carried on from the Japanese BL tradition, which refer to the penetrating role versus the penetrated role. The distinction between the top and the bottom is usually interpreted as a heterosexual construction. Galbraith has described some typical character traits associated with “top” as:

<https://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxbzg/qsnbg/201608/P020160812393489128332.pdf>, 33. (Accessed May 27, 2017.)

⁵ See following sources: “番外是什么意思” [What is the meaning of fanwai?], 百度知道 [Baidu Questions] <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/71798870.html>; See also, Wang Li 王黎, *The Creation Tendency of Network Literature of Female Writers* 女性网络文学作者的创作倾向, M.A. thesis, Shandong University, 2010, 24-25. Wang summarizes that in Chinese internet literature, 番外 can be added to the beginning, in the middle of, or at the end of a novel. Given the fact that it is a self-standing short story, it can choose a new narrator, jumps backward or forward in time etc.

⁶ Galbraith, Patrick W., “*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among ‘Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan,” *Signs*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (September 2011): 212.

“narcissistic, cruel, exhausted, younger, straight, and loser”; those associated with “bottom” are: “seductive, old man, cool, narcissistic, buff, laudable, impish, queen and princes.”⁷ His summarization applies well to the many Chinese danmei novels. However, the top/bottom roles do not necessarily correspond to characterization widely associated with the male/female gender.⁸ For example, a penetrating role may be physically strong, but also lack a sense of security and have a tendency to weep, whereas the penetrated role may be rational and emotionally stable. (An example of this pattern appears in Wasabi Kun’s novel *Sternstunden in Xiang Zhen’s Life* 项真的群星闪耀时). Nevertheless, quite often, the top role is characterized as dominant character and the bottom role as submissive, in consistency with a heterosexual hierarchy.

- **Guangbo ju** (广播剧), or **drama CD**, a practice inspired by Japanese “drama CD” with some difference. In China’s online community, it refers to the performance of voice actors/actresses based on an existent online novel. There is no or limited visual element to the final product. It is often non-commercial, and created out of fondness towards the novel and have acquired authorization from the novel’s author.⁹
- **H**: Huang 黄 (yellow), “erotic, pornographic.”
- **HE**: See **BE**.
- **Hexie** (和谐) (harmonious), 河蟹 (river crab). *Hexie* 河蟹 is a pun on *hexie* 和谐 that mocks Chinese government’s effort to “harmonize” or censor online content.¹⁰ If certain words or

⁷ Galbraith, Patrick W., *Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among “Rotten Girls” in Contemporary Japan*, *Signs*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (September 2011): 221.

⁸ Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, “女性向 耽美文化”[Female-oriented Danmei Culture], *Frontiers* 天涯 Issue 3 (2016):180.

⁹ Based on entry in Wang Yusu 王玉王, Ye Xuqiao 叶栩乔 and 肖映萱 Xiao Yingxuan, *Tongren fensi wenhua* 同人 粉丝文化 [Fan Production Fan Culture], *Yanjiu yu piping* 研究与批评 (April 2016), 183.

¹⁰ see <https://www.chinasmack.com/glossary> for entry 河蟹.

contents are 和谐 / 河蟹, it means they are erased, replaced or taken off line due to Chinese government's censorship or done so to avoid censorship.

- **Keng** (坑): Internet lingo specific to online literary websites, literally means “pit” or “hole.”

In Chinese online literary websites, novels are often serialized, and authors update their stories regularly or irregularly. In this context, it means a story unfinished in realization. Tiao keng (跳坑), literally “to jump into pit,” means to start reading and following an unfinished story in serialization. Dun keng (蹲坑), literally “squatting inside a pit” means a reader has finished reading the part of the story that was already published and is waiting for the author to publish more.

- **Luzhu** (撸主): aka **louzhu** 楼主 or **LZ**, a satirical way of addressing the user who posts the first thread in an online forum. Literally, 撸 means “to roll up.” It could also mean (for males) “to masturbate.” Since the popularization of the Chinese online game “LOL” (often referred to as “撸啊撸”), it could mean “to play (a computer game).”

- **Meng** (萌): derives from Japanese word *moe*. Moe, according to Patrick W. Galbraith, is affective response triggered towards a character (“a written description, drawn image, an actual person reduced to a character, or anthropomorphized animals, plants, machines, concepts, and so on”¹¹ – so practically everything). This ability to see moe in anything is based in fujoshi’s ability of “fantasizing about *yaoi* narratives,” as set in a space of imagination. In the Chinese context, “meng” is used both as a verb and an adjective. As a verb, “meng CP” means to be fond of/affective towards a romantically-involved couple. As an adjective, “meng” is used more broadly, simply meaning “cute,” “likable.” For an

¹¹ Patrick W. Galbraith, “Moe talk,” an essay in *Boys’ Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture and Community in Japan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 156.

example that put “meng” in the Chinese language context, refer to “meng niang baike” (萌娘百科) [The Encyclopedia of Moe and Feminization]¹², a Chinese-language encyclopedia dedicated to ACG culture.

- **Nüe** (虐): as a verb: to “punish¹³,” to put through sufferings (especially mentally, sometimes physically too); as an adjective: heart-wrenching (because of the sufferings the characters go through).
- **nü xing xiang** (女性向) or **nü pin** (女频): from Japanese 女性向け, means “female-oriented, targeted at females.”¹⁴ “Girl-oriented” (Fran Martin’s translation) or targeting female audiences. Despite that many readers and authors of internet literature are adolescent or young adults; “female-oriented” would probably better describe the audience. Certain online literature is considered female-oriented if it “strives to satisfy the desire projection and emotional patterns of females, genres include danmei, romance 言情 and tongren.” **nü pin** (女频), abbreviation for nüsheng pindao 女生频道 translates as female channels, refers “sections on commercial literary websites that devotes to female-oriented novels.”¹⁵
- **Nan xing xiang** (男性向) or **nan pin** (男频): opposite of nü xing xiang (女性向) or nü pin (女频), means male-oriented or targeting male audiences.
- **Rou** (肉): Flesh. In the context **BL** fiction, rou means sexual contents. Correspondingly, rouwen 肉文 means fictions are erotic or contain a big amount of sexual descriptions; “ample flesh” 大肉 usually edges on erotica.

¹² One entry on the encyclopedia, 万物皆可萌 [Everything can be seen from a “moe” perspective] echoes the broad application of *moe* in Japanese, <https://zh.moegirl.org/zh-hans/%E4%B8%87%E7%89%A9%E7%9A%86%E5%8F%AF%E8%90%8C>. Accessed August 23, 2017.

¹³ Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (2013): 80.

¹⁴ Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, “女性向 耽美文化”[Female-oriented Danmei Culture], *Frontiers* 天涯, Issue 3 (2016):175.

¹⁵ Ibid, 176.

- **Sao wen** (扫文): Quick survey of (online) fictions. The extent of details these quick surveys goes into varies depends on specific reviewer.
- **Shuangwen** (爽文): (derogatory) literature (often Chinese online literature) written to fulfill fantasy of readers that lacks artistic value.
- **Shun mao** (顺毛): literally means to stroke fur of a pet. It means to comfort an agitated or irritated person.
- **Su** (苏): an unrealistic and unconvincing characterization by depicting the characters as overly perfect and excellent (often at a young age). It originates from the English term Mary Sue (Mali su 玛丽苏). Chinese internet users also invented the category Tom Sue (Tangmu Su 汤姆苏), which refers to male characters of similar features.
- **Tongren** (同人): from Japanese word *Dōjin* 同人. In China's online community, it refers to "reproduction based on (often popular culture) source texts; it borrows from existent characterization, main plot and other settings; the formats of reproduction includes novels, drawings, video clips etc."¹⁶ Please note that while *Dōjin* stories in Japan can be original or aniparo (アニメパロ, meaning derivative works), in mainland China, the term "tongren" is strictly used to mean "derivative works" based on a source text (literary, anime, comics, TV drama, film etc.) This is partly the reason why an earlier term to address the rotten girls is "tongren nǚ 同人女," as most of the earliest Chinese-language BL writings are based on source texts.¹⁷ "Tongren xiaoshuo" 同人小说 means derivative writings based on a source text. However, the exception here is "tongren zhi" 同人志 (simplified Chinese) or "tongren

¹⁶ Based on entry in Wang Yusu 王玉王, Ye Xuqiao 叶栩乔 and 肖映萱 Xiao Yingxuan, *Tongren fensi wenhua* 同人粉丝文化 [Fan Production Fan Culture], *Yanjiu yu pipin* 研究与批评 (April 2016), 183.

¹⁷ Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, "女性向 耽美文化" [Female-oriented Danmei Culture], *Frontiers* 天涯, Issue 3 (2016):178.

zhi” 同人誌 (traditional Chinese), which adopts a similar meaning as Japanese *Dōjinshi*, and could be either original or derivative texts. Tongren fiction 同人小说 could be BL or BG oriented. As of the moment, majority of China’s tongren fiction are of BL nature.¹⁸

- **Tongren zhi** (同人志), from Japanese *Dōjinshi* 同人誌 (amateur fanzines¹⁹), in Japan, “*Dōjinshi* is zine-like publications of highly varied quality, the main non-commercial channel of distributing BL narratives.”²⁰ In the Chinese-language context, Tongren zhi can be either original or based on a source text. According to my observations, in mainland China, original (not based on any source text), self-published works are increasingly called “geren zhi” 个人志, while “tongren zhi” 同人志 is reserved for more often for derivative works based on a source text.
- **Tu cao** (吐槽): literally “spit invective,” means to give negative comments, or to ridicule.
- **yy** (short for **yi yin** 意淫): derogative term, means “to fantasize about, to have (sexual or other) fantasy about.”²¹ Online novels (especially low quality ones) are often criticized for indulging in these fantasy of success, sexual relationships etc.
- **Zhuang B** (装 B): being pretentious/showy. B is euphemism for bi (逼), a vulgar word for vagina. Some netizens replace “B” with “13,” which looks similar.

¹⁸ Ibid, 184.

¹⁹ Note that here “fanzine” refers to both “original compositions” and “works based on a popular original.” Translation based on Akiko Mizoguchi, “Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: a history and subgenres of Yaoi fictions,” *U.S.- Japan Women’s Journal*, issue (2003):54-55.

²⁰ Mark McLelland and James Welker, “An Introduction to ‘Boys’ Love’ in Japan,” an essay in *Boys’ Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture and Community in Japan*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 4.

²¹ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, Ji Yunfei 吉云飞, Li Qiang 李强, Gao Hanning, 高寒凝, “网络文学”[Internet Literature], *Frontiers* 天涯, 2016(06): 176.

Chapter 1: The growth of danmei fiction on the Chinese Internet

1.1. A brief overview of China's online literary websites development, 2000-2017

China's online literature websites have seen much success. Michel Hockx (2013), in the first comprehensive English monograph on the topic, defines Chinese internet literature as "Chinese-language writing, either in established literary genres or in innovative literary forms, written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen."²² Building upon the findings of Hockx and other scholars, this study begins with an overview of the development of China's online literature before turning to examine one of its specific types.

Scholar Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 identifies several main changes during the growth for China's internet literature at the beginning of the millennium: first, readers' primary demand for internet literature to change from expression and communication to leisure and entertainment; second, literary websites replaced BBS (Bulletin Board System) as its main platforms; this led to changes in writing style—the mainstream shifted from "amateur artistic/intellectual-youth" style (业余文青型) to "popular fantasy fiction" (通俗幻想小说).²³ This was followed by the commercialization of major genre novel websites, specifically the VIP pay-to-read model pioneered by the website Starting Point 起点.²⁴ The VIP model continues to serve as the

²² Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4, 217n21.

²³ Shao Yanjun et al. "1984-2016 中国网络文学大事年表" [Chronology of Important Events in Chinese Internet Literature: 1984-2016]. Published through a WeChat official account 媒后台 [Media Backstage], WeChat ID: meihoutaipku, which is the WeChat account of 北大网络文学论坛 [Beijing University Internet Literature Forum]. This comment is inserted in the chronology between year 2001 and 2002.

²⁴ For more information on the "Starting Point Model," see Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, pp. 110-112. To summarize here: most literary websites began as non-commercial. The VIP system was created by the team behind Starting Point. A serialized novel is free for the first dozen or so chapters; then starts to charge a small fee (usually two to five cents) for every thousand words, an income split between the author and the website. To take Jinjiang

foundation of all commercial Chinese literary websites that followed its lead. Commercialized genre novels websites still occupy the center of China's literary website industry, sustaining a mature industry of professional online writers.²⁵

Shengda Group 盛大集团 acquired online literary website Starting Point 起点 in 2004 and established Shengda Literature 盛大文学, aka Cloudary Corporation in 2008 to become the leading industry player.²⁶ Cloudary Corporation quickly established itself as the central figure in the field through acquiring a series of major literary websites and expanded its business model into the so-called “Multiple Copyright Operation Mode” 多版权运营模式. “Multiple Copyright Operation Mode” means that aside from online publishing, Cloudary also aims to fully exploit the revenue potential of its authors' novels through adapting their contents for other forms: publishing online novels offline, adapting online novels into mobile phone games, cartoons and animations, as well as their adaptation into television drama and films.²⁷ In 2015, the value of China's internet literature market was estimated at over 70 billion Chinese yuan (Renminbi), and China's three leading internet corporations— Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) – all owned literary websites.²⁸ Tencent purchased Cloudary Corporation and merged it with its own QQ

(晋江) as an example, to publish VIP articles, the author has to be a contracted author with Jinjiang, but many contracted authors write as amateurs and work full-time jobs.

²⁵ A sign of the industry's prosperity is the publication of guidelines for writing online novels by “Qianhuan bingyun” 千幻冰云 [Ever-varying ice and cloud], a successful online novelist and editor. His book on how to write successful commercial novels, 别说你懂写网文 [You Do Not Know How to Write Internet Literature] (2014) offers a personal yet insider perspective on the relatively new career of online genre novelist.

²⁶ Ni Yiming 倪一鸣, “Shengda Literature's Transformation to A Platform Operator: A Case Study of Shengda Literature's Cloudary” 盛大文学向平台运营商转型之路——浅析盛大文学“云中书城”运营模式, *Publishing Journal* 出版科学, Issue 3, Vol. 22 (2014): 85.

²⁷ Yu Mengxi 于梦溪, *A Study on the Operation of Chinese Network Literature IP* 我国网络文学 IP 运营研究, Nanjing University M.A. thesis, 2016. This study follows the Intellectual Property (IP) operation of both the previous industry leader Cloudary Corporation and the current industry leader China Reading Limited 阅文集团.

²⁸ See He Tianjiao 何天骄, “网络文学 IP 市场‘一超多强’格局逐渐形成” [The gradual formation of one superpower and many great powers in the Intellectual Property Right market of China's Internet Literature], *China Business News* 第一财经日报 (Shanghai), 29 Aug. 2016, A07. This article also quotes an analyst that “the contents of works should be carefully regulated, so as not to touch the ‘red line’. Previous productions that touch on politics

Literature (QQ 文学) to create China Reading Limited 阅文集团 (March, 2015), China's current leader in the internet literature industry. As a subsidiary of Tencent Holdings Limited, China Reading Limited is better equipped than its predecessor to adapt online novels; Tencent has subsidiaries in other entertainment industries, such as Tencent Games, Tencent Comics, and Tencent Pictures.²⁹ According to a 2017 interview with China Reading's vice president Luo Li 罗立, VIP subscription is still the main source of profit for China Reading Limited, but the goal is to decrease its proportion in total profit to around 50% in the upcoming five years, and China Reading is pursuing an IPO (initial public offering) in Hong Kong.³⁰

Starting Point and Jinjiang remain as main genre novel websites in terms of website traffic. Some websites have gone out of popularity, or their rankings have changed. For example, accessed on March 26 2017, the Alexa traffic global rankings of Under the Banyan Tree (榕树下), the **nü xing xiang** 女性向³¹ (female-oriented) site Jinjiang and the **nan xing xiang** 男性向 (male-oriented) site Starting Point are correspondingly 581,272, 3,059 and 7,917. From the data, it is clear that Under the Banyan Tree has largely disappeared from the public view. Both Starting Point and Jinjiang's website visit ranking has dropped since Hockx completed his study. Starting Point has fallen lower than the female-oriented site Jinjiang – from the top hundred within China in 2008 to rank 652 in March, 2017.

and pornography have been 'sternly rectified' 严厉整顿, sounding an alarm to the platforms and authors themselves." This statement seems to confirm Hockx's observation about the importance of "bottom line" 底线 discourse in the state's regulation of online productions.

²⁹ See China Reading Limited's website: www.yuewen.com (accessed April 11, 2017). See also Luo Ti 罗提, Zhang Gan 张乾 and Cui Jiang 崔江, "盛大文学悄然'易主'腾讯文学一家独大 [Quietly Shengda Literature has changed hands, Tencent Literature now dominates the industry], "Huaxi Municipal Newspaper 华西都市报, http://news.xinhuanet.com/info/2015-01/22/c_133937802.htm (accessed on March 30, 2017).

³⁰ See news report by Shi Rui 石睿, "阅文集团 IPO 逻辑何在?" [What is the logic behind China Reading's pursuit going public?] *Cixin Weekly* 财新周刊, <http://companies.caixin.com/2017-04-21/101081283.html> (accessed May 27, 2017).

³¹ All key terms appearing in bold in the main text are defined in the Glossary.

As of December 2016, an estimated 333 million people read internet literature on the computer and 304 million read internet literature on mobile devices; as the growth of the latter is much faster, it is likely that mobile apps will soon become the most used source of access.³² This trend was already noted by Hockx, who expressed hope that this change in consumption habits might spur more literary creativity. Nowadays, most major online novel websites have launched mobile apps,³³ which retain most functions available on the websites. On the “Reading Jinjiang Novels” 晋江小说阅读 app, for example, users can access both the “book store” and “forums”; functions available on websites – commenting, bookmarking, purchasing etc. – are also all available. Apart from reading apps dedicated to one specific site, big corporations have also developed mobile reading apps offering purchase for just about anything: from online serialized novels to paper printed books.³⁴ The mobile apps make reading convenient and help to promote paid, digitalized and legal reading.

Hockx predicted that “online interaction,” which rendered internet literature possible in the first place, will decline due to literature sites adopting the roles of traditional publishers and making digital-born books readily available for consumption in traditional ways: “the habit of going online to join communities where texts are written, read and discussed will not disappear but may well become an activity of a minority of enthusiasts for particular genres or subcultures.”³⁵ The forum of focus in this paper, Young Nobleman Changpei 公子长佩, is dedicated specifically to China’s Boys’ Love (**BL**) genre. Indeed, a decrease in active participation rather than mere consumption has become a concern for commercial literary

³² China Internet Network Information Center, “第 39 次中国互联网络发展状况统计报告” (The 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” published January 2017, <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwtjbg/201701/P020170123364672657408.pdf>, accessed August 1, 2017.

³³ For example, “Starting Point Reading” app 起点读书 for website “Starting Point Chinese Website” 起点中文网, and “Reading Jinjiang Novels” app (晋江小说阅读) for literary website “Jinjiang Literature City” 晋江文学城.

³⁴ Baidu has developed “Baidu Reading” app(百度阅读), while Tencent developed “QQ Reading” app (QQ 阅读).

³⁵ Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*, p.192.

websites. As internet literature reaches a bigger than ever readership and becomes ever more tailored to fit the appetite of consumers, new readers do not necessarily participate at a similar level as before. The head of the Jinjiang Literary City, Iceheart (冰心), mentioned that the active “elite readers” on Jinjiang’s forum shaped Jinjiang as it is today, and predicted that as the literary site drew in a broader and less selective reader group with mobile apps, they would have to wait and see how things come out in the end.³⁶

One telling analyst comment from 2011: “The core competitive strength of internet literary platforms is their ability to create authors (作者资源的造血能力, literally “ability to cultivate new authors and thus new blood”). Yet that ability usually comes from experienced editorial and administrative teams.”³⁷ If online authors are reduced to being a means of production shifting from one popular genre to another, the importance of reader participation decreases. Similar to cases in Japan, the internet in China accelerates “the blurring of boundaries between production vs. consumption, professional vs. amateur.”³⁸ The internet offers a platform that realizes literary dreams of many and invites participation, giving amateur authors the opportunity to become professional or semi-professional writers. However, the state censorship system and the commercialization process could disadvantage authors who fail to generate the most hits, or those who touch on politically or morally sensitive topics, pushing them into a more marginal online space – for example, BL online communities.

³⁶ See chapter “晋江文学城: ‘女性向’文学网站的兴起与现状”[Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of ‘female-oriented’ literary website] in 网络时代的文学引渡 [*Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age*] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).

³⁷ He Tianjiao 何天骄, “网络文学 IP 市场‘一超多强’格局逐渐形成” [The gradual formation of one superpower and many great powers in the Intellectual Property Right market of China’s Internet Literature], *China Business News* 第一财经日报 (Shanghai), 29 Aug. 2016, A07.

³⁸ Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Girls reading Harry Potter, girls writing desire: Amateur manga and shōjō reading practices,” *Girls Reading Girls in Japan*, ed. Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley (Abingdon, U.K: Routledge, 2010), 176.

In citing China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) statistics, Hockx notes a slowdown in Chinese online literature's user growth in the year 2012, especially since 2012 was the year when the number of online shoppers for the first time surpassed the number of internet literature application users in China. CNNIC's data from subsequent years (2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016) shows that the total number of literature-app users has sustained continuous growth on both the computer end, and, especially, the mobile end. Except briefly for mobile users in the first half year of 2014, the number of internet literature users has never again surpassed the number of online shoppers.³⁹ Hockx also points out limitations of CNNIC's statistics: they cannot accumulate data from all literary websites, especially not from unregistered non-commercial ones.⁴⁰ Several forums discussed in this study operate unregistered. In addition, for the category of BL, blogs and microblogs are active sites of sharing writings, whose existence is not reflected in CNNIC's data.

According to CNNIC statistics, younger internet users have easier access to internet literature and stronger financial ability to pay for online entertainment.⁴¹ In 2015, the "Annual Report of Youth and Young Adults' Internet Usage Behaviours" for the first time devoted a whole chapter to "youth and young adults' internet cultural entertainment behaviour analysis," further divided into four sections: "online literary content preferences," "online animation and cartoon content preferences," "online film and television content preferences" and "the ACGN (Anime, comic, games and light novels) cultural development in internet culture."⁴²

³⁹ The mobile user data appears first in CNNIC's July 2014 report, and has been available independent of computer user data ever since. See China Internet Network Information Center, "中国互联网络发展状况统计报告" [Statistical Report on Internet Development in China], published on January 2014, July 2014, January 2015, January 2016, July 2016, January 2017.

⁴⁰ Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press), 186-187.

⁴¹ China Internet Network Information Center's latest report available, "2015 年中国青少年上网行为研究报告" [2015 Annual Report of Youth and Young Adults' Internet Usage Behaviours], p.33, (accessed May 27, 2017). By CNNIC's definition, youth and young adults refer to age group between 6 and 25 years old.

⁴² Ibid, 27-32.

1.2. Defining *danmei*: China's Boys' Love novels and short stories

In contrast to websites that host a wide range of literary genres, this study focuses on a forum dedicated to one specific category—Boys' Love (BL) fiction—and specifically BL novels and short stories that are either original or fan fiction. This forum used to be non-commercial, but turned commercial in June 2017.

The English word for the genre, Boys' Love, is used as an umbrella term that addresses contents of male-male romance and erotica, mostly written, scholars believe, by and for straight females.⁴³ In Chinese the word is **danmei** (耽美), literally “addicted to beauty,” which often refers to “male-male homoerotic fiction.”⁴⁴ Danmei is thus roughly equivalent to Boys' Love, or Yaoi in Japanese.⁴⁵ Researchers have pointed out that China's danmei genre is influenced by both Japanese BL manga and fiction, and to a lesser extent Western slash, but has developed its own characteristics.⁴⁶

⁴³ Despite identifying the marginal male-gender who often “assume a female avatar or pseudonym” (Xiqing Zheng, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, 2016, 164), “some gay or lesbian” readers (Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 57), or “sexual minority” participants (Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, “Danmei, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China,” 2016, 251), scholars of *danmei* generally agree that it is mainly females who write and consume *danmei* texts. See, for example: Xiqing Zheng, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, 163; Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 56; Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, “Danmei, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China,” 253.) Based on an informal survey of discussion posts, readers themselves seem less concerned about males impersonating females in the danmei community than about female authors pretending to be male in order to attract readers. For example, see this discussion post on Jinjiang forum: “(Secret confession to a tree hole) Ever since I implied that I was male, readers have grown much more enthusiastic than before,” posted anonymously, <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=2&id=2578584&page=0>, accessed on July 24, 2017.

⁴⁴ Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*. (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2013), 15 & 53. See also Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 114.

⁴⁵ For example, on a website dedicated to reviews of (mainly) Chinese BL novels Saowen xiaoyuan 扫文小院 [Quick-Take Courtyard], many of Japanese BL novel writer 木原音瀬's novels are added by website users: <http://saowen.net/authors/view/8> (accessed May 27, 2017). On Baidu forum, there is a post bar dedicated to this author too, see 木原音瀬吧 [Narise Konohara Bar] <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E6%9C%A8%E5%8E%9F%E9%9F%B3%E6%BF%91> (accessed May 27, 2017).

⁴⁶ The origin of the three terms is discussed in this Chinese essay: Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, “女性向 耽美文化”[Female-oriented Danmei Culture], 天涯 *Frontiers*, Issue 3, (2016), 176-178.

Hockx defines danmei as being about “romantic same-sex encounters between male protagonists, often accompanied with more or less explicit yet highly aestheticized descriptions of sexual activity,” and further describes it as “the most prominent transgressive genre that has achieved gradual acceptance in recent years and is by now also tolerated (at least online) by the state system.”⁴⁷ The danmei genre is subdivided into qingshui wen 清水文 (literally: clear-water fiction), meaning fiction with little sexual description, and rou wen 肉文 (literally: flesh fiction), meaning erotic or pornographic fiction. Most danmei fiction falls somewhere in between the two. BL-oriented **Tongren fiction**⁴⁸ 同人小说 (fan fiction) often envisions romantic or sexualized encounters of two male characters; the division between original danmei and tongren danmei is mainly if there is a source text. Both may be, but are not necessarily, explicitly erotic.

It was in the 1990s that the consumption of Japanese manga and fictions in both Taiwan⁴⁹ and, later, in mainland China⁵⁰ gave rise to similar writings in the Chinese language world. China’s danmei writings began mainly in the form of tongren texts, based on Japanese manga and anime; later Chinese writers started to develop their own original stories and styles.⁵¹ In Japan, Yaoi fiction first appeared in the 1960s, but only became popular and mainstream in the 1990s as commercial publishers became involved.⁵² China’s original BL writing emerged around the turn of the 21st century. Around the turn of the millennium, its popularization was initially

⁴⁷ Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (Columbia University Press 2015), 114.

⁴⁸ Tongren could refer to both BL or **BG** (Boy-Girl, or heterosexual) oriented fan works. In this paper, on all occasions the word “tongren” is brought up, it specifically refers to only danmei tongren.

⁴⁹ Fran Martin, “Several interviewees pointed out that commercial BL’s popularity boom in TW can in fact be traced back to the rise of the local **tongrenzhi** (dōjinshi, self-published works) subculture during the early 1990s: the commercial publishing industry followed the lead of fan production.” “Girls who love boys’ love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2012:3.

⁵⁰ “In 1991-1992, Japanese *tanbi* manga series began to spread to mainland China via Taiwan.” Feng Jin, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2013), 55

⁵¹ Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, “女性向 耽美文化”[Female-oriented Danmei Culture], *Frontiers* 天涯, 2016 Issue 3, pp.176-178.

⁵² See Akiko Mizoguchi, “Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: a history and subgenres of Yaoi fictions,” *U.S. - Japan Women’s Journal*, 2003 issue, 49-75. It details BL’s development and subgenres in Japan and clarifies the nuances between historical and current Japanese terms for Boys Love (BL, yaoi, tanbi, etc.).

propelled by pirated print books. Before online danmei writing turned commercial in 2008, mainland danmei fiction was generally self-published (Geren zhi 个人志) with the author's authorization or through Jinjiang website's "Print on demand" 定制印刷 service⁵³; pirated online and in print; infrequently published through mainland publishers;⁵⁴ and published through legitimate Taiwan publishers.⁵⁵ As mainland female-oriented literary websites, particularly Jinjiang, turned commercial beginning in January 2008,⁵⁶ commercial literary websites began to act as online publisher, and intermediary between print publisher and author. One researcher on Taiwan's BL culture noted in 2013 that it "encompasses a range of texts, practices, and sites far exceeding its original instance in the Japanese comics,"⁵⁷ a summarization that applies to mainland China too. One key difference is that some danmei novels available to readers in Taiwan cannot easily be published (officially) in print in mainland China due to censorship. The "opaque censorship system" makes publishing outlook "unpredictable," with "sporadic

⁵³ See Sun Jianing 孙嘉宁, *Research on Publication of Tanbi Literature* "耽美文学"出版研究. MA thesis, Southwest Jiaotong University, 2012, 9. Sun further explains that the author initiates the "custom printing" process and the service requires a minimum order of 10 copies from readers. According to 管三((Literally "Rule 3", is short for "administrator No.3"管理员 3 号 of Jinjiang website), this service was terminated in 2014 after a BG writer with Jinjiang was arrested for selling pornographic writings. See chapter "晋江文学城: '女性向'文学网站的兴起与现状"[Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of 'female-oriented' literary website] in *网络时代的文学引渡 [Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age]* (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.21-23. Sun considers *The Stories of Qinglian* 青莲记事 (2006) to be the first mainland publication of danmei fiction, though the protagonist is a female soul in a male body. In addition, Editors interviewed by Sun told her that, because of censorship, it is much more effort-consuming to publish a danmei book than any other books.

⁵⁵ Uei-Shiang 威向有限公司(established in 2002), Long-ma 龍馬出版社(established in 2003), and Freshjoy 鮮歡文化 (subsidiary of Fresh Culture Group 鮮鮮文化集團, website: myfreshnet.com 鮮網; subsidiary established in 2003) are among the Taiwan publishers that published mainland danmei authors before those authors could profit from their works on the mainland. Some still publish mainland BL authors. Authors that published with them before 2006 include: An ye liu guang 暗夜流光 [Flowing Light in Dark Night], Fengnong 风弄 and Yirenbei 易人北. For a brief review history of Taiwan BL publishers, see 楊若慈 Jo-Tzu Yang, "The Acceptance of the Culture of Japanese Boy's Love in Taiwan: A Study on Taiwan Romance Novel of Boy's Love" 日本 BL 文化在台灣の受容: 以台灣 BL 言情小說為考察對象, *Journal of Studies of Everyday Life* 庶民文化研究, No.5, March 212, pp.1-25. Yang believes that 2000-2005 was the peak of BL fiction publishing in Taiwan, and that the industry has gone into decline since 2005.

⁵⁶ See Shao Yanjun et al. "1984-2016 中国网络文学大事年表" [Chronology of Important Events in Chinese Internet Literature: 1984-2016].

⁵⁷ Fran Martin, "Girls who love boys' love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 2012:3, 367.

alleviation of content control.”⁵⁸ Mark McLelland and James Welker have pointed out that popular Japanese BL manga “as with other genres, may be recreated across a range of media,”⁵⁹ but in mainland China, BL content is not easily adapted, which makes BL commercial writing less lucrative. In one web drama adaption of a popular BL novel, *Reborn as a Celebrated Superstar* 重生之名流巨星, the producer obscured the homosexual relationship and turned it into a heterosexual romance. Another popular web drama adaptation, *Addicted* 上瘾,⁶⁰ was taken off the internet after it rose in popularity.

Michel Hockx and Jin Feng have both written on the issue of Chinese government’s censorship of internet literature.⁶¹ To briefly summarize their findings: in August 2007, the National office for “Eliminating Pornography and Suppressing Illegality” (全国扫黄办公室)⁶² issued an urgent statement about restricting online obscene and pornographic fiction – especially 40 pornographic novels and 348 websites that disseminated such materials. This is likely the first time for online novels to come under scrutiny on a national scale. In practice, the process went like the following: local offices for “Eliminating Pornography and Suppressing Illegality,” with

⁵⁸ Zheng Xiqing, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, University of Washington Ph.D. dissertation, 2016, p.236. I accessed online lists of the latest 200 book contracts Jinjiang’s authors received (print books) as of July 25, 2017. On the mainland publishing list (simplified Chinese publishing), between August 16, 2016 and July 11, 2017, out of 200 contracts, 17 are danmei-themed, and 2 do not feature a romantic couple; the rest are heterosexual romances. On the overseas and traditional Chinese publishing list, between March 30 2016 and May 25 2017, out of 200 contracts, 25 are danmei-themed and 3 are Baihe 百合(Lily = lesbian) themed; the rest are heterosexual romances. I believe the percentage of danmei would be much higher if censorship were to loosen, considering the thriving self-publishing sector of the genre. See <http://www.jjwxc.net/copyright.php?publisherid=1>, and <http://www.jjwxc.net/copyright.php?publisherid=2>, both accessed on July 25, 2017.

⁵⁹ Mark McLelland and James Welker, “An Introduction to ‘Boys’ Love’ in Japan,” *Boys’ Love Manga and Beyond: History, Culture and Community in Japan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 4.

⁶⁰ Adapted from author Chaijidan 柴鸡蛋’s BL novel *Are you addicted?* 你丫上瘾了?

⁶¹ See “The Politics and Economics of Web Publishing” section in Jin Feng’s monograph *Romancing the Internet*, 2013, 21-28. See chapter 3 “The Bottom Line” in Michel Hockx’s monograph *Internet Literature*, 2015, 108-130.

⁶² Hockx points out that this National office is housed at the “the General Administration of Press and Publishing”(GAPP, 新闻出版总署). Both scholars note that the latter is going to merge with the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT, 国家广播电影电视总局) to become the new State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 国家新闻出版广电总局) in 2013.

assistance from local governments, would order the websites within the region to delete the 40 novels immediately. Then, the local government departments in charge of publishing (新闻出版部门) were in charge of checking the websites, and those websites that failed to comply with the rules would receive “administrative penalties”(行政处罚).⁶³ Feng notes that the government applied “stringent political control” on the internet, but also was “increasingly supportive of web publishing.”⁶⁴ In years 2010 and 2011, GAPP regularly published “blacklists of ‘website distributing obscene and pornographic content.’” Hockx’s interview with a GAPP official in 2011 suggests that internet users could file complaints against content online. The complaints could be filed both directly to GAPP (through their website) or through literary websites’ report links (a prerequisite for obtaining an internet publishing license). The official also acknowledges the existence of specific key word censoring, which is built in to the website using software by the website owners, in order to comply with state requirements.

Regarding the practice of specific sites, their self-censorship and site regulations are also changing to adapt to the state requirements. Take Jinjiang for example, Jin Feng notes that key word (“sensitive word”) censoring by website software is adopted, report links of inappropriate content is provided on the website.⁶⁵ In 2014, the “Cyberspace purge”(净网) campaign swept the internet and influenced almost every single literary website, among them Jinjiang. Shao Yanjun and her students interviewed Iceheart (冰心) and “(website) administrator No.3” (管三), two main runners/owners of the Jinjiang website, who explained the impact of the 2014 “Cyberspace

⁶³ Wang Feng, 四十部色情小说，绝对查禁[Forty pornographic novels, completely banned], *Southern Metropolis Daily* 南方都市报, <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2007-08-30/092712476909s.shtml>, posted on August 30, 2007, accessed August 23, 2017.

⁶⁴ Jin quotes the public director of Shengda Literature Wang Jing 王晶.

⁶⁵ Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 2013, p.23.

Purge” campaign and how they responded to the campaign.⁶⁶ Among others, Jinjiang “textually locked up” many novel chapters – meaning that the chapters are blocked from the public until the authors finish revising the chapters. In addition, Jinjiang developed a “三审机制” (triple censoring system). Jinjiang invites ordinary readers to censor all new publications online, and all newly published novel chapters have to be reviewed by three netizens before they are visible to the public. In doing so, reviewers gained Jinjiang coins (晋江币), which can be used to purchase VIP chapters on the Jinjiang website. Two things should be noted about the “triple censoring system:” firstly, it echoes the censoring system of the traditional print publication in China. Most recently, on August 15, 2017, SAPPRFT made an announcement titled 关于重申“三审三校”制度要求暨开展专项检查工作的通知 [Re-affirming (the importance of) the “triple censor and triple proofreading system” and announcing the start of a new round of inspection].⁶⁷ According to this announcement, print publishers/local publishing departments/SAPPRFT will respectively conduct inspections from August through October. Through adopting a self-censoring system that also requires three censors like that of the print publishers, Jinjiang tries to comply with the state requirements.⁶⁸ Since then, the “triple censoring system” seems to have further developed, according to a discussion between Jinjiang authors and Jinjiang’s online customer service (客服)

⁶⁶ See chapter “晋江文学城: ‘女性向’文学网站的兴起与现状”[Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of ‘female-oriented’ literary website] in 网络时代的文学引渡 [*Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age*] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).

⁶⁷ State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, 关于重申“三审三校”制度要求暨开展专项检查工作的通知[Re-affirming (the importance of) the “triple censor and triple proofreading system” and announcing the start of a new round of inspection], posted on August 15, 2017, <http://www.sapprft.gov.cn/sapprft/contents/6588/347058.shtml>, accessed August 23, 2017.

⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the censor process in print publication is obviously much stricter than the online censor conducted by netizens. In the former case, each editor is held responsible for the books they censor; whereas in the latter case, it is still mainly the website that is held responsible.

on the Jinjiang forum from April 2016.⁶⁹ In answering an author's question about the censoring process, a customer service account gave official answers: Chinese character “审”(“inspect” or “censor”) in color blue, refers to the first round of censoring, which usually does not apply to Jinjiang's contracted authors; Chinese characters “网审”(“online censoring”) in color red, refers to censoring by netizens, a step that applies to all novels of all authors; Chinese characters “待高审”(“awaits senior censoring”) in color red, means that there is a suspicion of pornographic content, which requires senior censoring (高审); as for the “审” in color green that appears next to any chapter title, it means if the author clicks on this button, this chapter will go into censoring process upon their requests.

During the 2014 Cyberspace Purge, Young Nobleman Changpei also went through a process of self-censoring. According to a forum post, the censored content include but are not limited to “erotic writing,” “writing that involves gang members or politics,” and “writing that includes child abuse, incest or any other amoral contents.” The moderators called authors to edit their own posts and the moderators were checking and editing the posts themselves. While erotic writing has somewhat resurfaced on Gongzi Changpei, my impression based on limited reading is that politics and gang member themed writings have not. In contrast to the more complicated system developed by the commercial website Jinjiang, the BL forum Young Nobleman Changpei has a simpler system based on forum rules, user report and moderator arbitration. The forum rules clearly state that certain types of topics/behaviours/content are banned. For example, topics relating to heterosexual romance and politics; content such as pornographic writing or kinky tropes (including male giving birth or **ABO**) are banned; any sexual description involving the

⁶⁹ See thread entitled “红审蓝审和绿审有什么不一样” [What is the difference between “red censor,” “blue censor” and “green censor”?], *Jinjiang Forum*, posted April, 2016, <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=17&boardpagemsg=2&id=418641>, accessed August 23, 2017.

children (less than 16 years of age) are banned etc. The forum rules are gradually built and supplemented. For example, initially the age limit ban on sexual writing involving children was set at 14 years' old or younger, which is the same age that the state law set for child pornography.⁷⁰ Later on, the age limit was raised to discourage writing involving underage characters.

1.3. Locating online existence and development of danmei fiction through main forums, websites and significant works

As original danmei fiction and tongren danmei fiction have mainly developed on internet websites and forums, a first step toward understanding the genre and its author/reader community is to identify important historical and current online websites and forums. In addition, to help understand the genre, it would be helpful to look at important novels published over time.

This section contains a brief narrative history of significant developments in the danmei fiction industry, including the publication of significant novels and the appearance, disappearance, and innovations of websites and forums. It also contains information about my methodology in compiling the tables of novels and websites/forums that appear in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. In compiling this data, I have heavily relied on the following sources:

- a. “中国网络文学大事年表”[A chronology of important events for China's Internet Literature] by Shao Yanjun et al., mentioned above;

⁷⁰ Hockx has noted that two law statutes in China (dated 2004 and 2010) “stipulate more severe punishments for disseminating pornography to those under eighteen and for producing and disseminating child pornography (defined as involving individuals under the age of fourteen.)” *Internet Literature*, p.118.

- b. Netizens' answers to the question “网上有哪些腐女聚集地?”[What are the online sites where **fu nü** (rotten girls) congregate?] on the Chinese question-and-answer website Zhihu 知乎 (literally, “Do you know?”);⁷¹
- c. Various danmei websites and forums for texts and discussions, including: Jinjiang literature website, various sections of the Jinjiang forum, the Young Nobleman Changpei 公子长佩 forum, a few Baidu post bars 百度贴吧 (literally Baidu post bars, translates Baidu web forums), Sina Weibo 新浪微博 (China's main microblogging website), and Lofter (a blog site under internet company NetEase 网易);
- d. Digital internet archive – the Wayback Machine.⁷² I used this site to track old announcements on websites Jinjiang and Lucifer-club, as well as material on myfreshnet.com, a site that closed due to bankruptcy;
- e. Domain ownership search tool Domaintools.⁷³ I used Domaintools to verify the location of registration for websites and forums. As noted later in this study, some forums have foreign IP addresses.

Among the above, Shao Yanjun's study is the most comprehensive chronology I have seen on the topic. Shao explains her sources as based on researchers' own observations, CNNIC reports and information accumulated from online literature forums. Shao adds that the study was also reviewed and edited by several creators of important online literary websites. The chronology includes notable events and novels of all online literary genres. Table 4 (“Selected

⁷¹ See “网上有哪些腐女聚集地?”[What are the online sites where **fu nü** (rotten girls) congregate?] <https://www.zhihu.com/question/31774542> (accessed April 12, 2017).

⁷² <http://archive.org/web/>.

⁷³ <https://www.domaintools.com/>.

danmei novels, 2001-2015”) includes translated material from Shao’s chronology, plus additional details I added to the sections related to the category of danmei.⁷⁴

Sunsun⁷⁵ Academy 桑桑学院, established in 1998, is often identified as one of the earliest online portals through which Chinese readers came into contact with danmei, though its main focus was on comics.⁷⁶ Lucifer-Club 路西弗俱乐部 was established as an encrypted literary forum in 1999 by Ducky and XERXES. Its tolerance of H 文 (*huang*, or erotic writing), its sole focus on literature, and the symbolic name “Lucifer” (the “rebellious angel”)⁷⁷ probably set it apart from other web forums.

Initially, most danmei stories in circulation online (and in print) were pirated works of Japanese and Taiwan authors. Original mainland danmei writings followed in the first years of the new millennium. Online platforms offering original mainland writings include: Lucifer-club in 2000,⁷⁸ Jinjiang in 2003,⁷⁹ several Baidu post bars dedicated to danmei (e.g., Danmei bar 耽美吧⁸⁰ and BL fiction bar BL 小说吧). At the time, as with other Chinese internet literature genres, most authors wrote out of personal interest or for sharing within the community. Meanwhile,

⁷⁴ See Shao Yanjun et al. “1984-2016 中国网络文学大事年表” [Chronology of Important Events in Chinese Internet Literature: 1984-2016]. Published through a WeChat official account 媒后台 [Media Backstage], WeChat ID: meihoutaipku. The chronology is initially published in an appendix to Shao’s monograph: 网络时代的文学引渡 [*Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age*] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015). The contents of year 2016 are added in the newest version as accessed through Media Backstage. The chronology is comprehensive as it includes notable events and novels of all online literature genres. It is so useful I decide to translate and adds some details to the parts that are related to the category of danmei, which becomes Appendix A in this paper.

⁷⁵ The translation here “Sunsun” is taken from the website’s domain name “sunsunplus.”

⁷⁶ Sun Jianing 孙嘉宁, *Research on Publication of Tanbi Literature* “耽美文学”出版研究. MA thesis, Southwest Jiaotong University, 2012, 23-24.

⁷⁷ See the website’s own self-introduction: “Lucifer-club studio”路西弗工作室, post 小露十七岁了 [Lucifer-club has turned 17], dated March 5, 2017, <https://www.lucifer-club.com/chapter-83434-1.html> (accessed April 26, 2017).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Shao Yanjun, 网络时代的文学引渡 [*Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age*] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015). See the chapter 晋江文学城: “女性向”文学网站的兴起与现状 [Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of ‘female-oriented’ literary website], by Iceheart 冰心, the director of the Jinjiang literature website.

⁸⁰ Sun Jianing 孙嘉宁, *Research on Publication of Tanbi Literature* “耽美文学”出版研究. MA thesis, Southwest Jiaotong University, 2012, 23-24.

several mainland danmei writers began to gain some commercial success through Taiwan commercial publishers. Under pressure from competition, Taiwan BL publisher “2 High” Culture Press 倍樂文化出版社 in 2005 reached out to Jinjiang, then the two jointly published a series of BL novels for sale simultaneously in mainland China and Taiwan.⁸¹ Many Taiwan publishers had actively been recruiting mainland authors so that eventually, the majority of their authors were from the mainland.⁸² Authors include Fengnong 风弄, published by Taiwan’s Uei-Shiang 威向⁸³; several other authors contracted with Taiwan publisher Freshjoy Culture 鮮歡文化, published in print and its website Freshnet 鮮網 (Myfreshnet.com).

While Taiwan publishers were quickest off the mark, mainland danmei publishers quickly replaced them. Most likely, the much larger readership and author group on the mainland, reader habits⁸⁴ and the fact that Taiwan publishers publish vertically in traditional Chinese characters contributed to their displacement.⁸⁵ The VIP pay-to-read system adopted by Jinjiang in 2008 has helped it to maintain its status as one of the most influential heterosexual romance and BL fiction websites in China. Two other important BL themed forums are Suiyuanju 随缘居 and Gongzi Changpei 公子长佩. The former was established in 2005 as a slash forum for

⁸¹ Tsai, Chih-Lan 蔡芝蘭, 女性幻想國度中的純粹愛情—論臺灣 BL 小說 [*Pure Love in the Female Imagination: On Taiwan’s BL Novels*], MA thesis, National Taiwan Normal University Department of Chinese 國立台灣師範大學國文所, 2011, 54. Tsai derives this information from the Taiwan publisher’s website; I cannot verify if the books were simultaneously sold in mainland China.

⁸² Ibid, 51-52.

⁸³ To give an example, *Slave* 奴才 by Fengnong was published by Uei-Shiang 威向 in 2003.

⁸⁴ Both Tsai Chih-Lan and Yang Jo-tzu point out in their aforementioned papers that under the influence of Japan, manga have been popular as a medium of BL-themed contents. In comparison, in mainland China, it is writings that quickly became the most popular medium of BL creation and consumption. Nowadays, it is usually the best-selling BL novels that have the opportunity of being adapted into manga, or other media, for example 金牌助理 [*Golden Assistant*].

⁸⁵ It would be hard for mainland readers to purchase Taiwan printed BL novels, and the delay of printing is further uncompetitive with instantaneous online reading.

European and American TV and films; the latter was established in 2010 by previous members of the Jinjiang forum community.

BL writings have constantly been subject to government censorship. Compared to the faulty publication contents rating system Taiwan came up with in 2004,⁸⁶ in mainland China, the situation is more complicated, especially concerning online contents. A clear-cut ban on pornographic contents was sporadically tightened⁸⁷ until the state “cyberspace purge” 淨網 of April 2014. Since then, even routine sexual depiction has been difficult. Commercial BL writers either refrain from any explicit sex scenes, or cut sexual depictions and post them elsewhere (popular choices include blogs, Sina Weibo). Geren zhi (self-published books) as underground publications often contains previously omitted or added extra sexual scenes, sometimes with additional side stories (**fanwai** 番外) as motivation for purchase. Forums like Suiyuanju and Gongzi Changpei show some tolerance towards erotic content, therefore contents on these forums tend to encompass both erotic and non-erotic writings. Taiwan online publisher Long-ma 龍馬 [Dragon Horse], in contrast, continues to exist as a website publishing mainly literary pornography. The recent announcement of Young Nobleman Changpei turning commercial

⁸⁶ 出版品及錄影節目帶分級辦法 [Rating Regulations on Publications and Videotapes], for the 2016 updated version, see <https://www.bamid.gov.tw/ezfiles/0/1000/img/11/218571983.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2017). For its content, how it affected the BL community and their reaction, see, Tsai Chih-Lan, 女性幻想國度中的純粹愛情——論臺灣 BL 小說 [“Pure Love in the Female Imagination: On Taiwan’s BL Novels”], 147. See also, Fran Martin, “Girls who love boys’ love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture,” 378. Martin points out that this rating system, by definition, could restrict underage access to the majority of the BL publications. In addition, the regulations want to “carve out” a category of “indecent” that is suitable for adults but not minors; however, the vague definition of “indecent” (in contrast to the completely banned obscene contents) and the hefty fine for violation could discourage the retailers from stocking BL materials. Tsai points out that it is the BL publishers in Taiwan who gained a consensus among themselves regarding which of the BL contents are “indecent” (Over 18 only) and which are suitable for general public including minors.

⁸⁷ Says IceHeart (director of Jinjiang website): “从十多年前开始，每到两会之前，我们都要经历一次“自宫”的行为，每年的尺度都在缩紧，已经成了习惯。” [Since over 10 years ago, every year before the Two Sessions, we will go through a ‘self-castration’ (namely self-censoring process). Every year, the policies tighten, and we have grown used to it.” The Two Sessions refer to China’s National People’s Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conferences. See 晋江文学城：“女性向”文学网站的兴起与现状 [Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of ‘female-oriented’ literary website], in 网络时代的文学引渡 [Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).

(June 2017), suggests a further retreat from the amateurish writing-for-community-sharing mode of production, and leaning further towards commercialized, marketed cultural industry products. (More details on the websites/forums and some representative works are listed in Table 4 and Table 5 in the appendix.)

Table 4 lists representative danmei novels from the start of the millennium to the year 2015. It details the original site of publication; the author's pen name; the title of the novel; whether the novel is free or VIP fee-based; the dates of serialization; significance and adaptations (drama CD, films, online TV dramas, comics etc., if applicable). The selection of the novels, partial introductions of their contents and significance are my translations of material from Shao's study; new information I added I have differentiated with italics. I also added the column on adaptations.

In Table 5 "Some important historical or current Chinese danmei websites or forums 1998-present," I provide the following information about the sites: name, domain name, active dates and the type of writings available. As in Table 4, information I translated from Shao's chronology appears in regular font, whereas new information I added appears in italics. Much of the information I added derives from netizen responses to the Zhihu question about where Rotten Girls congregate online. In deciding which items to include, I prioritized the most up-voted answers and discussions. I list the country of registration, as some of these websites are registered outside mainland China. This is mainly due to the tightening of the Chinese government's internet censorship and its ban on pornography. Some danmei forums make a conscious effort to not use Chinese servers. Both tables are based on the limited information accessible and are not comprehensive.

These chronologies indicate that new themes, settings and elements keep being introduced into the category of danmei. This is particularly evident on the website Jinjiang, as its VIP reading system (adopted in 2008) encourages and promotes publication of long commercial novels. The themes and tropes in danmei novels also keep expanding, and the websites keep adding more categories, styles and tropes, enabling readers to locate their favorite combinations. Jinjiang, for example, currently lists seventeen categories of novels, which apply to all novels, including danmei.⁸⁸

Ten original-produced novel genres:

爱情(Romance)

武侠(Martial arts), mainly about adventures of protagonists in *jianghu* 江湖 (literally rivers and lakes, and referring to an imagined world of commoners and martial arts practitioners in pre-modern China).

奇幻(Fantasy), includes western fantasy⁸⁹, featuring protagonists with magical or supernatural abilities (异能). Excludes fantasy fiction on Daoist figures and themes; see below.

仙侠(Daoist fantasy & chivalry, usually based on Chinese myths including Daoism [heavily influenced by the collective popular imagination of online writers]; often the protagonists' attempt to "cultivate to immortality" and "seek pinnacle of strength."⁹⁰)

⁸⁸ See website Jinjiang's instruction page 如何使用标签系统[how to use the tag system], dated Feb.14, 2017, <http://help.jjwxc.net/user/article/59> (Accessed July 25, 2017)

⁸⁹ Zheng Xiqing (pp. 79-85) offers a detailed discussion on the connotations of qihuan 奇幻 compared to its western counterpart "fantasy." To briefly summarize, she identifies qihuan as a Chinese imitation of western high fantasy with its own secondary world-building.

⁹⁰ See "General Glossary of Terms" on Wuxiaworld, one of the main translation websites of Chinese internet fantasy novels, <http://www.wuxiaworld.com/general-glossary-of-terms/> (accessed July 25, 2017).

网游(Online games), novels mainly based in the virtual reality of specific online games.

传奇 (Legends), mainly about how protagonists make great achievements and the ups and downs in their lives.

科幻 (Sci-fi), including stories set in the imagined galactic future.

童话 (Fairytale)

恐怖 (Horror)

侦探 (Detective)

Five derivative (tongren) novel genres, categorized based on source texts:

动漫 (Animation and comics)

影视 (Films and TV drama)

小说 (Fiction)

真人 (Real person), aka real person-slash.

其他 (Others)

In addition, there are 80 trope tags (for example: quick spirit travel 快穿, entertainment industries 娱乐圈, rebirth 重生, mecha 机甲⁹¹, genetically modified humans/aliens 异形) and 5 style tags (for example: tragic 悲情, serious 正剧, neither tragic nor comical). Readers should be

⁹¹ 机甲, “mecha.” An article in China’s famous fantasy magazine “Jingu chuanqi wuxia ban” 今古传奇武侠版 [Legends of Old and New – Martial Art Edition] names film *Pacific Rim*, Japanese robot anime *Neo Genesis Evangelion*, *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* and *Gundam* as examples of sources that “initiate the mecha dreams of (Chinese) youths.” 少年之梦 [Dreams of the youth], 今古传奇武侠版 [Legends of Old and New – Martial Art Edition], No.12 (2013): 71. From the source of influence, we can see that the mecha genre is a setting borrowed from Japanese anime and U.S. science fiction monster films. In the Chinese context, this subgenre is usually set in an imaginary future, sometimes during war (for example, between galaxies or galactic regimes – the monarchy and the republic). In this setting, mecha has become one of the most important fighting weapons, operated by human pilots from a cockpit through creating a neuro-biological link; mecha may assume a humanoid or non-humanoid forms. The mental strength of the pilot depends on a combination of talent and effort.

able to search and find fairly easily their favorite combination of novel. It has become increasingly common for a danmei novel to be hybrid in genre.

Judging by Jinjiang's genre tags and new novels, it seems that danmei authors are writing novels with themes and tropes previously more often associated with male-oriented fantasy novels. Some authors still focus on romantic relationships, while others are focusing on other genres' elements. Indeed, for some danmei novels, homosexual relationships are no longer the central focus (or at least not the only focus) of the stories. This is not to say that authors of heterosexual romance on Jinjiang have not been working with similar hybridity, but my hunch is that danmei novels outperform heterosexual-oriented novels in popularity.

To validate this hunch, I did a quick comparison of novel popularity on Jinjiang. Jinjiang offers five sexuality tags for its novels⁹²: (Heterosexual) Romance 言情, BL 纯爱 ("pure love")⁹³, Lesbian 百合 ("lily"), Matriarchal Romance 女尊 (literally, female supremacy)⁹⁴, and Non-Romance 无 CP ("no coupling"). I then conducted three searches with the tag "Imagined Future" 幻想未来 in: the BL category, the Heterosexual Romance category, and then the combination of the three remaining sexualities. Below is information on the top ten "bookmarked"收藏⁹⁵ novels

⁹² All data accessed on July 26, 2017.

⁹³ The change of name from danmei 耽美 [addicted to beauty] to Chun'ai 纯爱 [pure love] was prompted by the government's 2014 Cyberspace Purge.

⁹⁴ The translation "matriarchal romance" is Jin Feng's. She concludes that setting of this subgenre feature a "reconfiguration or inversion of the traditional gender hierarchy. See Feng, Jin, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2013), 92.

⁹⁵ These searches are ranked by the amount of readers who currently "bookmark"收藏 it, a feature that allows them to quickly return to the book when opening up Jinjiang website/mobile app.

that my searches returned:

作者	作品	类型	风格	进度	字数	作品积分	发表时间
priest	残次品	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	连载中	478024	2178073344	2017-04-05 11:00:00
风流书呆	神造	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	已完成	568151	1842430208	2017-03-08 09:00:00
颜	角色扮演	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-网游	轻松	连载中	353797	939995904	2015-05-02 10:00:00
龙柒	元帅们同时闹离婚	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	808719	1346520320	2017-04-10 07:50:00
月下桑	没有来生	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-科幻	轻松	已完成	962997	1868238976	2015-02-14 20:24:00
月下桑	安息日	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	640401	1494049408	2017-02-12 20:24:50
莫晨欢	重生之星际宠婚[娱乐圈]	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	已完成	862834	718685120	2016-04-19 10:00:00
阿辞姑娘	快穿之不死病人	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	809169	926971648	2017-01-30 10:00:00
酒矣	说好要杀我的人都看上我了[快穿].	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	已完成	411616	449564512	2016-09-30 01:00:00
犹太的烟	机甲契约	原创-纯爱-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	已完成	1317088	1444595328	2011-11-02 21:53:26

Table 1The Top 10 bookmarked BL novels with tag "Imagined Future"

作者	作品	类型	风格	进度	字数	作品积分	发表时间
雾矢翊	星际之宠妻指南	原创-言情-幻想未来-科幻	轻松	已完成	1022824	535567680	2016-03-10 11:00:00
扶华	重生攻略手札	原创-言情-幻想未来-奇幻	正剧	已完成	785250	485210752	2016-09-30 00:30:00
黑猫白白	未来美食豪门宠婚	原创-言情-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	275209	507632544	2017-06-10 21:21:21
南柯十三殿	(快穿)不恋爱就末日	原创-言情-幻想未来-奇幻	轻松	连载中	541375	354096864	2017-01-28 18:00:00
三水小草	还你六十年	原创-言情-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	已完成	1174247	713268864	2016-03-15 10:00:00
狂上加狂	巫山女	原创-言情-幻想未来-奇幻	正剧	连载中	334250	302690240	2017-05-10 07:00:00
雾矢翊	古穿未之星际宠婚	原创-言情-幻想未来-科幻	轻松	已完成	925336	392865376	2015-01-01 12:00:00
江湖不见	极品男神[快穿]	原创-言情-幻想未来-传奇	轻松	连载中	1134876	231441408	2017-03-11 13:45:00
伶人歌	系统之当软妹子穿成BOSS	原创-言情-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	1504096	377762400	2015-09-09 12:00:00
饭卡	他，来自火星	原创-言情-幻想未来-科幻	正剧	已完成	248690	162781808	2008-12-28 18:27:24

Table 2The Top 10 bookmarked Heterosexual Romance with tag "Imagined Future"

作者	作品	类型	风格	进度	字数	作品积分	发表时间
与沐	功德簿	原创-无CP-幻想未来-奇幻	正剧	已完成	952789	347744256	2015-10-01 23:09:11
小吾君	快穿之撩妹手册gl	原创-百合-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	已完成	938910	226693152	2016-07-09 11:11:11
玄笺	另类情敌（GL）	原创-百合-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	已完成	797302	268420080	2016-04-24 22:00:00
桑沃	男神他帅裂苍穹【快穿】	原创-无CP-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	连载中	335361	103261128	2015-06-30 13:08:00
与沐	功德簿·星海	原创-无CP-幻想未来-奇幻	正剧	连载中	62089	92277144	2017-05-01 17:22:00
花木白	精灵王的王妃	原创-百合-幻想未来-网游	正剧	连载中	1452724	447081184	2012-10-19 15:12:36
乙纯	帝国女配升职记gl	原创-百合-幻想未来-爱情	正剧	已完成	462470	110904496	2016-01-21 00:15:01
九十七郎	一步之遥[星际]	原创-百合-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	388883	203167936	2017-01-31 21:00:00
绝歌	请叫我战神（无cp）	原创-无CP-幻想未来-传奇	轻松	连载中	575649	164833792	2017-01-15 02:18:07
霸道种菜	总有人想咚我[快穿]	原创-百合-幻想未来-爱情	轻松	连载中	518373	102102040	2017-01-11 19:00:00

Table 3The Top 10 bookmarked Non-romance, Lesbian and Matriarchal Romance novels with tag "Imagined Future"

The most telling sign of popularity is the second column from right, namely “Cumulative points of this novel” 作品积分. For each chapter, every reader can assign from 2 points to -2 points. A formula then calculates total points for a title.⁹⁶ Taking into consideration the length of the novel, the time of its publication, four out of ten BL novels published in the most recent year 2017 have accrued over 1 billion points, whereas the highest scored title from all other categories combined score only 0.7 billion points. In other words, it seems that danmei novels, more so than any other categories of sexuality, seem to be able to satisfy the romantic and sexual imaginations of readers when set within backgrounds traditionally adopted in male-oriented novels.

Table 5 – the list of important works – contains primarily (except for in early years) VIP novels appearing on Jinjiang. This list is adapted from Shao’s chronology. There are several possible reasons why Shao mainly selected commercial novels on Jinjiang as important: first, Jinjiang is the most important site with one of the longest histories; and second, works on Jinjiang are publicly accessible. They are available to readers with no previous knowledge of this

⁹⁶ For the details on the cumulative formula and a commentary on the reader-rating feature of Jinjiang, see Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 62.

genre who may be coming in contact with it for the first time. Most new readers likely do not proceed to discover other more insular communities until they feel that publicly-accessible websites are failing to satisfy their interests and begin looking for more texts and more dedicated but secluded online space. On Jinjiang, as long as their novels return a good number of hits, online authors who commit to writing (even amateurs) tend to be discovered and contracted commercially; this is another reason why commercial danmei novels generally become more prominent and influential than writings published on non-commercial platforms.

Nevertheless, censorship and competition between platforms meant that Jinjiang did not remain the sole center of danmei writing. As Hockx expected, state censorship and regulation are reducing the room allowed for danmei and other internet literary works with explicit sexual descriptions or politically sensitive themes.⁹⁷ In the more secluded BL communities, capital and politics do not pose as major an influence as they do on commercial platforms. Therefore, more freedom is allowed for authors and typically more personalized writing could thrive in these communities, especially since these communities contain solely insiders of the BL culture and do not pursue commercial profits. Besides, more platforms are competing over established or emerging authors. Some authors would sign contracts with a different commercial literary site. Jinjiang is still a main site of danmei novels, but danmei authors are spreading out to other online platforms, for example, Sina Microblog Weibo,⁹⁸ blog website Lofter, and forum Young

⁹⁷ For example, 管三 (Literally Rule 3, is short for “administrator No.3” of Jinjiang website), explains it clear that “you can’t write about physical activities happening below the neck” (脖子以下不能写); this rule is enforced (at various degrees over time) through the website’s self-censoring. According to “Administrator No.3,” since the 2014 “Cyberspace Purge,” Jinjiang started to invite readers to censor contents on the website. Theoretically, each and every article has to be screened by three website users before becoming available to the public. These netizens volunteer their censoring service in exchange for Jinjiang coins 晋江币, which can be used to purchase VIP chapters of Jinjiang novels. I noticed that nowadays speech on forums, and comment under chapters are also sometimes censored before the public can see them.

⁹⁸ According to “A chronology of important events for China’s Internet Literature,” Sina Weibo’s reading platform (<http://book.weibo.com>) went online in July 2013; through it users can subscribe, purchase and bookmark e-books. The platform was shut down during the 2014 Cyberspace Cleaning (净网) movement for disseminating

Nobleman Changpei. Commercial danmei writing and the non-commercial online community of BL culture in general are both important to the future of this category. In addition, according to the “2016 年数字阅读行业年度报告”[2016 Annual Industry Report on Digital Reading] conducted by a consulting company iResearch 艾瑞, based on a sample of 2454 survey takers, about 45% of digital readers follow new information about novels and their authors through Sina Weibo, second to Tencent WeChat (57.8%) and slightly above Baidu post bar (44%).⁹⁹

In addition, danmei’s existence as a subcultural and taboo category means that much of its vitality is produced by a supportive and enthusiastic community. Its foreign origins and its connection with foreign fan fiction allow it to incorporate elements from Yaoi culture and western slash fiction. Zheng Xiqing argues that there is a sense of “elitism” associated with the subculture of danmei, given that it is closely associated with both popular Anglophone and Japanese culture (which rank higher on the Chinese cultural hierarchy than domestic popular culture), as well as the “neoliberal discourse of LGBTQ equality.” Both serve to lend danmei writing cultural capital that the community adopts as a sort of “self defense.”¹⁰⁰ While I find Zheng’s argument trenchant and relevant, two things should not be ignored: firstly, the gender fluidity and rejection of heteronormativity in BL texts did and still does carry a sense of enlightenment and “modernity” to its readers; secondly, both original and derivative danmei writing have been largely localized, even though hybridity (in story contents, linguistic style, etc.) is common in today’s highly globalized world.

“pornographic contents.” Since then, the Sina Reading platform has been restored, but its influence has decreased (restoration time unknown). In January 2016, one new feature offered by Sina Weibo came online - 头条文章 [Headline article]. This feature allows users to publish articles and receive 打赏 [tips] from readers. After this function came out, some BL authors have been using it to serialize stories, examples include Yue’er 约耳, Tongzi 童子 (ID: 折一枚针 [Break a needle]). Overall, Sina Weibo mainly stays as an important marketing platform and a channel through which writers connect with readers.

⁹⁹ <http://wreport.iresearch.cn/uploadfiles/reports/636287987095206743.pdf> (Accessed July 27, 2017).

¹⁰⁰ See Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace, pp. 218-221, 225-229, 235.

Scholar Xu Yanrui has commented that “interest-oriented writing for sharing with a community is an experimental field and still is a supply source for commercialized writing,” and says that such writing is more common in China’s online female writing than online male writing or in elite literature (精英文学). She further notes that both commercial and non-commercial authors seem to harbor an idealized notion of literature that values “imagination, exploration, communication and expression, the interpretation of human nature, pursuit of good intrinsic qualities.”¹⁰¹ Xu supports her argument with interviews, the example the mainly female-participant online BL community, and the fact that some popular authors do not put their works in the “VIP” pay-to-read system for a profit.¹⁰² This observation is partially confirmed and partially confounded by a report and two authors’ posts on Sina Weibo.

A 2016 report by the consulting company iResearch shows that when asked about the reason for starting writing novels, 52.5% of female authors choose “a childhood dream of becoming a writer” – a percentage higher than male authors; high percentages of male authors choose “writing novels to satisfy themselves when currently available novels prove unsatisfactory” (26.2%) and “writing novels is said to be good money” (20.5%). In addition, 60% of writers are amateurs, having a full-time job or studying as a student.¹⁰³ Though this report does not focus solely on BL authors and excludes non-contracted authors’ data, it reveals the general situation of professional/semi-professional authors. It also gives rise to a question – what “dream”? Two authors’ Sina Weibo posts offer potential answers.

¹⁰¹ Xu Yanrui 徐艳蕊, “The Production and Context of Feminine Writings on the Internet,” 网络女性写作的生产和生态, *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 北京大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), Vol.52 No.1 (2015):155.

¹⁰² The examples given are Lucifer-club, and a non-VIP danmei author 阿堵 [A’dù, short for 阿堵物, “money”] on Jinjiang Literature website.

¹⁰³ iResearch Consulting Company 艾瑞咨询, “2016 网络江湖群英谱-中国网络文学作者洞察报告” [The spectrum of talents in the internet literature jianghu – Observation on China’s internet literature authors in 2016]. This is a report based on a sample of 1,060 authors and telephone interviews with 13 authors, all of whom contracted authors with the China Reading Group.

The first of the two Sina Weibo posts is by danmei author Doggie Tianyi 狗娃子天一, dated April 20, 2017.¹⁰⁴ As of July 27, 2017, it has been reposted 2936 times and triggered 851 responses. The other is dated April 21, 2017, by another danmei author Dusty Night 尘夜,¹⁰⁵ as a repost and commentary on Doggie Tianyi's post. Both posts speak from a danmei author's perspective about writing danmei and their authorial pursuits. One key word in both posts is "dream" 梦想. Their posts both state that they are hanging onto a "dream." In addition, they reveal a yearning for popularity with readers amidst fierce competition in today's commercial writing market.

Doggie Tianyi's post delivers two messages. Firstly, a discussion between herself and a fellow author friend gives rise to a conclusion: their novels do not sell well because of their lesser "self-cultivation" 素养, "family background" 出生, "situation" 格局, and "scope of vision" 眼界—in short, their lower financial, cultural and social status. This, in turn, fills their stories with "a poverty-stricken feeling" 窘迫的气息 and "the stink of money" 铜臭味, lacking the dreaminess that ordinary readers desire. Secondly, a dream she has already abandoned is to become a "Thousand-Sale Lady" 千本太太 [an author whose self-published books sell over 1,000 copies]. However, writing danmei is the dream she has persisted in – and for this reason, she has not turned into a "salted fish" 咸鱼 [a loser who doesn't strive for change]¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁴ 狗娃子天一 [Doggie Tianyi], Sina Weibo, posted on April 20, 2017, http://weibo.com/1749887052/EFr6Z7r9v?type=repost#_rnd1501190754497 (accessed July 27 2017).

¹⁰⁵ 一只黄果果 [One Yellow Fruit], aka 尘夜 [Dusty Night], Sina Weibo post "想红不是坏事" [There is nothing wrong with wanting to become a popular author], posted on April 21, 2017, http://weibo.com/trafficjam?from=feed&loc=nickname&is_hot=1 (accessed on April 26, 2017).

¹⁰⁶ "Revival of a salted fish" 咸鱼翻身 means to have a lucky break or a turn of fortune. (In this scenario, I interpret "salted fish" to be a loser or a person who do not do anything to change current (unpleasant) situations. See Wenhao 文浩, "也谈'咸鱼'问题" [A new discussion on the meaning of "salted fish"], 咬文嚼字 [Punctilious attention to words], 2008:03, 3-36.

Scholar Zheng Xiqing notes “a cultural hierarchy based on knowledge and education”¹⁰⁷ that lends cultural capital to some danmei authors, justifying their involvement in a subcultural genre like BL. The case of Doggie Tianyi reminds us that some BL authors struggle with a lack of such capital. In a sense, the dream of writing is intertwined with a dream of self-elevation including but not limited to financial success. Given that Doggie Tianyi mainly writes pornographic BL texts, one might expect some sarcasm towards the “dream” under this post. Yet the comments are mainly encouraging, even constructive. They express satisfaction towards her erotic BL writings and offer encouragement. This example rejects the pursuit of literary qualities as laid out by Xu Yanrui, but it confirms the importance of a reception community in which sexually explicit writing is not only tolerated, but even admired.

The post of Dusty Night 尘夜, who is not an erotic writer, also focuses on the keywords “popularity” and “dream.” Dusty Night first reaffirms that writing danmei is more difficult than heterosexual romance, which she did for 13 years since 2004. She clarifies that for her, writing is a “hobby” 兴趣爱好, “a way to relieve stress” 解压方式, “a way to make friends” 结交朋友的方法. However, the lack of exposure and resources made her decide to sign a contract with Jinjiang in 2015, because she wanted more readers. Lastly, she affirms the joy of “chasing a dream,” during which process she becomes better, sees more and meets with more people going after their dreams. We can see that from 2004 to 2015, Dusty Night falls in the “free writing for sharing” category described by Xu – the only profit she could make is through print publishing offline. With the commercialization and industrialization¹⁰⁸ of the internet literature, it seems increasingly harder to persevere as a popular non-commercial author. Both Doggie Tianyi and

¹⁰⁷ Zheng Xiqing, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, University of Washington Ph.D. dissertation, 2016, p.235.

¹⁰⁸ Internet literature in China started off as interest-oriented creative writings of individuals. With its commercialization, the internet literature has turned into a “cultural industry” that mass produces popular literature, hence the “industrialization.”

Dusty Night's posts could be a gesture of self-marketing. Nevertheless, they also strongly associate socialization and idealized (mostly non-monetary) functions with danmei writing.

1.4. China's "rotten girls" (*fu n ü*) and their community

1.4.1 Definition

Danmei readers often refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as **Fu n ü** 腐女, a term that derives from the Japanese *fujoshi* 腐女子. Both terms translate as "rotten girls." Patrick Galbraith defines *fujoshi* as "females who are enthusiastic about *yaoi*, a genre of fan-produced fiction and art, usually manga, that places established male characters from commercial anime, manga and video games into unintended romantic relationships."¹⁰⁹ In Chinese contexts, I believe, *fu n ü* has a broader application, referring to any female who reads/watches derivative and/or original contents that feature male-male romantic or erotic fantasy.¹¹⁰ The key component of the "rotteness" is fondness towards the romantic relationships between fictional or real-life males, a practice referred to as "meng CP" 萌 CP [meng translates as **moe** – to be fond of, feel affectionate towards; CP refers to a romantically-involved couple]. Zheng Xiqing points out that "Meng CP" is a subjective interpretation that pairs two persons/fictional characters as a couple, an interpretation either supported by the real life/original story setting or purely fantastic.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Patrick W. Galbraith, "Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among 'Rotten Girls' in Contemporary Japan, *Signs*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (2011): 212.

¹¹⁰ Zheng Xiqing identifies two other terms used for "rotten girls" – Tongren n ü 同人女 [Tongren girls] and Danmei lang 耽美狼 [Danmei wolves]. Both are earlier terms that are used much less often than "rotten girls" now. Tsai Chih-Lan points out that both "Tongren girls" and "Rotten girls" are in use in Taiwan, but the former no longer carries a negative connotation, whereas the latter implies an excessive addiction to the genre. See, Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, "Female-oriented Danmei culture" 女性向 耽美文化, *Frontiers* 天涯 Issue 3 (2016:177). See also, Tsai, Chih-Lan 蔡芝蘭, 女性幻想國度中的純粹愛情—論臺灣 BL 小說 [*Pure Love in female imagination – on Taiwan's BL novels*], MA thesis, National Taiwan Normal University Department of Chinese 國立台灣師範大學國文所, 2011, pp.2-3.

¹¹¹ Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青, Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 and Lin Pin 林品, "Female-oriented Danmei Culture" 女性向 耽美文化, *Frontiers* 天涯 Issue 3 (2016):181.

Contents could be in the form of literary texts or **ACG** (Anime, comic, games). There is also a term describing males who consume homosexual or homoerotic contents, fu hanzi 腐汉子 (rotten guys), but this is a much smaller group.

Scholars generally believe Rotten Girls to be young “college-aged women” or, increasingly, middle school students.¹¹² For lack of better data, I quote here the partial and imperfect data accumulated through a questionnaire on the Chinese BL novels review website Saowen xiaoyuan 扫文小院 [Quick-Take Courtyard],¹¹³ hereafter referred to as SWXY. From April, 8 2015 to May 22, 2017, the questionnaire was filled out by over 3000 people.¹¹⁴

My brief analysis of its statistics is as follows:

1. The top three age groups identified with are: age 18-24 (1865/51.78%), age 15-18 (702/19.94%) and age 24-29 (18.93%). This is congruent with my impressions: readers (as well as authors) on forums often bring up topics like China’s University Entrance Exam and term papers. Some authors studied as international students abroad.¹¹⁵
2. Years spent “rotten” & current weekly reading time spent on danmei (both original and fan fiction): the largest group identified is 5-10 years (1662) (46.14%), and the second largest group 3-5 years (1051) (29.18%); 50% (1801) of survey respondents report spending more than 10 hours reading each week, and 25.79% (929) spend between 5 and 10 hours.

Comparing this group of statistics with statistics on their ages, one might say that people start

¹¹² Zhang, Chunyu. "Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of "Boys' Love" Fiction." *Women's Studies in Communication* 39.3 (2016): 250.

¹¹³ For an introduction of this BL novels review website, see Table 5.

¹¹⁴ See “Saowen xiaoyuan yonghu diaocha” 扫文小院用户调查 [“Little yard of BL novels user survey”], [mikecrm.com/r.php?t=ZJqFQb](http://www.mikecrm.com/r.php?t=ZJqFQb) <http://www.mikecrm.com/r.php?t=ZJqFQb> (accessed on May 22, 2017).

¹¹⁵ For example, the controversial but popular danmei author 天籁纸鸢 [Kite (the bird) with Sounds of Nature] was an undergraduate student in Britain (according to her statements on Sina Weibo). She has now stopped writing danmei, changed pen names and currently writes only heterosexual romance. Another highly successful commercial danmei author Shui qian cheng 水千丞 studied in the Netherlands.

reading danmei at a relatively young age. Yet since this data comes from SWXY only, it is biased towards a more devoted readership who favors a systematic recording of their reads. Many new readers to danmei probably do not know of or have the habit of using SWXY. Not every regular reader of danmei novels has the interest of recording and sharing their reviews with the community. Some readers may only look for well-rated works through SWXY without further participation in rating.

3. Around 75% of the survey respondents read both original and tongren danmei fiction, rather than just one or the other. Apart from danmei novels, roughly two thirds of survey takers read “other Chinese genre novels” 其他中国类型文学/通俗文学 in print, and about the same amount read “other foreign genre novels” 其他外国类型文学/通俗文学. About half of the survey takers report reading “serious”/ “pure” literature (严肃文学/纯文学), Chinese or foreign (likely in translation).
4. A bit over half have purchased Geren zhi (self-published books) (51.33%, 1849) and over a third listen to **drama CDs**.¹¹⁶ (39.01%, 1405).
5. Survey respondents voted Jinjiang, Gongzi Changpei & Lofter the top three go-to sites for reading danmei.

“Rotten girls” is a common blanket term for danmei aficionados, but the group is not homogenous. Overall, given the general prosperity of online genre novels and the “prosumer” (producer/consumer) option¹¹⁷ in this subculture, readers have more choices than ever. Their

¹¹⁶ Drama CD, which originates in Japan, refers here to the performance of voice actors/actresses based on an existent online novel. There is no or very limited visual element to the final product, which is often non-commercial and created out of fondness towards the novel. The production team of the Drama CD has to acquire authorization from the author before adaptation. Drama CDs are disseminated online.

¹¹⁷ Authors have mentioned that some of them start writing because they run out of novels that fit their appetite, or that they find a **CP** particularly cute.

public image and self-identification are shifting with time. The next section discusses the public perception and self-identification of the group, as well as some key discussions about the genre itself.

1.4.2 Hotly debated issues: The merits of the BL genre, sexual depiction, and the self-identification of the community members

One question often raised by people unfamiliar with danmei is how rotten girls become interested in the genre. Zheng Xiqing has consulted foreign and Chinese theories on this issue: the rhetoric of resistance, the genre's relation to female experiences, female projection, a utopian feminist agenda, generational subversion, and so on.¹¹⁸ I believe rotten girls who come into contact with the genre at different times likely have different answers to the question, as the available corpus of BL genre expands and changes.

Before the BL genre's rapid localization in China, rotten girls often got their BL fix through Japanese manga.¹¹⁹ Comparatively speaking, in China there is a lack of knowledge and awareness of both the BL culture and the LGBT discourse. Pioneering LGBT scholar Li Yinhe 李银河's introductory article on queer theories was published only in 2002.¹²⁰ A survey conducted also in 2002 on undergraduate students at certain universities show that 77.8%

¹¹⁸ See chapter 4, "Global Homoromance: Female Experiences, Fantasy and Utopia," in Zheng, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, p.235.

¹¹⁹ The influence of Japanese BL culture continues, and I do not posit a clear cut division between this earlier stage of reception and the BL genre's later development in China. I am merely pointing out that the Japanese influence was particularly strong in the beginning and that a certain level of ambiguity existed before the scholarly researches defines the category of danmei and begin to connect China's danmei with the Japanese BL and western slash.

¹²⁰ Li Yinhe 李银河, "酷儿理论面面观" [Aspects of Queer Theories], *Social Sciences Abroad* 国外社会科学, 2002 Issue 2, 23-29.

considered homosexuals to be “perverted”变态.¹²¹ As previously discussed, the mainland Chinese reception of the BL manga and writings from Japan and Taiwan started in the 1990s, and its dissemination on the internet began around 1998 and 1999. The readership around the turn of the century would count as the earliest readers of the genre in China. Yan Liangyu 颜凉雨, a popular (and still active) danmei author, is a good example.¹²² Yan says when she read Japanese shōjo manga series “Cardcaptor Sakura” as a junior middle school student¹²³, she felt that there was something special and subtle between Sakura’s elder brother and another male character. Then in senior middle school (2001-2004), when she read a (later extremely famous) gay novel *Beijing Story* 北京故事, she “came to a complete realization” and has been a rotten girl ever since. Then she started writing BL stories after reading some Hong Kong and Taiwan BL novels. What I want to emphasize here is that Yan’s narrative establishes a connection between *Beijing Story*, which is categorized as a gay novel, and the hinted BL elements in the Japanese manga series.

Two of the earliest journal articles I found on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database regarding rotten girls are from 2003¹²⁴ and 2005.¹²⁵ Both are based on interviews with consumers of danmei comics and fiction. While neither provides a quantitative

¹²¹ Yan Youwei 严由伟, Liu Jianguo 刘建国, Xu Yongzhen 徐永珍, “Knowledge and Attitude towards Homosexuality in Students of Normal Universities and Colleges” 师范院校大学生对同性恋的知识和态度分析, *Chinese Journal of Health Education* 中国健康教育, Oct. 2002, Issue 10, pp.645-647.

¹²² See Yan’s interview with a BL forum in celebration of the forum’s 8 years anniversary (interview conducted in 2013), <http://www.ximalaya.com/39040366/sound/13272750> (accessed May 16, 2017).

¹²³ In most schools in China, students spend 6 years in elementary schools, then 3 years in junior middle school 初中, then 3 years in senior middle school 高中 or professional education school. Yan liang yu probably was between the age of 13 and 15 while attending junior middle school. Students who attend senior middle school take the university entrance examination.

¹²⁴ Yang Ya 杨雅, “同人女群体: ‘耽美’现象背后” [On the Tongren nü group: Behind the ‘Danmei’ Phenomenon], *China Youth Research* 中国青年研究, 2006 Issue 7, pp.63-66.

¹²⁵ Wu, Nan 吴楠, 校园耽美族 [Danmei Groups in Colleges], *College Times* 大学时代, 2005, Issue 3, 57-59.

survey, they make claims about the mental state of the genre's earlier readers in China. Yang Ya (2003) describes Tongren nǚ (rotten girls) as a relatively narrow and closed-off community; these readers did not necessarily start reading BL for sex, but sex could take up an increasingly important role in their reading. In the end, Yang Ya rejects "moralists" (卫道士) condemning the genre for its sexually explicit content. The 2005 article seems to dwell on a more ambiguous and positive image of the "danmei group" (耽美族) based on a limited number of interviews. The conclusion that it draws is: members of the "danmei group" are mostly 19-26 years' old girls, reportedly big fans of comics, very fond of Japanese cartoon voice actors, often enthusiastic volunteers that care for animals or socially disadvantaged groups. I am skeptical that a simple correlation exists between people's preference in novel genres and their personalities, but Japanese manga obviously plays a crucial role in shaping tastes.

Both LGBT awareness and scholarly attention paid to the danmei genre has been rising. Meanwhile, new elements keep being introduced into the danmei genre, and its commercial publishing online starts with Jinjiang adopting the VIP pay-to-read system in January 2008. Next, I will try to look at how the genre is perceived within the danmei readers and non-danmei readers through a thread on Jinjiang's forum, with responses dating from 2008 to 2017.

In 2008 a post appeared on Jinjiang's forum, titled "晋江上现在耽美多的叫人恶心" [Nowadays there is so many danmei works on Jinjiang that it disgusts me].¹²⁶ It triggered 371 replies between December 28, 2008 and April 12 2017, a mixture of personal attacks, ridicule and serious opinions. The post touched a nerve among the danmei community, a community which is often accused of being hypersensitive.

¹²⁶ Thread "晋江上现在耽美多的叫人恶心" [Nowadays there is so many danmei works on Jinjiang that it disgusts me], 晋江论坛 [Jinjiang website forum], <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=4&id=16040&page=0> (accessed April 12, 2017).

This thread seems to have started because some Jinjiang community members objected to what they saw as excessive depictions of anal sex. The post by Ririri ju 日日日菊 (“Fuck fuck fuck the anus daily,” hereafter abbreviated as R), was deliberately offensive and provocative.¹²⁷ R writes “it is alright to read it occasionally, but who could stand the plot of fierce anal sex 爆菊 every day?” Ju 菊 stands for juhua 菊花 (chrysanthemum), which is slang for anus; bao 爆, meaning to explode or burst, is used to describe the intense nature of an action. The term seems to be used to describe both painful and fierce anal sex, or anal rape. Commentators have long pointed out that the trope of “rape” is used as “an expression of love” in Japanese BL culture,¹²⁸ and it often serves to not to repel the victim from his offender, but instead the victim eventually comes to “accept and reciprocate” this love.¹²⁹ Danmei, too, often uses the trope of forced or semi-forced anal sex, including drugged rape. Many danmei novels also feature “moneyboys” (who trade sex for money) or “kept men” as protagonists.

When asked why not avoid reading danmei altogether, R said that danmei works rank high on the monthly points lists (Post #3).¹³⁰ R mocked a user who described danmei as “others’ love stories” (Post #7),¹³¹ commenting that “do you fuck anus too? If yes, then you disgust me too.” R then added that “I have read a lot on Jinjiang, so I don’t reject danmei novels, but there is

¹²⁷ Ri 日 means “day, daily” and is also a slang word for fuck. It can also refer to Japan, though that meaning does not seem to be implied here.

¹²⁸ Akiko Mizoguchi, “Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: a history and subgenres of Yaoi fictions,” *U.S. - Japan Women’s Journal* (issue 2003: 56).

¹²⁹ Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Girls reading Harry Potter, girls writing desire: Amateur manga and shōjō reading practices,” *Girls Reading Girls in Japan*, edited by Tomoko Aoyama and Barbara Hartley, (Abingdon, U.K: Routledge, 2010), 180-181.

¹³⁰ Readers can evaluate each chapter they read by giving a score (ranges from -2 points to 2 points), points accumulated for all chapters in a book decides rankings of it on certain lists.

¹³¹ Posted by pseudonym “Senior Danmei Wolf” 资生耽美狼. Zisheng 资生 sounds like Zishen 资深, meaning highly experienced or senior. Danmei wolf 耽美狼 is also a self-mocking term used by girls who are into BL, though this term is not as often used nowadays.

so much danmei now I grudge not finding normal contents”(Post #8). In response to a post suggesting that romance and danmei should be treated equally, R wrote back:

You say you don't mind the majority of novels to be 'danmei' and you are normal, but since I can only tolerate an ordinary amount of danmei I must not be normal. OMG, am I being discriminated against because I cannot stand excessive amounts of danmei novels? Then I beg you not to discriminate against me, please I beg you!!! (Post #17)

R's comments relate to: the lack of a clear-cut distinction on the Jinjiang website between the danmei and romance genres; the fantasy nature of danmei writing; the excessive proportion of danmei novels compared to romance.¹³²

When this thread began in 2008, danmei was not as popularized as it is today. Yet the stigma associated with it echoes in replies dated 2016. Below, I list and analyze the three most debated issues related to danmei, which are from R's thread running from 2008 to 2016¹³³: 1) the merits of danmei versus heterosexual romance; 2) the artistic quality of current danmei fiction; and 3) whether danmei novels are realistic or fantastical. These translated sample comments are illustrative of recurring themes, and thus offer qualitative data about reader and commentator attitudes. These examples are not quantitative.

Debate 1: Danmei (BL) versus heterosexual (aka **BG**, “boy-girl”) romance.

(Participants: danmei readers, outsiders, and some light readers of the category)

¹³² I quote the discussion here realizing that these comments are only self-presentations of the forum users, so I make limited claims about their truthfulness. Nevertheless, given the anonymity of the Jinjiang forums and all internet exchange in general, there seems to be less reason to hide their true thoughts.

¹³³ Thread “晋江上现在耽美多的叫人恶心” [“Nowadays there is so many danmei works on Jinjiang that it disgusts me”], 晋江论坛 [Jinjiang website forum], <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=4&id=16040&page=0> (accessed April 12, 2017)

“There’s nothing particularly noble or degrading about danmei, it’s just a form...Although I hold a bit of a grudge towards (its popularity) too, as I have no love for this genre.” (Post #4, 2008)

“I read only danmei; BG is so cliché that it disgusts me.” (Post #12, 2008)

“Some novels label themselves danmei, but they are just as awful as bizarre BG novels, so neither of the two is less vulgar than the other.” (Post #13, 2008)

“Women’s **yy** [fantasies] in romance are just as disgusting and vulgar as men’s yy in □□¹³⁴.

Danmei is just another sort of romance+□□; besides the majority of danmei is light humorous parody (恶搞)¹³⁵.” (Post #18, 2008)

“I’d rather read high-quality danmei than silly and clichéd romance... Of course, except for those danmei by young luoli 萝莉 [Lolita, a young, cute girl]¹³⁶ on Jinjiang’s website these days – these Luoli’s writings make me want to smack them!” (Post #27, 2008)

“You will get a bit nauseous when you read too much of any genre... If you change the name and gender of the characters, some danmei novels are no different from (heterosexual) romance.” (Post #39, 2009)

“If you search for original heterosexual romance, Jinjiang returns 4094 pages; but if you search for original danmei novels, Jinjiang returns 1333 pages. Is danmei really outnumbering romance on Jinjiang website?” (Post #66, Feb. 7, 2009)¹³⁷

“I prefer danmei novels without sex. Nowadays BL novels are getting too exaggerated, as if anything could be fit inside the anus... BL is no different from BG, except that they fall in love with the same sex. That’s all there is to it.” (Post #102, 2009)

¹³⁴ □□ stands for words that are blocked by the Jinjiang website/forum due to key words censoring.

¹³⁵ 恶搞 on the internet also translates as “spoof.”

¹³⁶ In this scenario, luoli on Jinjiang refers to young-aged authors whose writing quality is low, presumably similar to the Mary Sue style of slash fiction (Zheng Xiqing has a section of her dissertation devoted to Mary Sue). See entry **Su** in glossary.

¹³⁷ Comparing to data accessed on May 23, 2017, the corresponding page numbers for romance 言情 and danmei (now the category has been renamed “pure love”纯爱) are 6031 and 2559.

“Do you know that the ‘normal’ novels in your eyes (heterosexual romance) are garbage in the opinion of those who read only ‘serious’ novels (正统小说)?? The existence of any genre justifies its rationality.¹³⁸ Everyone has a personal preference... Don’t judge others and spare your own dignity. Also, I have to say, the overall quality of romance is in a landslide. The novels have no logic!!! Many authors I have been following stopped writing!! I don’t know what to read now!!! I am no primary school student;¹³⁹ I don’t want romances featuring CEOs, martial art sect leaders, emperors or nobles.” (Post #272, 2016)

These responses show that given the anonymity of the forums, people are quite vocal or even aggressive in expressing opinions, and there is an array of opinions: some doubt the validity of BL as a genre. Two Taiwan researchers quoted in this thesis also categorize BL novels as a subgenre under romance in general. Comments like this raises a question: is the **Gong 攻** [*uke*, penetrating sexual role]/**Shou 受** [*seme*, penetrated sexual role] dynamic Chinese danmei novels took from Japanese yaoi so successful that it does not create any difficulty to consume BL as heterosexual romance? Or is it that in the female readers’ perception, there is at least a utopian egalitarian status between genders that encourages identification? I believe that answer really lies in each BL text. Spectators (light, non-enthusiastic readers) express indifference to danmei. Readers of danmei denounce the clichés in BG novels, which can be interpreted as suggesting an attractive novelty associated with BL. Less satisfied danmei readers demand high quality in the genre, and curse the fact that they are gradually losing the category to a naïve **Mary Sue** author group. Extremists find romance and danmei both as vulgar as male fantasy genres, because they

¹³⁸ The original post quotes the translation Hegel’s famous saying “What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable.” Here I translate the Chinese literally into English as “its existence justifies its rationality.”

¹³⁹ “Primary school student” 小学生 is a term often used to refer to unsophisticated users, readers, audience etc.

are not real but wish fulfilment, this pursuit of “seriousness” and “factuality” is representative of a more conservative attitude towards literature, which is less common in today’s online communities, since readers congregate around, praise, and gently criticize their favorite authors. Post #272, from 2016, points out the self-degrading nature of the “hierarchy” talk.

Debate 2: How has the quality of danmei changed?

(Participants: danmei readers, fu n ü)

“Current danmei novels are not ‘danmei’ enough.” (Post #22, 2008)

“????? It’s weird that **LZ** [original post author, who started the thread] always runs into novels with ‘fierce anal sex.’ I read both BG and BL novels, but I don’t happen to run into it as often.”

(Post #29, 2008)

“Nowadays, there are only so many patterns (套路) in danmei novels, and I have grown tired of them. To be honest, there aren’t many good danmei novels out there. Danmei is not better, it is just in fashion.” (Post #60, 2009)

“I used to like danmei novels, but.... the quality of danmei novels on Jinjiang is not good =, to be honest, poor quality danmei is more tortuous than romance... Some danmei novels on top of the Jinjiang ranking lists are extraordinarily bizarre... the more I read these novels the more disgusted I become.” (Post #69, 2009)

“I have read danmei novels for 7 years; I never read romance. I can’t stand the danmei novels on Jinjiang either—I can’t stand the endless sex, the SM [sado-masochism], and the fact that sex comes before love. But what I am trying to say is, we are elegant danmei lang 耽美狼 [literally,

danmei wolves, readers of danmei novels], and we don't have to open fire whenever there is a different opinion.” (Post #87, 2009)

“I have been reading danmei for 10 years now. My only comment is, ‘the more fishes in the tank, naturally the cloudier the water.’¹⁴⁰ The market for danmei is prospering, but danmei is no longer as pure as it was 10 years ago... To find a real danmei work, I have to read through countless pseudo danmei works... I can't accept all the empty emotions and meaningless words.” (Post #90, 2009)

“I agree. Danmei is really quite disgusting now. I used to read danmei, but recently there have been so many danmei works, and their depiction of the shou 受 is strange. My impression is that recent danmei is ‘adapting to a younger readership’¹⁴¹. They are way too *su* 苏 [Mary Sue, overly perfect hence unrealistic].” (Post #356, 2017)

“As long as it is true love, it's alright. Even in BG novels, sometimes there is unanticipated sex. I start reading BL when I grow tired of the patterns (套路) in BG novels. So far, I haven't grown tired of BL yet. After all, there are many possibilities of development between the same sex, so it's less routine (套路).” (Post 282, 2016)

“I have been ‘rotten’ for 7 years. I read in all categories: BG, BL, GL. However, some of the so-called ‘rotten girls’ denounce the BG genre, and will read only BL. In addition, whenever they see men, they YY [fantasize] about homosexual relationships between them. How are these “rotten girls” different from those BG readers who denounce BL? After all, it is women who are the hardest on women themselves. Readers can't accept female protagonists acting up, but when it comes to misunderstandings between male protagonists, they don't mind. This is obviously a

¹⁴⁰ An idiom meaning that when there are more participants in a certain thing, the situation becomes more complex.

¹⁴¹ 低龄化, literally the “tendency of growing younger at age.” The implication is that current danmei novels seem to be written by younger authors and catering to younger readers.

double standard... In addition, BL is spreading like a disaster, whether in original BL stories or fan fiction. Some authors don't spend enough time practicing writing, but instead write lots of **H** (erotic content) for popularity. I really don't know what is their original intention when they start writing." (Post 283, 2016)

Among those who recognize BL as a self-standing category, what is considered "danmei" enough, and what is not? Some subjective opinions are given here, allowing us to build up an impression the responders seem to have for the category. Unlike the other two debates, this discussion mainly takes place among rotten girls themselves, rather than between outsiders and *fu n ü*; secondly, while newcomers to the category seem to be satisfied with the novelty of gender play, more seasoned *fu n ü* almost uniformly express a lament for declining quality. Considering heterosexual romance "clichéd," danmei readers who acclaim the merit of this category express desire for danmei to be "innovative," "sophisticated," and not subscribing to traditional gender standards. Some earlier danmei authors were influenced by gay literature and film; earlier and newer alike, most danmei authors identify with the right to sexual orientation. Nevertheless, veteran readers tend to describe the current trend in danmei as increasingly unsophisticated (written by and for younger age groups), stereotyped, and containing too many unacceptable sexual practices, and treating sex too randomly¹⁴² or making it overly erotic. The complaints remain consistent from 2009 to 2016, showing that the State's repeated efforts to cleanse the web (especially in 2014) have failed. Yet many more readers enjoy BL for the same reasons these critics find objectionable. Posts containing such content receive high traffic on Changpei and elsewhere, and many authors move chapters containing sex from Jinjiang to more flexible

¹⁴² Many readers cannot accept sex outside a romantic relationship, such as a one night stand, or NTR (acronym for Japanese 寝取られ, meaning that one member of the couple has voluntary or forced sex with someone else outside the romantic relationship).

platforms, such as Sina Weibo. Government censorship, as always, is circumvented. Sexual depictions are becoming so congruent to the genre that it is indispensable to many.¹⁴³ It is not unusual to find light-hearted discussions on how to write *rou* 肉 (literally flesh, sexual scenes) on Sina Weibo between authors and readers.¹⁴⁴

Debate 3: Is danmei – and especially its depictions of gay people and gay sex – reality or fantasy?

(Participants: fu n ü and outsiders)

“To read about two men, it is terrifying for me!!!” (Post #56, 2009)

“I really can’t imagine what is beautiful about anal sex, and they call themselves ‘danmei’ [addicted to beauty]? My thinking is, OMG, the anus is not used for that purpose! Faeces would come out! (Vomiting)” (Post #70, 2009)

“It seems that many good stories on Jinjiang are danmei... but I am a heterosexual girl, and I have done internship at a hospital’s proctology department. That internship experience is the main reason why I don’t read danmei! Shou 受 [the bottom] is the most pitiful of all!” (Post #73, 2009)

¹⁴³ A line like “Have you never heard of the prostate?” is not uncommon in Boys’ Love stories. Apart from satisfying curiosity about the male body and homosexual practice, the question itself could easily be transformed into a question about female sexual satisfaction. Scholars have pointed out writing and reading BL texts allow women to explore sexual practices virtually, without confronting explicit heteronormative sex scenes. Authors often mention the excitement and nervousness they experienced when writing these stories in public environment (a study room in the library, for example), exhibiting the excitement of light transgression.

¹⁴⁴ One example would be danmei author Sinning 罪化, who in a Sina Weibo post dated July 28, 2017 writes: “I am stuck at a sexual scene. I did not see this coming, but it seems that I don’t know what words to use to describe ‘cucumber’ 黄瓜 [penis] and ‘chrysanthemum’ 菊花[anus].” Her followers were quick to volunteer a dozen options for selection. The alternative wording is likely needed to circumvent keyword censorship. http://weibo.com/1294943994/FewlLdoEo?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment, accessed July 28, 2017.

“Let me explain some general knowledge about sex... Anal sex is not confined to homosexuals or gays... If there isn't enough foreplay, even the most common vaginal sex can be extremely painful.” (Post #76, 2009)

“I can accept gays, but I can't stand women fantasizing about gays. Gays dislike this group too. It is genuinely a not welcomed group.” (Post #98, 2009)

“I don't identify with BL or GL, but I will defend to the death their right to such love. I often just do not pay attention to such relationships, I never openly object to non-heterosexual sex.

However, this distorted relationship should not be advertised, or become a fashion in writing... If this fashion goes on, it will definitely impart a wrong view of love to teenagers. I really couldn't imagine... if 50% of the relationships in the future world were homosexual...OMG, I almost can't understand this society!” (Post #108, 2009)

“I find danmei repulsive, because I live in Philadelphia. There are many homosexuals living here. It's impossible to not be repelled by two bald, fat-bellied guys being intimate. I read only romance.” (Post #113, 2009)

“I live in San Francisco, many of my friends and colleagues are gay. Some couples are really sweet. P.S. BL \neq Gay!” (Post #122, 2009)

“There are too many danmei novels and comics nowadays, erotic ones. In reality, only a small amount of people are homosexual. I can't help but feel that the rotten girls' psychology is distorted. I don't hold anything against homosexuality, but for some people to glorify homosexuality, I think is quite problematic.” (Post # 146, 2009)

“I've been reading for years, and I have to say that good danmei works are rare. Many danmei works are authors' fantasies and would be impossible in reality. I especially hate the type when a

man is raped by another but still loves the rapist so deeply. Damn, anyone in the right state of mind should know that's not possible!" (Post #193, 2010)

"Who says reading danmei would change a person's sexuality? Actually, women read danmei because they like men, and they read romance for the same reason. The difference is just one man or two men." (Post #230, 2010)

"99% percent of fu n ü are heterosexual, and most likely their boyfriends are in novels, games or comics.¹⁴⁵ I am growing outraged!!! Rotten girls are not lesbians!!! As for why we like danmei, it's because there are fewer disgusting female characters in danmei!!!Because it is cute to see two frank and straightforward guys being in a relationship!!!Because there are many good quality danmei works!!! And the emotions between males that are unaccepted by the society is beautiful!!! That's why two very capable male protagonists as a couple is the cutest combination!!!" (Post #254, 2011)

"I don't read danmei much. But I find gays cute and want to find a good gay friend someday. The one thing I can't stand the most about danmei, is the distinction between the gong and the shou! Most real gay couples are just two guys, and there is no distinction. The distinction only serves to help readers fantasize the shou as female, is it really meaningful to do this? Is it?" (Post #258, 2011)

"Danmei is very different from homosexuality. Terms like gong or shou are probably not scientific. You are really worrying yourself for nothing if you think danmei would affect the development of the society and adolescent children. Anyone who has spent time in danmei circles knows this. The fact that most danmei protagonists are better looking and from rich backgrounds alone should make it easy to tell how danmei characters are different from real-life

¹⁴⁵ Meaning that they are virtual, imagined. Not in the sense that they cannot distinguish the reality from the fiction, but in the sense that they like these fictional characters.

homosexuals... I think, there is no defensible reasons to discriminate against homosexuals.”
(Post #273, 2016).

“Nowadays, the popularity of danmei is simply unnatural. One often hears people proclaiming that only homosexual love is real love, and heterosexual love is simply for reproduction. It is not the danmei novels, but the fu nǚ who blindly chase them (the so-called pseudo-fū, as you call them) that makes me feel disgusted” (Post #303, 2016)

“Why blame the category when it is certain danmei authors who write poor quality works?
Romance as a category of writing has poor works too.” (Post #311, 2016)

This thread is typical in revealing how general online public views of rotten girls and their literary tastes. Firstly, anal sex and homosexuality are still largely stigmatized, despite some improvements in recent years.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, these commentators object to novels that center on homosexual relationships on the grounds that they are bad for adolescents and society. When fu nǚ defend themselves by saying that (the majority of) danmei novels are by nature “fantasy,” and hence unlikely to influence readers’ sexuality, others respond that the genre wrongfully represents gays as a group. This double social pressure suggests why some danmei communities prefer to stay insular and to commit members to following community rules.

The posts also make it clear that many observers realize that danmei literature is different from gay literature. More readers come to accept the basic tropes of danmei, for example

¹⁴⁶ A 2015 research done on university students shows that, male students have a more negative attitude towards homosexuals than females: 68%/64% of male students “strongly agree” that gay/lesbian sexual relationships are “obviously wrong.” This represents a significant drop from the 77.8% (of both genders) in the 2002 study (Yan, Liu & Xu). Nevertheless, in the sample, well over half of the university students still strongly disapprove. See Liu Jingxuan 刘璟璇, Sun Lin 孙琳, “Research on the Cognitive Attitude of University Students” 在校大学生对同性恋群体的态度, *China Journal of Health Psychology* 中国健康心理学杂志, 2015, Vol. 23, Issue 11, pp.1700-1704.

homosexual fantasy, the dichotomy of penetrating and penetrated roles in sex,¹⁴⁷ and distinctions between traditional, androgynous or non-traditional gender roles. More “senior” or self-claimed “genuine” fu n ü reject overly erotic contents as they believe that fu n ü should hold high moral standards or pursue literary quality. The dilemma then becomes: Is it possible to write danmei (and not gay) literature in a manner that is inoffensive towards the gay community while maintaining literary quality and satisfying readers’ expectations? One common practice is to shift the attention away from homosexual romance by adding detective, supernatural, historical and other fantasy elements. Another common practice is rejection of truthful representation (with full awareness of the writing’s utopian nature): for example, unrealistically good-looking protagonists, plenty of melodrama, comical tone, and excessive sex. After all, BL is not gay literature and should not bear the burden of faithful representation.

¹⁴⁷ It is not uncommon nowadays to downplay the distinction of the two roles, or make them ambiguous. But the willingness to be the penetrated party in sex is still a widely used trope to emphasize that party’s deep affection, and could carry a sense of ritualistic sacrifice akin to losing virginity in heterosexual sex.

Chapter 2: BL Forum case study: Young Nobleman Changpei (Gongzi Changpei)

2.1. A previously non-commercial forum in transition

Rotten girls' interest in BL and especially their fondness for “couples” (萌 CP) is remarkably more popular, open and marketed (at least on websites) in mainland China than it ever was. A quick search on Sina Weibo for fu nü “腐女” returns 34,993,556 results.¹⁴⁸ In a 2015 journal article, the phrase “everyone is ‘rotten’” 全民皆腐 is used to help comprehend the heatedly discussed yet fantasized nature of an alleged real-life “couple” – male pianist Li Yundi 李云迪 and male pop singer Wang Lihong 王力宏.¹⁴⁹ The number of fu nü is a myth – no study to date has offered reliable demographic statistics. The number of platforms, the diversity of taste, the diversity of media (fiction, comic, TV dramas) they consume, the many reading apps/literature websites/pirate websites through which they could access BL contents could all present challenges to counting their number.¹⁵⁰ Following the commercialization of the genre, BL fiction writing has become a cultural franchise that spans the fields of online/print publication (official or self-published), and film/TV/comic adaptation.

Here I want to return to the source of this industry– the production and consumption of the BL fiction through analyzing a BL writing and reading community – Gongzi Changpei 公子

¹⁴⁸ Sina Weibo, <http://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E8%2585%2590%25E5%25A5%25B3&Refer=index>, accessed on July 28, 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Shen Xiaoxiao 沈晓晓, “新媒体中的腐女亚文化及其商业收编——以‘春晚 CP’为例” [The subculture of rotten girls in new media and its incorporation through commercialization into the mainstream– using “Spring Festival Gala Couple” as an example], *News World* 新闻世界, 2015(05): 240-241.

¹⁵⁰ To offer some idea on the size of the reader group, here are the statistics on two popular Jinjiang danmei novels in serialization. Danmei novel 残次品 [*Defective Goods*] by author Priest, started serialization in April 2017; its first chapter so far has received 360k hits, then the amount of hits drops and stabilizes at around 80 to 90 thousand for non-VIP chapters (<http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3121357>, accessed July 28, 2017). Danmei novel 一替成名 [*Rocketed to Stardom through a Nude Double*] by Superpanda, started serialization on June 18, 2017 (only around one and half months, as of this writing); its first chapter has received 148k clicks, the remaining non-VIP chapters around 80k to 100k clicks per chapter. (<http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3190754>, accessed July 28, 2017).

长佩. How are all these presumably young female authors and readers writing and reading stories? What key elements attract readers and what are authors writing? A close look at the forum Gongzi Changpei offers answers to some of these questions.

While commercial websites with columns dedicated to BL fictions get the most traffic, Gongzi Changpei, a BL fiction forum, is one of the most visited sites dedicated to BL fiction alone. Launched in December 2010, it remained non-commercial until the end of May 2016, and until then comprised a more secluded community. While it is hard to know its exact number of users, its Sina Weibo account attracts around 47,000 followers, and its website shows that at its peak, 11,000 users were online simultaneously (accessed on March 28, 2017). On May 31, 2017, after it announced its commercialization, its Sina Weibo account followers had grown to 52,065.

On May 30th 2017, Gongzi Changpei, originally a non-commercial forum dedicated to original and fan fiction of danmei writings made an announcement on its Sina Weibo official account that it would go commercial in June 2017.¹⁵¹ This decision came half a year after the forum runners made an announcement on Sina Weibo on January 1st, 2017, about its decision back in 2016 to turn down an offer from investors. Back then, the major concern was that commercialization would mean that many BL novels on the website would have to be censored in accordance with the state's regulations.¹⁵² The reasons for going commercial are explained as: firstly, it wants to become a platform that could financially support authors, especially those who

¹⁵¹ See forum Gongzi Changpei's official Sina Weibo account: “大家端午节快乐，发个很长却很重要的公告” [Happy Dragon Boat Festival, everyone. Here is a very long but important announcement], microblog dated May 30, 2017. http://weibo.com/gongzichangpei?refer_flag=1001030102_&is_all=1 (accessed May 31, 2017).

¹⁵² See Gongzi Changpei's official Sina Weibo account: “A letter to all ‘mackerels’ (forum members) of our website 致所有青花鱼的一封信.” <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404058805758513380> (accessed May 31, 2017). All users of the forum are nicknamed 青花鱼, which translates as mackerel.

wanted to go professional¹⁵³; and secondly, because the forum is non-commercial, popular authors tended to leave for commercial websites. In response to one comment from the Weibo follower, the owners made several promises to forum members: firstly, funding came from within the team, ensuring financial autonomy¹⁵⁴; secondly, the forum would maintain a similar degree of artistic “freedom” as before; and lastly, they would spend time figuring out the exact mode of commercial operation. In addition, an “editor group” official account would be set up to deal with “consultation and contract signing services for authors.”¹⁵⁵

The change was somewhat unexpected, but responses to date have been mostly positive and supportive. Responses to the post getting most up-votes include: the possibility of developing a mobile app for the site (and concerns for excluding sex on the app); if possible, readers hope to exclude heterosexual romance, or at least to separate it from danmei; another concern is that the non-commercial mode of operation has provided convenience for readers, as well as authors not ready for commercialization, and this layer of protection would be lost.¹⁵⁶

These concerns and hopes are well-grounded. Major literary websites have adopted a mature VIP pay-to-read system and acted as the agent of online authors for around a decade. It is unclear how the commercial mode of Gongzi Changpei would differentiate from other websites. Below is my account, from the perspective of a user and analyst, of how Gongzi Changpei ran

¹⁵³ Before commercialization, since Gongzi Changpei adheres to its non-commercial principle, the incentives for authors are mostly non-monetary – in the form of readers’ encouragement or symbolic rewards, such as 鱼粮 (fish food) and 鲜花 (flowers).

¹⁵⁴ Before commercialization, the maintenance and management of the forum is based solely on “labor of love” 靠爱发电 (literally: electricity generated from love; translates as: labor of love).

¹⁵⁵ See official Sina Weibo account for 长佩编辑组 [Editor Group of Changpei], http://weibo.com/u/6263722857?from=feed&loc=at&nick=%E9%95%BF%E4%BD%A9%E7%BC%96%E8%BE%91%E7%BB%84&is_all=1#_rnd1496261444893, (accessed May 31, 2017).

¹⁵⁶ Before its commercialization, despite allowing guest posts, Changpei adopted a stricter registration process that filtered the website users. Unfriendly criticism would often lead to attacks from fellow readers or authors themselves.

the forum prior to commercialization. Its operations, of course, might well change during or after Gongzi Changpei finishes the commercialization process.

First, pornographic writing¹⁵⁷ was prohibited in the forum before commercialization, but sex (if deemed relevant to narrative development) is not. Take Jinjiang for example: since the government tightened censorship, many BL novels have been “locked up” (hence blocked from the public) and sex writing monitored and restricted. Before commercialization, Gongzi Changpei provided a much more lenient environment. It is yet to be seen if this will change afterwards; I believe the probability is high.

Second, less-famous or new authors are more likely to be noticed and receive some publicity in a smaller and more close-knit community like Gongzi Changpei. After all, even authors who have no intention to make a profit would appreciate feedback and attention, or else they would not post their stories online. Although both moderators and readers influence the publicity level of a specific novel, there is little editorial intervention. Moderators can bring attention to a thread (novel) through manually classifying it as “featured post.” Readers do so through giving positive feedback and leaving comments. An individual reader has more agency within a smaller community than on a big commercial platform.¹⁵⁸ For example, readers can send recommendations to a 长佩扫文小组[Changpei’s novel surveying team] account on Sina Weibo, which broadcast the recommendation to its followers. In comparison, on Jinjiang, if a novel does

¹⁵⁷ According to the forum rules of Gongzi Changpei, the proportion of “hidden content” (隐藏部分) should not go over 20% of the entire content. Content hidden is mostly sex scenes. “Hidden content” is accessible only to registered users. The authors are able to hide it through adding a code to the text. If any novel violates this rule, the forum moderator would notify the author and readers before taking action (for example, deleting the thread).

¹⁵⁸ Zhu Yuqing et. al comments in an analysis of the forum in a similar way, suggesting that the persistent participation of a few “loyal readers” suffices to maintain the hotness of a thread. Zhu Yuqing 祝宇清 et. al, 北京网络文学论坛 [Beijing University Internet Literature Forum], post 扫文进行时, 小众题材与“小甜饼”: 1-4 月长佩扫文报告[Novel surveying in progress: minority themed novels and “Little Sweet Pies”: an analysis of novels available on forum Changpei from January to April 2017], <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404113214035110641#0> (accessed May 31, 2017).

not make it onto a ranking list or is non-commercial, it is much harder to receive as much attention.

Third, contrary to commercial novels on Jinjiang, which can easily exceed words counts of one million, the non-commercial Gongzi Changpei hosted writings of various length and themes. When it comes to Gongzi Changpei's importance as a platform, I would like to draw a comparison between Gongzi Changpei and the Japanese BL manga magazine *June*. Akiko Mizoguchi summarizes the experimental writings in *June* as: breaking away from the *semeluke* (aggressive role/passive role) dichotomy; lack of sex scenes; works with strong female characters; and lastly, works focusing on subsidiary characters.¹⁵⁹ In this sense, the function of this forum is somewhat similar to that of Japanese yaoi magazine *June* as an experimental site in the early 2000s – a “launching pad” or incubator for new writers. Nevertheless, compared with the more rigid industry conventions of commercial BL in Japan, Chinese danmei has always been more flexible; for example, ambiguity regarding the top/bottom roles and lack of sex scenes are not uncommon even in commercial novels.

The day after Gongzi Changpei's decision to go commercial, the “Beijing University Internet Literature Forum” 北大网络文学论坛 posted an article analyzing popular and recommended novels published on Changpei in the first half of 2017. The article notes that less prominent danmei subgenres like “sci-fi,” “supernatural” themed novels, 小甜饼 (literally, little sweetie pie, or sentimental romantic novella), and “kept-man” themed novels are the three most popular themes available, and comments that the “thread” format is advantageous towards

¹⁵⁹ Akiko Mizoguchi, “Male-male romance by and for women in Japan: a history and subgenres of Yaoi fictions,” *U.S.- Japan Women's Journal* (issue 2003:62).

shorter stories.¹⁶⁰ While it is hard to predict how the forum will change in the future, the website deserves attention as a significant genre platform in transition.

2.2. Registration, forum rules, graphic design and declarations of the forum (pre-commercialization)

As shown above, despite rising popularity, BL remains controversial in China. To become a member of Changpei – as on the other major BL forum, Lucifer-Club – one needs to correctly answer a series of questions related to BL. Questions include the number of regulations Changpei forum has, the meaning of BL slang terms, and the plots or names of characters in popular Chinese BL novels. The list of questions is continually updated. Therefore, to successfully sign up requires effort, especially for outsiders to the BL subculture. The difference between guest users and registered users is that registered users have access to (mostly sexual) contents hidden by authors as required by the forum. The questions and the emphasis placed on forum rules serve to separate the community from general internet users, protecting both from each other and from the State.

Like Lucifer-Club, Changpei's forum is built with the Chinese internet forum software "Discuz!" Changpei's server is set up outside of China, meaning that it is occasionally hard to access for users in mainland China. Prior to the Chinese government's campaign against pornography in 2014, there were many more BL publications on Jinjiang. When waves of the cyberspace cleansing campaign hit (as in April 2014), they added to the burdens of authors, who had to avoid sensitive words, and were sometimes forced to revise their writings to stop their accounts from being locked and their novels from being blocked from the public view (a practice

¹⁶⁰Zhu Yuqing 祝宇清 et. al, 小众题材与“小甜饼”: 1-4 月长佩扫文报告[Novel surveying in progress: minority themed novels and “Little Sweet Pies”: an analysis of novels available on forum Changpei from January to April 2017].

referred to as *suowen* 锁文, “textual lock up”). Comparatively, despite still being affected by the overall environment, Gongzi Changpei always allowed authors more freedom.

Like other forums, Changpei’s rules regulate contents of the website as well as behaviours of its users. For example, forum rules make it clear that heterosexual romance, sexual or violent headlines, pornography, marginal subgenres (e.g., ABO¹⁶¹, human-animal romance, males giving birth), and sexual fantasies involving underage¹⁶² characters are all prohibited. Hidden content accessible only to registered users (usually sex scenes) cannot exceed 20% of a story. Cursing, ad hominem, and slander are also prohibited.



Figure 1 Graphic on the front page of the forum Gongzi Changpei¹⁶³

The graphic design used at top of the forum’s front page features a long-haired, androgynous man in an ancient Chinese-style robe (**Figure 1**). This is a partial image cropped from the cover page of an unofficial self-published book by multiple authors (多人合志) published for Changpei’s five-year anniversary, which contains 18 stories written by 18 different Changpei authors (**Figure 2**). The profit from this self-published BL story collection went to the

¹⁶¹ A “kink trope of Alpha/Beta/Omega dynamic,” the basic setting is that there are three types of biological roles (Alphas, Betas and Omegas) for the both male and female genders, which entails strong biological features and dictate their hierarchical roles. For an introduction, see Zheng Xiqing, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, 191-209. When Chinese danmei authors adopt this trope, they tend to make changes as they see fit to serve their own stories.

¹⁶² Changpei currently defines “underage” as 16 years of age. See 长佩文学论坛总版规 (2017 年 7 月版) [General Rules of the Changpei Literary Forum (July 2017 version)], <http://allcp.net/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=29561&extra=page%3D1%26filter%3Dsortid%26sortid%3D8>, accessed August 1, 2017.

¹⁶³ See: <http://allcp.net/forum.php> (accessed May 31, 2017).

cost of operating the forum.¹⁶⁴ The full image depicts two long-haired men, one in modern attire, fully-dressed, the other in an ancient robe, partly revealing his chest and thighs. The robe-dressed man leans back at the waist, while the modern-dress man holds him by the waist and kisses his hand. It seems to me that the more aggressive versus the more passive figures might correspond to the gong and shou sexual roles in BL fictions. The facial features of the two male characters resemble manga characters. In the background is a western building featuring arches, and a Chinese building featuring rice paper windows, a rainbow-colored keyboard and peach flower petals drifting in the air. These traits are characteristic of Danmei: the pursuit and enjoyment of aesthetic beauty of males yet in an inexplicit and refined manner.¹⁶⁵ One line that used to appear in a prominent location on Changpei's first page is “我们特别纯洁 (we are extremely pure).” Appearing alongside the graphic, this slogan could be taken as self-mocking, or it could be read as self-consciously justifying the consumption of male beauties.

¹⁶⁴ See forum's official Sina Weibo account, blog article “长佩五周年纪念刊 《时光机 PLUS》 购买说明” [Explanations for purchasing *Time Machine PLUS*], dated June 10, 2015, <http://weibo.com/p/1001603852302019606278?mod=zwenzhang>, (accessed May 31, 2017).

¹⁶⁵ Fran Martin, “Girls who love boys' love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, (2012, 13:3, 368).

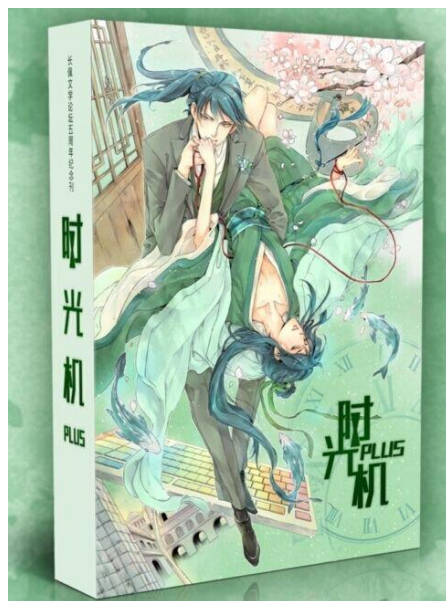


Figure 2 Gongzi Changpei Forum's Five Year Anniversary Self-printed Publication 时光机 Plus [Time Machine Plus]¹⁶⁶

Lucifer Club, the other major BL forum that came before Changpei, states that the forum was named after “Lucifer, the angel fallen from heaven,” and states that its inclinations are “rebellion—to break new ground and dare to be creative.”¹⁶⁷ Its major graphic icon is an inverted cross with “Lucifer Club” written on the horizontal line. The header of the Lucifer Club’s Sina Weibo account is shown in **Figure 3** below. The black-winged devil and the white-winged angel look identical except for the color of their attire and a slight change of hair color. Each of them is also holding a book with Lucifer-Club cross on the book cover.

The uses of these graphic designs and words again seem to convey the idea that rotten women (or men) are consciously aware of their “rottenness” and not ashamed of this identity.

¹⁶⁶ The front cover of this book is still accessible through on the Taiwan site of Sina Weibo, official account of 公子长佩, <http://tw.weibo.com/gongzichangpei/3852307135618910> (accessed May 31, 2017)

¹⁶⁷ See the forum’s self-introduction, <http://forum.luciferclub.com/lucifercity/member.php?mod=register> (accessed on March 14, 2017)



Figure 3 Lucifer Club Official Account - Sina Weibo Header

2.3.Components of the website, literary genres and subgenres

Novels on Changpei are set against a wide range of backgrounds: pre-modern, modern, contemporary, futuristic. Styles range from realist to fantasy; tones from satirical to earnest.¹⁶⁸ Aside from homosexuality, there is a wide range of other elements incorporated from genres such as detective, time travel or book travel (wherein the protagonist becomes a character in a book), Chinese and western fantasy, supernatural, online games, and science fiction (apocalyptic and otherwise). Some stories are almost devoid of sexual description, while others verge on erotica.

The Changpei landing page consists of the following sections: First, “Newly replied posts”, “hot posts” and “featured posts,” selected by readers and forum moderators. For example, the BL novel discussed in chapter three, *If You Have Been Through Winter*, was once featured in the section by a moderator. Next is the 创作区[Literary creation section], followed by 交流区[Communication section], and 版务区[Administration section]. At the bottom are links to related Chinese BL or slash forums.

¹⁶⁸ See Fran Martin’s discussion on Taiwan BL novels’ range, features and tones, which could also apply to Chinese internet literature in general, “Girls who love boys’ love: Japanese homoerotic manga as trans-national Taiwan culture,” 368).

When a special event is going on, such as the recent 原创区征文比赛[Call for Original Stories Competition], winning stories would be listed on top. Such activities are a conscious effort for the forum to mobilize writings, probably also in preparation for start of commercialization process.

The literary creation section is further divided into three sub-sections featuring “collections” of earlier works: 原创文窟[Original fiction section], 同人文窟[Tongren fiction section] and 完结文窟[Completed novels section]. In the case of Changpei, the subsection of original works attracts the vast majority of postings and clicks. The Communication section is divided into two sub-sections: Random posts and Advertisements for self-published books. The Administration section is divided into two sub-sections: General administration and Complaints and arbitrations. If Changpei receives complaints or finds violations of forum rules, moderators usually announce their decisions and penalties in this section.

The tag feature in the “Original fiction section” 原创文窟 shows that it is divided into the following categories, arranged horizontally, left to right, based on their main themes and contexts:

现代 (Modern/contemporary) (6955 posts)

古风 (Ancient-style) (2315 posts)

民国 (Republican China) (123 posts)

西方 (Western) (139 posts)

科幻 (Sci-fi) (367 posts)

奇幻 (Fantasy) (1001 posts)

网游 (Online games) (139 posts)

穿越 (Spirit/body travel) (152 posts)

百合¹⁶⁹ (Lesbian) (141 posts)

征文 (Call for submissions) (61 posts)

灵异 (Supernatural) (36 posts)

其他 (Other) (166 posts).¹⁷⁰

Changpei's categories, in short, are more or less similar to those of Jinjiang.

2.4. Overview of popular works on Changpei

2.4.1 Review website Saowen xiaoyuan 扫文小院 [Quick-Take Courtyard]

How is a reader to find what she or he likes online, given the immense volume of Chinese fiction posted every day on different forums and websites? One way is to follow the recommendations and features of literary websites and forums themselves. For many, another way to find desirable texts is through visiting Baidu web forums or following surveying websites/individuals dedicated to BL fiction. The term “saowen”扫文, means to glance over or skim through texts; online, it means to quickly read through online fictions and then offer comments to fellow readers. Comments vary greatly in length and format, and may give information on genres, plot, characterization or simply a score regarding overall quality. On Sina Weibo, many such accounts recommend works according to their own standards. These include the previously mentioned Sina Weibo account 长佩扫文小组 [Changpei's novel surveying team], which, according to its first microblog in 2010, was run by the forum's moderators and welcomes readers' contributions.

¹⁶⁹ *Baihe* 百合 literally translates as Lily.

¹⁷⁰ See <http://allcp.net/forum.php?mod=forumdisplay&fid=4>. Numbers of posts are as accessed on March 28, 2017.

Saowen xiaoyuan 扫文小院 (hereafter abbreviated as SWXY), literally translates as “Quick-Take Courtyard.” It is a reader-review website mainly dedicated to Chinese-language BL fiction. It was initially built and run by ID 镜上寒霜 [Winter Frost on the Mirror], hereafter Winter Frost. According to the “About the website” section, Winter Frost got the idea of building a website dedicated to reviewing BL fiction while she was reading review posts on Sina Weibo. She wanted to build a site that allows users to accumulate and share ratings and reviews.¹⁷¹ Winter Frost started building the website in 2012 as a hobby and archived the process of website building and adding functions on the blogging website Lofter.¹⁷² In these archival files, Winter Frost recorded her excitement regarding the increase in users, notes on how different functions were gradually added, and her personal opinions on BL fiction’s development.

She includes her thoughts on how to rank works of fiction and once mentioned she was “ambitious” and wanted to build up a grading system of internet fictions through tags. This is one wish repetitively expressed by BL readers and authors. One of the website’s functions – its “tags” 标签 system – is modeled after the tag systems on the website Douban, which turned into a major success. Readers can up vote or down vote others’ reviews as “useful” 有用 or “not useful” 无用. Users are free to add new entries into the database and edit them. In general, the more reviews a title receives, the more helpful its rating, as it would reflect a more communal opinion on a specific work. One screenshot showed that daily visits have climbed to regularly around 25,000 around June 2015.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ “关于扫文小院” [About SWXY], by Winter Frost, dated June 24, 2012. <http://saowen.net/about> (accessed March 28, 2017).

¹⁷² See blog collections “扫文小院建站杂记” [Miscellaneous notes on the process of creating SWXY], <http://saowenxiaoyuan.lofter.com/view> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹⁷³ See blog “受众群体概览” [Overview of website users], http://saowenxiaoyuan.lofter.com/post/1cfc5fef_76e5798 (accessed March 15, 2017)

SWXY has always been controversial. Winter Frost mentioned in her archive that “many expressed that their feelings were hurt by tu cao 吐槽 (literally “to spit invective,” meaning to give harsh negative reviews or ridicule) towards their own works on SWXY, blx (so easily hurt).¹⁷⁴” A quick search of SWXY in BL communities turns up many posts about the (perceived) “unfriendliness” of SWXY towards online fiction authors, some of whom are unwilling to have their works listed on SWXY. Angry fans also accused users of SWXY as readers who read pirated BL copies (and unwilling to pay for VIP chapters), which is obviously not entirely true.¹⁷⁵ In my opinion, these controversies arise partially due to the amateur nature of some danmei writings, the sensitivity surrounding the issues of piracy and plagiarism, as well as the fact that Chinese online fiction writing is still mainly author-oriented. While for the majority of Chinese online literature, authors try catering¹⁷⁶ to the tastes of their readers¹⁷⁷, the ethic surrounding non-commercial writings especially encourage readers to voluntarily show great respect towards authors.

¹⁷⁴ Blx is abbreviation for boli xin 玻璃心. 玻璃心 literally means “heart made of glass,” it is used to describe a person with an overly sensitive ego and hence easily hurt. Post dated October 4th, http://saowenxiaoyuan.lofter.com/post/1cfc5fef_556c937 (accessed March 28, 2017).

¹⁷⁵ Piracy is a major problem that faces commercial internet literature authors and websites. Piracy websites and apps use certain types of computer software to “snatch” the contents of online novels and pirate the VIP chapters almost instantly after a new chapter is published. Through posting VIP chapters for free on their own site, piracy websites and apps attract users who are unwilling to pay for reading, and make profits through advertisement. Internet literature industry has tried to fight piracy in various ways. For more information on the issue of piracy, see news report on the issue of piracy: 揭秘网络文学“秒盗”经济链 盗文网站月入15万[Uncover the economic motivation behind the “immediate piracy” of internet literature – piracy website generates 150,000 a month in profit], 文化产业周刊[Cultural Creative Industry Weekly], <http://www.bbtnews.com.cn/2016/0606/150639.shtml>, posted June 6, 2016, accessed August 23, 2016.

¹⁷⁶ Chinese online commercial novels are often pirated (online and in print) - meaning that novels’ content are pasted elsewhere other than their site of original publication without the authorization from authors. Such actionsThe logic behind such accusation is that.

¹⁷⁷ In an interview, scholar Sao Yanjun once asked Maoni 猫腻 [“trickiness” or “fishy things”], one of the most welcomed writer of male-oriented online genre novels: “Do you mean that you contain the exercise of your personal style within certain limits? That you should first respect the reading habits of the masses?” Maoni answered: “I think the biggest difference between us commercial novel writers and ‘pure literature’ writers lies in the extent of respect we show towards the readers.” See Maoni, Shao Yanjun, “以‘爽文’写‘情怀’——专访著名网络文学作家猫腻” [Using Wish-fulfilling Literature to Write about Feelings], *Nanfang wentan* 南方文坛, Issue 5, (2015):93.

Researchers have pointed out that “to protect the author’s creative energy and to respect their copyright and authorship, are important consensuses achieved when the BL community was first established in China.”¹⁷⁸ Accusations of plagiarism carry an especially strong stigma in the BL reading and writing community. The “taboo nature” makes it more difficult for BL fiction authors to defend their rights.¹⁷⁹ One specific incident in January 2016 led to Winter Frost making a public apology and to quit as webmaster and operator of SWXY.

Judging by the discussion thread on Jinjiang’s forum section Xianqing 闲情 (the section of Jinjiang forum dedicated to BL)¹⁸⁰ and another thread on Baidu web forums¹⁸¹, the incident seems to have unfolded in the following manner: one BL novel by author Chu han yi qing 楚寒衣青 was tagged as “having plagiarized” on SWXY. When the author was told of the tag, the author requested the tag to be removed. Supporters of the author found that Winter Frost did not cooperate to solve the issue effectively and that her attitude was biased. The incident kept escalating as supporters of both Winter Frost and the author started to attack each other. In the end, certain of Winter Frost’s behaviours were deemed unprofessional (for example, as an employee of Jinjiang, she leaked certain corporate information). The incident ended with Winter Frost turning over ownership of SWXY to her employer, Jinjiang, and writing a public

¹⁷⁸ Yang Ling 杨玲, Xu Yanrui 徐艳蕊. “文化治理与社群自治——以网络耽美社群为例” [Cultural Governance and Community Autonomy – Using Online Danmei Communities as an Example], *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索与争鸣, Issue 3 (2016): 66.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Yang and Xu’s article also offers details and analysis of a debate over plagiarism in the BL forum Lucifer-Club, which leads to serious consequences including authors and readers leaving the forum – eventually its decline in popularity.

¹⁸⁰ Thread titled “XQ 没人关注扫文小院和作者那件事吗?” [Has no one paid attention to the incident of SWXY and the author in the Xianqing section?], on Jinjiang Forum, <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=3&boardpagemsg=1&id=815338> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹⁸¹ Thread titled “没人 8 扫文小院诬蔑楚寒衣青抄袭一事?...” [Is no one discussing the incident of SWXY defaming the author Chu han yi qing 楚寒衣青 as committing plagiarizing?] *Baidu Anti-Plagiarism Bar* 百度反抄袭吧 <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/4303668173>

apology.¹⁸² Judging by replies to the announcement, the final decision satisfied neither side. Some commentators felt Winter Frost was not punished severely enough, while others worried that SWXY would lose its independence. After the heat of discussion faded, according to Alexa's website rankings, SWXY's ranking bottomed out on October 16, 2016. Since then, its ranking has slowly climbed back up, with 74% of its traffic coming from mainland China, and 16% from Taiwan.¹⁸³

Such events notwithstanding, I still find SWXY a relatively comprehensive and unbiased review website for BL fiction. Its "tag" feature and other netizens' recommendation lists are still useful when searching for new and old BL texts, especially old ones, since their publication site is sometimes unclear or gets locked off during cyberspace purges. Below, I quote some of SWXY's ratings and rankings.

2.4.2 Recent hot novels and threads on Gongzi Changpei

长佩扫文小组[Changpei's novel survey team] created a "2016 Annual Report: Recommended Works from Changpei," available through its official Weibo.¹⁸⁴ Here I list three popular novels to give readers an idea what kind of themes are being written and read on the forum:

(accessed March 15, 2017)

¹⁸² Thread titled "关于扫文小院事件的处理公告, 附: 镜上寒霜的道歉信" [Announcing the decision made towards the incident of SWXY, with apology letter from Winter Frost attached.], Jinjiang forum, <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=17&boardpagemsg=6&id=409423> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹⁸³ See Traffic Statistics for saowen.net on Alexa, <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/saowen.net> (accessed March 15, 2017).

¹⁸⁴ 长佩扫文小组[Changpei's novel surveying team] official Sina Weibo account, blog "2016 年长佩扫文年度总结" [2016 Annual Summary of BL novels surveying on forum Changpei], <http://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404071161372773022> (accessed May 23, 2017).

1. *I am Not Secretly in Love with My Friend* 我没有暗恋我朋友, by Nomlas 鱼文三, (serialized from January 2016 to February 2017). It is a first person pseudo forum thread, meaning that the story is written in the format of a thread by the protagonist in the first person. This story starts with a misunderstanding and has a classical happy ending, with two best (male) friends turning into lovers and announcing their happy union at the end of the “thread.” The author also has a blog writing danmei fan fiction on Lofter.
2. *Game of Slaughter* 杀戮秀 by fox ^^ (serialized from September 2016 to April 2017). It tells a story of the future, in which TV producers recruit criminals to participate in a popular TV show called “Game of Slaughter.” Two protagonists strive for survival. The author has a personal blog on bulaoge.net.¹⁸⁵
3. *Every day I Fight with My Boyfriend over World View and Moral Values* 每天都在和我的男朋友战三观 by Tongzhi Tiewan / Liquan hou 铜汁铁丸¹⁸⁶/醴泉候 (serialized from July 2015 to April 2017). It tells the story of a modern man who travels back in time to the end of the Yuan Dynasty, and the conflicts between his modern world view and those of the earlier age.

¹⁸⁵ Author fox^^’s personal page, on 不老歌 bulaoge.net, <http://bulaoge.net/?expertff> (accessed May 23, 2017).

¹⁸⁶ The first pen name Tongzhi tiewan 铜汁铁丸 (melted copper and iron balls) alludes to the novel *Journey to the West*, Monkey King could only drink melted copper and eat iron balls while trapped under Five Elements Mountain. In addition, there is a possibility that the pen name could be a pun, suggesting “steel-testicle gay,” as 铜汁 is a homophone of tongzhi 同志 (comrade, gay).

2.4.3 Top three most reviewed novels from Gongzi Changpei, based on reader reviews from SWXY¹⁸⁷:

1. *The Most Attractive Guy in the Faculty & the Most Attractive Guy in the College* 系草和校草. ABO themed. Now deleted from the forum. Written in 2013.
2. *A Couple in Name Only* 貌合神离 (serialized from January 2015 to November 2015). A story of 契约爱情[“contracted love”]¹⁸⁸ with many twists.
3. *A Trivial Matter called First Love* 初恋这件小事 (serialized from June 2015 to July 2015 original title: *A Trivial Matter called Being a Kept Man* 包养这种小事), a novella reviewed as being a funny and heart-warming love story.

Nomlas is a classical “writing for sharing” kind of author. The author updates on a highly irregular basis, often disappearing for a long time, unconcerned about hurting the popularity of the novella. Note how the pace of updates is relatively slow for other novels listed above too. From the vivid life details, the readers can tell that the two protagonists are studying abroad.¹⁸⁹ Some curious readers have speculated that the author is an international student too. The central theatrical conflict in the novella lies in a double misunderstanding – a classical trope in romances. In addition, the story often has amusing and lighthearted turns of events that makes it easy to read through. This novella and *A Trivial Matter Called First Love* 初恋这件小事 are both

¹⁸⁷ Search result returned from SWXY on fiction published on site “allcp,” ranking based on review numbers. <http://saowen.net/novels/advSearch/sort:Novel.rTotal/direction:desc?title=&author=&type=&isOriginal=&progress=&ystartafter=&ystartbefore=¥dafter=¥dbefore=&theLength=&classification=&characters=&url=allcp> (accessed on May 23, 2017.)

¹⁸⁸ I’m quoting SWXY user 嘘 [Shush]’s wording in his/her comment on this story. “Contracted love” refers to a relationship starting as an agreement between gong and shou, in which shou agrees to act as boyfriend of the gong because he owes gong a favor. This trope of “contracted love” usually either proves to be true love in camouflage later, or develops into true love over time.

¹⁸⁹ For example, a term paper is often called *zhi* 纸 (literally, paper), which is an intentional (faulty) literal translation used by Chinese speakers.

typical “Little Sweet Pie” as Zhu et. al has pointed out; whereas *A Couple in Name Only* 貌合神离 is a typical melodramatic story with many twists – memory loss, contracted love,¹⁹⁰ kidnapping and the like.

Fox^^ is one of the earliest danmei authors. She has been writing since 2001, initially on Lucifer-club.¹⁹¹ The setting of the story bears some resemblance to that of *Hunger Games*, featuring an empire separated into two polarized social classes and a reality show in which criminal contestants kill for survival. Its introduction on the forum Changpei does not mention anything about the setting and focuses solely on the relationship; it specifically points out that it is a 互攻 [reversible couple, meaning that both parties in the relationship could be gong or shou in sex] story. The two most up-voted reader comments on SWXY,¹⁹² one (reader ID: Hehuan wuyang 合欢无恙) focuses on the emotional perspectives in the story, and the other (reader ID: Ranyi 燃衣) analyzes its world setting. Ranyi goes as far as to say: “I do not want to categorize this novel as a danmei novel. I’m more willing to define this novel as a dystopian sci-fi novel.” As this study has pointed out, shifting focus (partially) off the homosexual relationship and rejecting the gong/shou dichotomy are not unique to Fox ^^ but has become a popular choice of danmei writers. Yet these writing are still categorized as BL. Firstly, they are still largely marketed/self-marketed on the merits of a fantastic male homosexual relationship; secondly, often times their depiction of homosexual romance involves some elements (examples: too dreamy/utopian/joyful) that do not fit into the gay literature genre. Zheng Xiqing quotes what

¹⁹⁰ Usually real love in disguise, similar to the way “kept men” are usually in fact the true love.

¹⁹¹ See Lucifer-club Sina Weibo official account (露西弗俱乐部), “向经典致敬,细数那些坚持创作十年乃至十五年以上 的老牌作者” [Saluting the classics, naming danmei authors who have been writing for over a decade or even 15 years], posted December 29, 2016, http://weibo.com/1737372117/EolP7AEdk?from=page_1005051737372117_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment, accessed July 28, 2017.

¹⁹² See comments by Hehuan wuyang 合欢无恙 (last updated on May 5 2017), and Ranyi 燃衣, under title *Game of Slaughter* 杀戮秀: <http://saowen.net/novels/view/40827>, accessed July 28, 2017.

Elizabeth Woledge dubs “intimatopia” writings,¹⁹³ whose “central exploration is intimacy.”¹⁹⁴ I find this concept to be applicable to a good amount of Chinese BL fiction.

The Most Attractive Guy in the Faculty and the Most Attractive Guy in the College 系草和校草 is one of the earliest works of ABO setting stories borrowed from slash fiction. Later on, Changpei excluded the subgenre because it became associated with pornographic writings.

¹⁹³ Zheng Xiqing, *Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace*, p.181.

¹⁹⁴ Woledge, Elizabeth, “Intimatopia: Genre Intersections Between Slash and the Mainstream,” *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. Ed. Karen Hellekson, Kristina Busse, (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2006), 97.

Chapter 3: Author case study: Wasabi Kun

3.1. *If You Have Been Through Winter*, by Wasabi Kun

3.1.1. A brief biography of Wasabi Kun

If You Have Been Through Winter 如你走过冬天 is a BL novel serialized on forum Gongzi Changpei between November 15th 2015 and January 30th 2016. As of March 28, 2017, the novel's thread has received 611 replies (including those by the author), and the story has been bookmarked by 544 Changpei users. The actual number of readers is likely to be higher because this feature is used mainly during serialization. After a story finishes serialization on the forum, a new post with its full content is created in the Completed Works Collection section. This new post had 69 bookmarks, and received over 8,000 hits. Apart from the posts on Changpei, readers often access BL fiction through piracy websites. In short, *If You Have Been Through Winter* is a relatively popular novel on Changpei.

The author, Jiemo Jun 芥末君 (literally Mr. Mustard), goes by Wasabi Kun (the author's own translation)¹⁹⁵, whom I hereafter will refer to as Kun. Kun registered an account on Changpei in April, 2012 and serialized a first story on in May, 2012; Kun has been posting both original and tongren danmei stories on Changpei ever since. Kun is not the most prolific author – within the four and half years till March 2017, only 24 completed short stories and novels have been posted.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, Kun produces quality writings steadily. After an interval of up to several months, the author always publishes a new piece, and the lengths of the stories have grown from short stories/novelette to novellas and novels. In Kun's earlier experimental stage

¹⁹⁵ After serialization of *If You Have Been Through Winter* was completed, 芥末君 uploaded a txt-format file of the complete story for readers to download for free. The user name of the uploading profile was “wasabi_kun.”

¹⁹⁶ That is, excluding any threads the author may have created but later deleted (accessed on May 23, 2017).

(which I would put as from year 2012 to 2013), the author mainly wrote short stories in very different genres, ranging from sci-fi to ancient period pieces to a few tongren short stories. Later, the author returned to a modern urban setting, which in my view is the one that Kun is most skilled at and receives most views from readers. On SWXY, the reader-review website for BL stories, three of Kun's stories made Changpei's top 50 most-reviewed list to date (ranked 29th – 222 reviews, 34th – 198 reviews, and 49th – 169 reviews.)¹⁹⁷

Wasabi Kun's Japanese-style pen name is probably self-translated into Chinese from Japanese (or vice versa). More than one of Kun's stories are set in Japan, feature Japanese characters and contain some Japanese language. Kun has written two tongren short stories based on a Chinese author's detective story collection, which is set in modern-day Japan; Kun has also mentioned reading Japanese mystery author Soji Shimada's short story collections. All of this suggests that the author has a certain level of knowledge of Japanese culture and language. In an after note for a short story serialized in 2016, Kun mentioned that the story is a new style s/he was experimenting with, aka "Japanese-translationese style" (日式翻译腔), which I view as a conscious linguistic experiment of using the Japanese language and contents to alienate the readers from mundane daily linguistic experience, while creating an exotic Japanese atmosphere. In addition, judging by the English used in writing, Kun also has good command of English.

According to the author's profile on Changpei, Kun's gender is classified information. Unlike some other BL authors who are active on social media (for example, Weibo, the Chinese microblogging website), Kun does not share any contacts elsewhere, so there is no evidence as to whether Kun is female or male. "Kun" as a title does not clearly suggest gender. Nevertheless, if

¹⁹⁷ Accessed on 13th March, 2017. Titles in sequence of ranking (high to low): 1. *Sternstunden in Xiang Zhen's Life* 项真的群星闪耀时 (novel), 2. *Looking Afar at The Beauty* 望美人兮长颈鹿 (novella), 3. *If You Have Been Through Winter* 如你走过冬天 (novel).

a reader goes back to Kun's earliest post on Gongzi Changpei, one could notice that Kun used often “啦,” “喂,” both are exclamatory words often used by females. I speculate that it is likely that Kun is a female author. Kun addresses his/her readers as GNs (plural form of Guniang, meaning “girls.”) This form of address shows that like many other authors on Changpei, Kun believes at least the majority of readers are younger females. On at least one occasion, a reader addresses Kun as Jiemo jun **taitai** (芥末君太太¹⁹⁸).” In this occasion, taitai (太太) – as opposed to **dada** (大大) (skilled male) – is a common way of addressing a very skilled female author. That reader, at least, sees Kun as female.

Every author on Gongzi Changpei has a one-line self-description that appears under every post of theirs. Kun's says: “Writing exclusively silly, immature and sweet stories for twenty years” (专注傻白甜二十年). While “silly and immature” might be modesty, “sweet” is an accurate description of the author's stories. Except for a short western fantasy story and one serialized novel, the rest of stories by Kun all have a HE (happy ending). Readers' comments repeatedly call the stories “zhiyu” 治愈 [healing, or uplifting] or “tian”甜 [sweet]. The plots and themes of some of Kun's stories seem to follow a pattern: the heroes usually face one or more significant barriers to achieving happiness or winning over love. It is always through their persistence, great effort (and of course luck in running into the right person) that in the end, they overcome the barriers and have their love requited. As readers have pointed out, often, the shared theme is redemption, saving and self-help.¹⁹⁹ Many, but not all of Kun's works, follow this pattern. While a recurrent theme may seem monotonous, and the happy endings idealized,

¹⁹⁸ Taitai is the web lingo for “skilled or knowledgeable female.”

¹⁹⁹ See *If You Have Been Through Winter*, chapter 4 comments. Some of Kun's texts sharing this theme include: 1. *He Came to Save Me out of the Tall Building* 他来拯救高楼上的我, 2. *If You Have Been Through Winter* 如你走过冬天, and especially Kun's most recent serialization 3. *S.O.S of a Man in Distress* 一个忧伤者的求救, a story of mutual redemption.

variations in themes and character settings help to make Kun's stories consistently readable. Kun exhibits good narratorial skills, for example keeping readers in suspense or adding a twist at the end of each installment in a serial; vivid details make characters convincing and easy to identify with; the author is obviously widely read and knowledgeable in many different fields (or does proper research before writing), so that the author can write about a wide variety of professions in appropriate language; Kun will also sometimes surprise readers by reversing conventional gender traits or creating a discrepancy between physical appearance and personal character.

The majority of BL stories published on Changpei contain some sexual scenes. Some verge on erotica; fewer are devoid of sexual description. Kun's stories fall somewhere in between, with fewer descriptions of sex. In my opinion, the author's stories are usually not consumed with writing sex scenes – sex is more like a natural stage arrived at when the emotions have been built up, or a need for others to confirm one's existence.

Danmei stories appeal for a variety of reasons. Some authors are skilled at capturing sexual tension and tactfully depicting sensual pleasures;²⁰⁰ some have good command of various settings; some specialize in the light-hearted, utopian, or cute. Kun's works generally do not emphasize sex, or try to tell a story that involves lofty sentiments about the nation or the world.²⁰¹ When Kun does write about sex, Kun's writings emphasize the factual, for example, preparations such as enemas. Kun's stories usually feature two characters in love without extra complications (for example, unethical relationships or love triangles). Kun mainly attracts readers through refined, polished language²⁰², expert knowledge in certain topics (for example,

²⁰⁰ One of the well-rated (both by readers and fellow authors) examples of this style is *Immersed in the Roles* 入戏, by Tongzi 童子.

²⁰¹ Nevertheless, Kun skillfully incorporates the tragic fates of five veterans in the novella, *Afar* 迢迢.

²⁰² Kun's language is not as colloquial or filled with internet lingo, as some authors tend to be.

astronomy, psychology, cryptography, specific historical periods)²⁰³, convincing characterization, conflicts readers could empathize with, sweet romance and most importantly, a strong sense of rapport between characters.

So far, at least two of Kun's stories have been adapted into Chinese drama CDs. Despite not being officially published, one of Kun's stories was self-published by a studio into *Geren zhi*, which is the main text discussed in this chapter: *If You Have Been Through Winter* 如你走过冬天.

3.1.2. An analysis of plot and character

Except for minor retouching by the author, this novel comes in two versions, the online version on Changpei and the *Geren zhi* (self-published book) version. The main difference in content is that, as an incentive and a gesture of appreciation for buying the self-published book, the book version includes sex scenes omitted from the online version, as well as a *fanwai* 番外 (side story) not available in the online version, depicting the sweet life the couple has since shared together. In the online version, the sexual scene was omitted between the words “from here down, the contents have been harmonized” 以下河蟹 [i.e., censored/self-censored] and “from here above, the contents have been harmonized” (以上河蟹). The reason why Kun excludes the sexual details is not clear, but without them the plot remains clear and comprehensible.

²⁰³ The author says in a post note of the short story “密码学的七道习题” [Seven exercise questions on cryptography] that it is only natural for readers to bypass the part related to cryptography because lack of interest, but those readers who do pay attention to these details are “particularly adorable 特别可爱,” and it is the best kind of “默契” [tacit understanding/rapport] between author and readers.

The Geren zhi edition is also a collector's edition. In the spirit of "addiction to beauty", many Geren zhi are aesthetically designed and printed, accompanied by small gifts for buyers, such as post cards or bookmarks, and sometimes author autographs. The book cover of *If You Have Been Through Winter* is a blue ink painting-like picture, on which are two receding figures walking away on the snow, leaving two pairs of footprints behind them. One Sina Weibo comment exclaims: "The cover is so pretty! I haven't read the novel, but just seeing the cover make me want to buy a copy."²⁰⁴

The story's time line alternates between the present and the past. To help readers to differentiate the past events from the present, the author uses Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3 etc. to lead off chapters with present time events, and simplified Chinese characters 一, 二, 三 (one, two, three) etc. to lead off flashback chapters. Each numeral chapter is followed by a Chinese character chapter of the same number. This practice continues through the first eleven chapters, which recount Ji Chen's past in a fragmented manner. Bit by bit, his traumatic childhood and his current grueling situation of fighting depression are revealed. Starting from the twelfth chapter, since the background has been given to the readers, the story is told in the present time only. The charm of the story lies partly in this sequence of narrative, as the author constantly keeps readers in suspense regarding what led to Ji Chen's symptoms and whether or not he could overcome them. In addition, the fact that part of the personal history was firstly recalled from the childish perspective of the little Ji Chen, rather than his mature adult perspective, provides further suspense and increases the impact on readers when the truth is revealed.

Here is a brief summary of the plot:

²⁰⁴ See Sina Weibo official account of a Geren zhi studio 不能描述工作室[Indescribable Studio], post 《如你走过冬天》简体全一册预售[Advance sale for *If You Have Been Through Winter* Simplified Chinese version], post dated July 2016, http://weibo.com/5660455115/DE1kPiCUZ?type=comment#_rnd1486842565440 (accessed on February 11, 2017)

In college, Ji Chen developed a crush on his male friend Pei Li. Ji Chen dropped out of college when Pei Li's new company Feixun needed full-time legal help. He even agreed to invest in Feixun when the angel investor withdrew. Shortly afterwards, Pei Li's father caught Ji Chen kissing Pei Li, who was drunk at the time. As a child, Ji Chen witnessed the death of a fellow classmate and was wrongfully blamed and abused by classmate's distraught parents. Chen's widowed mother blamed herself for failing to protect Chen, and she could not accept Chen's depression, which emerged despite her efforts. Both situations worsened Chen's mental health. When Pei Li's father castigates Ji Chen for his "perverted" behaviour, his words and Chen's own guilt together bring back traumatic memories from Chen's childhood and lead to a relapse of severe depression and SAD (seasonal affective disorder). Accepting the terms of Li's father in exchange for his silence, Ji Chen leaves the city without informing Li, then falls severely ill and recovers only through hospitalization. When Ji Chen recovers, he misses Li so much that he returns to the northern city Li lives in on impulse. There, his conditions once more worsen due to SAD, but this time he made a full recovery with Li's help. Ji Chen blames himself for contacting Li, and tries to repel Li through confessing his love. Contrary to Chen's expectations, Li gradually finds himself attracted to Chen. With Li's help, Chen also realizes that falling in love with Li was not a mistake, nor was Li his responsibility. They could rely on each other and build a better future together. After all, as the author writes, "If you have been through winter, you surely will see the coming of spring."

If we look back at the history of homosexual texts, Wu Cuncun notes that "in late imperial literature devoted love between young men was as noble as love between young men and women," praising "chastity, devotion and beauty" while "condemning lust, venality and

coarseness.”²⁰⁵ In contemporary Chinese BL fiction, love between men (or man and boy) are depicted as just as genuine and precious; however, lust is in general not portrayed negatively. It is often physical desire and spiritual love, together make up the complete image of a romantic relationship.

In this specific novel, because of Ji Chen’s mental condition, there is limited sex, so that it resonates back to those features in a modern urban and egalitarian setting: both male characters are each other’s first love; both are devoted (or grow to become devoted), especially the shou in this relationship— Ji Chen. Pei Li is a relatively flat figure in the novel, since Ji Chen’s trauma, his later growth and confirmation of self-worth are at the center of the book. In this sense, Ji Chen invites more identification from readers. Yet the rapport between the two is integral to Ji Chen’s final success – an inseparable and irreplaceable connection that Ji Chen treats as most precious, especially since both his mother (his only family member) and teacher (from childhood) both fail him.

Patrick W. Galbraith quotes Sharalyn Orbaugh and adds to her analysis of Japanese Yaoi characters as “vulnerable and abject (they describe themselves as strange), but they accept each other as true or destined lovers,” and “the bond is key, the bond between them is special and irreproducible.”²⁰⁶ These analyses could partially apply to many Chinese BL novels, including this one in discussion.

Ji Chen is vulnerable (though not strange) – the vulnerability is both pushed to an extreme and rationalized by his traumatic childhood. The vulnerability arouses empathy and sympathy from readers. As for Pei Li, if Ji Chen is homosexual to begin with, Pei Li is depicted

²⁰⁵ Wu, Cuncun. *Homoerotic Sensibilities in Late Imperial China* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Chapter 1.

²⁰⁶ Galbraith, Patrick W., “*Fujoshi*: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among ‘Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan,” *Signs*, Vol. 37 no.1 (September 2011): 213.

as a straight guy in the beginning, gradually 掰弯 [turned gay by becoming attracted to a homosexual male] in the process – a common trope in BL novels. Ji Chen has always devoted himself to Pei Li and his career since he falls in love with Pei Li. One may say that Pei Li is touched by Ji Chen's deep feelings, and coincidentally discovers that he is sexually attracted to Ji Chen as well. This obvious sense of dependency rationalizes the fact that Ji Chen is the shou in this relationship. However, there is more to Ji Chen's characterization.

Ji Chen keeps battling and eventually overcomes his vulnerability. Aside from Pei Li's support, Ji Chen's strong will to live is indispensable in his final (albeit temporary) recovery from depression. Their bond is the key: it is the one thing Ji Chen hangs onto in his most desperate times, yet it does not come as destined. They accompany each other for a long period of time before they become romantically involved. By shifting the focus from the relationship towards one individual, Ji Chen, the purpose of this novel somehow surpasses that of romantic love, towards the importance of self-growth.

3.2. Reader responses to *If You Have Been Through Winter*

After the serialization of a novel starts, if an author already has followers, some supporting comments will appear right after it starts. One feature of the forum is to “subscribe” 收听 to another member, therefore receiving updates. Judging by their responses, active readers are often quick to become emotionally attached to characters. Readers usually get nervous when a turn of events is foreshadowed, expressing good wishes or concern towards characters. Close readers usually have good instincts for future plot development. Occasionally, if it is not clear which two characters are a couple, or if it is not clear which one of them is gong or shou, the readers will guess. This is especially the case when the two protagonists are similarly strong

physically or equally capable. Then, usually either top or bottom is put through an ordeal, for various reasons including trying to confess love or pursue love. During these torturing (nǚ 虐) moments, readers go through the ordeal with the characters and express their empathy with their pains or happiness. The speech that a reader uses towards the author is usually both intimate and encouraging – many authors mention that the readers’ response is what keeps them serializing. Authors may become more opinionated as their writings mature, but usually still react to constructive opinions. To take *If You Have Been Through Winter* as an example, here is how reader response went as the story was serialized:

After the first two chapters were serialized, two readers left messages saying they were not following the plot – mainly because the narrative was so fragmented at the beginning.

Starting in Chapter 4’s comments section, two readers ID Bai yu guang (白语光) and ID tcorbc noted and commented on the theme of “salvation” and the behaviour of treating a loved one as a “saviour.” Attentive readers react quickly. While Bai yu guang expresses fondness for the theme – redemption (救赎) and hopes gong would save the depressed shou, tcorbc makes a practical observation that “to treat a loved one as the sole saviour, this kind of story setting tends to foreshadow sufferings.” Note that here pessimism towards the future happiness of characters does not equal to disapproval. On the contrary, readers do not seem to object to melodrama.

After Chapter 6, readers were still in suspense regarding whether Pei Li could get to Ji Chen in time: Meow is merely a foodie (喵不过是只吃货) wrote: “Every time when I read LZ’s stories, my heart always aches to a certain extent, then it gets ‘cured.’” Meanwhile, two more readers expressed confidence in the author’s reputation of completing her stories with a happy ending. One of them “foresaw” how Pei Li could locate Ji Chen through his job in telecommunications.

After Chapter 9, Chen's childhood trauma was partially unveiled. All comments showed great sympathy towards Ji Chen. One reaffirmed that "it was never his (Ji Chen's) fault." The other two said they cried. One anonymous reader wrote empathetically: "silently I shed tears, I could even feel my bones freeze with ice." By Chapter 10, one of the readers Bai yu guang has developed a nickname for the Gong character, Pei Li – *Liyu* (鲤鱼, carp). The nickname *Liyu* was quickly picked up by a fellow reader, then transformed into jinli 锦鲤 (koi fish) in another comment, as a traditionally auspicious creature and nickname. Eventually there is some plot about "koi fish" that entered the author's side story in the self-published Tongren zhi.

Chapter 12 was a small climax when *Liyu* found the emotionally unstable Ji Chen. The uniform concerns and worries expressed in previous comments transferred to a uniform celebration of the duo's meeting and optimism. Meanwhile, one anonymous comment berated the main cause of Ji Chen's illness – the abusive parents of his dead classmate Liu (who covered up their crimes through posing threats and bribery), as well as the teacher who was obviously biased because Liu's parents are of great influence.

Chapter 14 is a "sweet" chapter as *Liyu* took care of Ji Chen at hospital. One comment by 一颗芹菜[Celery Stalk] says: "It feels as if (Pei Li) really dotes on (Ji Chen)." Then immediately in the next chapter, Kun writes about the conflicts in Chen's mind: "He should be an independent person, standing by Pei Li's side, not a withered rattan clinging tightly to a tall tree. He knows what he should do, he knows." Superficially, this line is a revised version of the female poet Shu Ting (舒婷)'s famous poem "To the Oak Tree" 致橡树. Shu's poem writes "If I love you – I will never be a clinging trumpet creeper, Using your high boughs to show off my height."²⁰⁷ With hindsight, however, as the story unfolds, the readers would know there is a difference between

²⁰⁷ Bilingual version of poem "To the Oaktree" 致橡树, anonymous translator, revised by Johanna Yueh, http://www.china.org.cn/learning_english/2011-02/21/content_21967654.htm.

the two. Chen thought he knew what he should do at the time, but in reality he does not. The story was not about independence, about egalitarianism or honour, as demonstrated by Shu Ting's poem. It was rather about mutual support, about trusting your loved ones and faith in yourself that Kun was aiming for here.

After Chapter 15, one user 注册真麻烦 [Registration is a real hassle] left a comment: "I just realized that, Pei Li sounds similar to 'pei ni' 陪你[keep you company]." Author Kun did not respond to confirm or deny this comment. But if it is true, the pun surely adds extra sweetness to the package.

After Chapter 16, as the story was again told from the perspective of Ji Chen, readers read about how deeply Ji Chen cares for Pei Li and how much Chen blames himself for being unable to leave Pei Li. One user comments: "The gong was so nice! But the shou deserves him." Both are deemed as worthy of readers' fondness – probably because of their self-sacrifice, Pei Li's gentle caring towards Ji Chen, Ji Chen's kindness, unfortunate past and perseverance in fighting illness. In this sense, readers love this story because it is about good human nature.

In Chapter 17, the plot reached another small climax. Ji Chen's spirit was taken down by the news of a fellow patient's death – a child named Fangfang. In the end, the unfortunate incident serves as an incentive for Ji Chen to get better. Several readers were quick to get inspired by the last two sentences of the chapter, as it says: "I couldn't save Fangfang... or anyone else." "But I can save myself."

In Chapter 18, Pei Li's father – who pressured Ji Chen to leave Pei Li the first time – returns to the scene. Immediately, readers got nervous and left similar comments expressing worries. The father figure represents external societal pressure and adds to Ji Chen's sense of

guilt. To see similar concerns repeated by various users, in my opinion, has the apparent effect of soothing the collective anxiety and magnifies the strength of empathy.

Note that throughout the serialization, except for songhua 送花 [sending flowers] and song yuliang 送鱼粮 [sending fish food],²⁰⁸ readers show support and encouragement to the author through an intimate manner of speech. For example, one reader said: “It’s tiring for LZ,²⁰⁹ you’ve been tired writing the story, come into my arms and let me stroke you (来我怀里摸摸).” Another said: “Pat on your shoulder, keep it up Wasabi Kun. You’ve worked hard, the prize is to toss you up in the air once” (辛苦了, 奖励你扔高高一次). The words might seem like words one would usually use to children, but here they should be interpreted as the readers expressing intimacy, or even that they were “doting on” the author, the same way danmei protagonists dote on each other.

Chapter 22 brings another twist in the story. Ji Chen confides his love towards Pei Li out of the blue. Even more unexpected is that Pei Li responds by avoidance and locking the usually unlocked door of his room. In the next chapter Ji Chen responds by moving out, again readers expressed a division of opinions regarding this decision: “Ji Chen is a bit wilful” or “Ji Chen is clear-minded.” After the nadir of Chapter 23, Chapter 24 sees a bit of progress but no real change in the awkwardness between the two. Through Chapter 25 and 27, Pei Li seems to develop romantic feelings towards Ji Chen. Meanwhile, the last piece of Ji Chen’s childhood trauma falls into place. All comments show that readers were excited to see a development in their relationship and slight anxiety over the suspense. One anonymous comment stands out:

(accessed March 30, 2017).

²⁰⁸ As users of Changpei are nicknamed 青花鱼 [mackerel], the forum currency is called yu liang 鱼粮 [fish food]. Both to give “flower” and “fish food” are forms of rewarding authors for good work or hard work, but note that both the flowers and the fish food here are all symbolic and carry no monetary value.

²⁰⁹ Original user that posts a thread, here referring to the author.

“Good story. My heart aches for Ji Chen, who is such a gentle kid. Actually, *Liyu* is also a good kid. Even if he couldn’t love Ji Chen, it wouldn’t be his fault. Luckily, this is a story, so they can attain happiness.” It is interesting to see that, in this type of danmei novel (which emphasize realism), readers are at once emotionally swayed by the story as being very real, yet still conscious that this is fictional.

As readers foresaw, Pei Li’s father loses his temper seeing the two together. Pei’s father humiliates Ji Chen and beats up Pei Li. In this time of crisis, as Bai yu guang hoped, Pei Li would “man up” and act as a shelter for Ji Chen. The story proceeds as Pei Li convinces Ji Chen to overcome his belief that he would “harm” 害了 Pei Li if he dates him. They start dating and almost sleep together. The chapters with sex scenes, despite the sex taken out by the author (“harmonized,” 河蟹), generated the most responses and enthusiasm in this serialization. The ending paragraph of Chapter 36 is also very well received. It says: “Due to different personality and interests, for Pei Li, romantic love could only take up a small portion of his life. Pei Li has a good family, nice friends and a successful career. Pei Li hasn’t loved anyone else before Ji Chen; despite that, what Pei Li could offer Ji Chen is only a minor portion of his rich life. But for Ji Chen, that minor portion is everything and all he needs.” One reader praises this ending as “real,” as love is “only one part of life, and it’s not eternal.” Another says: “The romantic love written by Dada is quite natural,” and this fact “didn’t sadden me, on the contrary, I feel indifferent, as if this is how things should have been.” Chapter 37 describes the first time they have sex. Afterwards, the novel ends with an epilogue in which Ji Chen reaffirms his trust in Pei Li and their good future together. Several comments mention they are suffering from depression too; one mentions: “maybe we all yearn for redemption.” The other, “I am suffering from depression, and I hope to run into my *Liyu*.”

The above summary of the reader responses shows that despite limited (to the extent of very rare) participation of the author Wasabi Kun at times, readers are able to cultivate an emotional intimacy with other readers, the author, and even the fictional characters. While Kun appreciates “tacit understanding” (默契) of attentive readers who appreciate the details in his/her stories, readers empathize with the experience of the protagonist so strongly, to the extent that in a sense, the author becomes an understanding and intimate friend (知己). In addition, Kun does respond to reader comments occasionally – as an author who does not seem to pursue commercial gain and does not share social media account information, the purpose of writing for the self and for sharing within a community loom large. As a matter of fact, the fact that novels are posted as a thread on the forum means that readers’ comments occupy a more central stage than websites like Jinjiang, where reader comments are more tucked away at the bottom of a webpage.

To sum up, Wasabi Kun is an author whose steady progress could be traced through his/her oeuvre. Being an author knowledgeable of the Japanese/English language and culture as well as an author who can write about a variety of professions convincingly, Kun is also consciously experimenting with literary and linguistic devices including language styles. The theme of redemption and self-help in some of Kun’s novels is very important to some empathetic readers, which may resonates back to China’s current social and familial issues. The author and readers develop a sense of intimacy in the process of reading and being read – a feeling of being understood or understanding. Kun’s persistence in non-commercial writing shows that interest-oriented writing for sharing within the community still exists despite the commercialization of the BL genre in China.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This study draws several conclusions about the current state of online Boy's Love / *danmei* fiction in China, circa July 2017. These findings concern issues such as: the state of the online literature industry, including the activities of both not-for-profit and corporate interests; the structure of forums and review sites in circulating BL fiction; the type of BL literature being written and consumed in mainland China, including changes in styles, tastes, and genre elements; the changing ecology of online author-reader communities, including their interactions with each other and with “outsider” readers and with government regulatory bodies; the moral, ethical, intellectual and emotional appeal of *danmei* fiction, especially as revealed by the testimony of readers themselves; the sociology of the *danmei* literary community; the specialized terminology netizens have developed to talk about *danmei* as a literary category; its foundational and current literary influences; and the hot topics that drive debate about *danmei*, including homosexual relationships and gay sex.

Below, I summarize my main research findings and offer suggestions for further research.

1. BL literature is becoming increasingly commercialized because of the commercialization of genre literature as a whole, and because the consumer group is growing.

Since the Pay-to-read commercial model came out in 2003, Chinese internet literature has developed into a cultural franchise. The most recent example is the newly-established corporation China Reading Limited. Now an industry leader that watches over a number of major commercial literary websites, it is ambitiously tapping into what it believes to be the under-developed revenue potential of its online bestsellers. As *danmei* gains more public

acceptance (as exemplified on the SNS platform) and its readership grows, the commercialization of BL literature seems inevitable. Pioneering Taiwan publishers, mainland commercial literature websites, and the grey self-publishing production chain, all have played or are still playing important roles in the ongoing commercialization process.

2. Danmei literature as a category is currently becoming increasingly hybridized (by incorporating other genre elements), erotic, utopian and melodramatic.

As the BL category develops and localizes in China, the novelty associated with the genre (curiosity towards male homosexuality, the gong/shou dynamic, nonconformity to traditional gender roles, etc.) is diminishing. Common tropes (social homophobia, family objection etc.) are becoming overly familiar, and novelty is turning into cliché BL writings are thus constantly absorbing new settings, and incorporating elements from sci-fi, detective fiction, and other genres—especially themes and tropes often associated with male-oriented fantasy novels. This hybridization of genre elements is on top of ongoing influences from Japanese BL culture and western slash. BL-oriented novels, in my limited reading, seem to be achieving a higher level of popularity compared to heterosexual romance. Other than this, BL erotica, sweet utopian love and emotionally-torturing melodrama continue to be popular.

3. Danmei faces continual challenges from censorship, social stigmatization, and uneven literary quality

Sexual depictions, to many, are indispensable for BL fiction. Hence the challenge of constant government censorship looms large—especially after the 2014 Cyberspace Purge that banned explicit sexual depictions on commercial literary websites altogether. Enforcement of

censorship, while inconsistent, prevents the legal publication of BL novels and their cinematic or television adaption. Despite some gradual acceptance of gay themes in public discourse, social prejudices against both homosexuality and the fu n ü group still pose challenges. Furthermore, the mainstreaming and commercializing of BL category is accompanied by veteran readers' complaints that literary quality is decreasing due to excessive sexual depictions and a loss of gender experimentation. All of these factors represent limitations to danmei's development.

4. Fu n ü are a non-homogenous reader group, while BL authors' motivations vary from personal interest to career development and professional profit; all are highly conscious of being a community that defines itself against "outsiders"

Some traits of Chinese BL readers and authors can be gleaned from forum discussions and online danmei community dialogues. Survey report and case studies suggest that female authors identify with the social functions and idealized personal dreams more than their male counterparts. Many authors write to earn a living, but interest-oriented original BL writing continues, as in the case of Wasabi Kun. *Tongren* BL writing, for example, is based on a source text and mostly written out of interest; nevertheless, authors of popular *tongren* novels can achieve commercial success through sale of self-printed books. Survey results from "Quick-Take Courtyard" (a BL texts review website) shed some light on the reading habits and demographic composition of rotten girls: the majority are young (under 30); many came into contact with the genre at a relatively young age; well over half read both original and derivative BL texts. Stigmatization and denouncement of the both the fu n ü group and the danmei genre still trigger online debates with non-BL readers till today. Yet debates in online danmei forums feature a

wide variety of opinions and reveal that danmei community members are hardly of a type: they have diverse attitudes towards danmei as well as varied self-perceptions.

5. General literature websites, specialized danmei forums, review websites, microblogs, and post bars all help readers to navigate the field of online BL fiction

As we saw from my brief history of danmei and its online platforms, BL literature arose with the general growth of internet in China, making websites important venues of production, dissemination, and discussion of the genre. (Representative novels from the years 2000-2015 are listed in Table 4, and important historical and current websites and forums [1998-2017] are identified in Table 5.) Currently, Jinjiang is a market leader, but a number of other sites publish original danmei fiction as well as fan fiction. Jinjiang Literature City is the main commercial website for danmei in mainland China; Gongzi Changpei is another important BL writing and reading forum. Literary websites and forums direct readers by recommending works. Sina Weibo (microblogging SNS), Baidu post bars (online forums), a dedicated review website (Quick-take Courtyard) are channels that readers rely on to search for desired texts and stay updated on new publications. Despite focusing mainly on mainland online sites and fiction, this study mentions some Taiwan publishers as well as other aspects of the multimedia cultural franchise associated with BL literature.

6. The BL forum Gongzi Changpei is at a crossroads of commercialization

Changpei's growth as a more secluded BL forum, in a sense benefited from government censorship purges, as it offered a less restrictive writing environment than commercial sites. As an autonomous not-for-profit BL community, Changpei developed its own forum rules and

modes of operation. In June 2017, however, it stepped into the commercial sphere, citing the needs of authors and the platform's shared need with them of professional development. A simple analysis of popular works on the forum reveals a diversity of literary styles within the danmei category. Nevertheless, the forum's competitive advantage lay partially in its close-knit community and the unrushed updating habits of authors—advantages that could be lost unless Changpei finds a way to preserve them by developing a distinctive commercial model.

7. A case study of Gongzi Changpei forum author Wasabi Kun and Kun's *If You Have Been Through Winter* shows that interest-oriented writing and emotional realism still persists in BL writing

The case of Wasabi Kun shows that a danmei author might write more out of personal interest rather than profit for many years. Kun's growth as an author is demonstrated through the BL writings Kun posted on the Gongzi Changpei forum. Authors like Kun try to perfect their writing skills and especially to make the emotional development of their characters more realistic, and thus more convincing, and to develop consistent themes such as “redemption” over the course of their oeuvre. My case study of reader responses to the novel *If You Have Been Through Winter* shows the intimacy and interactive nature of reader involvement with a serialized online danmei novel.

Research from consulting companies and some survey data, as well as analysis of the literary texts and related commentaries, support the above claims. In the future, it would be helpful to have more comprehensive demographic studies dedicated to the “rotten” community. For one thing, better data would help to confirm or refute the community's connection with

gender minorities in a Chinese-language context, and especially in mainland China. The table in Appendix A, which builds on Shao's studies, lists influential (mainly) commercial novels. As my own reading capacity is limited, it remains for future researchers to discover other high-quality danmei novels, and to supplement this list. The BL community itself is also starting to track its own history—a process that deserves scholarly attention. Lucifer-club, for example, recently has been cataloguing early danmei authors and their works. Lastly, with the hybridization of genre elements, and the increasing rejection of the gong/shou dichotomy among readers and writers alike, I believe that the old question of “What qualifies as Chinese BL or danmei fiction?” will remain relevant and contested.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table 4 Selected danmei novels (2001-2015)

Table 4: Selected danmei novels (2001-2015)

*Note that my new data and contributions are in italics, whereas translated Shao's work is in regular font.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
Lucifer-club	<i>Ten Years</i> 十年, by 暗夜流光 [Flowing Light in Dark Night].	Pre-VIP era.	12-27-2001 to 03-06-2003	Considered one of the earliest classic of danmei novel. <i>The author wrote in the first chapter that this novel is "gay themed" (同志题材). She wrote that it was genuinely written for gays and would stay as close to reality as possible.</i>	<i>In June 2015, The South – a film adapted from Ten Years, announced the start of its shooting.</i> ²¹⁰
Lucifer-club, later Metrics	<i>Phoenix up in the Ninth Heaven</i> 凤于九天, by Fengnong 风弄.	Free to VIP	Starting in 12-05-2002, unfinished (<i>The serialization was moved and continued</i>)	风弄 is one of the earliest influential danmei authors and this novel one of her earliest widely welcomed works. <i>So far, 574 chapters have been published online (roughly 2,000 words</i>	<i>Comics based on the novels have been published in print by Taiwan publisher Uei-Shiang.</i>

²¹⁰ Till the time of writing, (June 2017), the film has not been released. According to the official Sina Weibo account of the film production team 电影南方 [Film *the South*], the latest post is dated July, 18, 2016, and says “还在” [(We are) still here]. http://weibo.com/u/5640191568?refer_flag=1001030201_&is_all=1 (accessed June 2, 2017). The post led to near 1,000 comments, mostly expressing support as they wait for the release of the film. Nevertheless, no new update has been posted since.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/ VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
			on website Myrics.)	per chapter by my calculation), and its serialization still hasn't finished. ²¹¹ She is a full-time writer of danmei novels contracted with Taiwan publisher Uei-Shiang 台灣威向有限公司.	
Jinjiang	<i>The Stories of Qinglian</i> 青莲记事, by Grape 葡萄	Free	From 2005-09 to 2008-11.	One of the earliest online novels featuring a female's spirit traveling into a male body(女穿男), a classic subgenre of time travel(穿越). ²¹² This subgenre is also referred to as "pseudo danmei" (伪耽美). Published in print by China Friendship Press 中国友谊出版社.	N/A ²¹³
Jinjiang	<i>Phoenix Rule Land Under Heaven</i> 凤霸天下 by Liu yue 流玥	Locked ²¹⁴	From 2005-09-14. completed	One of the earliest pseudo danmei novels. Three volumes published in print by China Friendship Press 中国友谊出版社.	Drama CD
Jinjiang	<i>Supreme Beauty on Land under Heaven</i> 花容天下 by 天籁纸 [Kite (the bird)]	Deleted from Jinjiang.	From February 2006.	It contains descriptions of male giving birth, which became a highly controversial issue ²¹⁶ in danmei genre. This novel ranked high on Jinjiang's rating list.	Drama CD

²¹¹See novel *Phoenix up in the Ninth Heaven* 凤于九天, Myrics 米国度, <http://myrics.com/titles/226> (accessed June 2, 2017).

²¹² The genre of time travel could be further divided: spiritual travel is referred to as 魂穿, meaning the protagonist's spirit travelling to a different time. 身穿 means the body and the spirit together travels to a different time or place. The newest type of "chuanyue" includes the protagonist becoming a character in a book(穿书), or a video game etc.

²¹³ Not to my scope of knowledge, the same for the rest of "N/A" under the same column.

²¹⁴ If a novel is locked, regardless by author or editor, it could no longer be accessed by readers.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
	with Sounds of Nature]. ²¹⁵				
Jinjiang	<i>Right Wing of God</i> 天神右翼 by Kite (the bird) with Sounds of Nature	Deleted from Jinjiang	From September 2006 to 2008. ²¹⁷	<i>Contains plots of male giving birth and father-son incest</i> , based in a setting of western fantasy. Rumours are that the three volumes of this novel published under a fake ISBN number, causing much controversy. ²¹⁸	<i>Drama CD</i>
Jinjiang	<i>Give Me a Bowl of Millet Porridge</i> 给我一碗小米粥, by 蝶之灵 [Spirit of Butterfly]	Free to VIP	March – May 2009	One of the early representative works of online computer games 网游 subgenre.	<i>Drama CD, 7 episodes</i> ²¹⁹
Jinjiang	<i>Three Step Layup</i> 三步上篮 by Dingding Zhang 张鼎鼎	Free to VIP	<i>1st volume July-November 2009. 2nd volume</i>	One of the representative works of danmei novels based on sports setting.	<i>Geren zhi</i> (self-published book) ²²⁰ for sale, available through Long-

²¹⁶ Cannot verify because of the lock; as a matter of fact, despite the trope's popularity, it gradually became a marginal theme banned from certain danmei forums, for example Gongzi Changpei, but it keeps being used in erotic danmei writings.

²¹⁵ Note that this author has adopted a different pen name (君子以泽) and mainly focused on writing BG novels now. Many of her BG oriented novels are published. See her own clarifications regarding pen names “关于笔名分类的公告” [Public notification regarding the division of pen names], *Jinjiang website*, <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1797378&c>

²¹⁷ Cannot verify because of the lock.

²¹⁸ See discussion in a Jinjiang forum post: “惊！天神右翼是假书？为什么锁帖？” [Shocked! Is *Right Wing of the God* a fake publication? Why are previous posts on the forum locked?], thread started in 2008, <http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=17&id=63112&page=0> (accessed April 25 2017).

²¹⁹ Accessible on video sharing site *Bilibili*, “【广播剧】蝶之灵原著 现代耽美广播剧《给我一碗小米粥》（全七期）” [drama CD, based on modern setting novel *Give me a bowl of millet porridge*, 7 episodes], <http://www.bilibili.com/video/av920532/> (accessed June 2, 2017).

²²⁰ Unofficial self-published book, for more details see Glossary.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
			November 2009 – April 2010		ma's online book store ²²¹
Jinjiang	<i>Reborn as a Celebrated Superstar</i> 重生之名流巨星 by 青罗扇子 [Blue-green Fan]	Free to VIP	2009-2011 ²²²	This is one of the earlier works under the rebirth genre (重生) in female-oriented (nǚ pín 女频) works. It is also one of the early representatives of female-oriented fictions that write about entertainment industry (娱乐圈). ²²³	An online TV drama series is produced based on this novel. The scriptwriter changed it from danmei into a heterosexual story and caused controversies. ²²⁴
Jinjiang	<i>Born Noble</i> 生而高贵, by 天望 [Sky Gaze]	Free to VIP	January – May 2010	Important Tongren novel of Harry Potter series. CP: Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter.	N/A
Suiyuanju 随缘居	<i>The Sheathe of A Sword</i> 归剑入鞘, by Tangstory	Free	September 2010 – November 2010	Important tongren novel based on BBC's TV Series <i>Sherlock Holmes</i> , CP: Sherlock/Watson	N/A
Jinjiang	<i>Make Revolution In the Depth of Soul</i> 灵魂深处闹革命, by Fei tian ye xiang 非天夜翔	Free - VIP	February – April 2011	Supernatural grave robbing (灵异向盗墓) novel, this danmei novel picks up influence from male-oriented grave robbing genre novels.	Drama CD
Jinjiang	<i>Evening Talks of Rebirth</i> 重生	Free-VIP	April-June 2011	This novel represents further development in	N/A

²²¹ Self-published book *Three Step Layup*, 2 vol., published April 2011, in consignment through Long-ma Culture Limited Company, http://www.longmabook.com/index.asp?action=shop_view&id=2070, (accessed May 20, 2017).

²²² Some chapters have gone through revisions since first posted online.

²²³ Novels set in entertainment Industry(娱乐圈) is one of the popular categories.

²²⁴ Web TV drama – *Reborn as a Celebrated Superstar* 重生之名流巨星, Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/fdug0j3etx4ioja/j0019n4upc9.html>. Except for the first episode, the remaining episodes are only available to paid members of Tencent Video.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
	夜话, by 老牛吃嫩草 [literally “Old Cow Eating Tender Grass,” translates as a relationship where two parties have considerable age difference].			the rebirth trope, which appear in many female-oriented subgenres, surpassing the popularity of spirit/body travel (穿越).	
Jinjiang	2013 (二零一三) by author Fei tian ye xiang.	Free - VIP	August – October 2011	Representative danmei novel based in a zombie apocalypse world.	<i>Drama CD</i>
Jinjiang	<i>Mecha: Contracted Slave</i> 机甲契约奴隶 by 犹大的烟 [Juda’s Cigarette Smoke]	N/A ²²⁵	October 2011 – August 2014	Representative danmei novels with mecha setting.	<i>Drama CD</i>
Baidu Ping/Xie Bar 瓶邪吧 ²²⁶	<i>Unchanged For Millions of Years</i> 万古如斯 by Xu Weixia 许维夏	Free	December 2011 – June 2012	A representative tongren novel deriving from online novel <i>Grave Robbers’ Chronicles</i> 盗墓笔记. CP: Ping 闷油瓶/Xie 吴邪. <i>Geren zhi publication (at least two prints, first print in June 2012, second print August</i>	N/A

²²⁵The novel is locked by administrator on grounds of being “overly erotic.” See 烟圈[Smoke Ring] (column of author “Juda’s Cigarette Smoke,”) <http://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=295874> (accessed on May 20, 2017).

²²⁶Xu Weixia 许维夏, thread “(原创瓶邪) 万古如斯” [(Original Ping/Xie fan fiction) Unchanged for millions of years], 百度贴吧瓶邪吧 [Ping/Xie post bar on Baidu web forum], <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/1338715367>, (accessed May 20, 2017). When the serialization finished, the author also posted the novel on Jinjiang website.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
				<i>2015 on demand of readers).</i> ²²⁷	
Jinjiang	<i>Found A Lost Dragon-Blood Child</i> 捡到一个小龙人 (Another title: <i>Adoptive Father</i> 养父)	Free - VIP	March 2012 – N/A	One of the most famous danmei novels featuring <i>genetically-modified human</i> (异形人), <i>to be specific dragon-blood humans</i> (龙血人) <i>that are created in the labs by the Chinese and the U.S. governments.</i>	<i>Drama CD</i>
Jinjiang	<i>End of the World Seven Start above Palm</i> 末世掌上七星 by 月下金狐 [Golden fox under the moon]	Free - VIP	July 2012 – June 2013	A representative Daoism fantasy (修真文) of danmei novel.	N/A
Jinjiang	<i>Sunken Ship</i> 沉舟, by Chu han yi qing 楚寒衣青	N/A	July 2012 – N/A	A relatively large part of the novel describes the thick-black 厚黑(thick-skinned, has a vicious mind) ²²⁸ struggles	N/A

²²⁷ See author's post script, "(瓶邪)万古如斯 – 最后一个后记" [Ping/Xie fan fiction, Unchanged for millions of years, last post script], dated August 2015, <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1405815&chapterid=207> (accessed May 20, 2017).

²²⁸ 厚黑 is short for 脸厚心黑, which literally means thick face and black heart and translates as "thick-skinned, have a vicious mind and no conscience." 厚黑学(the thick-dark theory) is created by Li Zongwu 李宗吾. Li first published an article entitled "The Thick-dark Theory" in 1912 and gradually added to the theory over time. Li wrote in the preface to his book that, the reason of many historical figures' success should be attributed to the fact they are thick-skinned and lack in conscience ("古人成功的秘诀, 不过是脸厚心黑罢了). Li made it clear in the preface that this theory was originally written to amuse ("游戏文字") rather than to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the meaning of irony is often lost to readers from both the Republican China as well as the more recent time (the earliest

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/ VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
				higher up in the government and officialdom. It is a typical political struggle genre fiction (政斗文) that skirts the line of censorship. ²²⁹	
Jinjiang	<i>Cautious speech</i> 谨言 by <i>From Afar</i> 来自远方	N/A	May 2013 - N/A	The protagonist travelled back to Republican China and successfully rewrote the history of China. This plot is controversial among readers and is reported during the “2014 Cyberspace Purge” event. ²³⁰	N/A
Jinjiang	<i>The Sword of Galaxy</i> 银河帝国之刃, by Huai shang 淮上	Free - VIP	September 2013 – April 2014	This novel and the one below are among the earliest to incorporate the ABO trope. ²³¹ (Originally from western slash fiction) into original danmei stories.	N/A
Jinjiang	<i>Academy Students</i> 在校生 ²³² by Spirit of Butterfly	Free - VIP	September 2013 – April 2014	Another one of the earliest original danmei fiction using ABO trope.	<i>Drama CD</i>

post-1949 reprint dates 1989). The word has gradually become a common noun. See 厚黑学(全本) [*The Complete Collection of the Thick-Black Theory*], Qunyan press 群言出版社, 2009. See also article 厚黑是非论到今 [The right and wrong of thick-black theory], 书屋 *Shu wu*, 1996(05).

²²⁹ The novel *Sunken Ship* is no longer accessible on Jinjiang. It has been blocked from public access 锁文 (literally, “to lock up articles”) by editor on April 13, 2014 (accessed on April 12, 2017).

²³⁰ This novel has been locked by website editor since April 14, 2014, see author’s page 快乐驿站 [Happy Relay Station] by author 来自远方 [From Afar], *Jinjiang website*, <http://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=18719> (accessed on May 20, 2017).

²³¹ Refer to note 161 for details.

²³² Original title: Military Academy Students 军校生.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
Lofter	<i>Origin</i> 原点 by 烈焰琴魔和两个小矮人 [Raging Flame Qin mania and two dwarfs]	Free	December 2013 - May 2014	A representative danmei Tongren novel deriving from an online game novel – 蝴蝶蓝 [Butterfly Blue]’s <i>The King’s Avatar</i> 全职高手 ²³³ . CP: Yu Wenzhou 喻文州/Huang Shaotian 黄少天. <i>ABO. A tongren zhi of this tongren novel has printed.</i> ²³⁴	N/A
Jinjiang	<i>Golden Assistant</i> 金牌助理 by Fei tian ye xiang	Free - VIP	April 2014 – May 2014	Following the 2014 Cyberspace Purge, “entertainment industry” becomes one of the safer themes that danmei authors work on. <i>Its geren zhi has been printed for at least twice.</i>	<i>Drama CD, Adaption into comics (published on Chinese webcomics site U17.)</i> ²³⁵
Jinjiang	<i>Household of Emperor’s Cook</i> 御膳人家 by 缘何故 [Cause for fate]	Free - VIP	September –December 2014	Among the earliest danmei novels featuring gourmet food (美食文).	N/A

²³³ Translation of title taken from translator nomyummi, *The King’s Avatar*, from novel translation website *Gravitytales*, <http://gravitytales.com/novel/the-kings-avatar>. Gravitytales is website devoted to translating “Chinese and Korean light novels” (accessed June 2, 2017).

²³⁴ See the author’s *Lofter* homepage: 烈焰琴魔和两个小矮人 [Raging Flame Qin mania and two dwarfs] on blogging site *Lofter*, <http://suace.lofter.com/post/25a5bcf53abfb>, (accessed May 21, 2017). *King’s Avatar* is one of the most popular source texts for Chinese BL fan production.

²³⁵ See comics artist 修大绿 [Fix Big Green], comics series *Golden Assistant* 金牌助理, *u17*, <http://www.u17.com/comic/75763.html> (accessed June 2, 2017). The Chinese webcomics site U17 also adopts a VIP pay-to-read system.

Site	Author (pen name) and title of novel	Free/ VIP	Serializing dates	Significance	Adaptations
Jinjiang	<i>Spirit Travel: Giving Smack in the Face</i> 快穿之打脸狂魔 by 风流书呆 [Romantic Pedant]	Free - VIP	March 2015 – August 2015	One of the earlier popular danmei novels adopting the setting of “quick spirit travel system” (快穿系统文). It is currently one of the most popular settings in mainly commercial danmei novels.” ²³⁶	N/A
Lofter	<i>Thousands of Miles of Rivers</i> 江河万里 by 恋爱脑与乌托邦 [Romance Addict and Utopia]	Free	September 2015	<i>Tongren short story based on TV drama The Disguiser</i> 伪装者, CP: <i>Ming Lou</i> 明楼/Ming Cheng 明诚.	N/A

²³⁶ The genre arises from “time/spirit travel novel” 穿越小说 and “infinity (horror) novel” 无限流（恐怖）小说. It features a protagonist leaving his/her original world and enters multiple virtual/parallel worlds through a “system” 系统. This system is an artificial intelligence that assigns tasks to the protagonist, and gives rewards or punishments depending on the protagonist’s performance. Therefore, a long “quick spirit travel” novel usually consists of multiple short stories, each telling the story of one world. For more discussion on the genre in Chinese, see: Mujiangli 慕江篱, “如何写好一本快穿小说” [How to write a good Quick Spirit Travel Novel], article dated March 8, 2017, *jianshu.com*, <http://www.jianshu.com/p/90e4707b73e7>; see also “网络小说的”快穿“分类具体所指的是什么?” [What specifically does the category “Quick Spirit Travel” refer to in Internet Literature?], Question and answer website *Zhihu* 知乎, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/24384025>. (Both accessed June 2, 2017).

Appendix B: Table 5 Selected Chinese danmei websites or forums (1998 – present)

Table 5 Selected Chinese danmei websites or forums (1998 – present)

*Note that my new data and contributions are in italics, whereas translated Shao’s work is in normal font.

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
Sunsun Academy 桑桑学院 (http://sunsunplus.51.net) is established in 1998. The website contains comics and literary texts. The literary texts published initially unauthorized translations and reposting of Taiwan works, then gradually starts to publish original mainland works. ²³⁹	1998 – N/A ²⁴⁰	1994-11-04	<i>China, Beijing/Private.</i>	Both
Lucifer-Club 露西弗俱乐部 (https://www.lucifer-club.com) The first literary website in mainland China dedicated to danmei . Around November 2007, the website’s editor’s improper treatment of a plagiarizing event caused many authors to leave the site. Its influence significantly reduced. ²⁴¹	1999 ²⁴² – present	2001-03-05	<i>China, Zhejiang/Private.</i>	Both

²³⁷ Accessed through *whois.domaintools.com* (accessed April 24, 2017).

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Corroborated in Xu Yanrui & Yang Ling’s essay “Forbidden love: incest, generational conflict, and erotics of power in Chinese in Chinese BL fiction,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, (2013):31.

²⁴⁰ The forum exists, but is barely active now.

²⁴¹ According to webpage archive *Wayback Machine*, Lucifer-club forum’s members dropped from 95,142 on January 11, 2008 to 50,001 on March 2, 2008. A number of authors deleted their ID on Lucifer-club after the incident in protest. Right now, on April 26, 2017, the forum has 41,772 members but barely receives any new posts. See a thread on Baidu web forum related to the event: “新露事件毅然删文/ID 写手名单” [The namelist of authors who resolutely deleted their ID or their articles after the new Lucifer-club event], *Baidu web forum*, <https://tieba.baidu.com/p/287363479>, the thread dated November 2007, accessed on April 26, 2017. For analytical discussion on this event, see Yang Ling 杨玲, Xu Yanrui 徐艳蕊. “文化治理与社群自治——以网络耽美社群为

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
<p>Myfreshnet 鮮網 (http://www.myfreshnet.com) 鮮文學網 (<i>fresh literature net</i>) was one of the website's four columns available in September 30 2000.²⁴³ Under this column, a variety of literary writing genres were listed. The company 鮮鮮文化事業有限公司 [Fresh Culture Ltd.] published online and in print media. A financial crisis broke out in the mid of 2014, hence the corporation stopped running.²⁴⁴ Danmei authors from across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland posted their works here. It was among the first to provide print (legal) publication for online authors in traditional Chinese.</p>	2000 ²⁴⁵ - 2014.5.	2000-04-13	No longer available./Freshbuy.com, U.S.	Both ²⁴⁶

例” [Cultural Governance and Community Autonomy – Using Online Danmei Communities as an Example],” *Tansuo yu zhengming* 探索与争鸣, Issue 3 (2016): 68.

²⁴² See history compiled by 露西弗工作室 [Lucifer-club studio], titled “小露十七岁了” [Lucifer-club has turned 17], dated March 5, 2017, <https://www.lucifer-club.com/chapter-83434-1.html> (accessed April 26, 2017). The establisher of the website ID *Ducky* and ID *XERXES* established it in 1999. The reason was that Ducky was expelled from Sunsun Academy (桑桑学院) for announcing the plan to write “aesthetic sex” (唯美 H), hence Lucifer allowed sexual description in danmei.

²⁴³ See webpage archive, 鮮網 (myfreshnet.com), *Wayback Machine*, captured on September 30, 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20000930063052/http://www.myfreshnet.com:80/big5/index.asp> (accessed April 26, 2017).

²⁴⁴ See online news report, “積欠作家稿費 鮮網疑似倒閉” [Owing authors’ remuneration, Myfreshnet is suspected to be bankrupted], posted May 22, 2014.

<http://www.appledaily.com.tw/appledaily/article/headline/20140522/35844142/>. See also Zhang Zhengwei 張政偉, “The circumstance and significance of literary criticism in cyberspace” 網路環境下評閱文學的樣態及其意義, *National Changhua University of Education Chinese Department Journal* 彰化師大國文學誌, Vol.31 (Dec.2015): 115. <http://libwri.nhu.edu.tw:8081/Ejournal/AB05003104.pdf> (Both accessed April 26, 2017)

²⁴⁵ 鮮文學網 (myfreshnet.com), Facebook page “about” column, https://www.facebook.com/pg/myfreshnet/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed April 26, 2017).

²⁴⁶ An online Excel file on Google Drive is voluntarily created in 2014 to collect the new sites used by previous Myfreshnet authors, see “鮮網群作家: 新家位置” [New publishing sites of previous *Myfreshnet* authors], personal blog on *Pixnet*, posted June 18 2014, <http://mynameanlie.pixnet.net/blog/post/43570957%E9%AE%AE%E7%B6%B2%E6%96%B0%E4%BD%9C%E8%80%85%E8%B3%87%E6%96%99%E8%A1%A8>. The owner of the file opens edit permission to the public. Judging by the information in this excel file (accessed on May 21, 2017), authors keep writing on the following sites: Popo (<http://www.popo.tw/index>), 冒險者天堂 (<http://paradise.ezla.com.tw/>), 螞蟻創作 (<http://www.antscreation.com/>), 晉江文学网 (<http://jjwxc.net/>), 痞客邦 (<https://www.pixnet.net/>), Lofter (<http://www.lofter.com/>) etc.

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
<p>Jinjiang Literature City 晋江文学城 (http://www.jjwxc.net/)</p> <p>Initially the website pirated Taiwan novels in print. It later created a site specifically for original works (year 2003).</p> <p>Over the time, popularity of original works rapidly outnumbered pirated works.²⁴⁷</p> <p>Jinjiang adopted the VIP system to survive the impact of commercialization (<i>Jan.8 2008</i>)²⁴⁸. Since then, it gradually became the main site of where heterosexual romance and danmei writings are published in mainland China.</p> <p>During the 净网 Cyberspace Purge²⁴⁹ movement by Chinese government in 2014, it temporarily shut down a few forums and adopted a reader-assisted self-censoring system (三审机制), leading to the reality that authors could not write about sex on Jinjiang's main site.</p> <p>Jinjiang's forum http://bbs.jjwxc.net/ also publishes original and tongren danmei novels and short stories.</p>	2003-present	2004-12-03	<i>China./Beijing Jinjiang 北京晋江原创网络科技有限公司</i>	Both
<p>Suiyuan ju 随缘居 [Residence of Leaving It To Fate] (www.movietvslash.com) is established in August 2005. Its site changed to http://www.mtslash.org/ in July 2014.²⁵⁰</p> <p>It is one of the most important sites for</p>	2005-present	2014-07-21 ²⁵¹	<i>U.S./Private.</i>	Tongren

²⁴⁷ See chapter 晋江文学城: “‘女性向’文学网站的兴起与现状”[Jinjiang Literature City: the rise and current status of ‘female-oriented’ literary website], 网络时代的文学引渡 [*Ferrying Literature Into the Internet Age*].

²⁴⁸ See webpage archive “VIP 上线公告” [Public Announcement of Adopting the VIP mode] dated January 8 2008," Wayback Machine, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080109214106/www.jjwxc.net> (accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁴⁹ The full name of the movement is “扫黄打非: 净网 2014”专项行动 [Eliminate Pornography and Illegal Publications: Cleaning the Web 2014] movement].

²⁵⁰ I couldn't verify its establishment date in Shao's study. Additional information: the website runs on donation by its administrator and users, the administrator posts its financial accounts details online for view: <http://www.ytji.com/bills/personal/35040> (accessed on April 24, 2017). It shows that the change of domain name was that the old domain name was blocked by China Mobile(中国移动), one of the major telecommunication companies.

"<http://i.lofter.com> (accessed April 24, 2017).

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
danmei tongren works that derive from European and American TV and films.				
Gongzi Changpei 公子长佩 [Young Nobleman Changpei] (http://allcp.net/forum.php). Its administrators came from Jinjiang's forum, and have created a similar writing environment on it. Initially it was mainly tongren fiction posted on it. Later, original works start to publish on the forum. <i>In April 2017, original works have largely outnumbered tongren works.</i>	<i>December 2010 - present</i>	2013-04-23	<i>US Arizona/Private</i>	Both
Lofter 乐乎 (http://www.lofter.com/) <i>A blogging and social networking website; apart from texts, users can share links of music and videos, and upload and share photos. It has gradually become an important site for sharing tongren works, both BG and BL oriented. The tongren stories published here derive from "ACG (Anime, comics and game), TV and film, novel and glove puppetry etc." Tags are created to track the popularity level of each CP. Each month, a monthly ranking list of tongren stories is published See http://www.lofter.com/act/animeRank?op=new Original stories are published here too. Either case, it is mainly novella or short stories, rather than long novels, that publish on this platform. Erotic contents cannot publish on Lofter.</i>	<i>December 1, 2011²⁵² till present</i>	<i>August 2011</i>	<i>China/NetEase Computer System Co. Ltd (网易), Hangzhou NetEase Leihuo Science & Technology Co. Ltd</i>	Both
<i>Haitang Culture Limited Company 海棠文</i>	<i>N/A - present</i>	<i>N/A²⁵⁴</i>	<i>U.S./Taiwan</i>	Both

²⁵² See official blog of the corporation Lofter: http://i.lofter.com/post/4a3a_498dc (accessed on May 15, 2017).

²⁵⁴ According to its official Sina Weibo account, the publisher 龍馬文化出版社 [Long-ma Culture Press] was established in 2003. An announcement shows that the name of the website is changed from Long-ma 龍馬[literally, Dragon Horse] into Haitang 海棠 [Begonia] on March, 10 2017. http://weibo.com/longmabook?refer_flag=1001030102_&noscale_head=1&is_hot=1#_0 (accessed on May 15, 2017).

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
<p>化 (http://ebook.longmabook.com/ or http://www.longmabookcn.com/), aka the previous Long-ma 龍馬文化(dragon horse), publishes (mostly) pornographic or erotic romance, danmei as well as tongren writings.</p> <p>龍馬文化網路商店 [Longma Culture Limited Company]</p> <p>http://www.longmabook.com/, is home to the publisher based in Taiwan that publishes danmei novels.²⁵³</p>				
<p>Baidu Events Recording Bar 百度事件记录吧</p> <p>(http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%CA%C2%BC%FE%BC%C7%C2%BC) is a forum under Baidu that publishes, discusses and recommends BL novels. Its predecessor is BL Novels Bar (BL 小说吧), created in January 15, 2005 and shut down in March 2009.²⁵⁵ According to its own introduction, it is a “BL novel forum, a gathering point of rotten women and men (腐妹, 腐汉子), if you enter by mistake please leave.”²⁵⁶ Current follower (May 15, 2017), over 1.2 million.</p>	2009 - present ²⁵⁷	2009	Hong Kong, China/Beijing Baidu Netcom Science Technology Co. Ltd.	Both

²⁵³ Website of 龍馬文化 [Long-ma Culture Limited Company], 關於龍馬 [About Long-ma], <http://www.longmabook.com/index.asp?action=mypage&id=1364> (accessed May 15 2017).

²⁵⁵ To celebrate the 10-year anniversary of “Baidu BL Novel Bar & Events Recording Bar” 百度 BL 小说吧&事件记录吧, a series of interviews with famous BL authors are conducted. See: 吧庆作者访谈(BL 小说&事件记录) [10-year anniversary celebration of “BL Novels Bar & Events Recording Bar”– interviews with authors], audio sharing website *Himalayas FM* 喜马拉雅 FM, http://www.ximalaya.com/39040366/alb_um/3882497 (accessed May 15, 2017).

²⁵⁶ See the forum’s first page, 百度事件记录吧 [Baidu Events Recording Bar], <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%CA%C2%BC%FE%BC%C7%C2%BC> (accessed May 15, 2017).

²⁵⁷ The earliest post I found on the bar is dated on March 20, 2009 (accessed on May 16, 2017).

Name, domain, description/events.	Dates	(Current) site creation date. ²³⁷	IP location/Registrant ²³⁸	Genre (danmei, tongren, or both)
<i>Baidu Cambrian Chronicle Bar 百度寒武纪年吧</i> (https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%BA%AE%CE%E4%BC%CD%C4%EA). Its function is similar to Events Recording Bar. Its introduction says: “A dream island for reading danmei novels, a base of original danmei novel writing.” ²⁵⁸ Current follower (May 16, 2017), over 1.9 million.	N/A - present ²⁵⁹	N/A	Hong Kong, China/Beijing Baidu Netcom Science Technology Co. Ltd.	Both
<i>Quick-Take Courtyard 扫文小院</i> . (http://saowen.net/). Apart from forums and blogs, this website allows users to create entries of BL novels and then review them.	December 2010 – present	December 2010.	China/Beijing Jin Jiang Qi Jing Network Technology Co., Ltd.	None. Review website.
<i>Bilibili 哔哩哔哩</i> , https://www.bilibili.com/ . It is an online video/audio sharing websites that allows registered users to view/submit comments as real-time overlaying subtitles. Among other themes, popular themes are anime, manga and game fandom. Fans of a danmei novel often create derivative videos based on the novel, and posted them on Bilibili. Often, BL-themed drama CD is uploaded to this site for circulation. One noticeable incident is that on July 12, 2017, many TVs and films (including foreign ones) were taken off the site for unknown reasons, triggering much discontent among users.	June 26, 2009-present ²⁶⁰	June 26, 2009	China/Private.	None. Video sharing websites.

Note: POPO (<http://www.popo.tw/>), PTT BBS (<https://www.ptt.cc/index.html>) seems to be sites

where Taiwan danmei authors are active. Since it is not often for mainland readers to read from Taiwan sites any more, they are not included in this table.

²⁵⁸ 百度寒武纪年吧[Baidu Cambrian Chronicle Bar], *Baidu web forum* 百度贴吧, <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf8&kw=%E5%AF%92%E6%AD%A6%E7%BA%AA%E5%B9%B4&fr=search> (accessed May 16, 2017).

²⁵⁹ Earliest dated post found is also in March 2009 (accessed May 16, 2017).

²⁶⁰ See its own website, 关于我们[About us], *Bilibili*, <https://www.bilibili.com/html/aboutUs.html>, (accessed May 21, 2017).