



Transmedia

THE *DANMEI* CULTURE IN CHINESE MEDIA AND SOCIETY

**MALE-MALE ROMANCE, RESISTANCE AND
REPRESENTATION**

Tingting Hu and Liang Ge



The *Danmei* Culture in Chinese Media and Society

The Danmei Culture in Chinese Media and Society offers groundbreaking comprehensive mapping of the Chinese *danmei* (boys love) cultural ecology, tracing its evolution from Japanese origins into a distinct, female-driven transmedia phenomenon.

Spanning from the late 1990s to the regulatory shifts of 2025, the book investigates how *danmei* subculture functions as a resilient yet incoherent counterpublic. In Part I, the literary heartland of *danmei* web novels is established, exploring the foundational world of creators and readers. Part II transitions to *danmei*'s fractured transmedia landscape, covering web dramas, audio dramas, manga, and animation. Employing a medium-specific approach, the authors analyze how specific platforms and fan engagements navigate the cat-and-mouse game between grassroots desires, platform capitalism, and state censorship. Theoretically, the work employs infrapolitics and queer world-making to examine how *danmei* creators and fans articulate alternative desires. Methodologically, the authors deploy immersive digital ethnography—an aca-fan approach—integrating longitudinal observations with in-depth interviews to provide deep, localized knowledge.

Essential for students and scholars in media and communications, sociology, and cultural studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies, this book offers an accessible guide to queer popular literature and cultures, digital cultural production, consumption and governance, and global fandoms.

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- The political economies of global digital culture.

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Introduction

Mapping the Field: Chinese *Danmei* Narratives

Boys love (BL) is a genre that features male-male romances and/or erotica, created primarily by and for women. Although it originated in Japanese comics during the 1970s, BL has become widespread in the Chinese media landscape over the past two decades, where it is known as *danmei*. This term is a transliteration of the Japanese word *tanbi*, meaning “indulging in beauty”. It is important to note that while the term is Japanese in origin, *tanbi* itself is not the primary word used for the genre in Japan, where terms like *yaoi*, *shōnen’ai*, and boys love (*bōizu rabu*) are more common. In the Chinese context, however, *danmei* has become the dominant signifier for this cultural sphere (Ge, 2021). The genre first entered mainland China in the late 1990s, influenced by Japanese BL manga and fiction that often arrived via Taiwan and Hong Kong as transit points. Over time, while the umbrella term BL is still understood, *danmei* has evolved from its Japanese roots into a distinct cultural phenomenon with its own unique and dynamic ecology.

While Japanese BL primarily originated and continues to be represented in manga, its Chinese counterpart, *danmei*, is built upon a foundation of literary fiction. The emergence of *danmei* writing in the late 1990s is inextricably linked to the explosive growth of Chinese internet literature—a vast ecosystem of genre fiction produced by both amateur and professional authors for online platforms. Unlike electronic art that leverages multimedia, this form of literature is fundamentally text-based, a crucial distinction that has shaped its development. The establishment of literary websites since 1997, such as the male-oriented Qidian and the female-oriented Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang), created the fertile ground for this growth.

Jinjiang, in particular, became the primary narrative engine for the *danmei* phenomenon. As a platform dedicated to female authors and readers, it fostered a space where romance genres, including heterosexual romance (*yanqing*), girls love (GL), and *danmei*, could flourish outside the male-gaze-dominated mainstream. This unique environment allowed *danmei* to evolve from a niche interest shared on early fan forums (Tian & Adorjan, 2016) into a commercially significant and culturally powerful genre with a

distinct identity, largely independent of its Japanese manga origins. This digital ecosystem supports two main categories of *danmei* narratives. Initially, much of the genre's energy came from *danmei* fan fiction, derivative works where authors re-imagine characters from existing media—films, animation, and games—in romantic pairings. A significant and often controversial subgenre of this is Real Person Fiction (RPF), which creates fictional narratives about real-world celebrities and public figures. However, the core of the contemporary *danmei* cultural sphere consists of original *danmei* novels. These are works with author-created characters and intricate world-building that have allowed the genre to mature into a sophisticated literary field of its own, far surpassing its initial status as simply derivative fan work.

Academic inquiry into *danmei*, much like studies of its Japanese and Western counterparts, has often focused on a central question: why are its primary creators and consumers women? Early interpretations frequently centered on *danmei* as a space for expressing repressed sexual desires or as a straightforward feminist tool for countering patriarchy. While these readings hold some truth, they risk oversimplifying a complex affective engagement. A more nuanced understanding, supported by the voices of readers themselves, reveals that the genre functions as an affective laboratory where participants can deconstruct unsatisfying real-world gender scripts and imaginatively rehearse more desirable alternatives (Ge, 2021; Ni, 2020).

The primary driver of this engagement is a profound desire for egalitarian relationships. Many female readers express deep disappointment with the weak and submissive heroines of mainstream heterosexual romance, a sentiment that fuels their turn to *danmei*'s fantasy of a bond forged between equals (Zheng, 2015). While the narratives often employ the *gong* (top) and *shou* (bottom) dynamic, this is not a simple proxy for heterosexual roles. The ideal *shou* is not depicted as subordinate or dependent; indeed, the rising popularity of the *qiang-shou* (strong *shou*) character signals a clear preference for protagonists who possess their own agency, strength, and resilience, even when in the receptive role (Yang & Xu, 2015; Wang, 2011). This focus on a partnership between two independent, powerful subjects is a direct response to the hierarchical gender dynamics readers perceive in their own society.

Within this framework of equality, *danmei* also serves as a safe medium for the exploration of female sexuality and desire. The explicit depictions of intimacy in many works allow women to explore sexual fantasies free from the male gaze and the pressures of real-world performance (Yang & Xu, 2015). Research indicates that readers engage these scenes with a notably fluid gaze, shifting identification between the dominant and receptive partners or adopting the detached perspective of an observer (Ge, 2025). This fluidity is in itself a form of empowerment, offering a sense of control and imaginative freedom that counters the often-rigid scripts of female sexuality (Jacobs, 2015; Yang & Xu, 2014; Zheng, 2015).

Ultimately, this imaginative work culminates in the construction of not just an ideal relationship, but an ideal self. The protagonists in *danmei* fiction,

whether *gong* or *shou*, often embody a compelling blend of traits that defy stereotypical gender norms: strength is paired with tenderness, independence with care, and tenacity with vulnerability (Feng, 2009; Ge, 2021). In constructing and consuming these narratives, women are not only imagining an ideal partner but are also implicitly projecting their own aspirations onto these characters. By crafting a world populated by fictional heroes who can be emotionally expressive and mutually respectful, *danmei* fiction inherently functions as a critique of the rigid, hegemonic masculinity upheld by mainstream culture (Hu et al., 2023). This appeal is not limited to women; the genre's presentation of alternative, more vulnerable masculinities has also attracted a growing male readership in both Japan and China (Nagaike, 2015; Ge, 2024), highlighting a shared desire across genders for escapes from restrictive patriarchal norms.

Danmei novels have faced criticism for perceived misogynistic elements, as female characters are often marginalized or portrayed as obstacles to the male protagonists' romantic development (Zhang, 2016). Frequently cast as antagonists, these female characters contribute to what Blair (2010) observed as a pattern of hostile attitudes among English-language BL manga readers toward female figures. Additionally, the genre's polarized sexual roles and the frequent portrayal of overly feminized *shou* characters have led some scholars to argue that *danmei* often reinforces heteronormative gender stereotypes (Zhou et al., 2018). Consequently, scholarly opinions on the gender ideology in *danmei* narratives are divided: while some critique it for perpetuating misogynistic and homophobic tropes, some view the genre as holding queer, feminist, and counterpublic potential (Ge, 2021, 2022; Xu & Yang, 2013; Chao, 2016), and as a participatory space created via female imaginative power and affective engagement (Martin, 2012). However, broad generalizations about *danmei* risk oversimplifying a complex and evolving genre.

In recent years, thematic and generic shifts within *danmei* signal its dynamic and heterogeneous nature. For example, traditional strong *gong* and weak *shou* pairings are increasingly challenged, with the rise of strong *gong* versus strong *shou* (known as *qiangqiang*) and *hugong*, which entails the coupling of two heroes who are both versatile in sex scenes rather than a *gong* (the penetrator) and a *shou* (the receiver). Lin (2020) argues that within the *hugong* genre in China, the coupling of two masculine tops presents a model for a new form of equality within relationships. This genre constructs an alternative masculinity as a form of queer resistance to the dominant, heteronormative, and hegemonic notion of masculinity (Lin, 2020). This alternative framework challenges conventional gender roles, offering a vision of masculinity that resists traditional expectations and embraces fluidity. Prominent *danmei* novelists, such as Priest and Moxiang Tongxiu, have also begun to incorporate strong, positively depicted female characters. These developments suggest that *danmei*, as a popular genre, is both responsive to critique and reflective of shifting gender and narrative ideals.

In *danmei* novels, gender ideology and portrayals of male homosexuality are closely intertwined. Some scholars highlight the utopian and fantastical aspects of *danmei* for female readers, distinguishing it from real-life gay experiences. The romantic bond between male characters in most *danmei* works is often depicted as exceptionally pure and intense, elevating it to an idealized dream. This fantasy, scholars suggest, stems from women's dissatisfaction with the restrictive and materialistic conjugal expectations in contemporary Chinese neoliberal society (Zhang, 2016). Consequently, *danmei* novels are viewed more as avenues for women's wish fulfillment than as reflections of male homosexuality. Accordingly, they have faced criticism for romanticizing and appropriating gay experiences—a critique reminiscent of Japan's 1992 *Yaoi Ronsō* (*yaoi* debate) (Vincent, 2007).

In mainland China, the formal acknowledgment of queer identity began in 1997, marked by the removal of homosexuality from the Criminal Law. Prior to this shift, homosexual men were occasionally detained by police under charges of “hooliganism” (*liumangzui*) or related offenses, following a 1984 ruling by the Supreme People's Court (Jeffrey & Wang, 2018). Additionally, homosexuality was classified as a psychosexual disorder in a diagnostic text released by the Chinese Society of Psychiatry in 1981, which later became the first Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-1) in 1989. This classification remained until 2001, when the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders was updated to CCMD-3, officially removing homosexuality as a mental disorder. By this point, queer identity in mainland China had been both decriminalized and depathologized.

The legalization and recognition of queer identity in China can be seen as part of the Party-state's strategy for international diplomacy, aimed at maintaining its standing in the United Nations. For example, in a 2015 meeting with the United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies,¹ China's official spokesperson affirmed that non-heteronormativity is not a disease and that discrimination based on sexual orientation is unacceptable. Similarly, during the 2018 UN Universal Periodic Review in Geneva, China's representatives reiterated this stance, affirming support for the rights and social welfare of the LGBT+ community. They argued that the delay in legalizing LGBT+ marriage reflects historical and cultural considerations rather than discriminatory intent (Wang, 2022). Later, in a session with the UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity at the 44th UN Human Rights Council, Chinese representatives again asserted their opposition to discrimination and violence based on gender and sexual orientation.²

Domestically, however, the Party-state's stance toward the LGBT+ community diverges sharply from its international messaging, as evidenced by its ongoing suppression of LGBT+ representation in media. A 2008 directive on “film and television censorship standards” explicitly banned portrayals of homosexual sex and masturbation, adding these to the list of prohibited sexual content (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television SARFT, 2008, Article 3).³ Although these guidelines were replaced in 2010 by new regulations

without direct mention of homosexuality, the looming potential for censorship has led many individuals and organizations to self-censor in order to avoid regulatory penalties and safeguard commercial interests. As a result, most LGBT-themed media products and publications are independently produced and circulate primarily within LGBT circles, limiting their broader accessibility (Jeffreys & Yu, 2015).

Given the historical absence of queer groups in Chinese mainstream media, *danmei*-adapted dramas, which gained popularity starting in 2016, can be seen as a significant audiovisual medium connecting queer individuals on mainstream platforms over the past decade. However, censorship against the *danmei* genre has tightened progressively, particularly since the 2014 anti-pornography campaign, during which the state began to perceive the genre as potentially containing obscene and pornographic content. Here, “obscenity” pertains to the non-normative male homoeroticism and non-hegemonic masculinities often depicted in *danmei* narratives (Hu et al., 2023). Consequently, sexual depictions in *danmei* novels have been restricted to kissing, with any further intimacy below the neck strictly forbidden (Yang & Xu, 2016).

The year 2016 marked a turning point for *danmei* fandom with the release of *Addicted* (*Shangyin*), the first widely recognized *danmei*-adapted drama, which aired on various popular streaming platforms and garnered significant attention.⁴ However, the show was abruptly halted by the SARFT on February 26, 2016, while it was still in progress, leading to a ban on the two leading actors, Huang Jingyu and Xu Weizhou, from appearing together in any television shows or public events. Between 2018 and 2021, notable series such as *The Guardian* (*Zhenhun*, 2018, Youku Video), *The Untamed* (*Chenqingling*, 2019, Tencent Video), and *Word of Honor* (*Shanheling*, 2021, Youku Video) exemplified a shift in *danmei* web dramas to *danmei*-adapted dramas. These adaptations employed the bromance-as-masquerade strategy (Hu & Wang, 2021), portraying male intimacy under the guise of homosocial bonding to evade censorship and engage with mainstream audiences (Ge, 2022). However, the excessive popularity of these *danmei*-adapted web dramas proved short-lived, culminating in a crack-down by the Party-state in 2021. State media published a series of articles denouncing such productions as manifestations of “vulgar culture” during the 2021 Internet Clean-up Campaign (*Qingliang Yundong*), signaling a shift towards prioritizing heterosexist, hegemonic masculinity and transitioning from an invisibilization strategy to one of censorship and prohibition. This repressive approach framed *danmei* and male effeminacy as unhealthy (Hu et al., 2023).

The landscape of online censorship surrounding *danmei* in mainland China is not static but is in a state of continuous, reactive evolution. As Hu, Ge, and Wang (2024) note, this framework is characterized by shifting media targets and adaptable justifications for suppression. The result is a relentless and escalating crackdown on *danmei* content, a process reinforced by a state-influenced media narrative that actively cultivates public disdain for the genre. This dual pressure of direct censorship and social stigmatization systematically constrains opportunities for the expansion of *danmei* fandom and chills the creativity of its

practitioners. This dynamic has created a persistent and adversarial relationship between *danmei* culture and state regulation, a high-stakes “cat-and-mouse game”. On one side, creative practices remain highly attuned to the ever-changing red lines of government policy, with authors and fans developing sophisticated methods of code-switching, using allegories, and migrating across platforms to survive. On the other, censorship measures constantly adapt in response to the resilience and innovation within these communities. This interplay not only shapes the production and dissemination of *danmei* works but also reflects broader tensions between state control and cultural expression in contemporary China. A nuanced understanding of this context is therefore essential, cautioning against a simplistic view of Chinese media regulation as merely repressive. Instead, a more insightful analysis reveals a site of constant contestation and negotiation between queer imaginaries and state power, where suppression breeds its own forms of creative resistance.

In the Chinese context, the relationship between the queer community and the *danmei* subculture is complex rather than oppositional or simply allied. Many female fans of *danmei* actively support gay rights and have participated in activism against anti-homosexual discrimination (Xu & Yang, 2013; Lin, 2020). *Danmei* communities encompass a diverse range of members beyond the stereotypical portrayal of straight women, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer fans (Ge, 2024). For instance, Feitian Yexiang, one of the most renowned *danmei* authors, is reportedly a gay man whose works tackle pressing issues faced by sexual minorities, such as homophobia and AIDS panic. However, some early *danmei* narratives have also faced criticism for displaying reticent homophobia by shying away from explicitly addressing homosexual identity. In these works, even when homoerotic intimacy is depicted, protagonists often claim they are not “gay”, asserting instead that they have simply fallen in love with someone of the same gender by chance. Tian (2020) observes that more recent *danmei* narratives since the 2010s often reflect conventions that downplay homosexuality or attempt to dissociate *danmei* from gay literature.

The boundary between *danmei* and what might be termed “gay literature” in China is not a clear line but a porous and often deliberately ambiguous membrane. A canonical example of this ambiguity is *Beijing Story* (*Beijing gushi*). This novel, first published anonymously on the online gay forum Boy2Man in 1998, is widely regarded as a classic of Chinese gay literature. Its status was cemented when it was adapted into the critically acclaimed film *Lan Yu* (2001) by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan. The text’s significance lies in its dual citizenship: it is embraced as a foundational work by both the gay community and *danmei* aficionados. This shared ownership is complicated by the enduring mystery of its authorship. The persistent speculation that the writer may have been a woman (Lim, 2006) perfectly encapsulates the genre’s central ambiguity, blurring the line between a narrative emerging from lived gay experience and one produced through the women’s imaginations that defines *danmei*. *Beijing Story* thus functions as a shared cultural touchstone, inhabiting a liminal space that satisfies both communities, albeit for potentially different reasons.

This blurring of boundaries is further evident in a specific subgenre within *danmei* known as reality-oriented (*xianshi xiang*) fiction. These narratives deliberately eschew fantasy settings to realistically portray the social and emotional lives of gay men in contemporary Chinese society. While these works are often considered too emotionally demanding or “heavy” (*nue*) for casual reading, and thus remain less popular than stories set in fantastical or historical contexts, they are highly valued by a segment of the readership. These readers appreciate them precisely for their verisimilitude and their willingness to engage with the complexities of real-world queer experience, including social discrimination, family pressure, and personal identity struggles. Together, these points of overlap demonstrate that the *danmei* intimatopia is not a space entirely divorced from the lived realities of gay men. Rather, it is one that selectively borrows from, romanticizes, and sometimes faithfully represents those realities to serve its own complex affective and narrative purposes, further complicating any simple distinction between gay literature and women’s fantasy.

Film studies scholars (Berry, 2007; Shiao, 2008) have found that gay-themed films such as *Formula 17* (2004), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Eternal Summer* (2006) appeal to both male homosexual audiences and female *danmei* fans. Additionally, the film *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) is also appreciated by some Chinese women as embodying *danmei* narratives (Xu & Tan, 2021). The ongoing blurring of boundaries between gay literature and *danmei* novels, the transformation and parody of outdated homophobic conventions, the rise in popularity of *hugong* stories, and the increasingly positive representations of female supporting characters all point to a *danmei* culture that is highly heterogeneous, inclusive, and self-reflective.

The *danmei* genre in China has cultivated a distinctive cultural ecology, evolving from a niche subculture into a transnational and female-dominated meta-fandom that integrates with a variety of local and global media. This ecosystem is no longer confined to a single format; today, Chinese *danmei* stories manifest across a wide transmedia landscape, including fiction, manga, animation, audio dramas, games, and cosplay. Since its inception, the internet has been the lifeblood for the genre’s dissemination, allowing it to cultivate a dedicated fan base primarily consisting of relatively well-educated young women (Feng, 2013). The genre’s explosive growth and mainstream visibility are directly linked to its integration with the wider Chinese internet literature industry. This industry has become one of the fastest-growing sectors online and now functions as a crucial IP (Intellectual Property) pipeline for mainstream film and television. To illustrate, in 2018 and 2019, 42 of the top 100 most popular movies and dramas were adaptations of internet novels (Xu, 2021). *Danmei* online fiction has successfully followed this lucrative path to the screen, achieving considerable phenomenal success and cultural impacts, such as *The Untamed* (2019), *Word of Honor* (2021), and the most recent *Revenge Love* (2025). However, this very success creates the central paradox of the contemporary *danmei* landscape. As these stories move from the semi-sheltered spaces of online literary platforms to the highly visible domain of mainstream

media, they become prominent targets for state censorship. The genre's core themes of male homoeroticism and its sexually explicit content put it in direct conflict with official regulatory frameworks. Consequently, the journey from beloved online novel to blockbuster adaptation is fraught with tension, requiring narratives to be heavily sanitized, with queer relationships often recoded as bromance or socialist brotherhood (Ge, 2022). This creates a high-stakes environment where commercial success is contingent on a strategic erasure of the very elements that define the genre for its core audience.

As a primary source of entertainment, *danmei* novels have been widely adapted into various media forms, particularly focusing on *danmei*-adapted live action web dramas, audio dramas, manga, and animation—key subjects explored in this book. The web dramas examined include both early adaptations that closely follow the original novels' narratives and explicitly depict male-male romance, as well as later works that obscure male intimacy under the guise of bromance. Initially released on major mainland Chinese streaming platforms like Tencent Video and Youku Video, many of these *danmei* web dramas have since been blocked and are now primarily accessible on international platforms including YouTube, Viki, and GagaOOLala, resulting in a lack of visibility for *danmei* works in mainstream media outlets in mainland China. Consequently, non-human-performed manga and animation have started to attract more *danmei* fans, with platforms like Bilibili and Tencent Video taking the lead in producing *danmei*-adapted animation, while Kuaikan App has emerged as the primary creator of *danmei* manga. However, as mainstream media platforms, Bilibili and Tencent Video typically eliminate male intimacy plots altogether to distance these adaptations from the *danmei* genre. In contrast, Kuaikan App, which primarily targets a young audience, has managed to retain male-male romances in its offerings. Nevertheless, it faces strict prohibitions on visually depicting intimate behaviors such as kissing and sex. This results in a careful balancing act where the essence of *danmei* romance is preserved, albeit within the constraints imposed by censorship regulations.

Against this backdrop, audio dramas adapted from *danmei* novels utilizing vocal performances and sound effects to convey stories, similar to podfic in the Western media context, have emerged as a vital media form within the *danmei* genre. The *danmei* audio dramas discussed in this book primarily fall into two categories: those produced by professional studios and released on major commercial audio media platforms that require payment, and those produced by amateur groups and made available to the audience for free. While major audio media platforms, such as Miss Evan and Manbo, engage in self-censorship—particularly concerning sexual depictions—male-male intimacy can still be narrated within *danmei* audio dramas.

This book intervenes in a critical contemporary dynamic: the escalating tension between the imaginative power of the *danmei* culture and the tightening grip of state control in mainland China. We are particularly interested in the socio-political logic driving this suppression and the resilient, creative

potential of *danmei* creators and their fandoms. Therefore, this book provides a comprehensive genealogy of the *danmei* genre across its various media forms, tracing a complex feedback loop. Our central interrogation examines how the genre and its participants' intensive affective engagement challenge predominant heteronormativity; how this challenge, in turn, provokes nation-level official suppression; and, crucially, how the fandom responds by developing strategies of resistance and expressing alternative voices through proactive transmedia engagement. Throughout this study, we maintain a precise terminological distinction. We use *danmei* to refer specifically to the genre of Chinese male-male romances and/or erotica. In contrast, BL is used as a broader umbrella term for the genre as it appears in Japanese and other Asian contexts, such as South Korea and Thailand. This introduction lays the groundwork for our analysis. We begin by contextualizing *danmei*'s historical development within mainland China and reviewing the existing scholarly literature. From there, we approach *danmei* cultural ecology through the analytical lens of public and counterpublic from a transmedia perspective. The introduction concludes with an overview of the chapters to follow, guiding the reader through the book's argument.

***Danmei* Culture: Public Versus Counterpublic Spheres**

The scholarly conversation surrounding *danmei* is defined by a central tension. While some critics have rightly pointed to misogynistic and homophobic tendencies within the genre, others have emphasized its queer, feminist, and counterpublic potentials (Martin, 2012; Xu & Yang, 2013; Chao, 2016). Ge (2022) attempts to reconcile this by proposing the concept of dual ambivalence, framing *danmei* as a popular feminist project where women question heteronormativity while simultaneously inheriting and internalizing its logics.

Rather than adjudicating whether *danmei* is simply feminist *or* misogynistic, progressive *or* regressive, this book takes a different approach. We offer a comprehensive genealogy of the Chinese *danmei* cultural ecology by examining its dialectical relationship with the hegemonic, heteronormative mainstream. Our central argument is that the *danmei* cultural ecology functions as a vital yet ambivalent counterpublic sphere that is under constant threat of neutralization by both state power and commercial co-optation in which the matrix of heteronormative ideologies is in play. We investigate the extent to which the genre expresses alternative voices that challenge heterosexual hegemony and consider its queer feminist potential through its adaptation, expansion, and fandom engagement.

To build this argument, we draw first on the theoretical framework of public and counterpublic spheres. The concept originates with Habermas's (1989) bourgeois public sphere, a domain where private individuals could debate societal issues and shape political agendas. However, as feminist and queer theorists like Nancy Fraser (1990) and Michael Warner (2005) have

powerfully argued, this idealized public sphere was never universal. It was built on the exclusion of marginalized groups, privileging the discourse of affluent, educated men.

In response, Fraser (1990) developed the concept of subaltern counterpublics: parallel discursive arenas where marginalized groups can formulate “oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 81). These arenas expand the discursive space, often emerging as responses to exclusion from the dominant public sphere. Additionally, Fraser highlights the dual role of subaltern counterpublics: they serve both as spaces for withdrawal and regrouping and as bases for training and organizing activities aimed at engaging with and challenging the wider public. Counterpublics thus operate by establishing and preserving shared knowledge within marginalized groups while simultaneously framing issues through their experiences of marginalization, ultimately seeking integration into the dominant public sphere (Asen, 2000).

Warner (2005) conceptualizes counterpublics as public bodies of individuals who are acutely aware of their subordinate status within society, emphasizing the significance of the ways in which these groups form and coalesce. Warner suggests that a counterpublic can emerge around a particular text or discourse that garners collective attention and engagement from a marginalized group. Given their potential to critique the dominant public sphere and challenge hegemonic discourses, counterpublics often extend beyond rational-critical discourse, instead adopting diverse modes of expression and practices that reflect their unique experiences and positionalities.

Counterpublics can emerge from a range of social categories, including political or religious beliefs, ethnicity, class, gender, and other constructed identities (Leung & Lee, 2014), coalescing around shared values and counter-hegemonic practices, such as organizing collective activities and creating alternative media spaces (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). Scholars like Fraser (1990) and Warner (2005) have identified women, people of color, sexual minorities, and subaltern communities as prominent counterpublics, each challenging dominant ideas by articulating distinct identities and values. In this book, we define the public as those who endorse or comply with the dominant heterosexual norms in Chinese media discourse, while the counterpublic includes media producers, designers, and participants who oppose these norms and express dissenting or alternative voices.

Mainstream media frequently fail to offer a genuinely diverse array of perspectives, often overlooking or actively suppressing the voices of marginalized groups (Dahlberg, 2007). Alternative media, however, serve as crucial counterpublic realms (Downing, 1988) or subaltern public spheres (Squires, 2002), fostering spaces where counterpublics can form and articulate dissent (Warner, 2005). Recognizing the coexistence and multiplicity of publics (Squires, 2002), we draw on Downey and Fenton's (2003) concept of the counterpublic sphere, which contests the hegemonic, heteronormative public sphere by incorporating diverse voices of dissent. Through this lens, we aim to explore the extent to which the Chinese *danmei* subculture may function as a counterpublic sphere, allowing fans to express alternative viewpoints and forms of resistance.

In recognizing *danmei* as a significant form of subculture, we draw upon Epstein's (1998) assertion that subcultures emerge within the framework of the dominant culture as youth respond to the hegemony of the prevailing parent culture. Gelder (2007) further defines subculture as a primarily social world characterized by distinct social expressions, which develop through shared narratives and histories. In this context, narrative serves as a crucial component of this social world, with media acting as the primary conduit through which society engages with the subculture. While individual members of a subculture may be motivated by various factors for their participation, Hebdige (1979) posits that a predominant incentive is the desire for alternatives that the dominant culture fails to provide—essentially, a means of escaping the constraints of mainstream cultural norms. Thus, *danmei* functions not only as a cultural expression but also as a refuge for individuals seeking to explore identities and narratives that diverge from societal expectations.

The societal perception of subculture operates as a dynamic and reciprocal process. On one hand, subcultures are often viewed as dangerous, repugnant, or deviant; on the other, they can be seen as exciting, alluring, and intriguing (Gelder, 2007). This duality highlights the fragmentation of subculture from the dominant culture, generating tension that fosters both alienation and assimilation (Hebdige, 1979). The vitality of a subculture is closely tied to its opposition to mainstream society, which tends to respond to perceived threats by attempting to neutralize subcultural influences through processes of alienation and assimilation in order to reassert power and control. Hebdige (1979) identifies two primary forms of neutralization: the commodity form and the ideological form. The commodity form involves the appropriation of subcultural elements for consumption. As demand for subcultural products increases, the commercialization process begins, often leading to the dilution of the subculture as commercial entities take over its original expressions. The ideological form of neutralization manifests in two principal ways: trivialization and the removal or displacement of meanings. Through trivialization, mainstream culture alters its discourse to create narratives that diminish the impact of the subculture, effectively taming it. In the second method, society constructs new or distorted meanings for subcultures within media representations, thereby reshaping public perception and undermining the original significance of subcultural practices (Hebdige, 1979).

In the context of Chinese media, *danmei*-adapted dramas exemplify the commercialization process, as the commercial potential of notable *danmei* novels gains recognition among media capitals. This shift towards professional production results in a neutralization strategy characterized by bromance-as-masquerade (Hu & Wang, 2021), which obscures explicit homosexuality while enticing audiences to engage with male-male romantic fantasies. In terms of ideological neutralization, trivialization appears less applicable in China, given the party-state's stringent intolerance toward homosexual content and its objective to eliminate it entirely. However, Hebdige's (1979) concept of removal and displacement of meanings resonates strongly within the

Chinese *danmei* context. While authorities have historically employed overt censorship, recent strategies involve using state media to stigmatize *danmei* as a vulgar culture, reinforcing negative associations with traits such as sissiness and immorality (Ge, et al., 2025).

This book thus focuses on the processes through which the *danmei* subculture is neutralized, commercialized, and ideologically manipulated. It seeks to illuminate the tensions between *danmei* subculture and the dominant heterosexual mainstream culture in mainland China by tracing the historical development of the *danmei* genre across various media forms, decoding the cultural meanings embedded in *danmei* narratives, and examining fans' proactive engagement with the transmedial expansion of *danmei* across diverse platforms.

A Fractured Transmedia System

To analyze the *danmei* genre within China's popular media landscape, this book adopts a transmedia perspective. This approach is essential because it at the same time helps to recognize *danmei* participants' active, collaborative role in making meaning across multiple platforms. We argue that *danmei* cultural ecology is best understood not as a seamless storyworld, but as a fractured transmedia system. Within this system, the bottom-up, fan-driven processes are not merely participatory; they function as an essential corrective force, actively repairing the narrative and affective ruptures created by a top-down commercial adaptation process that is fundamentally compromised by the Chinese party-state censorship and market pressures.

The concept of transmedia was first articulated by Marsha Kinder (1991) and later developed into the influential theory of transmedia storytelling by Henry Jenkins (2008). In its ideal form, as Jenkins describes, a transmedia story unfolds across multiple platforms, with each medium making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. As he elaborates:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through gameplay or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained, so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole

(Jenkins, 2008, pp. 97–8).

This model, exemplified by franchises like *The Matrix*, is predicated on a synergistic relationship between corporate producers (top-down) and active fan communities (bottom-up), where consumers become “hunters and gatherers” in pursuit of a comprehensive narrative experience (Jenkins,

2008, p. 21). The Internet has facilitated the formation of extensive virtual communities centered around diverse cultural texts (Baym, 2000). Consequently, it is essential to reconsider the concept of mass culture, often criticized by scholars as merely “an agent of mass sociability” (Jacobs, 2007, p.115), and to advocate for a cultural re-examination of the public sphere (Jacobs, 2011). Popular media experiences foster dialogues among audiences, who may hold varying perspectives. Thus, a broader exploration of cultural productions becomes a shared concern, reflecting the dynamics of contemporary audience engagement (Jacobs, 2007).

The concept of transmediality was first introduced by Marsha Kinder (1991) in her exploration of children’s media consumption. Kinder posits that young consumers navigate various media while remaining engaged with a cohesive storyworld, a phenomenon she terms transmedia intertextuality. She argues that children are socialized to consume a franchise across multiple media platforms, which is essential for the franchise’s commercial viability (Evans, 2011). Harvey (2015) critiques Kinder’s interpretation of transmediality as being closely linked to intertextuality, which he describes as one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary, applicable in various contexts for differing purposes (Allen, 2011). For Kinder (1991), the intertextual exchanges within transmedia structures position children as active consumers whose desires are directly addressed, thereby reinforcing cultural norms. In this light, transmediality is primarily viewed as a commercial strategy. However, the concept of intertextuality serves to elucidate both transmediality in general and transmedia narratives specifically, as it accounts for the diverse ways in which texts influence and interact with one another (Harvey, 2015).

Transmedia storytelling encompasses various dimensions, including innovative narrative forms and complex storytelling structures, as well as a new cultural landscape where social media, connectivity, fan cultures, and online information exchange play crucial roles. Additionally, it involves the application of marketing strategies and suitable business models to effectively engage audiences within a digitally connected environment (Schiller, 2018). Fueled by advancements in smart technologies and the media industry’s commercial incentives to promote entertainment franchises, transmedia storytelling thrives on consumer- and fan-generated content. According to Jenkins (2008), this emerging culture signifies a transition from a passive spectatorial approach to a more active, participatory model, wherein fans and consumers actively seek, create, and disseminate new elements, information, and content, forging connections across various media platforms. This participatory engagement among fans significantly expands the storyworld in new and innovative directions. Jenkins and Deuze (2008) further illustrate that the evolution of transmedia storytelling can occur through two primary avenues: top-down corporate processes and bottom-up consumer-driven initiatives, both contributing to the dynamic growth of narrative universes.

Notably, the ideal model of transmedia breaks down when applied to the Chinese *danmei* context. The reciprocal dynamic is fundamentally disrupted. While producers and production companies are eager to adapt popular online novels to capitalize on their built-in fan bases, the top-down process is characterized by fracture rather than cohesion. Most Chinese producers treat the source material not as a world to be expanded, but as a property to be adapted—a process that, as Carlos Scolari (2009) argues, is a unidirectional transfer from one medium to another rather than a true transmedia expansion. This is not merely an aesthetic choice but a structural necessity. Due to increasingly stringent state censorship of queer content, the core homosexual romance of a *danmei* novel must be systematically erased, sanitized, or “castrated” for it to reach a mainstream audience as a web drama (Ge, 2022). Producers are therefore forced to reimagine the narrative, often transforming a queer love story into a bromance, which diverges significantly from the original’s emotional and narrative logic. This creates a fundamental schism between the literary storyworld and its audio-visual adaptation. The example of Xuxu Tuzhi’s *Fairy Tale* series illustrates this fragmentation perfectly.⁵ While the audio drama producers attempted a transmedia strategy by using the same voice actors for characters across different adaptations, the inability to secure rights for the entire series and maintain casting continuity across professional and amateur productions resulted in a broken, disjointed experience for fans seeking a cohesive storyworld.

It is in response to this top-down failure that the bottom-up power of the fandom becomes so crucial. The *danmei* community’s engagement is not just participatory; it is also *reparative*. Fans recognize that the official adaptations are compromised, and they take on the active labor of restoring what has been lost. This is where the true transmedia storytelling of *danmei* occurs. Platforms like Lofter, Archive of Our Own (AO3), Suiyuanju (mtslash.me), Weibo, and Bilibili become essential hubs where fans create and circulate their own stories to fill the gaps left by censorship. Fan fiction rewrites key scenes to make the queer intimacy explicit. Fan-edited videos re-cut footage from the bromance dramas, using suggestive editing and music to restore the romantic narrative. Fan art visualizes the intimate moments that could never be shown on screen. This fan-driven content is not merely ancillary to the main text; it is a necessary supplement that allows the community to re-engage with the original storyworld and heal the fractures created by the adaptation process. As Matt Hills (2002) argues, fan productions are the work of a community’s most committed consumers, and in this context, their commitment extends to becoming co-authors and restorers of meaning. This dynamic grants fans significant agency, allowing them to collectively construct their own understanding of the storyworld and, in doing so, articulate the alternative voices and queer desires that the mainstream public sphere seeks to suppress (Joyce, 2018; Schiller, 2018).

In summary, the contemporary Chinese *danmei* landscape reveals a unique and contentious transmedia dynamic. The top-down process, constrained by censorship, produces fragmented and ideologically sanitized adaptations.

This, in turn, catalyzes a powerful bottom-up process, where the fandom mobilizes to perform a kind of narrative and affective repair. As Jenkins (2011, para. 4) states, “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience”. In the *danmei* context, it is the fandom, not the industry, that undertakes this systematic dispersal and coordination. By adopting a transmedia approach, this book moves beyond a traditional focus on the literary texts alone to recognize the *danmei* fandom as the primary engine of transmedia expansion and the vital force that sustains the queer heart of the storyworld against constant pressure.

Methodology

This book employs a mixed-method approach, integrating digital ethnography, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews. Our initial phase involved extensive digital ethnography, drawing theoretical insights from scholars such as Christine Hine (2017), who conceptualizes the internet as an embedded, embodied, and everyday phenomenon rather than a distinct sphere of life. From 2018 to 2025, we immersed ourselves in the *danmei* subcultural field across a range of media platforms, including Youku, Tencent, Bilibili, Sina Weibo, WeChat, Douban, RedNote, Jinjiang, Changpei, and Feiwen (sosad.fun). This immersive stage encompassed reading *danmei* novels, watching *danmei*-adapted dramas, participating in fan groups, systematically analyzing comments and chat histories, summarizing emergent interaction patterns, and identifying potential participants for subsequent research phases.

In the second stage of our research, we deployed a mixed-methods online survey to empirically investigate the dynamics of the ever-expanding *danmei* cultural ecology. The survey, conducted in 2021, garnered 275 valid responses from a cross-section of *danmei* fans. The instrument was specifically designed to capture the heterogeneity of this community, allowing us to distinguish between the content creator community and the broader readership and spectatorship. The questionnaire combined quantitative metrics on consumption behaviors (e.g., frequency, platform choice, expenditure) with qualitative prompts exploring participatory paradigms. This approach provides a granular dataset that illuminates how different actors engage with and contribute to this flourishing cultural ecosystem.

In the final stage of our research, we utilized purposive sampling to recruit a total of 123 interviewees. These participants were organized into four distinct groups based on their primary engagement with various *danmei* media forms. The first group consisted of 50 intense female readers of *danmei* novels. The second group, comprising 18 female participants, primarily engaged with *danmei*-adapted web dramas. The third group, totaling 30 participants, focused on audio dramas, equally divided between 15 audience members (1 male and 14 females) and 15 producers, including 5 CVs (all male) and 10 female members of

production teams covering the roles of planners, directors, scriptwriters, postproduction, distributors, and art designers. Finally, 15 female participants were recruited for their engagement with *danmei* manga and animation. Recognizing the increasing global impact of *danmei* stories in the digital era, particularly the widespread reception of *danmei* manga and animation among international audiences, we also incorporated supplementary data from non-Chinese fans. Beyond the 15 mainland Chinese interviewees focused on manga/animation, we included insights from 10 additional non-Chinese *danmei* fans who were fluent in English (mostly multilingual) and actively engaged with *danmei* manga and animation ranged from 2 to 10 years. Among these 10 international participants, 5 identified as women, 2 as men, 1 as a transgender woman, and 2 others as non-binary, whose sexual orientations included asexual, bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual, and queer. They primarily hailed from the UK and Australia.

Recognizing that the *danmei* community is predominantly female—a trend well-documented in prior research (e.g., Wood, 2006)—we anticipated and observed a similar demographic composition among our interviewees. Our semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were aligned with participants’ focused *danmei* media forms as well as their broader engaging experiences. This approach enabled us to explore how *danmei* fans’ diverse transmedia activities unfold, the ways they perceive and contribute to these activities, and how they articulate alternative voices or challenge (or fail to challenge) heteronormative mainstream culture. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online via phone, WeChat, or Zoom, with audio recordings made with participants’ prior consent. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, and all names appearing in this book are pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Our position as aca-fans—academics who are also fans—offered significant benefits and shaped our research strategies in this study. This dual allegiance, as popularized by Hills (2002), provided us with insider knowledge of the *danmei* cultural field, enriching our understanding in ways that external perspectives might miss (Jenkins et al., 2011). By engaging in immersive digital ethnography and in-depth interviews as aca-fans, we leveraged our familiarity with fandom language and practices, as outlined by Cristofari and Guitton (2017). This approach not only facilitated the integration of academic and fan perspectives but also ensured a more ethical and nuanced understanding of the community, ultimately allowing us to contribute meaningfully back to the fan culture, as Lee (2021) suggests. This qualitative research employs multiple methods, including online observation, participation, and in-depth interviews. As both researchers are also *danmei* fans, we acknowledge that we are engaged in a process of “studying ourselves studying ourselves and others” (Preissle, 2006, p. 691). On one hand, our lived experiences—such as participating in *danmei* communities and consuming *danmei* stories across various media platforms—shape our perspectives and inform our analytical lens. On the other hand, these experiences influence the knowledge we generate as

Introduction

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