

# *Censorship and Circumvention in China: How Danmei Writers ‘Drive a Car’ on Jinjiang*

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## ABSTRACT

Danmei, aka Boys Love or BL, denotes a literature genre featuring male-male romantic or erotic relationships, predominantly created by and for heterosexual women who are referred to as ‘rotten girls’. This subculture is characterised by explicit depiction of sexual encounters and erotic spectacles, which is metaphorically represented by a newly coined Internet neologism *kaiche* ‘to drive a car’ in China. As a consequence of its dual connection with homosexuality and pornography, as well as its accused transgression of traditional norms, danmei is subject to severe moral scrutiny and state censorship in China. As a leading danmei website with the largest readership and prominent commercial success, Jinjiang has been sensitive to government policy shifts and anti-pornography campaigns, and hence has enforced strict self-censorship standards comprising both automatic detection of transgressive keywords and multiple rounds of manual review. Consequently, writers at Jinjiang adopt a variety of circumvention tactics, including metaphor, code-switching and satire strategies, so as to accommodate readers’ requirement for homoerotic depictions. More significantly, erotic representations illustrate writers’ sexual desires and identity as ‘rotten girls’, as well as illuminate writers’ rebellion against online censorship and restriction on freedom of creation imposed by authorities.

**Keywords:** *China, danmei, boys love, censorship, circumvention, eroticism, fan-fiction, social taboo*

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## ÖZ

Danmei, çoğunlukla *'fujoshi'* (edebiyatta erkekler arasındaki romantik ilişkiden hoşlanan kadın hayranlara verilen isim) olarak adlandırılan heteroseksüel kadınlar tarafından ve onlar için yaratılan erkek erkeğe yaşanan romantik ya da erotik edebi türü ifade eder. Bu alt kültür, internet ortamında yeni ortaya çıkan Çince *'kaiche'* yani araba sürmek anlamına gelen kelime ile metaforik olarak temsil edilen cinsel yakınlaşmanın ve erotik sahnelerin açıkça işlenmesi olarak nitelendirilmiştir. Danmei hem homoseksüellik hem de pornografi ile olan bağlantısının yanı sıra geleneksel normları da aştığı için Çin'de ahlaki denetime ve sansüre maruz kalmıştır. En geniş okuyucu kitlesi ve dikkat çeken ticari başarısı ile önde gelen bir danmei websitesi olan Jinjiang, hükümet politikasında değişime ve pornografiye karşı kampanyalara karşı duyarlı olmuş ve bu nedenle hem suç teşkil eden anahtar kelimelerin otomatik olarak algılanmasını sağlayan hem de birçok incelemeyi gerektiren katı bir otosansür uygulaması getirmiştir. Sonuç olarak ise Jinjian yazarları, okurların homoerotik tasvir isteklerini karşılamak için metafor, diller arası geçiş, satirik dil kullanmak gibi pek çok taktik kullanmaya başladılar. Daha da önemlisi, erotik tasvirler, yazarların cinsel arzularını ve kimliklerini *'fujoshi'* olarak göstermenin yanı sıra, yazarların çevrimiçi sansüre karşı isyanını ve yetkililer tarafından dayatılan yaratma özgürlüğü kısıtlamasını aydınlatıyor.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Çin, danmei, sansür, erotizm, kurgu, sosyal tabu

## 1. INTRODUCTION

'Slash fiction', or 'male/male slash', refers to a productive strand of female-fan-generated literature in which same-sex (usually male) television or film characters are subversively converted into queer subjects (Dhaenens et al 2008, Keft-Kennedy 2008, Willis 2016). 耽美 danmei is China's version of slash fiction, and it denotes a literature genre featuring and romanticising male-male homoerotic desire and romantic relationships, predominantly for

mass circulation and consumption by female audiences, the vast majority of whom are heterosexual (Feng 2009, Fujimoto 2015, Hartley 2015, Yang and Xu 2016). With its provenance in Japan that significantly impinges on Chinese subcultures, danmei, originally *tanbi*, pertains to aestheticism and thus its literal meaning ‘addicted to beauty’ or ‘indulgence in beauty’. Since being borrowed into the Chinese language, this terminology has adopted the definition of *yaoi*, aka Boys Love or BL, and ‘beauty’ is hence limited to that of young male characters in BL narratives exclusively (McLelland 2000, 2009, 2017, Wood 2006, McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2015, Chen 2017, Yang and Xu 2017a, 2017b, Wang 2019, Sun 2020).

Danmei literature is marked by distinctive characteristics: protagonists are bestowed with attractive appearance, charisma and sentiment—although being called ‘Boys Love’, the danmei genre pertains to relationships involving pubescent or mature men, the majority of whom do not identify their sexual orientation as homosexual. Moreover, the saccharine romantic fantasies exhibit exciting plots and exotic settings, appearing in anime, manga, as well as textual and visual pieces (Leech 2012, Suzuki 2015, The Economist 2015, Zsila and Demetrovics 2017a, 2017b).

Since entering China’s comic market in the mid-1990s as a Japanese cultural export, danmei works and subculture have attracted a prodigious fangirl readership, among whom it is not uncommon to participate in producing homosexual love stories themselves. In China, this cohort is referred to as 腐女 *fuvv* ‘rotten girl’ which is borrowed from the Japanese term *fujoshi*, viz. heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women who are fascinated with female-oriented narratives concerning male-male romantic and erotic relationships, and have deviated from social rules and responsibilities defining women (Berry 2007, Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013, Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015, Chao 2016, 2017).

## **2. Danmei in China**

Nevertheless, in tandem with its surging popularity among Chinese 'rotten girls', the genre has also been subject to moral scrutiny and fallen prey to government censorship due to sexual depictions (Suzuki 1998, Nagaike 2003). Owing to the fact that danmei literature is unprofitable in theory, it lacks commercial power and representation that can enforce its legitimacy (Zheng 2019).

A salient attribute of the danmei genre is that some BL works are flooded with explicit sexual representations. It is noteworthy that BL literature enriched by erotic or pornographic stimuli as entertaining elements should not be treated liberatorily as autoerotic female pornography, in that the pornographic aspects are inextricably intertwined with the portrayal of mutual romantic attachment between characters. BL works present sexual pleasure of both lovers and they may perform either the seme (top) or uke (bottom) role according to their personality traits, which functions as a parody of heterosexual paradigm by means of unravelling the possibilities embedded in gender performativity (Otsuka 2004, Nagakubo 2005, Mori 2010, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015, Otomo 2015). In Japan, policymakers are lobbied by international agencies to comply with international standards restricting fantasy sex and impose stricter regulations on contents involving and/or targeting at young people, and 'rotten girls' also increasingly come under official scrutiny (McLelland 2015, 2016).

Analogous to its status in Japan, danmei literature in China is also one of the easiest targets for moral scrutiny and the severe control and regulation of the party-state, owing to its dual association with homosexuality and pornography, as well as its presumed desecration of the conservative traditional norms prescribing that women must be chaste and subservient to men (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Zhang 2017, He and Zhang 2018). Although male same-sex intimacy used to be embraced by pre-modern elite culture, gay-themed media representation has been a social taboo since the Chinese

Communist Party became the ruling party (Hinsch 1992, Song 2004, Wu 2004, Dong 2005, Lim 2006, Wang 2019).

The majority of Chinese danmei narratives are in the form of fiction, published on online websites such as Jinjiang (see discussion below), yet several anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government have disastrously impinged upon them in the past decade (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Wang 2019). On 13 April 2014, the National Office against Pornographic and Illegal Publications, in collaboration with other government departments, jointly announced a nationwide crackdown on pornographic content on the Internet, named ‘Jingwang Xingdong’ (‘Internet Cleansing Movement’). The campaign was carried out from mid-April to November, aiming to eradicate all online pornographic texts, images, videos and advertisements, and to rectify websites involved in production or dissemination of pornographic information; consequences included the removal of potentially inappropriate works from most literature websites and the shutting down of an online literature channel of Sina.com (Ji and Long 2014, Ning 2014, Yang and Xu 2017a). In 2018, posts with pornographic and homosexual implications were deleted from Weibo, China’s largest social media platform (Kwong 2018, Wu 2019). In 2019, Chinese authorities further intensified the crackdown on pornography and illegal publications, thereby maintaining the market order of publication and a clean social and cultural environment (Xinhua News 2019). Moreover, on 22 May 2020, the Cyberspace Administration of China announced the launch of a dedicated Qinglang ‘clear and bright’ action lasting for eight months, with a mission to establish a healthy Internet space in China (Cyberspace Administration of China 2020, Qin 2020).

There have been cases where danmei writers were subject to the anti-pornography campaigns and penalties. In 2011, the Zhengzhou police bureau busted a commercial BL website with 600,000 registered users and arrested over ten writers under the charge of spreading obscene articles (Shen and Li 2011); in 2014, a Jinjiang pseudonymous author ‘big grey wolf’ was

arrested in Jiangsu and later sentenced for imprisonment of three years and half (Peng 2015); in 2018, an author of a self-published homoerotic book that 'obscenely and in detail described gay male-male acts' was found guilty by Wuhu county court and was given a ten-year jail term (He and Zhang 2018, Shepherd 2018); in 2019, eight danmei writers and practitioners in Wuhan were involved in illegal business crimes, and a writer was sentenced for four-year imprisonment and fined 120,000 RMB (Yang 2019, Yang and Teng 2019).

Furthermore, the discussion concerning danmei-related censorship would not be complete without mentioning two phenomenal works, viz. a film titled *藍宇 Lan Yu* and a TV drama called *上癮 Shangyin*, both of which are adapted from online danmei novels. The former has been banned in Mainland China, despite its positive reviews and considerable number of awards from outside Mainland China (Friess 2002); the latter was removed from all streaming websites by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, in accordance with the cultural crackdown on 'vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content' that 'exaggerates the dark side of society' (Ellis-Petersen 2016).

### **3. Jinjiang and Censorship**

Jinjiang Literature City ([www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net)), known as Jinjiang, is one of the earliest and most influential women's literature websites in China. Since launched in 2003, Jinjiang has established an almost exclusively female readership well-known for enthusiasm, loyalty and power of articulation (Yin 2005), and has developed into an elaborate organisation constituted of an e-bookstore, a discussion forum, a users' feedback forum, as well as a website to obtain entertainment, satisfy creative impulses and derive emotional nurturance (Feng 2009).

Statistics show that 93% of Jinjiang users are female, and 83% of them are aged between 18 and 35 (Linder 2005, Xu and Yang 2013), who are perceived

as possessing ‘three highs’, viz. high salary, high level of education and high social status (Yang 2009); a significant amount of users reside outside China (Xu 2002). Among Jinjiang’s contracted and paid writers, only a small proportion of them are full-time, while the vast majority of authors have occupations outside writing (Feng 2009). Though most of them are part-time, these writers still manage to produce an impressive amount of fiction: in February 2012, approximately 199,100 BL stories were published on Jinjiang, among which 145,600 are original, i.e. non-fanfic. The popularity of Jinjiang is partially attributed to its easy access serves that efficiently disseminate danmei to a broader fanbase and mainstream the previously marginalised subculture (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013).

In China, supposedly offensive content must be removed from officially approved print versions of danmei fictional writing before passing censorship and getting published, yet previously, web versions of Jinjiang works were permitted to contain sex scenes portrayed in detail and to demonstrate authors’ exploration of forbidden themes and non-normative sexualities (Feng 2009, Wang 2019). Some earlier ‘abuse’ novels on Jinjiang, e.g. *不能动* *Buneng Dong* and *活着就是恶心* *Huozhe Jiushi Exin*, abound in contentious plots such as rape, incest, sadomasochism, imprisonment, underage sex, etc. Of course, graphic description of sexual encounters has been strictly disallowed since anti-pornography campaigns launched by the government.

As a website with the biggest readership base and the most developed commercial connections, Jinjiang has always been under surveillance. Moreover, although the crackdown jointly mandated by multiple authorities applies to heterosexual romance genres as well, the danmei genre has been more severely affected (Wang 2019), resulting in Jinjiang’s vigilance. In order to circumvent being an easy target, Jinjiang coined a euphemistic tag to substitute danmei, namely, *纯爱* *chunai* ‘pure love’ (Zheng 2019), which, however, does not seem to work.

Since 2014, Jinjiang has been censured and fined for several times.

Furthermore, Jinjiang's management was taken to the police bureau for investigation due to the legal case concerning 'big grey wolf'. Afterwards, as proactive reactions to government regulations, Jinjiang issued a 'stricter-than-government' self-censorship standard banning 'any depiction of body parts below the neck' and started a reporting system encouraging readers to flag transgression of rules to government censors. Additionally, Jinjiang announced a policy to manually check all online publications by multiple reviewers and in potentially more than one round, yet due to the tremendous quantity of works, the promised review is suspected to be 'a publicity stunt, a gesture of kowtowing to the government, than a serious, long-term commitment' (Guancha 2014, Southern Daily 2015, Yang and Xu 2017a: 174, Zheng 2019).

The prediction made by Yang and Xu (2017a) is indeed borne out: although Jinjiang claimed to employ netizens to review its prodigious amount of fictional writing (Southern Daily 2015), according to my observation, the current review procedure is partially conducted by auto-detection software, rather than human reviewers. Potentially caused by lack of a proper and effective reviewing process, in 2019, Jinjiang was rectified twice within two months: it was forced to remove pornographic publications, stop updating content and conducting business operations, as well as publish notifications of corrective actions on the homepage (Ma 2019, Xinhua News 2019).

A preposterous consequence triggered by automatic detection is that currently text on Jinjiang is replete with little boxes replacing 'indecent' words and phrases. Adjacent characters belonging to distinctive words may unexpectedly and unintentionally form new words that happen to be on the blacklist, so the software automatically substitutes these characters with little boxes, without investigating their real meanings in context. For instance, 奶奶头疼 *nai nai tou teng* 'grandma has a headache' is altered into 奶□□疼, because the two characters next to each other in the middle, *nai* 'grandma' and *tou* 'head', form a new word *naitou* which means 'nipple'. As a body part that



is ‘below the neck’, *naitou* is banned by Jinjiang, so the two characters are blocked, generating 奶□□疼. Another unexpected example is 量□□温 derived from 量下体温 *liang xia ti wen* ‘to check body temperature’, because the two characters in the middle accidentally form a new word *xiati* ‘lower body’. From a linguistic perspective, Chinese characters are predominantly polysemous and there is lack of space separating characters, so semantic judgement of Chinese discourse heavily depends on contextual information and syntactic analysis, rather than simply lexicon. This feature of the Chinese language accounts for the fact that such miscomprehension is ubiquitous in the written form, if lexicon is used as the sole criterion to decide meaning. Therefore, the oversimplified automatic detection and substitution ineluctably cause confusion, impede understanding and sabotage reading experience. As a consequence, readers seriously or jokingly complain that reading novels at Jinjiang is like doing reading comprehension exercises or playing crossword puzzles.

There is no denying the fact that Jinjiang still enforces a manual review process to eradicate eroticism. That is to say, the current review procedure is a combination of both automatic detection of sensitive keywords and manual review of several rounds. After being castigated for charging writers for revising their works after review, Jinjiang removed the restriction on revision, whereas as pointed out by Jie (2019), the process of manual review took longer and some works had to undergo four rounds of harsh review, causing authors’ dissatisfaction.

#### **4. Circumvention Strategies Adopted by Jinjiang Writers**

Despite the strict censorship, ‘rotten girls’ still expect writers to 开车 *kai che* ‘to drive a car’ which is an Internet neologism implicitly indicating ‘to write/say erotic content’. In order to accommodate their readers, Jinjiang writers apply a range of strategies to circumvent the regulations.

It is notable that apart from erotic depictions that can be conveyed implicitly,

eroticism-related terms can be euphemised as well. 'Rotten girls' have coined neologisms to denote eroticism-related terms in an innovative fashion. A representative paradigm related to *kai che* is 肉 *rou* 'flesh; meat' that is frequently employed in expressions such as 吃肉 *chi rou* 'to eat meat' ('to read erotic content') and 肉文 *rou wen* 'erotic text'. Another euphemistic term for *rou wen* is H文 *H wen* 'H text', in that H is the initial letter of the word 黄 *huang* 'yellow' which is an equivalent of the English word 'blue' as in 'blue story'; and since H is a letter, *H wen* is also euphemistically called 字母文 *zimu wen* 'letter text'. The antonym of *rou/H/zimu wen* is 清水文 *qingshui wen* 'clear water text'. These neologisms integrate a fecundity of imagination and a richness of innovative humour.

#### 4.1. Metaphor

One of the most typical and frequently utilised tactics adopted by Jinjiang writers is metaphor which can be lyrically or visually expressed. Metaphors are completely void of expressions that are potentially pornographic, so they are able to portray sexual behaviours in a lyrical fashion or vividly. For instance, Example (1) contains a metaphor conveyed in a lyrical manner, elegantly comparing sexual intercourse to rainfall. Such rhetorical strategy is referred to as 移情于物 *yiqingyuwu* 'transferring emotions to objects' in the field of traditional Chinese poetry. This depiction is easily comprehensible to educated Chinese-speaking readers, as 云雨 *yun yu* 'cloud and rain' is an archaic term for sex coined in the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c BC). Similarly, Example (2) deploys farming to describe sexual intercourse, which is understandable to readers as well.

(1) 雨还在下着，没有因为叶子的脆弱而停下，叶片上的雨滴汇聚在一起，压迫得叶子不停颤抖，最终叶子支撑不住弯折下去，雨水全部滴落进了泥土里。

Yu haizai xiazhe, meiyou yinwei yezi de cuiruo er tingxia, yepian shang de

yudi huijuzai yiqi, yapo de yazi  
buting chadou, zuizhong yezi zhicheng buzhu wanzhe xiaqu, yushui quanbu  
diluo jin le nitu li.

‘The rain was still going on and did not stop because of the leaf’s fragility.  
The raindrops on the leaf converged  
together, rendering the leaf to shiver continuously. Eventually, the leaf could  
not bear and bent down—the  
rainwater all dropped into the mud.’

(两小无嫌猜 *Liangxiao Wu Xiancai*)

(2) 种田的动作似乎都是单调重复的,好在营养剂的确是个好东西,让栽种的过程都变得轻松了许多,轻易就能破除土壤的阻碍,把农作物深深地埋进地里去。

*Zhongtian de dongzuo sihu dou shi dandiao chongfu de, haozai yingyangji  
dique shi ge hao dongxi, rang  
zaizhong de guocheng dou biande qingsong le xuduo, qingyi jiu neng pochu  
turang de zuai, ba nongzuowu  
shenshende mai jin di li qu.*

‘The action of farming seemed to be monotonous and repetitive, but luckily  
the nutrient was a good thing that  
made the planting a lot easier—the barrier from earth could be easily  
overcome and crops could be deeply  
buried into earth.’

(怱怱 *Song Song*)

Example (3a) regarding mathematics, however, is extraordinary and requires more imagination and knowledge. To facilitate readers’ comprehension, the author has provided a note to explain the meaning, as in (3b).

(3) a. 现在有一个圆B,它的方程式是 $x^2 + y^2 = 0.01$ ,这时有一个动点P1,在圆内沿直线 $y=0$ 做往复运动,请问动点P1需要多长时间,可以把圆的方程变成 $x^2 + y^2 = 1$ ?

*Xianzai you yi ge yuan B, ta de fangchengshi shi  $x^2 + y^2 = 0.01$ , zheshi*

*you yi ge dongdian P1, zai yuan nei*

*yan zhixian  $y=0$  zuo wangfu yundong, qingwen dongdian P1 xuyao  
duochang shijian, keyi ba yuan de*

*fangcheng biancheng  $x^2 y^2=1$ ?*

‘Now there is a Circle B, whose formula is  $x^2 y^2=0.01$ ; there is a Moving point P1 that is making a

reciprocating motion along Line  $y=0$  within Circle B. Question: How long does it take for the Moving point

P1 to turn the formula of Circle B into  $x^2 y^2=1$ ?’

b. 我给大家友情翻译一下... 圆B=菊花, 动点P、Q=手指...

*Wo gei dajia youqing fanyi yixia... Yuan B=juhua, dongdian P、Q=shouzhi...*

‘Let me provide a friendly translation for everybody... Circle B=anus, Moving point P/Q=fingers...’

(残疾后我雇了个保镖 *Canji Hou Wo Gule Ge Baobiao*)

Apart from metaphors that are conveyed lyrically, there are visual metaphors which evoke imagery by means of comparing one object/act to another due to their visual resemblance. For example, Example (4) is regarding an imagery-evoking visual metaphor that compares making love to feeding rice porridge with a spoon, and in Example (5) the images of water tap and spanner are vividly used. There are, of course, an enormous amount of other paradigms involving visual metaphors, such as planting strawberries for making love bites (in *Song Song*), practicing archery for making love (in *Siduitou Shi Maobohe Er Wo Shi Mao Zenmepo*), a green dragon for a male reproductive organ (in *Wode Fujun Shi Fu Heng*), etc. The author of *Ni Zhende Bushi Haizi Tadie* even wittily utilises symbols to form a cartoon car in the main text to represent ‘driving a car’.

(4) 余年饿了，谢游是第一次喂他吃米糊，开始时掌握不好力道，勺子太大，总是喂不进去。

Yu Nian e le, Xie You shi diyici wei ta chi mi hu, kaishi shi zhangwo bu hao  
lidao, shaozi tai da, zongshi wei  
bu jin qu.

‘Yu Nian was hungry. It was the first time that Xie You fed him with rice  
porridge: at the beginning, Xie could  
not manage well, as the spoon was too big for Yu.’

(听说我很穷 *Tingshuo Wo Hen Qiong*)

(5) 对水龙头这种器械而言, 出水速度果然还是分人的。阚泽的扳手没动  
几下, 已经有温热的水珠滴了出  
来...

*Dui shui longtou zhe zhong qixie erylun, chu shui sudu guoran hai shi fen  
ren de. Kan Ze de banshou mei dong  
ji xia, yijing you wenre de shuizhu di le chulai...*

‘For gadgets like water taps, the speed of generating water indeed depended  
on individuals. Soon after Kan

Ze’s spanner moved a few times, there was warm water drops dripping out...’  
(死对头是猫薄荷而我是猫怎么破 *Siduitou Shi Maobohe Er Wo Shi Mao Zenmepo*)

#### 4.2. Code-switching

Another representative approach adopted by Jinjiang writers when ‘driving a  
car’ is Chinese-English code-switching. Taking Example (6) as an example:  
the sensitive verb 摸 *mo* ‘to touch’ has been substituted by its English  
counterpart, thereby escaping automatic detection. As for the word 伟brother  
*wei brother*, its normal version is actually 伟哥 *weige* which is a nickname  
for Viagra; the author replaces *ge* ‘brother’ with the English equivalent, so  
that the whole word would not be detected.

(6) ‘你别touch我, 别touch我!’ ... 那一晚上, 王洵跟吃了伟brother一样...

‘Ni bie touch wo, bie touch wo!’ Na yi wanshang, Wang Xun gen chi le  
wei.brother yiyang...

“Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!” That night, it was like Wang Xun had

taken Viagra...'

(我和隔壁老王 *Wo He Gebi Lao Wang*)

In terms of Example (7), it contains whole English sentences extracted from a paragraph depicting sexual intercourse. Although there are noticeable grammatical errors, the author has satisfactorily completed their writing task.

(7) ...Xinshan is such a pervert, how come this function can be figured out. Meng of course won't let him go, he does some strange things that Jinjiang don't let me say. Meng crosses the dangerous line, Lu has to beg for mercy...

(群雄逐鹿 *Qun Xiong Zhu Lu*)

### 4.3. Satire

As can be seen from Example (7), there is a phrase that has mentioned Jinjiang, i.e. 'some strange things that Jinjiang don't let me say'. This is a significant strategy I would like to analyse, namely, the satire strategy. It is not uncommon for writers to roast the censorship and review of Jinjiang in their works, mostly humorously. For instance, in Example (8-9), the writers jokingly roast Jinjiang for preventing them from creating erotic content. As for (10), its sarcastic tone is more obvious; 'green' not only illustrates the colour of Jinjiang's homepage, but also the non-obscene implication of the green colour in Chinese culture.

(8)沈浮白认真道: '你再继续下去, 放晋江是要被锁文的。'

*Shen Fubai renzhen dao: 'Ni zai jixu xiaqu, fang Jinjiang shi yao bei suo wen de.'*

'Shen Fubai said seriously: "If you continue, this work will be locked at Jinjiang.'

(和影帝互粉那些年 *He Yingdi Hufen Naxie Nian*)

(9) 微微掀开被子，想往下看，又怕过不了审。

*Weiwei xiankai beizi, xiang wangxia kankan, you pa guobuliao shen.*

‘She drew the quilt slightly and wanted to have a look, but was afraid that this work would not pass review.’

(为我称臣 *Wei Wo Cheng Chen*)

(10) 仅仅是一个吻，什么脖子以下的事都没做，谨守绿晋江社会主义核心价值观。

*Jinjin shi yi ge wen, shenme bozi yixia de shi dou mei zuo, jin shou lv Jinjiang shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan.*

‘It was just a kiss and nothing below the neck was involved—it strictly observed the core socialist values of the “green” Jinjiang.’

(小行星 *Xiao Xingxing*)

Some more rebellious writers, however, choose to retain sexual scenes in their works, but they have to resort to euphemistic expressions. In Example (11), the author uses ‘indescribable’, ‘indescribability’ and ‘to be indescribable’, and draws on ‘indescribable part below the neck’ to sarcastically echo Jinjiang’s policy banning ‘any depiction of body parts below the neck’. Consequently, the text demands more processing effort from readers, yet it is still comprehensible. Similarly, Example (12) amusingly roasts the restriction of Jinjiang and ridicules it with a nickname ‘Ah Jin’.

(11) 用脖子以下不能描述的部位，狠狠不能描写了锸哥脖子以下不能描写的部位。两人在不能描写中火辣地不能描写起来。

*Yong bozi yixia bu neng miaoshu de buwei, henhen bu neng miaoxie le Kai Ge bozi yixia bu neng miaoxie*

*de buwei. Liang ren zai bu neng miaoxie zhong huoladi bu neng miaoxie qilai.*

‘He used an indescribable body part below his neck to roughly “get indescribable” an indescribable body part

below Kai's neck. They hotly started "to be indescribable" in indescribability.'

(哎我刀呢 *Ai Wo Dao Ne*)

(12) 整个卧室充斥着阿晋不许出现的声音，房间的每个角落，都留下了阿晋禁止那项运动的痕迹。

*Zhengge woshi chongchi zhe Ah Jin bu xu chuxian de shengyin, fangjian de mei ge jiaoluo, dou liuxia le Ah*

*Jin jinzhi na xiang yundong de henji.*

'The whole bedroom was filled with sounds that were forbidden by Ah Jin, and in every corner of the room

there were traces of activities that were forbidden by Ah Jin.'

(婚后每天都在吃醋 *Hunhou Meitian Dou Zai Chicu*)

As can be seen from Example (10) above, the author not only complains about Jinjiang, but also mentions the core socialist values in a lighthearted manner. This kind of lampoon-like writing concerning ideology can be attested in some danmei novels. For instance, in Example (13), the protagonist's actions of unbuttoning his lover's clothes and flirting are abruptly followed by a four-line rhymed satirical verse, in which the former half is quoted from a signature line of President Xi Jinping. As for Example (14), it teasingly uses the unmanned Shenzhou-8 capsule and the mini spacelab Tiangong-1 as metaphors, yet the success of the venture paves the way for manned missions and hence has political significance.

(13) 费原抬手去解他的扣子: '我看看, 怎么那么金贵。'

人民有信仰, 民族有希望。

开车上晋江, 想都不要想。

Fei Yuan tai shou qu jie tade kouzi: 'Wo kankan, zenme name jingui.'

Renmin you xinyang, minzu you xiwang.

Kaiche shang Jinjiang, xiang dou bu yao xiang.

'Fei Yuan raised his hand to unbutton his clothes: "Let me have a look. How



can you be so delicate?” The  
people have faith; the nation has hope. Driving a car on Jinjiang—Don’t  
even think about it.’

(原路看斜阳 *Yuanlu Kan Xieyang*)

(14) 扩张充分后把陈循的腰往下一按，像神州八号和天宫一号一样，对接  
了！

*Kuozhang chongfen hou ba Chen Xun de yao wang xia yi an, xiang  
Shenzhou Bahao he Tiangong Yihao  
yiyang, duijie le!*

‘After complete dilation, he pressed Chen Xun’s waist down—It was like  
Shenzhou-8 that had rendezvoused  
with Tiangong 1!’

(不装B *Bu Zhuang B*)

Under the circumstances that writers refrain from ‘driving a car’, they may  
also imply their satirical perspectives on ideology and politics. In Example  
(15), the author draws on the ideal of Harmony (和 *he*) which is a carefully  
constructed normative complex prescribing social virtues and maintaining  
morality and ethics. Serving as a language policy in China, ‘harmony’ is  
derived from the third phase of Confucianist ‘renaissance’ and inextricably  
intertwined with the state doctrine of Socialist Harmonious Society (社会  
主义和谐社会 *shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*) propounded in 2005 (Fan 2011,  
Louie 2011, Wang et al 2016).

(15) 当晚，一夜春风，差点做不和谐运动的最后一步...季朗默念了三遍‘和  
谐和谐和谐’然后忍住了。

*Dang wan, yi ye chunfeng, chadian zuo bu hexie yundong de zuihou  
yi bu...Ji Lang mo nian le san bian  
'hexie hexie hexie' ranhou renzhu le.*

‘There was spring wind during the night, and they almost reached the last  
step of an inharmonious activity...

Ji Lang repeated 'harmony' for three times in mind and refrained himself.'

(辣鸡室友总撩我 *Laji Shiyou Zong Liao Wo*)

## 5. DISCUSSION

Although writers tactically employ a range of strategies so as to circumvent the review and censorship, Jinjiang is fully aware of their tricks and a member of the management team warned such behaviours in 2019 (Guancha 2019):

(16) 我个人体感，只要你写了性行为性心理或其它涉及性器官的任何描写，无论是字数多少，无论是不是意

识流，无论是不是用了各种形容词代称粉饰，是不是用了各种比喻，是一个人的行为还是两个人的交互，

只要让人看出你这是写了性相关，就属于高风险。被封文章中有一段不足四百字描写，没有具体器官

名称，没有交互动作，已经被鉴定中心鉴定为色情等级最高的淫秽描写。

*Wo geren tigan, zhiyao ni xie le xing xingwei xing xinli huo qita sheji xing qiguan de renhe miaoxie, wulun*

*shi zishu duoshao, wulun shi bu shi yishiliu, wulun shibushi yong le gezhong xingrongci daicheng fenshi, shi*

*bu shi yong le gezhong biyu, shi yi ge ren de xingwei haishi liang ge ren de jiaohu, zhiyao rang ren kanchu*

*ni zhe shi xie le xing xiangguan, jiu shuyu gao fengxian. Bei feng wenzhang zhong you yi duan bu zu sibai zi*

*miaoxie, meiyou juti qiguan mingcheng, meiyou jiaohu dongzuo, yijing bei jianding zhongxin jianding wei*

*seqing dengji zuigao de yinhui miaoxie.*

'My personal experience and feeling is that as long as you depict sexual behaviours, psychology or organs,

which can be perceived, your work will be categorised as "high risk", regardless of word count or whether

you use a “stream of consciousness” style or various metaphors—this applies to both solo and interactive acts.

There is locked novel that contains a paragraph of description with less than 400 characters without specific organs or interaction, but it has been reviewed as “pornographic depiction of the highest eroticism level”.’

Therefore, there is a cohort of writers who avoid producing any potentially transgressive content and count on readers to inspire their own imagination. An archetypical example is a prolific author whose pseudonym is ‘Priest.’ This author does not explore forbidden themes or non-normative sexualities yet still manages to attract a legion of loyal fans by means of labyrinthine plots. In Priest’s hit detective-style danmei novel 默读 *Mo Du* that has been adopted into a radio play, in which a sexual encounter is implicitly portrayed through a cat’s perspective:

(17) 突然，它听见有人短促难耐地‘啊’了一声...

*Turan, ta tingjian youren duancu nannaide ‘a’ le yisheng...*

‘Suddenly, it heard someone’s short, eager “ah”...’

(默读 *Mo Du*)

Since there is only one character that is vaguely correlated with sexual implication, this ‘erotic content’ is referred to by readers as 一字豪车 *zì yì hào chē* ‘one-character posh car’ to joke about the conciseness of the description. Due to the writer’s popularity and the hilariousness of her depiction, the expression ‘one-character posh car’ expeditiously became a gag in the danmei circle. Another precautious author is 西子绪 *Xizixu*, who writes 再然后，一切都不可描述 *zairanhou, yiqie dou bukemiaoshu* (‘then everything was indescribable’) in her novel *Kuaichuan Zhi Wanmei Mingyun*, similar to Example (11).

According to Wang (2019), in sharp contrast with earlier danmei fiction, this relatively safer style exhibits an obvious financial advantage: it renders novels easier to be published in print and adapted into audio and TV dramas, films and animations.

Nonetheless, writers such as 淮上 Huaishang, who insist on freedom of artistic creation, refuse to compromise with the overall tightening of censorship imposed by Jinjiang, so they used to publish main text with Jinjiang, yet took refuge at the non-commercial, non-profit open-source repository Archive of Our Own (AO3) and posted erotic depictions there for readers without charge. Nevertheless, AO3 was blocked in Mainland China on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020, owing to the mass-reporting of stans of an actor who starred in a hit TV period drama 陈情令 *Chenqingling* (*The Untamed*) adapted from a popular danmei novel 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* on Jinjiang (Cai 2020, Gong 2020, Hall 2020, Jiang 2020, Romano 2020, The Economist 2020, Wu 2020, Yu 2020). Enraged by the crackdown of a virtual comfort zone and spiritual home, on 1<sup>st</sup> March a netizen complained on Weibo that danmei writers might end up resorting to the Morse code for suspected erotic content, which provoked heated discussions on Weibo and the Douban forum. Some netizens expressed recalcitrance, fury and disappointment, while others seriously or teasingly took this option into consideration and started to explore the feasibility of self-teaching the Morse code or using online converters.

It is worth mentioning that an author even encouraged audience to read the pirate copy of their novel in the 'author's words' section on Jinjiang, which is a space set off from the main text to display authors' comments and responses to readers' remarks. This writer would rather sacrifice their profit than show their readers a 'soulless', twisted Jinjiang version of the work:

(18) 诸位, 看盗版去吧, 这文为了过审已经没有灵魂了。

*Zhu wei, kan daoban qu ba, zhe wen weile guoshen yijing meiyou linghun le.*

‘Everyone, go and read the pirate copy. To pass the review, this work has no soul now.’

(当我看了男友日记 *Dang Wo Kanle Nanyou Riji*)

In terms of the reason why Jinjiang writers create erotic content, I postulate that it is partially attributed to writers’ intention to accommodate readers. As posited by Otomo (2015), for women acting as consumers of sexual fantasy, reading BL narratives functions as a self-expression and performance, via which sexual desires can be demonstrated. The homoerotic content is essentially ‘pleasure-oriented’ for female consumers, and pornographic scenes are comprised of an autonomous female pleasure-seeking impulse (Kaneda 2007, Galbraith 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). Driven by physical and psychological desires, Chinese danmei readers implicitly or explicitly express their expectation via the forum and discussion space on Jinjiang, or interact with writers directly on social media platforms such as Weibo. On Jinjiang, writers and readers have established and been maintaining a harmonious rapport, and their interactions are predominantly positive and supportive. In this danmei-themed community, 太太 *taitai* ‘Mrs’ is a well-established title of veneration addressing female writers, as well as an honorific second person pronoun for politeness, irrelevant to writers’ marital status. In terms of authors, they normally adopt popular Internet titles among young women to intimately address their readers, e.g. 小可爱 *xiao keai* ‘little cuteness’, 小宝贝 *xiao baobei* ‘little baby’, 小仙女 *xiao xiannv* ‘little fairy’, etc. Furthermore, readers also leave constructive comments for writers and have in-depth discussions among themselves in the forum, generating a fertile ground for danmei literature.

Therefore, since readers have expressed their preference for texts graphically depicting sexual acts, it is not unexpected that danmei writers endeavour to satisfy their requirements. A direct, tangible benefit is larger economic gain from Jinjiang, as writers’ income is proportional to the size of their

paid readership and the amount of tips. Another benefit pertains to writers' self-esteem and identity as members of 'rotten girls'. The Self-Aspect Model of Identity propounded by Simon (2004) postulates that self-concept is constituted of beliefs about one's own attributes or self-characteristics, including personality traits, abilities, physical features, behavioural characteristics, religious beliefs, social roles, language affiliation(s) and group memberships. I suggest that since producing homoerotic materials is an attribute of 'rotten girls', depicting sexual scenes satisfies writers' identity needs, and equips them with a sense of belonging and satisfaction regarding the collective identity and community.

More significantly, danmei writers who are vocally expressed demonstrate their rebellion against political and social ethos. A large proportion of danmei writers are featured by multiple characteristics, e.g. young, female, heterosexual and 'rotten', and simultaneously, they are Internet literary creators of a niche genre. Therefore, the multifaceted aspects of danmei writers render their intentions and purposes complex. I presume that consuming and even producing materials that are officially defined as 'pornographic' allow 'rotten girls' to construct and display rebellious spirit and to deviate from traditional social ethos and accepted cultural and ethical norms prescribing women's chasteness and subservience. Danmei fan communities in China have established a public sphere for 'rotten' participants to discuss social issues represented by, but not limited to, government policies and ethics of writers (Yang and Xu 2016, Wu 2019), and as pointed out by Meng (2011), online spoofs in China is a form of political expression. Additionally, according to Wang (2019), homosexuality challenges the (post-) socialist ideology in China, in that it is deemed as a violation of the patriarchal heterosexual family. Therefore, I suggest that the rebellion exhibited by 'rotten girls' is dual: it targets not only the socio-political layer, but also the gender and familial layer. Moreover, as literary creators belonging to a niche subculture, although marginalised, danmei writers deploy erotic writing to

express cravings for recognition and freedom of creation enjoyed by their mainstream counterparts.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I investigate danmei fiction published on Jinjiang, analysing the strategies adopted by writers to circumvent the censorship and review. Except for pre-cautious writers who refrain from depicting sexual scenes altogether and who post potentially transgressive texts on virtual platforms such as AO3 instead, there are writers who decide to ‘drive a car’ by means of a variety of circumvention strategies. Utilising metaphors for euphemism is a typical strategy, which can be further categorised into metaphors portraying sexual intercourse in a lyrical fashion and visual metaphors evoking imagery. Another approach employed by Jinjiang writers to avoid automatic detection is Chinese-English code-switching, and either sensitive keywords or whole sentences may be substituted by their English equivalents. More significantly, writers satirically criticise Jinjiang for forbidding them from describing sexual acts or mockingly replace sex-related expressions with those pertaining to Jinjiang and its policies. Furthermore, a cohort of vocal writers even convert erotic depictions into lampoons about politics and ideology. All circumvention strategies require more imagination and knowledge and hence more processing effort from readers, whereas they do not render text incomprehensible.

Apart from accommodating readers’ requirement for homoerotic content, production of such writing satisfies writers’ own physical and psychological desires simultaneously, in line with their self-perception and group identity as ‘rotten girls’. Moreover, producing (and consuming) materials officially prescribed as ‘pornographic’ serves as an embodiment of writers’ rebellious spirit, as well as political and social expression against government censorship and ethical norms. Additionally, one of the multifaceted identities of ‘rotten girls’, viz. literature creator, determines that although stuck in a marginalised

subculture, danmei writers also crave recognition and freedom of creation, parallel to their mainstream counterparts.

Surveying policies and anti-pornography campaigns launched by the Chinese government is important in the sense that it helps understanding the reactions and survival patterns of danmei communities. Based on China's status, historical background and comparison with its equivalents, I would also like to explore the feasibility of introducing a rating system for danmei literature, which might be applied to the film industry as well to replace the current reviewing system.

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