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## NONNORMATIVE MASCULINITY IN DANMEI LITERATURE: 'MAIDEN SEME' AND SAJIAO

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### Abstract

Masculinity in contemporary China can be embodied by myriads of works featuring male-male same-sex intimacy and eroticism, which fall into a genre dubbed as danmei 'addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty', aka Boys Love (BL). As a marginalised yet increasingly visible subculture, danmei writing has attracted legions of female producers/consumers, who are (self-)referred to as 'rotten girls'. The female-oriented fiction is overwhelmingly marked by a conspicuous dichotomy differentiating seme (top) from uke (bottom) roles, and a prodigious amount of narratives concern feminisation of uke characters, motivated by the prevailing 'soft masculinity'. Nonetheless, readers also delight in a subcategory of danmei featured by shaonü gong 'maiden/adolescent-girl seme' manifesting epicene demeanour and conducting sajiao which denotes playing cute/winsome/petulant or performing pettishness/coquettish. The sajiao acts of semes indicate authorial personae and the 'cuteness' youth culture, especially the 'paradoxical cuteness' integrating masculinity and femininity as well as cross-dressing and cross-gender performance. Furthermore, seme characterisation entailing enfeebled virility enables female readers to challenge

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heteropatriarchal and heteronormative zeitgeist, and it mitigates women's dread and anxiety concerning sexual violence, exploitation, and oppression in real-world contexts.

**Keywords:** Danmei, feminised uke, 'maiden seme', sajjiao, heteronormative

## Introduction

In contemporary Chinese literature, there is a genre called 耽美 *danmei* that literally means 'addicted to beauty; indulgence in beauty', in which 'beauty' exclusively denotes that of youthful males (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Wang 2019). *Danmei* is the Chinese counterpart of the Japanese Boys Love (aka BL) subculture romanticising male-male relationships for female audiences (McLelland 2000, 2009, 2017, McLelland and Welker 2015, Welker 2015). BL fiction and ACG (Anime, Comic and Games) have attracted legions of producers/consumers, the vast majority of whom are heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women (self-)referred to as 腐女 *funü* 'rotten girl(s)' (Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015, Chao 2016, 2017).

Chinese *danmei* is developed from and impinged upon by the Japanese BL subculture, aka *shōnen'ai* or *yaoi*, which draws on the convention of profoundly romanticised comics concerning beautiful males for female target viewers in the 1970s (McLelland 2000, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). The Japanese BL subculture first spread to Hong Kong and Taiwan as a cultural export (Dasgupta 2006) and then entered the niche market of mainland China in the 1990s (Liu 2009, Yang and Bao 2012), following the era of socio-economic reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, during which overseas media products began to be imported into mainland China (Zhu and Zhang 2015, Zhao 2017). There is no denying the fact that the indulgence in BL is not exclusive to Japanese and Chinese fangirls, as the Japanese BL subculture has been proliferating across not only Asia, but also North America, Europe, and Australia (Xu and Yang 2014). Moreover, in Western societies, there is a similar genre, i.e., slash, which also has some influence on Chinese *danmei*, though much more trivial compared with that from Japanese BL (Zheng et al 2016). There are, of course, preponderant disparities between Chinese *danmei* and Western slash, for instance: 1) *danmei* writing tends to demonstrate a patent dyad between active and passive roles (see below for details), whereas slash literature is characterised by versatility (Xiao 2018); 2) *danmei* contains both fanfiction and non-fanfiction, viz. original creation, and the latter significantly outnumbers the former (Xu and Yang 2014), yet slash is limited to fanfiction; and 3) *danmei* features male-male homosexuality exclusively, but slash denotes same-sex sexuality in a broader sense (Zheng et al 2016).

Significantly, the previously marginalised *danmei* subculture has permeated Chinese cyberspace and transformed the landscape of contemporary youth culture in the aspects of gender and sexuality, in that *danmei* fiction has attained the quintessential status as an 'oppositional discourse' that challenges conventional literary genres and official cultural norms (Martin 1986: 44-45, Wei 2008, Xu and Yang 2013). Nonetheless, by virtue of its correlation with homosexuality that has been imposed on extra-legal sanctions since the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (Chou 2001, Li 2006, Kong 2016) as well as obscenity,<sup>2</sup> *danmei* literature is subject to moral scrutiny as well as government censorship and surveillance in

<sup>2</sup> An Internet neologism 开车 *kaiche* 'to drive a car' has been coined by fans to euphemistically indicate the meaning 'to write/say erotic content'. See my previous research for a detailed discussion (Wang 2020).

contemporary China (Ng 2015, McLelland 2016, Wang 2019). As a result, all BL producers write and publish under pseudonyms for self-protection (Xu and Yang 2013, Zeng 2017), and BL writing is euphemistically labelled as 纯爱 *chunai* 'pure love' to substitute the explicit terminology *danmei* and extenuate obscenity (Zheng 2019).

One of the leading and pioneering female-oriented online platforms accommodating textual *danmei* narratives is 晋江文学城 *Jinjiang wenxue cheng* 'Jinjiang Literature City', known as Jinjiang among fans. Since launched in 2003, Jinjiang has been enabling users to achieve entertainment, satisfy creative impulse and derive emotional nourishment, and hence has obtained impressive commercial success and attracted an enormous, almost exclusively female, readership (Linder 2005, Feng 2013, Wang 2019, Zheng 2019). As a well-organised, multi-functional website, Jinjiang has hosted a myriad of *danmei* fiction: in February 2012 only, Jinjiang published approximately 199,100 fictional works, among which 73.13% were original, viz. non-fanfiction (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013).

The vast majority of *danmei* writing on Jinjiang is characterised by a patent dichotomy between 攻 *gong* 'seme' (top; insertive) and 受 *shou* 'uke' (bottom; receptive), whereas the so-called 互攻 *hugong* 'versatile' (literally means 'mutual seme') text only occupies a trivial proportion: among currently available works, approximately a hundred thousand of them exhibit rigid binary roles, while only 14,307 works possess versatile protagonists.

Apart from its overwhelming popularity among Chinese 'rotten girls' (in stark contrast to the *hugong* subcategory), the seme-uke configuration is also featured by feminised masculinity of uke characters. Protagonists and deuteragonists assuming the penetrated role in anal sexual intercourse are frequently depicted with conspicuous feminine attributes in terms of demeanour and personality. For instance, in 男神男神你掉了一个男朋友 *Nanshen Nanshen Ni Diaole Yige Nanpengyou* ('Prince Charming Prince Charming You Have a Missing Boyfriend'),<sup>3</sup> the uke is a cross-dresser nicknamed 'school belle' (Chapter 1); in 樱桃树下 *Yingtao Shu Xia* ('Under the Cherry Tree'), the uke is portrayed as 'a pretty little nancy speaking in a soft girlie voice and walking with hips wiggling' (Chapter 1).

## 'Maiden uke' and *sajiao*

It is worth mentioning that the feminised virility in *danmei* literature not only manifests itself in uke, but also in seme characters. An array of neologisms denoting feminised semes have been coined in *danmei* fandom, such as 哭包攻 *kubao gong* 'crybaby seme', 软萌攻 *ruanmeng gong* 'soft cute seme' and 奶油攻 *naiyou gong* 'cream seme', among which 少女攻 *shaonü gong* 'maiden/adolescent-girl seme' is the most commonly adopted and well-accepted fandom terminology.

Under most circumstances, *shaonü gong* is characterised by androgyny and effeminate physical traits reflected by delicate features, fair skin, and slim shape. Additionally, 'maiden seme' characters are inclined to practice transvestism, as demonstrated in a period 修仙 *xiuxian* or 修真 *xiuzhen* 'immortality cultivation' fantasy in 反派他过分美丽 *Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili* 'The Villain is Excessively Beautiful', in which the 美攻 *mei gong* 'gorgeous seme' is depicted as a fresh-faced, coquettish 'femme fatale' who dresses like a bride in

<sup>3</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all titles and extracts are translated by me.

the bridal chamber (Example (1)). An analogous paradigm is a horror-themed novel 死亡万花筒 *Siwang Wanhuatong* 'Kaleidoscope of Death', in which the seme protagonist is a 女装大佬 *nü Zhuang dalao* 'cross-dressed mogul', as in Example (2).

(1) 孟重光凤冠霞帔, 朱色盈口, 贴身朱衣描画出不及一握的温软腰身, 云墨也似的长发散落于枕榻之间。他 趴伏在床上, 极媚极轻地一笑: “我自己添置的。师兄可喜欢?”

*Meng chong guang feng guan xia pei, zhu se ying kou, tie shen zhu yi miao hua chu bu ji yi wo de wen ruan yao shen, yun mo ye shi de chang fa san luo yu zhen ta zhi jian. Ta pa fu zai chuang shang, ji mei ji qing di yi xiao:*

*'Wo zi ji tian zhi de. Shi xiong ke xi huan?'*

*'Meng Chongguang was wearing a phoenix coronet and lipstick. The red bridal robe fully exposed his narrow and flexible waist; his long hair covered the pillow like spilt ink. Lying on the stomach, he smiled enchantingly and asked lovingly: "I bought the clothing myself. Do you like it, Senior Apprentice-Brother?"'*

*(Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili. Posterior Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)*

(2) 身上穿着身不合时宜的长裙, 眼睛里裹着充盈的泪水, 姑娘轻轻抽泣着...

*Shenshang chuanzhe shen buheshiyide changqun, yanjing li guozhe chongyingde leishui, guniang qingqing chouqi zhe...*

*'The girl was in a long skirt, weeping softly with her eyes full of tears...'*

*(Siwang Wanhuatong. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)*

Feminised virility of seme characters prevalently appertains to a tag 年下 *nianxia*, which literally means 'age below' and denotes the pattern involving a younger seme. Owing to inferiority in terms of age, 'maiden semes' resort to weeping and lovey-dovey talks so as to induce their older ukes to satisfy their requirements. For instance, in *Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili*, the seme convinces his senior apprentice-brother to assume the receptive role and to complement his sexual competence (Example (3)); in *Siwang Wanhuatong*, the invincible seme often pretends to be vulnerable by going 嘤嘤嘤 *yingyingying* (an onomatopoeia mimicking girls' feigned or whiny sobs), thereby obtaining attention and protection from the uke (Example (4)); he is hence given a nickname 嘤嘤怪 *yingying guai* 'yingying monster' by fangirl readers out of affection.

(3) 好在孟重光并不用强, 软声软气的, 尽拣着好话说: “师兄最好了。这回先由着重光一回可好?下次就换师兄在上...还有, 师兄, 我, 我怕痛...”...结果被徐行之训过几百次剑术太差的人, 被这几句撒气的话气得眼泪汪汪, 又害得徐行之心软不已, 还得反过来安慰他。

*Hao zai meng chong guang bing bu yong qiang, ruan sheng ruan qi de, jin jian zhe hao hua shuo: 'Shi xiong zui hao le. Zhe hui xian you zhuo chong guang yi hui ke hao? Xia ci jiu huan shi xiong zai shang...Hai you, shi xiong, wo, wo pa tong...''...Jie guo bei xu hang zhi xun guo ji bai ci jian shu tai cha de ren, bei zhe ji ju sa qi de hua qi de yan lei wang wang, you hai de xu xing zhi xin ruan bu yi, hai de fan guo lai an wei ta.*

*'Meng Chongguang did not force him, but persuaded him tenderly with sweet words: "You're the best, Senior Apprentice-Brother. Would you spoil me this time please? Next time you'll be the top... And, Senior Apprentice-Brother, I'm...I'm afraid of pain..."...Upon hearing the teasing judgement on his sexual skills, the man who had been ignoring criticism of his abysmal sword skills for hundreds of times was immediately reduced to tears, which rendered Xu Xingzhi so relented that he ended up consoling him instead.'*

*(Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili. Chapter 77. Trans. Mine)*

(4) 阮南烛：“嘤嘤嘤，你不要乱说，我胆子也很小，你怎么可以说我吓你。”...柔柔弱弱的表示：“林林，我好害怕，你来陪我睡吧。”

*Ruan nan zhu: 'Ying ying ying, ni bu yao luan shuo, wo dan zi ye hen xiao, ni zen me ke yi shuo wo xia ni.' ...Rou rou ruo ruo de biao shi: 'Lin lin, wo hao hai pa, ni lai pei wo shui ba.'*

*'Ruan Nanzhu said: "Yingyingying, don't be ridiculous. How can you say that? I'm too timid to scare anyone."...He spoke in a delicate manner: "Linlin, I'm so scared. Come and sleep with me please."*

*(Siwang Wanhuatong. Chapter 51. Trans. Mine)*

Moreover, 'maiden semes' deploy tears to achieve forgiveness and pampering, exemplified by the seme's tearful apology for having sexual intercourse with his cultivation master in a time travel fantasy entitled 人渣反派自救系统 *Renzha Fanpai Zijiu Xitong* 'Arch-Villain's Self-Rescue System' (Example (5)). Therefore, fangirl readers of *danmei* fiction containing 'maiden semes' are prone to 站错攻受 *zhancuo gongshou* 'misjudge seme-uke' even after reading graphic descriptions of anal sexual encounters, and they hence initiate discussions on Jinjiang forums and social media platforms, joking about the ukes' supposed 反攻 *fangong* 'subversion'.

(5) 洛冰河的眼泪像断了线的珠子，顺着他肩膀滚落，一边手足无措抱着沈清秋，一边哽咽道：“师尊你别恨我...我不知道...我不想伤你的...为什么你不推开我，为什么你不杀了我。”沈清秋在他背上有一下没一下地摸着顺毛：“为师知道。为师愿意。”

*Luo bing he de yan lei xiang duan le xian de zhu zi, shun zhe ta jian bang gun luo, yi bian shou zu wu cuo bao zhe shen qing qiu, yi bian geng ye dao: 'Shi zun ni bie hen wo...Wo bu zhi dao...Wo bu xiang shang ni de...Wei shen me ni bu tui kai wo, wei shen me ni bu sha le wo.' Shen qing qiu zai ta bei shang you yi xia mei yi xia di mo zhe shun mao: 'Wei shi zhi dao. Wei shi yuan yi.'*

'Luo Binghe's shoulders were beaded with tears. He was crying his eyes out and clutched Shen Qingqiu disconcertedly: "Master, please don't hate me...I didn't know...I didn't mean to hurt you...Why didn't you push me away or just kill me?" Shen Qingqiu stroked his back gently and comforted him: "I know. I was willing."

(*Renzha Fanpai Zijiu Xitong. Chapter 80. Trans. Mine*)

*Shaonü gong* in *danmei* is an incarnation of the 撒娇 *sajiao* culture in contemporary China. Being a composite, complex conception, *sajiao* can be loosely rendered into a list of versions: 'playing cute', 'to show pettishness, as a spoiled child', '(of a woman) to pretend to be angry or displeased' (Farris 1994: 12-13), 'performing winsome/coquettish', 'adorably petulant' (Farris 1994: 161), etc., in that it integrates different behaviours, such as pouting, flirting and whining. As a feminine form of communication or a sexually suggestive posture aiming to construct nurturing relationships, *sajiao*-ness extensively combines both linguistic and nonverbal cues, and typical *sajiao* strategies include making innocent or bratty facial expressions, batting eyelashes, cooing in a baby voice, and using sentence-final particles (Sundararajan 2015: 125, Han 2019, Starr et al 2020). Incited by societal infantilisation of females to accommodate fetishes and further brainwashed by media propaganda, pubescent girls and even adult women in both mainland China and Taiwan employ this playful approach so as to convince, demand or seduce their (potential) partners, yet the subjects of *sajiao* conduct may extend to peers and seniors of both genders (Farris 2002: 85, Chuang 2005, Yueh 2013, 2017: 64). Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that most Chinese men are indeed void of immunity to *sajiao* deeds and regard the succumbing as a manifestation of their masculinity. Furthermore, women who are indisposed or unable to practice this technique are perceived as being unfeminine (Lin 2013, Qiu 2013). It is notable that *sajiao*-ness discussed in this paper is more interconnected with cuteness than flirtatiousness.

The ecological background of *sajiao*-ness is attributed to synergistic community and it can be outright manipulative in the context of intimacy. Moreover, *sajiao*-ness promotes gratification of impulses, an adoring gaze from the benevolent other, as well as indebtedness resulted from asymmetrical relationships (Farris 1994: 13, Sundararajan 2015: 126-133). In Chinese cyberspace, the *sajiao* culture has shaped and interacted with a 非主流 *feizhuliu* 'non-mainstream' youth culture amongst the post-1990s generation, which entails cuteness as a sub-trend and subtle strategy of gender performativity. Modern femininity and female sexuality, which are inextricably intertwined with *sajiao* conduct, have been transformed into a highly visualised representation of *feizhuliu* as a renewed form of sexual expression, enhanced by the novel media landscape in post-socialist Chinese modernity (Qiu 2013). Significantly, a salient constituent of *sajiao*-ness, i.e., cuteness, can function as a palpable tool to promote consumption by means of communicating sensual pleasure and hedonic values (Martens 2010, Dale 2016, Shen 2020).

It is worth mentioning that the *sajiao* culture not only pervades Chinese youth culture, but also permeates other major East Asian countries, reflected by its embracement in Japan and South Korea. *Sajiao* in Japanese culture bears similitude with *amae* 'expectation of indulgence and interdependence', which is employed by both children and adults to entertain emotional closeness to others (Doi 1981, 2013, Rothbaum et al 2007, Sundararajan 2015: 131), as well as *kawaii*, a composite notion that covers 'cute', 'sweet', 'childish', 'innocent', 'soft', etc., and serves as an indispensable constituent of Japanese generic and popular/massified culture (Kinsella 1995, Keith and Hughes 2016, Pellitteri 2018). Additionally, *sajiao* in Japan is correlated with a phenomenon of *burikko*, the core derogatory meaning of which is women's bogus

innocence and feigned naiveté; as the natural product of the cult of cuteness, *burikko* entails stereotypical properties such as a high-pitched voice (Kinsella 1995, McVeigh 2000, Miller 2004). In South Korea, the equivalent of *sajiao* is *aegyo*, a baby-talk register marked by childish expressions and pronunciations, repetitions of sounds, nasalised voice quality and high pitch, and is employed by adult addressers to look or sound cute, thereby transferring and/or evoking tenderness and positive emotions to/from addressees (Ferguson 1977, Starr 2015, Ahn 2017, Puzar and Hong 2018, Shaver and Mikulincer 2018). *Aegyo* functions as a pivotal construal in Korean media, society, and popular music (renowned as K-pop) as well as a fundamental component of the hyper-sexualised 'K-cute' aesthetic and commercial environments (Epstein and Turnbull 2014, Han 2016, Seo et al 2020).

As can be seen in Examples (1-5), these *shaonü* semes are depicted as conducting *sajiao*-ness both verbally and nonverbally, by means of (feigned) crying, whining/sweet words, and seductive facial expressions. Moreover, the employment of sentence-final particles represented by 了 *le* and 吧 *ba* further intensifies the *sajiao* effect. As mentioned earlier, notwithstanding a vaguely flirtatious tone, their *sajiao* expressions are saliently marked by cuteness.

## Rationale behind shaonü gong

In terms of the rationale behind *danmei* writing's compatibility with the 'maiden seme' persona, I postulate four reasons.

First, the *sajiao* conduct of seme characters in *danmei* fiction is a projection of authors' mindset during their communication with readers. As an online youth culture, *danmei* bears similitude to *feizhuliu* 'non-mainstream', in that they are both marginalised subcultures disseminating among adolescent girls and young women. Impinged upon by the prevailing youth culture of 卖萌 *maimeng* 'playing cute' derived from the Japanese *moe* culture, 'rotten girls', including both producers and consumers, adopt a *sajiao* style in their intra-community interaction. For instance, in the work's 文案 *wenan* 'introductory/summary text', the author of 末世之苏黑莲 *Moshizhi Su Heilian* 'Black Lotus Su in the Last Phase' pleads readers' mercy for potential disappointing content and invites readers to bookmark her column in a pleasing fashion. Apart from a sentence-final particle 哦 *wo* and an emoticon, she also uses 么么哒 *mameda* that is a neologism frequently deployed in online verbal and textual interaction to convey endearment: it is either interpreted as an onomatopoeia representing the sound of kissing, analogous to 'mwah' in English, or as the playful homophone of an expression 摸摸哒 *momoda* 'to stroke' (Example (6)).

(6) 另外要是写崩了o(>\_\_\_\_<)o千万别嫌弃我。喜欢我的文的话就去我的专栏收藏我哦, 么么哒。

*Ling wai yao shi xie beng le, qian wan bie xian qi wo. Xi huan wo de wen de hua jiu qu wo de zhuan lan shou cang wo o, me me da.*

*'In case the story goes weird, please please still love me. If you like my fiction, just visit my column and bookmark me, memeda.'*

*(Moshizhi Su Heilian. Wenan. Trans. Mine)*

Additionally, the 作者有话要说 *zuozhe youhua yaoshuo* ‘author’s words’ section on Jinjiang, which is a dedicated space set off from the main text to display authors’ comments and responses to readers’ remarks, serves as a channel for ‘rotten’ writers to practice *sajiao*-ness to their readers, exemplified by the work 饲鬼 *Sigui* ‘Feeding Ghosts’. In Example (7), 虎摸 *humo* ‘to stroke’ is an Internet neologism coined in pursuit of cuteness: by means of deliberating altering the correct pronunciation of the original word 抚摸 *fumo*, this expression creates a misperception for listeners that such a mispronunciation is caused by lack of clear enunciation in baby talk, and hence a cute, infantilised effect. The author also refers to a sentence-final particle, onomatopoeia, and emoticon to enhance the winsome effect.

(7) 趁着今天可以偷偷晚睡~~把新文开了~咔咔~求蹭求虎摸求包养~o(\*^▽^\*)>~

*Chen zhe jin tian ke yi tou tou wan shui, ba xin wen kai le, ka ka ka, qiu ceng qiu hu mo qiu bao yang.*

*‘I can sneakily stay up late today, so I’m starting a new novel, kakaka. Begging for rubbing, stroking, and feeding.’*

*(Sigui. Author’s Words. Trans. Mine)*

As pointed out by Feng (2013a), the user-friendly *wenan* page not only allows authors to establish authorial personae and manoeuvre reader commentary, but also to provide information on their ideological bent and values.

In sharp contrast to female *danmei* writers, their male counterparts, who are in an absolute minority, generally refrain from making *sajiao* gestures and thus do not create *shaonü gong*. A paradigm is a prolific male *danmei* writer pseudonymed 非天夜翔 *Feitianyexiang* who is renowned for magnificent views, rich historical allusions and a thought-provoking, realistic work 北城天街 *Beicheng Tianjie* ‘Paradise Walk’.<sup>4</sup> In Feitianyexiang’s 33 novels on Jinjiang and several others contentiously ascribed to him, ukes are seldom feminised, not to mention semes: Feitianyexiang tends to equip semes with a masculine appearance, bulging muscles and indomitable personality, as in Example (8) extracted from 鹰奴 *Yingnu* ‘Eagle Slave’.

(8) 身长九尺, 肤色黝黑, 鼻作鹰钩, 眉若兵锋, 唇如折剑。...奈何不苟言笑, 一脸阴鸷。

*Shen chang jiu chi, fu se you hei, bi zuo ying gou, mei ruo bing feng, chun ru zhe jian...Nai he bu gou yan xiao, yi lian yin zhi.*

*‘He was a tall man with tanned skin. He had an aquiline nose, sharp eyebrows and firm lips...Yet he never smiled and looked solemn.’*

*(Yingnu. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)*

<sup>4</sup> *Beicheng Tianjie* is an exception to stereotypical, clichéd *danmei* works that entail single-faceted characters and fantasised male-male romance, in that it boldly concerns promiscuity, one-night stands, AIDS and decease in a realistic manner (Zhao 2015).

Second, the description of ‘maiden semes’ generates a popular 反差萌 *fancha meng* ‘paradoxical cuteness’ with flawed virility and caters for the fascination with 大屌萌妹 *dadiao mengmei* ‘cute girl with a big cock’ in the ACG field and beyond. Example (9) from *Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili* demonstrates the seme’s robust sexuality whereas epicene, intriguing appearance simultaneously, generating imperfect masculinity. Similarly, in 魔道祖师 *Modao Zushi* ‘Grandmaster of the Fiend Dao’, the uke is depicted as being invincible and courageous, yet he can be easily intimidated by dogs; such a comical trait, therefore, renders this tragic hero less depressing and more real and many-sided. I propose that *danmei* consumers’ embracement of and attraction to paradoxically-enriched characters can be accounted for by Aronson et al’s (1966: 227) ‘pratfall effect’ unravelling that ‘the attractiveness of a superior person is enhanced if he commits a clumsy blunder’.

(9) 这个人看起来是个漂亮姑娘, 掏出来比我都大。

*Zhegeren kanqilai shige piaoliang guniang, taochulai biwo dou da.*

*‘He looks like a pretty girl but has a penis bigger than mine.’*

*(Fanpai Ta Guofen Meili. Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)*

In terms of the offensive terminology *dadiao mengmei*, it is sometimes interchangeable with *nüzhuang dalao* and falls into the category of 伪娘 *weiniang* ‘fake girl’. Currently on the Internet and in mass media, there is an increasingly visible phenomenon of *weiniang*, which denotes performing femininity on biologically male bodies, particularly male cosplayers cross-dressed as female ACG characters of feminine attributes. Despite its association with cross-dressing and cross-gender performance, *weiniang* has obtained celebrity status among cosplayers and other fandoms by virtue of media exposure, so it has been accepted by a growing cohort of young people from different social groups (Chao 2017). The *weiniang* phenomenon in reality and the feminisation of characters in *danmei* also accord with the prevailing ‘soft masculinity’ in contemporary China, epitomised by the popularity and consumption of sexualised males labelled as 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* ‘little fresh meat’, i.e., pubescent boys and youthful men possessing attractive, effeminate appearance.

Third, producing and consuming semes with impaired masculinity enables ‘rotten girls’ not to subjugate themselves to China’s heteropatriarchal and heteronormative gender system.

According to research findings on motivation for BL consumption, these textual and audio-visual products facilitate female consumers to express and share their passion for youthful male bodies in an uninhibited fashion, which is not endorsed by the wider society (Greer 2003: 10, McLelland 2005, 2017, Zsila et al 2018). To be more specific, these gender-inflected fantasies allow fangirls to pursue escapism, voyeurism, aesthetics, gender equality, as well as freedom from gender constraints and traditional gender norms and constructs (Chou 2010, Zhang 2016, Lilja and Wasshede 2017). Moreover, BL narratives offer female readers access to a phallus,<sup>5</sup> which, according to Lacan (1958), symbolises social rights. In the Chinese context, inspired by gender equality and neutralisation, young women exhibit desire for pleasure generated by a phallus, whereas such desire cannot be satisfied in heterosexual romances, in which the object of a

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that female readers’ perception of a phallus and consumption of sexual violence are correlated with a feeling of ‘revenge’.

phallus is women themselves; female readers, therefore, turn to *danmei* writing and regard males as the object of their desire and glory in the exaltation produced by the phallus (Wang 2011). In BL fiction, uke characters are depicted as having carnal satisfaction as freely as seme characters do, so through identifying with male homosexual characters, female readers can delight in men's aberrant, transgressive deeds and sexual ecstasy with an enfeebled sense of guilt and shame, and their sexual repression regarding enjoying pornographic sex can be projected onto male characters (Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). By means of providing a scopophilic dissociation from male characters and the practical reality of sexuality itself, female readers can control the balance of subjective sexual repression, and through attaining the phallic authority to address their eroticism, the locus of interactivity is thus realised (Nagaike 2003).

Meanwhile, given the fact that the target bodies are male, women feel less threatened while consuming scenes of sexual violence (Fujimoto 2004, 2015). Significantly, through regarding uke as a symbolic representation of the ideal self-image or enjoying reversed sex roles (Mizoguchi 2008, Feng 2013a), BL fangirls are capable of mitigating negative self-image triggered by gender-related anxiety and conventional gender roles in terms of emotionality and sensitivity, because the fictionally constructed masculinity in the form of strength and dominance equips them with an advantageous perspective to express repressed sensual desire without being reduced to an inferior position (McLelland 1999, Wood 2006, Kamm 2013, Zsila and Demetrovics 2017).

When feminising seme roles, 'rotten girls' endeavour to further express their eagerness not to comply with orthodox heteronormative precepts or comprehensively accepted social norms. In this sense, *shaonü gong* fiction is analogous to father-son incest narratives that *danmei* fangirls contrive in order to address generational conflict and re-order the familial power structure via eros and passion, thereby achieving democratic transformations in both intimate and public spheres (Xu and Yang 2013). I argue that the similitude between a father and a seme lies in their dominant status in familial and societal hierarchies. Under the palpable influence of strict Confucian moral codes and precepts, women in the feudal era had been stringently prescribed by the Confucian pivotal virtue of filial piety (Ivanhoe 2000: 2, 2007, Chan and Tan 2004, Nuyen 2004) as well as patriarchal ideals encapsulated by 三从四德 *san cong si de* 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' (Gao 2003, Rosenlee 2006: 90-92, Lee 2009). This construal is similar to reader enjoyment derived from 父子文 *fuzi wen* 'father-son writing' and 兄弟文 *xiongdi wen* 'brother-brother writing' which are frequently tagged with *nianxia* ('age below') and involve biological or adoptive relationships, e.g., the celebrated 杀破狼 *Sha Po Lang* ('Killing, Deconstruction, Wolf') and 大哥 *Dage* ('Older Brother').

Fourth, due to the fact that female characters in *danmei* literature are usually represented negatively as a narrative device and 'a barrier to the male characters' developing relationships' (Blair 2010: 113), 'rotten' girls tend to subconsciously identify with uke characters in novels. Based on seme-uke pairing, *danmei* writing can be divided into a range of subcategories, including the formulaic and somehow clichéd pattern of strong seme × weak uke, as well as strong seme × strong uke, weak seme × strong uke and weak seme × weak uke, which are less attested. A proportion of fangirls disdain the strong seme × weak uke characterisation, in that BL fiction featuring feminised ukes are fundamentally BG (boy-girl, viz. heterosexual-oriented) and complies with heteronormative ethos, so they adulate the strong seme × strong

uke format instead. Therefore, fantasising a *shaonü gong* reinforces the strong-strong pattern and even escalates it to a higher degree.

Furthermore, I propose that *shaonü gong* fiction is parallel to female-oriented 女尊文 *nüzun wen* ‘matriarchal writing’ that narrates women’s ascent to power in the public arena or emphasises female supremacy in heterosexual romances occurring in a patriarchal society (Feng 2013b) as they both challenge patriarchy and heterosexism. More significantly, *nüzun* romance’s reconfiguration of the orthodox gender hierarchy in a patriarchal society unveils Chinese women’s deep-rooted dread of sexual violence, exploitation, and oppression (Feng 2013b). Therefore, it can be assumed that *shaonü gong* writing solaces female readers’ anxieties by means of illuminating seemingly enfeebled, yet indeed idealised masculinity in a holistic manner.

## Conclusion

Inspired by the construal that BL literature is ‘better than romance’ (Pagliassotti 2010) and more than romance (Xu and Yang 2013), legions of Internet readers in contemporary China ‘indulge in beauty’ and produce/consume female-oriented *danmei* fiction. The vast majority of *danmei* narratives on Jinjiang illuminate a discernible seme-uke dyad, rather than versatility. The most frequently attested pattern is strong seme × weak uke, which is often marked by the feminisation of uke characters, driven by the prevailing ‘soft masculinity’ in the contemporary Chinese society. Nevertheless, fiction adopting the ‘maiden seme’ characterisation also receives popularity, in which semes are portrayed as exhibiting epicene traits and conducting *sajiao* deeds verbally and nonverbally.

In terms of the rationale behind the ‘maiden seme’ persona in *danmei* writing, it lies in four aspects:

First, the *sajiao* behaviour of semes facilitates the construction of authorial personae and embodies authors’ aspirations during interaction with readers, namely, to ingratiate themselves with readers and to establish and maintain a bond via *sajiao* acts. I posit that in addition to direct communication addressing readers through *wenan* and ‘author’s words’, authors deploy characters and plots to implicitly convey their ideologies and values. That is to say, feminised semes serve as representations of authorial personae and intentions such as ingratiating themselves with readers and constructing rapport and emotional intimacy with readers by means of *sajiao* techniques. It is noteworthy that disparate from their female counterparts, *danmei* writers predominantly refrain from making *sajiao* gestures and are less disposed to create *shaonü gong*.

Second, an integration of masculinity and femininity in the seme role generates innocuously flawed masculinity and ‘paradoxical cuteness’, which renders characters more complex and accommodates ‘rotten girls’ embracement of cross-dressing and cross-gender performance in the ACG fandom. In other words, it is exactly their innocuously flawed masculinity that renders *danmei* characters more multi-faceted and real, and thus more popular among readers who may also be devoted to the ACG subculture. Additionally, the feminisation of *danmei* characters also accords with the *weiniang* phenomenon and the prevailing ‘soft masculinity’ epitomised by ‘little fresh meat’. More significantly, the feminisation of seme is by virtue of

'rotten' girls' aspirations to manoeuvre gender and sexuality and deviate from orthodox ethical ethos and gender roles.

Third, fantasising enfeebled virility permits female readers to express their disobedience to heteropatriarchal hierarchies and heteronormative gender zeitgeist, analogous to the consumption of father-son and brother-brother incestuous entanglements. I state that *danmei* fangirls in contemporary China are keen to exhibit a defiant attitude towards the conventional zeitgeist. A seme is supposed to be the acute epitome of masculinity and its associated power and strength, yet by means of fantasising him to be a man practicing *sajiao*-ness, suppressed female readers are able to attain a sense of superiority and control. Additionally, consuming incest tales in which fathers and elder brothers occupying senior social positions are sexually penetrated, 'rotten' readers can bask in reversed gender roles and subverted patriarchal mores.

Finally, compared with the strong-strong pattern, less masculine semes further intensify reader enjoyment and mitigates women's dread of sexual violence, exploitation, and oppression in real-world contexts. To be more specific, the semes demonstrate super-masculine attributes in the public sphere but highly feminine characteristics in intimate bonds, which means when identifying with ukes, fangirls can be immune from the dread and anxiety they have in the real world. In this sense, *shaonü gong* fiction is analogous to female-oriented 'matriarchal writing' that features female supremacy in heterosexual relationships, as they both challenge patriarchy and heterosexism and solace female readers' anxieties via enfeebled masculinity.

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