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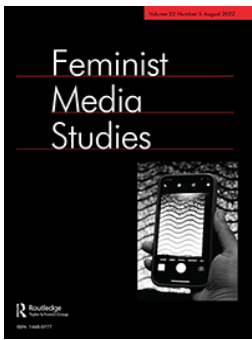
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Oscar Tianyang Zhou & Ming Zhang

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Watching *National Treasure*, creating *danmei tongren*: stories of power and the power of stories

Oscar Tianyang Zhou ^a and Ming Zhang^b

^aSchool of Arts, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; ^bFaculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

ABSTRACT

Discussing *danmei tongren* (the Chinese term for slash fan creations) fandom of the mainland Chinese variety television programme *National Treasure*, this article examines how the meanings of Chinese television are perceived, contested, extended, and transformed by female fan audiences. By undertaking close reading of both *danmei tongren* fiction and music videos, we investigate how Chinese female fans creatively rework, extend, transgress, and subvert their favourite popular media texts to speak to their shared interests and fantasies, working-in stories of romance, sex, and intimacy between men and removing sexist, heteronormative, and nationalist discourses. Our examination shows that *National Treasure danmei tongren* fandom concerns both stories of power relationships across genders, sexualities, classes, ages, and these stories' power over women. It offers a communal space for amateur and alternative female cultural production in which marginalised voices can speak back to mainstream media culture in China.

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Introduction

On December 3 2017, a new variety television programme named *National Treasure* ([NT]; 国家宝藏) premiered on China Central Television (CCTV). Blending documentary with elements of theatre and reality television, this show selected twenty-seven of the most prestigious cultural relics from Chinese museums as “national treasures” to tell their historical stories to a Chinese audience. To appeal to the younger generation, a mixture of ordinary people and renowned Chinese celebrities were invited to present these relics. The format of the show features personal stories inspired by the relics, and short dramas performed by the A-list stars to showcase the treasures as the embodiments of Chinese traditional culture. With its innovative visual storytelling, big-budget production value, and well-targeted marketing strategy, *NT* successfully revitalised public interest in Chinese history and culture. The programme has been an unprecedented success both online and offline (Xinhuanet 2018): its videos have gone viral on Chinese social media, accruing billions of views and comments. The hashtag “CCTV *National Treasure*” garnered nearly two billion views after the first season in 2018 and this number more than tripled to

CONTACT Oscar Tianyang Zhou  o.zhou@kent.ac.uk  School of Arts, Room 2-26, Jarman Building, School of Arts, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NZ

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six billion in 2021; offline, *NT* has also reinvigorated Chinese museums as effective economic engines. Its success has increased the number of visitors to the museums featured in the show by 50% and spawned a nationwide cultural and heritage tourism campaign.

NT's success is celebrated in Chinese mainstream media and academic circles (Theresa Trimmel, Oscar Tianyang Zhou, Ming Zhang, and Eve Ng 2022). It is hyped as the leading edge of Chinese cultural variety television, directing the younger generation away from the influence of foreign cultures. As such, *NT* answers President Xi Jinping's call to "tell China's story well" to boost domestic cultural confidence and international soft power. Triumphant accounts of this programme, however, reflect functionalist perspectives for which the Chinese media system is an organic whole that represents the "tongue and throat" of the Chinese Communist Party. These perspectives continue the long-standing tradition that "reads the audience from the structures of the text or in terms of the forms of consumption generated by the institutions of production and marketing" (Henry Jenkins 2013, 285). Watching *NT* is only the beginning of the process of media consumption among its audiences. Understanding how Chinese media affects audiences of different genders, sexualities, classes, ethnicities, and ages requires scrapping "a model that sees only media effects on passive spectators" (Jenkins 2013, 287). Instead, it entails empirical investigation of the ongoing and complex relations among audience(s) and media texts.

Adopting a fan studies perspective, this article explores an especially fruitful genre of *NT* online fandom, namely, *danmei tongren* fandom. According to Xiaofei Tian (2018, 353), *danmei tongren* is "the Chinese term for slash fan fiction," referring to "fan creations based on a literary or media source text; it includes all forms of fan art, but fiction remains the most popular form." *Danmei tongren* fandom is predominantly female, which foregrounds a romantic and/or erotic relationship between male characters from the source text. Far from being manipulated by the show's ideological structures, Chinese *danmei tongren* fans actively rework the stories, characters, and celebrities in *NT*. They move beyond explicitly presented information to create collaborative meta-texts that are more complex than the original programme. Although the *danmei tongren* fan audience is a particular niche of *NT*'s viewership, they play a crucial role in contemporary Chinese popular culture. Chinese *danmei tongren* (and its parent genre *danmei*) "has successfully merged with a diverse range of local and global media and celebrity cultures, and developed into a transnational, all-inclusive, and female-dominated meta-fan culture" (Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu 2017, 3). Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom is quickly evolving and spawning new derivative elements. As such, one cannot generalise about the entire genre. Recent studies have probed the diversity of Chinese *danmei tongren* cultures, exploring sub-genres (Xiqing Zheng 2015; Yuan Gong 2017), specific case studies (Xiaofei Tian 2015, 2018; Ling Yang 2017), and censorship and platforms (Jamie Jing Zhao 2020; Shuyan Zhou 2017). That said, challenging one-size-fits-all explanations of Chinese *danmei tongren* requires further empirical research on the specificity and contexts of female fan production.

In addressing the research gap, this article looks into *NT*'s *danmei tongren* works. After a critical examination of Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom and its relationship with female sexualities and gay politics, we look at how *NT danmei tongren* offers a space for amateur and alternative female cultural production in which marginalised voices can speak back to

mainstream media culture. Chinese female fans creatively rework, extend, transgress, and subvert their favourite popular media texts to explore shared interests and fantasies.¹ We undertake close reading of three *danmei tongren* stories on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), an open-source repository of fan works, and two *danmei tongren* music videos on Bilibili, an online entertainment platform popular among Chinese youth. These viewers tend to watch videos whilst posting live *danmaku* comments, which are shown on-screen as the video plays. We also draw on our ethnographic engagements with Chinese *danmei tongren* fans and methodological discussions on how to protect and respect fans in studying fan works.² We conclude by reflecting on the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of Chinese *danmei tongren* cultures.

Danmei tongren fandom in China

In the Anglo-American context, fan fiction has been defined as “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works” (Bronwen Thomas 2011, 1). As a fan fiction subgenre, slash fiction refers to stories that feature a romantic and/or erotic relationship between existing canonical characters of the same sex. The term “slash” arose in *Star Trek* fandom in the early 1970s, referring to “the convention of employing a stroke or ‘slash’ to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S)” (Jenkins 2013, 186). Also originating around the same period in Japan, Boys’ Love (BL) manga and fiction produced by female writers targeted young female readers, portraying love stories about beautiful boys. In China, heavily influenced by Japanese BL cultures, *danmei* fandom emerged in the early 1990s. According to Zhao (2020, 465), *danmei* is “a particularly influential genre of online writing (often by and for women) that portrays male same-sex fantasies,” which started as “a minority, underground fan culture but has now become established as a major form of Chinese pop culture with a variety of subgenres.” Generally, *danmei* can be divided into two subgenres, namely “*yuanchuang danmei*” (the original *danmei* work) and “*danmei tongren*” (the derivative *danmei* work). While the former produces new and original stories, the latter, and the focus of this article, “often lifts characters and settings from existing works but also adds portrayals of homoerotic relationships that do not exist in the canon universe” (Jin Feng 2013, 123).

In clarifying terminology, we do not intend to provide a genealogy of Chinese *danmei* fandom in relation to its Anglo-American and East Asian counterparts; that work has been done by Yang and Xu (2017) and Zhao (2020). Still, as Sharon Kinsella (1998, 308) points out, “the preoccupation with converting serialized dramas into homoerotic parodies that emerged spontaneously among women in the United Kingdom, America, and Japan suggests that all of these women have undergone some essentially similar social and cultural experience.” With this in mind, this section focuses on Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom’s relationship with female sexualities and how female fans engage with *danmei tongren* cultures to explore sexual desires and their (non-)alignment with gay communities.

In the Anglo-American context, slash has been conceptualised as “feminist pornography,” allowing women to demonstrate their desires for men and for equality (Joanna Russ 1985; Erica Lyn Massey 2019). Female fans can, in Abigail De Kosnik’s (2016, 151) words, “engage in queer relations” by writing slash fiction for fellow female fans, “intentionally

turning other women on, or at least, fulfilling those women's desires to be temporarily transported into an imaginary that is highly charged with libidinal energies." Similarly, as female sexual desire is still a taboo in China, *danmei tongren* allows Chinese women to express, explore, and fulfil their sexual desire and fantasy, and sometimes, it is the first communal place where they can freely talk about sex without shame.

Although "hardcore" stories featuring explicit sexual practices are undoubtedly popular among some Chinese *danmei tongren* communities—for example, many female fans are fascinated with ABO (Alpha/Beta/Omega) *danmei tongren* because of its bold sexual explicitness, and therefore, a motto was developed: "writing ABO without juicy sexual details is a kind of disrespect" (Zheng 2015, 21)—for other female fans, what is fascinating about the eroticism is less its pornographic content and more its communal character. Indeed, *danmei tongren* fandom establishes a safe and empowering space in which discussions of non-normative sexual fantasies are considered normal. Although this may not fundamentally change gender norms in China, as Tian (2015, 254–255) argues, *danmei tongren* is progressive in that "women can freely express and exchange their sexual fantasies, speak of their sexual desires and 'perversions,' and discuss what turns them on or off—in a generally supportive and sympathetic environment."

In the Anglo-American context, slash is seen as enabling fans to challenge the gender inequalities and patriarchal power relationships in mainstream culture (Nickie Michaud Wild 2020). In China, similarly, *danmei tongren* is perceived as being subversive, helping "Chinese women to cope with anxieties caused by gender inequality in society and explore their subjectivity in creative ways" (Feng 2013, 123). The male protagonists in *danmei tongren* stories often have equal professional background and social status, allowing female fans to explore intimacy beyond the conventional gender norms in Chinese society. This makes *danmei tongren* a form of feminist writing, foregrounding a critical, radical, and utopian perspective to critique patriarchy.

Researchers debate the extent to which Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom is concerned with gay politics and experiences. The relationship between slash and queer culture has been widely discussed in Western academic and fan circles. In reviewing the history of Anglophone slash sexualities, Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian (2018, 127–128) highlight three waves: "from women-oriented romance fantasies written onto male bodies, to self-conscious engagement with gay representation in mainstream television, to multilayered and complex metaphorical discourses engaging queer formations of sex, gender and power." Broadly, these stages progress "from the more conservative to the more radical." Optimists believe that Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom promotes openness and sympathy towards homosexuality, reduces prejudice, and teaches fans to view the world through a non-heterosexual lens. For example, Zhou (2017, 105) highlights the potential power of *danmei tongren*, arguing that it can "exceed the border of the fandom to interfere with reality" and reproduce "the discourse of homosexuality from online fandom to mainstream culture, to confront homophobic prohibition and make it visible."

This does not mean that Chinese *danmei tongren* fans' representations and desires always align with those of gay communities. Sometimes, their interest in queer knowledge may result in negative attitudes towards gay communities. As Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu (2016, 254) observe, some female fans adhere to "the motto 'cherish *danmei* and stay away from gays,' a parody of Chinese government's anti-drug slogan 'cherish life and stay away from drugs,'" such fans "emphasise the difference between the idealised one-on-

one relationship in *danmei* and the promiscuous, HIV-risky gay lifestyle in reality, as well as the ingrained sexism among Chinese gay men, which has partly contributed to the widespread phenomenon of gay wife (*tongqi* 同妻)." Yuli Zeng (2016) espies a paradox in Chinese real person *danmei tongren* fans' support for homosexuality, suggesting that although they support same-sex love in general, some still adhere to gender norms and stereotypical images of gay men as being handsome, charming, romantic, and dreamy. This paradox is most evident in their homoerotic fantasy of Chinese male celebrities. Arguably, therefore, Chinese *danmei tongren* fans' support for gay communities is simultaneously based on and constrained by how they imagine homosexuality.

While *danmei tongren* fandom, together with other *danmei* cultures, can provide a progressive public space for open discussions on gender, sexuality, and political issues, the problem is, as Yang and Xu (2017, 14) highlight, "the content and nature of this public space has been severely circumscribed by government regulations." As a result, "fans of transnational pop culture are not necessarily more liberal about national politics than nonfans and 'pop cosmopolitanism' and nationalism can actually go hand in hand." Indeed, strong nationalist and patriotic sentiments flourish in some Chinese *danmei tongren* (Yang 2017). Probably due to *danmei's* association with Japanese popular culture, some *danmei* fans "have demonstrated a strong nationalistic and pro-government stance in political discussions," and "any group or individual that challenges the legitimacy of the one-party rule or threatens the stability of the Chinese government has all been vehemently denounced" by them online (Yang and Xu 2016, 255). In this vein, Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom can provide a lens through which to view how gender politics intersects with nationalism and geopolitics.

To grasp how *danmei tongren* functions as a space of feminist fantasy that engages with gay politics and nationalism, Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom should be seen as diverse and continually in flux. Recently, a growing body of studies have conceptualised Chinese *danmei tongren* fans as not a monolithic block, but a spectrum of groups with multiple, divergent, and sometimes contradictory motivations. For example, Yang (2017, 46) anatomises the Chinese *danmei tongren* production of *Hetalia* (a Japanese anime series that features important historical events), which she sees as "a tool to reshape configurations of gender and sexuality" and "a vehicle for political expression." Gong (2017, 180) examines the Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom of European football, suggesting that the fans' queered interpretations are transgressive on one hand as they are empowered by "creating online spaces to address their distinct interests in predominantly male football fandom," but on the other hand, they failed to resist certain patriarchal and racist ideologies by idealising White masculinity in their fantasies. Tian (2015, 225) investigates Chinese online *danmei tongren* production of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, arguing that they "bring into focus fascinating questions of gender, sexuality, power, fan identity, and the encounter of tradition and postmodernity." Together, these studies suggest that one cannot make generalisations about Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom based on a single case. In this context, our analysis focuses on *NT danmei tongren* fandom, aiming to broaden and diversify empirical research on how Chinese female fans rework, extend, and subvert popular media texts. We hone in on those surrounding two popular same-sex pairings, namely He Jiong/Sa Beining and Chen Fan/Chen Zhuo (played by Liu Haoran/Xiao Yang). In so doing, we do not mean to suggest that the tropes and themes of these female fan productions are most important to *danmei tongren* fans. That

said, these works participate in the wider constellation of Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom. That is unsurprising, for many Chinese *danmei tongren* fans are “nomadic, constantly moving from one circle to another, bringing fan knowledge of previous circles to new ones” (Yang and Xu 2017, 8).

Pairing He/Sa: gay solidarity, feminine erotica and “inappropriate” fantasies

Posted on AO3 on January 22 2018, *The Guardians* is a short *danmei tongren* fiction that revolves around a gay romance between He Jiong and Sa Beining, two renowned male television hosts in China, who appeared in *NT*’s first season (see Figure 1). In *NT*, He Jiong plays a businessman from the Tang dynasty, but is recast as a university lecturer in the *danmei tongren* story, who carefully conceals his sexual identity at work. Some Chinese *danmei tongren* writers do not present male protagonists in their stories as gay, but simply in love, and therefore, in avoiding the issue, they are often accused of being naïve and homophobic. *The Guardians*’ author, in contrast, is keenly aware of the story’s queerness, situating the two characters as gay men explicitly who are facing a homophobic Chinese society: “He made every effort to hide this part of his life [sexuality] from others.



He Jiong and Sa Beining. Stills from *National Treasure*, season 1.

Sometimes he also wondered if he could quit the job and live more freely. That is not to say teachers do not deserve sexual freedom. It is just too difficult to be out and proud in this land" (dawningli 2018a). This true-to-life description of He Jiong's sacrifices recalls the experience of being gay in China, where gay individuals in university or government jobs face especially intense discrimination.

For Anglo-American female slash writers, "writing about the gay male means writing about the risk inherent in pursuing an oppressed sexuality" (Camille Bacon-Smith 1992, 247). Accordingly, *The Guardians* engenders solidarity between women and gay men, whose social positions resonate on several levels. In Western masculine culture, women, like gay men, have been silenced, finding it "difficult to publish when they write, difficult to gain an audience when they speak. Any interest women express in an erotic life outside of the monogamous heterosexual relationship classes them immediately as degenerates" (247). Likewise, Feng (2013, 56) suggests that heteronormative culture oppresses Chinese *danmei* fans in similar ways, accusing them of "selling pornography, promoting incest, and 'poisoning' young minds." In consequence, they "often find it necessary to conceal this guilty pleasure from family and friends," just like many gay men. Therefore, He/Sa can be seen as symbols for how female fans see love. Everyone needs affection and support, regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Everyone needs to express their identity, whatever mainstream culture compels people to think about themselves. Despite the social stigma attached to them, Chinese female fans continue to write and read fan fiction and watch fan-made videos, just as He/Sa never stop looking for love in the story. Although *The Guardians* features gay protagonists, ultimately it is not about gay men. Articulating two sets of meanings, it indicates the marginality of both gay men and *danmei tongren* fans and expresses their yearning to be "out and proud" in China.

By pairing He/Sa, the author also cuts against the source text's propagandist ideologies. In *NT*, He Jiong is filmed reciting an ancient Chinese poem written on a treasured porcelain ewer, which was excavated overseas in the 1970s:

Bidding farewell, you go thousands of miles away,
I never know the day you will return.
There are thirty days in a month,
I miss you each night.

As *NT* constructs it, the poem crystallises the ancient Chinese capacity to market their wares overseas. In the source text, this ewer's story is heavily shaped by nationalist political discourses surrounding the "Maritime Silk Road" and "cultural confidence." They both reflect China's Belt and Road Initiative, which echoes Xi Jinping's political philosophy that calls on Chinese people to have confidence in their own culture. In claiming that the porcelain ewer underlines ancient China's successful export market and cultural competence, *NT* indoctrinates viewers in prevailing nationalist and patriotic discourses (Trimmel et al. 2022).

The Guardians, in contrast, expresses a negation of the politicisation and commercialisation of art and love. The *danmei tongren* author has He speak to Sa (and the female readers) on her behalf: "sadly, the ewer became a commodity that was sold overseas at a low price, and the poem written on it was monetised by businessmen" (dawningli

2018a). The sorrow expressed here—at such a pure poem being traded and politicised—echoes the wider Chinese *danmei tongren* fan community's celebration of pure same-sex love, as opposed to commercialised heterosexual relationships. It also reflects some Chinese female fans' attitude towards the question of commercialisation of *danmei tongren*. Although the gift-culture spirit, in which fans do not pay to enjoy fan fiction and videos, still lies at the heart of Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom, monetisation of *danmei tongren* fans' activities is imminent (Zhou 2017). It is against this backdrop that the author reworks the source text, directing it against nationalism, and imagining *danmei tongren* as transgressive work with a gift-culture soul.

The Guardians' appeal also lies in its explicit descriptions of sex between two protagonists, offering critical insights into female sexual fantasies. These sexual encounters differ markedly from those of traditional male-oriented pornography that tends to focus on physical acts, especially genital sex. In portraying He/Sa's anal sex, the author does not emphasise physical penetration and ejaculation. Rather, sex is veiled: "while the wet tile was slippery and He almost knelt down, Sa's hands clasping He's waist so that he can freely enjoy a shaking orgasm" (dawningli 2018a). The author also projects her own sexual fantasies onto the protagonists' bodies, foregrounding their patient, sensual foreplay and tender kissing. In particular, she uses the metaphor of "a seesaw battle" to describe how their kissing moves from tongues to lips, ears to necks, fingers to chests. Since female sexual expression is largely policed in public space, online *danmei tongren* fiction written by women for women becomes an important site "in which women and girls can feel that they are participating in a tradition of female writing and reading, and can experience a sense of safety in numbers" (De Kosnik 2016, 135).

Whereas *The Guardians* can be seen as a work of feminine erotica in that the sex between He and Sa is romantic and feminine in character, another short *danmei tongren* story by the same author reflects a more masculine sensibility. This work, titled *Mouth Open, You're High*, was posted on AO3 on February 21 2018. Constructing He and Sa as dominant and submissive characters in a BDSM (bondage, domination, sadism and masochism) world, it includes explicit sexual practices, including bondage, discipline, roleplaying, dominance and submission. In the story, He acts as a flogger, striking Sa's bottom ten times with a whip. They have chosen "*National Treasure*" as a safeword for Sa to call out should things develop beyond what he can handle. Slash with violent sexual scenarios is seen by some scholars as representing an imbalanced power relationship between male partners and reinforcing the heteronormative gender roles (Virginia Keft-Kennedy 2008). However, *Mouth Open, You're High* is far from heteronormative. Its BDSM content constitutes a female public sexual fantasy and provides queer female space in which Chinese women can "explore myriad alternative ways of feeling, being, sexing, doing, and communicating," and more importantly, "exceed the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality" (De Kosnik 2016, 151).

Mouth Open, You're High is best understood as what Elizabeth Woledge (2006) calls an "intimatopia" for its defining feature is the intimacy engendered by explicit sexual practices. In intimatopic *danmei tongren* fiction, aggressive and violent sex can engender intimacy. Unlike BDSM scenes in gay pornography, in which sex occurs for its own sake, BDSM practices are caring, tender, and loving in this He/Sa story. They develop as part of a complicated relationship and dovetail with more "vanilla" sexual and love stories. Sa endures the pain to share his feelings with He: "The last whip came down together with

He's kiss . . . Sa opened his eyes with tears and a smile, looking long into He's face. 'I want to tell you some secrets that I had never shared with others before,' he said while kissing He lovingly." Similarly, He strikes Sa only to foster unconditional trust between them: he does not want to hurt Sa, but needs Sa to "give himself to another person unreservedly" (dawningli 2018b). The flogging increases the protagonists' intimacy, transcending BDSM practices and suggesting that the true act of love is found not in sex itself, but in lying together and talking afterwards.

This BDSM *danmei tongren* can also be read through the lens of a fan fiction genre named "hurt/comfort," which involves an "intimacy growing through one partner providing physical and/or emotional comfort to the other who is sick, wounded, or troubled" (Mirna Cicioni 1998, 162). In this light, Sa's pain leaves him tender, providing a pretext for He to comfort him. After ten strokes, "Sa was going to fall down. He caught him and kissed him. 'Are you okay?,' He asked softly while holding Sa's cheek in his hand" (dawningli 2018b). Domination gives way to tenderness: "beginning as the product of force—bad, masculine power—it becomes the reflection of his need for caring—good, feminine power" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 272). The author gives BDSM a feminine, even maternal twist. She reconstructs the "men," telling readers that men can both cause and suffer pain. They sometimes need comfort and must learn how to comfort others. Sa's pain renders him vulnerable, giving the protagonists opportunities for intimacy that would likely not arise under different circumstances.

Excessive descriptions of bodily pain also perform what Rachel Linn (2017) calls "an erasure of limits," diminishing the line between characters' and readers' emotions. Sa's overwhelming pain might cause readers to suspend their disbelief, bringing them into the spanking scene and provoking their curiosity as to whether they are sadistic, masochistic, or both. This underlines the queerness of BDSM *danmei tongren* fiction and how it can challenge heteronormativity. Celebrating fannish kinky fantasies, Chinese female *danmei tongren* fans "queer" the source texts and talk about non-normative sexualities. They refuse the norms that structure sex and gender representation, problematising the idealisation of heterosexual intercourse and its narrative of reproduction. BDSM *danmei tongren* stories can therefore solicit readers to think beyond genital-focused sex and experiment with a new BDSM identity.

Poaching *National Treasure* on Bilibili: *danmei tongren* music videos and *danmaku* comments

If images of He Jiong and Sa Beining in *NT* take on new meanings in *danmei tongren* fiction, does this hold true for other imaginative *danmei tongren* works in the age of convergence culture? What new cultural meanings does the imagery of He and Sa acquire in music and *danmaku*-based participatory viewing? How do other *danmei tongren* works demand and reward fans' active participation, identification, and emotional responses? In addressing these questions, we shift our focus from the literary landscape to the *danmei tongren* communities on the Bilibili platform. Specifically, we investigate two He/Sa *danmei tongren* music videos and how they, in conjunction with "live" comments, articulate Chinese *danmei tongren* fans' shared understandings, interests, and collective fantasies.

One *danmei tongren* music video on Bilibili adopts "Eternity in One Glance," *NT*'s theme music, in offering a poetic commentary on He/Sa's romance. While the programme's

official music video serves as a trailer to display the cast and relics featured in the show, the fan music video on Bilibili, by contrast, explores the male relationships in which *danmei tongren* fans are interested. Each time the line, "... eternity in one glance, after a thousand years it is just like the first sight ..." is repeated, the fan video shows a close-up of He/Sa in a very suggestive position: looking meaningfully into each other's eyes, they show what "Eternity in One Glance" means. These nonverbal glances reveal hidden aspects of He/Sa, constructing them as protagonists in a homoerotic narrative. The chorus' voices seem to come from their mouths. The lyrics, "You come into my dreams a thousand times, I just want to touch your face," come to express He and Sa's longing for each other. In this new *danmei tongren* context, the theme song accompanied by footage of He and Sa in *NT* therefore takes on new meaning, celebrating female fans' homoerotic fantasies rather than advertising the programme.

Another He/Sa fan video named "Night at the Museum" has a stronger narrative dimension. A popular female duet "A Thousand Years" is used to evoke same-sex intimacy and voice the protagonists' thoughts. The fan video's storyline is simple, with an exciting climax and inspiring conclusion, allowing images of He and Sa to harmonise with the song. The creator exploits the alternation between two female voices to cast the protagonists as a couple and tells a love story from their perspectives. Moreover, the lyrics and melody make televisual images of He and Sa more meaningful. The shot of Sa sitting in a taxi coincides with the lines, "if I have wings, I will fly to you, even against the world." This suggests an emotional depth that Sa cannot put into words. The creator deliberately places a four-second silence halfway through the video to intensify the emotions and play with viewers' expectations, keeping them "hooked" until the story ends.

The fan music video's climax arrives as the singer's vocals restart after the silence. The creator ingeniously connects He's recitation scene in *NT* to Sa's performances in another popular Chinese cultural variety show named *Everlasting Classics* (经典咏流传). In this way, the two men are linked across time and space, reciting the same love poem antiphonally:

I was not when you were born,
 You were old when I was born.
 You regret that I was late born,
 I regret that you were early born.

Unlike mainstream Tang poetry than tends to follow strict rules for style and tone, this ancient love poem is short and colloquial. As such, it is enormously popular in China. In the source texts, the poem was first reinterpreted in the context of a legendary Chinese tragic heterosexual love story and then presented as a piece of historical marketing to promote global exports of Chinese porcelain. The female fan creator, in contrast, queers the source text in her video, using this poem to express an impossible same-sex relationship between He and Sa. Ending with the lyrics "even if it is an illusion, we will still fall in love, even just for a moment," the fan video reminds its viewers that He/Sa's stories are "illusionary" and same-sex intimacies are still marginalised in China. Meanwhile, it also expresses *danmei tongren* fans' own thoughts that their works create an important

and Sa. Transcending verbal communication, these comments therefore become a spectacle of collective female performance.

Pairing Fan/Zhuo: queer readings and the romance of incestuous *danmei tongren* fiction

In recognising *NT danmei tongren* works' resistive potential, it would be wrong to conclude that all are subversive. Indeed, Catherine Tosenberger (2008, para 1.3) argues that "not all source texts are created equally heteronormative; too strong a focus upon slash as a subversion of canon can mask consideration of the ways in which the canon itself may make queer readings available." Following this lead, this section probes the complexities around how Chinese female fans interact with *NT* through a close reading of *Lifeblood*, an incestuous *danmei tongren* story. *Lifeblood* does not simply oppose heterosexual, non-incestuous media. Rather, it offers a reparative reading, which is supported by the source text itself.

Lifeblood, which was posted on AO3 on April 12 2019, revolves around an incestuous romance between two male characters from the canonical story "Gold Lacquer Wooden Shrine" in the second season. Fan and Zhuo are brothers fighting in the Second Sino-Japanese War. They will sacrifice everything, even their own lives, to protect the family shrine (the national treasure) and defend China against Japanese aggression. Given its explicitly nationalistic and patriotic message, which encourages Chinese youth to serve their country, the Chinese Communist Party's sub-organisations and media outlets have purposefully endorsed this story on social media. *Lifeblood* does not simply appropriate presumably heteronormative patriotic material to tell queer romantic stories. Rather, the source text arguably encourages the author's queer and incestuous reading. There are two main indications of this.

Firstly, although *NT* emphasises the patriotism and nationalism of Fan/Zhuo's story, it is also concerned with love. Lacking parents, girlfriends, or wives, the protagonists have no-one to love but each other. This exclusive love is the source text's emotional centre, encouraging *danmei tongren* fans to perceive an incestuous romance. Fan's heroic sacrifice may have a patriotic purpose, but *NT* presents it against the backdrop of Fan/Zhuo's love, eschewing the uncritical patriotic narratives that are often fed to China's young people. Viewers cannot see Fan dying for his country without imagining his brother's devastation and heartbreak. The source depiction of Fan's sacrifice, therefore, already has a feminine sensibility, recognising "that pain and death cause suffering, not only of the victim sacrificed to the need of the state, but also of those who knew him, cared about him" (Bacon-Smith 1992, 276). Moreover, *NT* culminates with Fan's spirit returning to declare his undying belief in China. In suggesting that death is not final, this ghostly return refuses to "succumb to the masculine myth that constructs a hero unsuited to living beyond the end of his story" (277). A far cry from everyday reality, this fictional world is "unconstrained by the pragmatics of realism" that underpin heterosexuality (Sara Gwenllian Jones 2002, 85). This bolsters Chinese female fans' queer incestuous readings.

Secondly, *NT* draws heavily on celebrities' mediated bodies to encourage metatextual engagement among audiences. Two popular male actors, Liu Haoran and Xiao Yang,

starred as Fan and Zhuo, the first time that the show cast two male guest celebrities to perform the past lives of the national treasures in the same episode (see Figure 3). Chinese *danmei tongren* fans believe that the character Fan was created especially for Liu Haoran, for it reinforces his celebrity image as “the nation’s younger brother.” Through this metatextual connection, *NT* seduces the audience to imagine Fan in terms of Liu Haoran’s stardom, refusing completion. For example, it might lead viewers into the metaverse of another historical drama *Nirvana in Fire II* (《琅琊榜之风起长林》), within which Liu Haoran also starred as a beautiful young man, whom Chinese female fans often incestuously pair with his brother. Additionally, *NT*’s intergenerational pairing of Liu Haoran and Xiao Yang (seventeen years separate them) encourages *danmei tongren* fans to read the love between Fan and Zhuo as an incestuous romance between father and son. *Lifeblood*’s author provides a creative backstory of their upbringing: “because of their father’s absence, Zhuo was always around Fan and taught him since he was little” (xiaoheroll 2019). Although the backstory features no explicit sex, there are clear incestuous hints. Fan loved to “suck Zhuo’s finger to grind his teeth whilst sleeping in Zhuo’s arm with his little butt sticking up,” while Zhuo held “Fan’s bottom onto his body” (xiaoheroll 2019).



Liu Haoran and Xiao Yang. Stills from *National Treasure*, season 2.

This incestuous intimacy is further developed through “the eroticization of nurturance,” in which “mutual love occurs as one partner recognises and satisfies a basic need of the other—physical (warmth, food, care during illness) or emotional (reassurance)—and, more or less explicitly, ‘mothers’ him” (Cicioni 1998, 163). In *Lifeblood*, Fan’s childhood revolves around a sweet sold at their hometown’s festival. After Fan stole the sweets, and lied to cover his tracks, Zhuo adopted a fatherly tone and taught him their family doctrine. Henceforth, “each year during the Lantern Festival, Zhuo took Fan to the local pastry shop, holding his hand while asking him to select his favourite sugar-lion” (xiaoheroll 2019). Zhuo’s protectiveness of Fan is “expressed in the form of orders combining affection and authority” (Cicioni 1998, 163). When Fan turns twelve, Zhuo leaves for Thailand, after which “Fan found the sweets flavourless” (xiaoheroll 2019). In *Lifeblood*, then, sweets are subtly eroticised, having both emotional intimacy and an incestuous motif. These veiled fictionalisations of intergenerational incest avoid the controversy surrounding explicitly paedophilic and incestuous *danmei* stories. This suggests that Chinese female fans feel torn. On one side, they are under “pressure to profess their adherence to socio-ethical norms in China,” while on another, they “unequivocally defend their rights to fantasy and entertainment” (Feng 2013, 73).

Lifeblood takes up the overwhelming love between Fan and Zhuo in the source text to narrate incestuous intimacy between a father and son. It also explores other queer potentialities by foregrounding incestuous desires for mutuality and sameness between brothers. *Lifeblood*’s author particularly creates a backstory to explain why Fan and Zhuo are arguing in the source text: whereas Fan is keen to join the resistance to Japanese aggression, Zhuo cautions against participating. The author then reverses their canonical positions, enabling Fan to experience Zhuo’s caution whilst imagining Zhuo as a radical patriot: “Fan grabbed Zhuo’s strong arms as if this were the only way that his brother would never leave. ‘Just come back home. We don’t need money, and we don’t need resistance. It’s just the two of us living our lives together happily,’ he begged” (xiaoheroll 2019). This imaginative projection of Fan/Zhuo’s backstory constitutes a reparative, loving reinterpretation, which centres an incestuous desire to find the Self in the Other.

In providing a believable backstory to the protagonists’ homoerotic romance, *Lifeblood* develops readers’ empathy for two protagonists and others affected by the Second Sino-Japanese War. It presents historical issues in a fannish manner, offering a strong affective supplement to *NT*’s patriotic histories. Endowing canonical characters with emotional depth, the author imagines a way into ordinary Chinese peoples’ lives during wartime to understand their thoughts and feelings of love and hate, separation and reunion, longing and loss. Unlike mainstream scholarship and journalism, which often seeks to present historical facts objectively, *Lifeblood* works through affect, fostering readers’ feelings for Fan/Zhuo. As such, it offers an alternative route to historical knowledge, which serves as a queer archive that preserves the personal and the intimate, and prioritises “affective experiences and investments that are excluded from traditional cultural memory institutions” (De Kosnik 2016, 152).

Conclusion

This article has explored how the meanings of Chinese television are perceived, contested, extended, and transformed by female fan audiences, focusing on the *danmei*

tongren fandom surrounding the popular variety TV programme *National Treasure*. Investigating how women express, explore, and experiment with their sexualities through *danmei tongren* fiction and videos, we have identified a key communal space for amateur and alternative female cultural production in China. In doing so, we have directed attention to the underexplored theme of “fans of texts produced outside Western Anglophone media” in fan studies (Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse 2014, 2) and responded to calls for empirical audience research in Chinese television studies (Michael Keane 2015). Although our analysis cannot prove that all of Chinese television’s fan audiences are active, it shows that they are neither uniformly passive nor easily manipulated by media texts. Chinese female fans rework *NT* creatively to speak to their own interests, working-in stories of romance, sex, and intimacy between men and removing sexist, heteronormative, and nationalist discourses. *Danmei tongren* fandom’s eroticism reflects these female fans’ desires, whether for soft petting, aggressive BDSM, or incestuous intimacy.

Existing academic discussions of Chinese *danmei* cultures mainly focus on textual works. This article, however, has also examined *danmei tongren* music videos. In foregrounding the homoerotic narratives that Chinese *danmei tongren* fans want to explore, these videos satisfy female fans’ desires in ways that their state-owned and commercial counterparts do not. These fan videos’ communal dimension is further enhanced by *danmaku* comments, turning the videos into a theatrical space of collective affection, knowledge, and fantasies.

Overall, *NT danmei tongren* fandom is about stories and power. It concerns both stories of power relationships across genders, sexualities, classes, ages, and these stories’ power over women. Our examination has underlined the heterogeneity and fluidity of Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom. Accordingly, we wish to avoid generalising about the group as a whole. As Len Ang ([1989] 2013, 110) remarks, “reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent” and “there is no such thing as ‘audience’ [in this case, a generic Chinese *danmei tongren* fan] whose characteristics can be set once and for all.” One should neither impose narrow political meanings onto Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom nor criticise it for being apolitical. Chinese *danmei tongren* fans, especially the young generation, engage with politics in broad, circuitous ways that move beyond fixed political labels such as “anti-nationalist,” “left-wing,” or “feminist.” Exploring and negotiating identities, they (re)construct power relations among individuals and social structures. As Bacon-Smith (1992, 294) writes, female media fans can “resist all dictates to change themselves to fit either a masculine or feminist ideal, insisting that structures should build upon the way people are, not the reverse.” Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom is not organised feminism. Many women enjoy *danmei tongren* because it allows them to create their own cultures and participate in a new genre that expresses their own social visions and fantasies. They aim, not to “anticipate a politically correct feeling one might wish to have,” but to “meet current needs of communication and sharing, of the community” (294).

Recognising the complexity and fluidity of Chinese *danmei tongren* fandom is important both theoretically and practically. As Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2012, 51) remark, “every fandom has different rules and expectations, some of which touch on privacy. It is important to learn what these are and how to negotiate them, so that fans and their communities can be treated respectfully.” *Danmei tongren* fandom in China may

not provide an ideal female queer space, but it tells stories that, in Ken Plummer's (2019, 155) words, bring "the possibility of a reflective, reflexive and remembering embodied just humanity." We close this article by inviting further reflection on *danmei tongren* in China as a way of empowering and living a life, and calling for a rethinking of its narrative power in terms of the interrelated processes—representation, identity-work, production, consumption, and regulation—that complete the "circuit" of female media fandom.

Notes

1. Although we acknowledge the diversity of *danmei tongren* fans in China, this article uses the term "*danmei tongren* fan" to refer to heterosexual female fans, unless otherwise indicated.
2. In our ethnographic engagements, we see ourselves not as neutral observers, but academic fans who occupy a position of power and therefore need to respect the communities under study. Regarding permissions, we secured the right to quote from fan music videos from two creators, though one was cautious about copyright infringement. Accordingly, we neither cite their profile information nor provide links. Despite our attempts, we could not establish contact with the authors of the *danmei tongren* fiction analysed here. To give them credit whilst protecting their privacy, we adopt a special citation format recommended by Busse and Hellekson (2012, 45) to "provide sufficient citational references without directly linking," which "signals to the fan that her space is worthy of protection."

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Notes on contributors

Oscar Tianyang Zhou is a lecturer in media studies at the University of Kent. His research uses the lenses of cultural studies, feminist, and queer theory to investigate how LGBTQ communities engage with media technologies, texts, and practices in their everyday life. His work has been published in journals such as *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *Sexualities*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *China Media Research*, and within edited volumes such as *Queer TV China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2023), *Queer Sites in Global Contexts* (Routledge 2021), *Queer Intercultural Communication* (Rowman & Littlefield 2020), *Exploring Erotic Encounters* (Brill 2019), and *Chinese Social Media* (Routledge 2018). E-mail: o.zhou@kent.ac.uk

Ming Zhang holds a Ph.D. in media and communication from Bournemouth University. Her research focuses on the impact of female fans' online practices (writing, reading, and discussing slash fan fiction) on their negotiation of hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality in mainland China, which has been published in *Celebrity Studies* and *Communication, Culture & Critique*. E-mail: zhangm@bournemouth.ac.uk

ORCID

Oscar Tianyang Zhou  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9170-9351>

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