



## **From Online Danmei Literature to Web Series: A Study of Chinese Internet-based Adaptations Under Censorship**

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Web series produced by and for Chinese online streaming platforms have been on the rise since 2013, and have made available a space for production outside the traditional mass media like television. These web series often adapt their scripts from popular online novels, including danmei literature. Since China joined the Internet in 1994, the spread of this technology has opened up new spaces and created new genres for Chinese literature, and the development of Chinese Internet literature and its subgenre, danmei fiction, have been frequently scrutinized in both English and Chinese scholarly works.<sup>1</sup> Recently, variegated Chinese-language research have been directed towards the phenomenon of popular danmei novels adapted into web series and aired on major online streaming platforms such as iQiyi, Tencent Video, Youku, etc. However, most of these scholarly works, in particular Weihua Chen and Qin Hu's 2018 essay, "A Study on Online Tanbi Drama in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," on the emergence and development of Chinese online danmei series as well as Yang Liu's 2018 essay, "Study on the Adaptation Strategy of the Chinese Network Tanbi Novel in the Receptional Aesthetic Vision," on adaptation strategies taken by danmei web series, center on the danmei web series industry before June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, that is, before the "General Rules For Reviewing Netcasting Content"<sup>2</sup> were issued by the China Netcasting Services Association which for the first time officially banned homosexual content in web series. Thus, in the face of censorship post-2017 danmei web series adaptations confront the challenge of trying to stay true to the original danmei novels while being unable to showcase explicit homosexuality on screen. Focusing on the issue of censoring the content of web series adaptations of online danmei literature, this paper first reviews the opening up of an alternate space that 'online' danmei literature has created for queer expressions out-

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<sup>1</sup>Danmei, 'Boys' Love' in English, or Tanbi in Japanese, refers to a subgenre in literature, film, animations which romanticizes homosexual relationships between male characters to target a female audience.

<sup>2</sup>《网络视听节目内容审核通则》

side the state-controlled system, and then argues how this space outside heterosexual norms operates despite the 2017 policy which seeks to ban on-screen homosexuality thereby highlighting the space that danmei web series initially opened up for queer representations that were not allowed on TV. By using a 2018 danmei web series *Guardian* as a case study, this paper investigates how the post-2017 danmei web series made compromises due to censorship but also found strategic ways to hint at queer relationships by making the queer edge subtle enough to pass the censors. In doing so, this paper wishes to provide a speculation into the future of Chinese danmei literary adaptations under increasingly stringent censorship of online mass media.

The rise of online Chinese danmei literature since the late 1990s relied on the increasing popularity of online Chinese literature and the influx of danmei culture from Japan. Scholars of Chinese Internet literature like Guobin Yang, Michel Hockx, and Jin Feng have emphasized on the crucial role the Internet played in providing a space for Chinese literature outside of the heavily state-controlled publishing system. Circumventing the need to obtain legal book numbers in the publishing process, this online space outside of print literature allowed for greater freedom of personal and creative expression. However, initial optimism of Internet literature being “democratic” and “anti-elitist,” as worded by Yang (342–343), has started to wane, as the state has sought to tighten censorship around erotic and obscene content in Internet literature since 2007 (Hockx 116). Literary websites have become increasingly commercial and actively participate in self-censoring the content with a view/intent to get Internet Publishing Permits (Hockx 115).<sup>3</sup> However, censorship is perhaps most evident in danmei literature, which is, according to Hockx, the most prominently transgressive genre that features romantic and sexual relationships between male protagonists (115). The genre originated from an anti-naturalist literary movement called *tanbi*<sup>4</sup> in early-twentieth-century Japan that stressed highly aestheticized descriptions of sensory impressions. By the 1970s it was used to describe a genre of Japanese girls’ comics that portrayed beautiful, androgynous young men with feminine bodies and romanticized homosexual relationships targeted at women readers craving for “beauty” (Feng 4–5). *Tanbi*, directly translated from its *Kanji*,<sup>5</sup> into Chinese pronounced as dan-

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<sup>3</sup>The Internet Publishing Permit (网络文化经营许可证) is a license issued by the government that commercial and non-commercial websites of gaming, manga, music, videos, literature need in order to operate. The license expires every three years.

<sup>4</sup>Tanbi, たんび in Hiragana, 耽美 in Kanji.

<sup>5</sup>Editor’s note: The “Japanese” word for Hanzi or Chinese characters.” The Japanese use Chinese characters, called Kanji, along with two forms of a syllabary, called Hiragana and Katakana. (Source: Insup Taylor, M. Martin Taylor. *Writing and Lit-*

mei, was introduced into China in the 1990s via Internet popularity and the influx of Japanese comics and animations that came with it (Yang and Xu 252). As a genre of romanticized male homoeroticism, created by and for heterosexual women and usually lacking in critical as well as political edge, the depiction of overtly feminine and androgynous male characters of danmai sometimes makes it pretty different from ‘actual’ queer literature; because of this, numerous scholarly essays have delved into the mentality behind heterosexual women’s preference for danmei literature. Zhou argues that danmei literature and Boy’s Love fandom have the political potential to stimulate anti-homophobic discourses, and provide women readers with different ways to re-think about sexuality and gender outside of heteronormative ideologies, especially in the Chinese society where the attitude towards sexuality and gender remains largely conservative (29). Yang and Xu question the common attribution of “straight women read[ing] danmei,” arguing that danmei literature very likely assists readers in discovering their own sexual identities (253). Feng centers her research on readership and suggests that by setting the story in fantasized and fictional worlds and depicting utopian love with little markings of realism, danmei literature provides a space for female readers to “impersonate” an ideal masculinity through the gaze at the male protagonist in the novel, and this process encourages them to perceive themselves as empowered (24). These works are significant in understanding the varied dynamics of danmei literature in relation to female readership, but this paper seeks to take departure from feminist discourses and concentrate on internet-based adaptations in the wake of censorship.

Although policies banning pornographic content in Internet literature have been in force since the 2004 “Self-regulations on Prohibiting the Circulation of Obscene, Pornographic or Other Malicious Information on Websites,”<sup>6</sup> as well as the 2007 “An Urgent Announcement about Strict Action against Online Obscene and Pornographic Fiction,”<sup>7</sup> danmei literature existed at the margins and thus enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom until around 2010–2012 when literary websites, in cooperation with the state, started to censor keywords involving sexual descriptions of male homosexual activities by using keyword filtering programs (Zhou 35). Although this filtering restricted danmei writers from writing explicit sexual content on websites, authors nevertheless found ways to get around censorship

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*eracy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese*, John Benjamins Publishing company, 2014)

<sup>6</sup> 《互联网站禁止传播淫秽、色情等不良信息自律规范》

<sup>7</sup> 《关于严厉查处网络淫秽色情小说的紧急通知》

such as substituting sensitive words with pinyin<sup>8</sup> or deliberately creating typos to avoid keyword-screening softwares (Hockx 124), describing sexual activity poetically and metaphorically (Hockx 125), posting pictures of texts on other platforms like Weibo (Zhou 35), coding the texts through translation machines such as “Buddhist Sutras Translator” (Zhou 35), etc. This paper will thus demonstrate the recurrent process of coming up with alternate spaces of expression outside the mainstream along with new ways to circumvent censorship even after continuous bans.

Web series or webisodes are a new form of online videos that emerged in 2012 and have since gradually gained popularity among Chinese audiences. Web series are similar to TV series in style and format (or in the case of web series with only one episode, similar to film), but are produced by online streaming platforms and meant to be streamed online only, although in recent years some web series like *Love Me if You Dare* (2015), which was co-produced by Sohu Video and Shandong Film & TV Media Group and was aired both online and on TV,<sup>9</sup> is an excellent example of web series entering the domain of traditional television. With the increasing popularity of web series, this new medium has received scholarly attention but it mostly remains limited to Chinese scholarship. Huimin Wang theorizes three stages that web series went through. The first stage (2012–2013) consisted of short, low-budget, self-mocking web series like *Diors Man* (2012)<sup>10</sup> and *Never Expected* (2013)<sup>11</sup> (13). Using irony and low production values to separate themselves from mainstream productions, these newly emerged web series flagged their outsider status and commented on class hierarchies from peripheral perspectives (13). These series achieved considerable success, and web series began to receive more funding from streaming platforms along with other traditional TV production companies, thus moving into their second stage (2014–2015) in which higher production values and longer series became dominant in the market (14). However, the production costs of web series were still significantly lower than that of TV episodes, thus, with relatively smaller stakes of failure, some new genres that

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<sup>8</sup>Ed. note: An official romanization system adopted in 1979 for “Putonghua” or the standard “Chinese language.” It is used in China for teaching the sounds of “logographic” “Chinese characters,” for inputting a Chinese word on a computer to retrieve a character for it, and to write Chinese words for foreigners. (Source: Insup Taylor, M. Martin Taylor. *Writing and Literacy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese*, John Benjamins Publishing company, 2014)

<sup>9</sup>《他来了，请闭眼》. See <https://www.zhihu.com/question/36628094>

<sup>10</sup>《屌丝男士》. The translation from 屌丝, which literally means “loser,” to “Diors,” is a parody in itself.

<sup>11</sup>《万万没想到》. Other translations of this series include *Unexpected*.

were seldom seen in TV productions were put into experiments in web series, resulting in a burgeoning of detective thrillers and tomb raiding series while also running traditionally popular TV genres dealing with themes like going back in time and coming-of-age stories (14). The new genres, alienated from reality, fulfilled audience's expectations of watching something peculiar (14). However, this burgeoning space of artistic freedom with sufficient capital did not last long due to the government's tightening of censorship control in 2017. Prior policies, like the 2012 "China Network Audiovisual Program Service Self-discipline Convention"<sup>12</sup> on which the 2017 policy was based, did seek to regulate web series but the regulations were quite unspecific and loose as compared to traditional TV resulting in a comparatively large space for creative freedom. However, the "General Rules For Reviewing Netcasting Content"<sup>13</sup> issued on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2017 for the first time officially specified that web series would now be subject to "thorough censorship"<sup>14</sup> and "censorship before airing"; thus pushing web series into their third and current stage termed by Wang as "a return to the mainstream" (16). This implies that the censoring of web series is now identical to the censoring of TV programs, causing some genres like fantasy and depictions of homosexuality to be banned in web series.<sup>15</sup> Textually, it also means that web series would have to conform more to political correctness, be more mainstream and less experimental in genre, and return to realism for a mass appeal (16).

In recent years both TV and web series have increasingly resorted to adapting popular online novels such as *The Journey of Flower*<sup>16</sup> (2015), *Princess Agents*<sup>17</sup> (2017), *Eternal Love*<sup>18</sup> (2017), and *Fighter of the Destiny*<sup>19</sup> (2017), as well as highly successful serial stories such as *The Tomb Raider Chronicles* (2015)<sup>20</sup> which has been adapted into web series (Xie 57). Yan Xie analyzed several reasons for TV and web series turning to adapting successful online novels. Compared to published novels, online novels go through shorter production process, and due to the vast quantity of online literature, provide more options for producers (Xie 57). It is also relatively cheaper

<sup>12</sup> 《中国网络视听节目服务自律公约》

<sup>13</sup> 《网络视听节目内容审核通则》

<sup>14</sup> 《先审后播，审核到位》

<sup>15</sup> Li Jingsheng, head of the SAFRT TV department, said in February 2016: "What is not allowed on TV is not allowed in web series/电视台不能播的网站也不能播" (Wang, 15).

<sup>16</sup> 《花千骨》

<sup>17</sup> 《楚乔传》

<sup>18</sup> 《三生三世十里桃花》

<sup>19</sup> 《择天记》

<sup>20</sup> 《盗墓笔记》

to acquire full adaptation rights for online novels (57–58). Successful online novels have higher chances of success when adapted, because they have survived the competitive online literature market and have already gained a fanbase that will very likely turn into fans of the adaptations (58). According to statistics, readers of Internet literature and audiences of web series both fall within an age range of 10–39 years-old, thus, making it highly likely that fans of the original novel and audience of the adaptation will overlap (58). In order to keep the original fanbase, adaptations often seek to live up to the fans’ expectations which usually means trying to stay true to the original novel. Thus, the tension is especially pronounced in adaptations of online danmei novels, in which fidelity approach finds itself in conflict with the censorship laws.

If one looks at the trajectory of the development of danmei web series, the situation is different from the trajectory of non-danmei web series in general, as self-censoring of danmei web series came before the 2017 policy. Chen & Hu mapped out a similar three-stage trajectory for them. The first danmei web series to appear was *I Love You If You Were Men*<sup>21</sup> in 2014, which consisted of a single episode (Chen & Hu 71). The first stage, from *I Love You If You Were Men* (2014) to *Addicted*<sup>22</sup> (2016), involved small budget productions mostly within the genre of urban comedy (73). Due to loose regulations at this time, danmei web series sought to depict explicit homosexuality on screen, and *Addicted* even included explicit sexual behavior between male protagonists, but the series was quickly brought down and banned before it was completely aired. This incident marked a turning point in danmei web series productions, and caused later danmei web series to self-censor themselves and gradually embark on, according to Liu, a process of “de-danmei-fication” (1). Thus, in the second stage, danmei web series adaptations witnessed a surge of productions that used other aspects of the story to cover up the danmei parts, for example, placing the story within traditional Chinese settings and flaunting this cultural background to cohere to mainstream values (Chen & Hu 73). However, these cultural danmei web series still kept identifiable depictions of homoerotic relationships.<sup>23</sup> From *The Raccoon*<sup>24</sup> (2016) to *Love Is More Than a Word*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 《类似爱情》

<sup>22</sup> 《上瘾》

<sup>23</sup> A major problem with examining danmei web series made in the past few years is that, after their initial airing, they might be asked by the censors to recut and leave out certain parts; thus, the version that we currently find on the Internet might be very different from the original version. For example, in *Love Is More Than a Word*/识汝不识丁, a wedding scene between the two male characters was filmed and was included in the original version, but it was cut out in later edits. Thus, alt-

(2016), cultural danmei web series achieved considerable success, thus were able to open up new genres in the third stage of danmei web series' development, exemplified by *Till Death Tear Us Apart*<sup>26</sup> (2017) that took place in the Republican era (Chen & Hu 73).

Although Chen & Hu's essay was published in September 2018, their case study stops at *Till Death Tear Us Apart*, which was aired in February 2017, and it partially explains why their third stage seemed to end somewhat abruptly. And possibly because of this time gap, they did not take into account the 2017 policy that censored homosexual content in web series completely. Another 2018 essay that nodded at the issue of censorship but also ignored the 2017 policy was Yang Liu's aforementioned essay which points out that danmei web series operate on three different levels: appealing to fans of the original novel, appealing to a wider audience that may not welcome homosexual relationships on screen, and conforming to SAFRT standards, which she only accounted for a policy on TV series issued on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016 titled "General Rules of TV Production"<sup>27</sup> (1–2). Though the essay quotes head of SAFRT TV department Li Jingsheng's words that web series shall receive the same degree of censorship as TV programs (1–2), but the essay does not engage with 2017 policy. Moreover, Liu's paper shies away from examining policies; it rather theorizes the "perfect" model for danmei web series that appeals both to fans and regular audience which, she argues, showcases unimposing heterosexual relationships on supposedly homosexual couples (14), having multiple storylines outside of the romantic plotline (18), employing an aesthetic that stresses beautiful images such as using soft lighting (22), among others. Contrary to Liu's position, this paper stresses the need to change methodologies of research on web series so as to take into account strategies of adaptation in the face of 2017 censorship policy. Before 2017, it was perhaps necessary to think about ways to regulate and improve productions in the industry when creative freedom was guaranteed, but after the 2017 regulations, when the banning of homosexual relationships on-screen almost closed this space off for filmic adaptations of danmei literature, the emphasis should now turn to ways through which web series can portray queer relationships amidst censorship.

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though homosexuality is subdued in *Love Is More Than a Word*, the intention of explicitly showing homosexuality was present in the filmed wedding scene.

<sup>24</sup> 《多情债，今安在》

<sup>25</sup> 《识汝不识丁》

<sup>26</sup> 《愉此一生》

<sup>27</sup> 《电视剧内容制作通则》

Hollywood faced similar challenges from 1930 to 1968 under the Production Code which banned representation of explicit homosexuality in film productions. Nevertheless, directors found ways to hint at the possibilities of queer relationships between the lines and through *mise-en-scene* that led to a number of queer classics even at the time of stringent censorship. This paper draws upon this approach of reading between the lines and identifying the particular ways in which post-2017 danmei web series *Guardian* (2018) worked to implicitly hint at potential homoerotic relationships. It will also examine the comments and danmus under the series on Youku,<sup>28</sup> as well as discussions of *Guardian* on the Chinese social media Weibo to theorize ways through which actual spectators interact with the platform to protect the series from censorship. The role that actual spectators play in decoding queerness in danmei web series cannot be overlooked or dismissed, and *Guardian* demonstrates interesting spectator-platform relationships that point to the possibility of future cooperative alignment between spectators and platforms to together combat censorship.

The 2018 web series *Guardian* was adapted from a popular online danmei novel *Zhenhun*<sup>29</sup> posted on Jinjiang Literature City from November 2012 to March 2013,<sup>30</sup> written by the long time column author, Priest. Priest started writing on Jinjiang in 2007, and has by now produced 19 danmei novels and 10 heterosexual romances which are still available for viewing on the Jinjiang website. Her most popular novels are her lengthier danmei works that range from 400,000 to 960,000 characters.<sup>31</sup> Priest's works have frequented Jinjiang's chart for most well-received novels, and several of her danmei as well as romance works have been issued in print by commercial publishing houses, although any description of sexual activities and majority of overtly explicit depictions of homosexuality have been deleted or replaced by expressions of familial bonding in the publishing process. An online reader who purchased the print version of Priest's 2016 novel, *Modu*,<sup>32</sup> noted that what got deleted and what

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<sup>28</sup>Danmu is a type of short comment (usually no longer than 50 words, but it depends on the platform and nature of the video) that will scroll across the screen on the video. To avoid blocking the video, users can adjust the transparency of danmus or disable them all together. Because *Guardian* was taken down in August and was made available again in November 2018, a lot of original danmus were lost during the process; thus, this paper also presents an image from archives of danmus when *Guardian* was initially aired (Fig.2).

<sup>29</sup>《镇魂》

<sup>30</sup>[www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net)

<sup>31</sup>Comparing the points that each novel earned, which is calibrated from the number of hits the novel received, the top 5 most popular novels that Priest had written are all danmei novels. See <http://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=145956>

<sup>32</sup>《默读》

passed the censors was highly ambiguous; a line declaring the homosexual relationship between two male characters in the original online novel, “he is my lover”, has been replaced in the print version by “he is my family,” but another homoerotic scene of the male protagonist licking his lover’s fingers has not been deleted,<sup>33</sup> exemplifying the space of ambiguity and freedom which exists despite stringent censorship. Priest’s numerous works have also been adapted into radio episodes aired on online radio platforms like *Maoer FM*,<sup>34</sup> exhibiting the potential and flexibility of her works for adaptation into other media. Six of her danmei works and two of her romances have been sold for filmic and animation adaptations. In the case of *Guardian*, which was the first filmic adaptation of her works to come out, Priest was not involved in the adaptation process,<sup>35</sup> and would have likely sold full adaptation rights to the production company.

The web series *Guardian* (2018) was directed by Zhou Yuanzhou, an experienced cinematographer turned director of well-known Chinese TV series such as *Sparrow*<sup>36</sup> (2015). Prior to *Guardian*, Zhou had worked as a cinematographer on only one web series *Naughty Princess*<sup>37</sup> (2015). The first draft of *Guardian*’s script came out in the winter of 2016,<sup>38</sup> the production of *Guardian* was finished in 2017, and *Guardian* was aired in June 2018, stepping on key moments when SAFRT announced and actually put into practice stricter censorship on danmei web series. After the huge success *Guardian* received in the summer of 2018, it was suddenly removed from Youku on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, days after the season was finished. But the platform unofficially reassured the fans that *Guardian* was only temporarily taken down, and would be back soon.<sup>39</sup> The reasons behind this censoring remain unknown, however, a photo taken of an email possibly sent to Youku by SAFRT was widely circulated on the Internet, which asked Youku to take down *Guardian* for “...promoting feudalism and superstition, exaggerating the dark sides of society, and containing violent images” (Fig.1). It is not certain whether feudalism and superstition were simply guises to dissemble the real reason of curtailing danmei tendencies, but when the series was back on Youku in November 2018, some but not all homoerotic scenes and other “violent” scenes were eliminated from the story. On the whole, there were no major changes in

<sup>33</sup>See <https://www.zhihu.com/question/296097445>

<sup>34</sup>猫耳FM

<sup>35</sup>Her name was not in the credits, but it would have been highly likely that the production team communicated with her.

<sup>36</sup>《麻雀》

<sup>37</sup>《调皮王妃》

<sup>38</sup>See [http://www.sohu.com/a/243404680\\_100156659](http://www.sohu.com/a/243404680_100156659)

<sup>39</sup>See <https://knews.cc/zh-my/entertainment/z5blq3a.html>

the story, as an average of 10 to 20 seconds were cut out from the majority of episodes, with only a few episodes receiving cuts of up to five minutes.<sup>40</sup>

Comparing *Guardian* with Priest's original novel in conjunction with the 2017 policy would illuminate how the story was compromised in view of censorship in the process of adaptation. One major change was shifting the background setting of the story from mythology to science. The original novel exists in a world where an abyss and spirits coexist with the urban space, and the male protagonist Zhao Yunlan is head of a mysterious government department named "Special Investigation Office," which looks into supernatural cases that cannot be explained by science. Zhao, as the "guardian," has the ability to see spirits, and is in charge of communicating and cooperating with regulators of the abyss regarding cases of spirits doing harm to inhabitants of Earth. During Zhao's investigations he meets Shen Wei, who is ostensibly a university professor, but later reveals himself to be the regulator of the abyss, the one guarding the souls, also a long-time acquaintance of Zhao's, who never revealed his dual identities up to this point. As the two male protagonists bond while solving cases and develop feelings for each other, the truth of their past lives is uncovered. Zhao, a human on the surface, is actually a reincarnation of Kunlun, the mountain god in Chinese folklore, who regains his powers by the end of the novel. This mythological setting of the original novel, although taken from actual Chinese folklore, would not have likely passed chapter 4.4.1 of the 2017 policy,<sup>41</sup> which states that web series should not "...promote superstition that runs counter to science." This includes "...propagating superstitious thoughts of the soul possession, reincarnation, witchcraft and other feudal superstitions" and "...propagating ignorance, evil, grotesque and other aspects of feudal culture." Therefore, the parallel existence of an abyss with the human world and Zhao being Kunlun, a god-like figure, would have made it difficult for the series to pass the censors. Due to these reasons, the adaptation took a scientific turn and imagined a futuristic world where ordinary humans, genetically modified humans, and aliens coexist on planet named Haixing due to an alien invasion hundreds of years ago; the ordinary and genetically modified humans live on the surface, while aliens reside underground. Thanks to physics instead of superpowers, Shen Wei, who regulates the social order of the underground world, is able to travel between the under-

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<sup>40</sup>See [https://weibointl.api.weibo.cn/share/64921195.html?weibo\\_id=4305601758310178](https://weibointl.api.weibo.cn/share/64921195.html?weibo_id=4305601758310178)

<sup>41</sup>For full policy, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E8%A7%86%E5%90%AC%E8%8A%82%E7%9B%AE%E5%86%85%E5%AE%B9%E5%AE%A1%E6%A0%B8%E9%80%9A%E5%88%99/21508108?noadapt=1>

world and the surface at will, while other aliens are not allowed to do so. But some still manage to travel illegally to the surface to cause harm and the Special Investigation Office works with Shen to transport the “smugglers” back to the underground, a place that resembles an abyss and has no sunlight. Most of the remaining notions of magic are explained by physics and electronics, and one of Zhao’s co-worker, a monk in the original novel, is turned into a tech-guy, while Zhao’s past life as Kunlun is eliminated altogether. Although textually the whole story masks itself under a cover of science, the look of the web series is nowhere near scientific, but still resembles the mythological and the yin-yang worlds of the abyss in the original novel. The act of loosely applying a mask of science over the story so as to pass the censors demonstrates the ambiguity and looseness of censorship. Although the story was altered according to the change of background, and new characters were added in, on the whole the general trajectory of the series remained true to the original novel.

However, with the 2017 policy, the homosexual affair central to any danmei novel was officially denied in web series; thus, posing *Guardian* with its biggest dilemma: how to adapt a danmei novel when danmei was banned on-screen. The 2017 policy was improvised at the 2012 “China Internet Audiovisual Program Service Self-discipline Convention,”<sup>42</sup> a convention of “self-discipline” that roughly sketched out the code of conduct web series producers should follow; for example, reject feudalism, embrace traditional Chinese virtues, not produce contents forbidden by law, etc. The 2012 policy did not specifically mention homosexuality, although same-sex marriages remain illegal in China and homosexuality is banned in TV productions, and only stated that web series should not promote “obscene and erotic contents.” However, the exact definition of what is considered “obscene and erotic content” has long been highly ambiguous in various disciplines, exemplified by Hockx’s discussion of the term in censorship of online literature. In chapter three of Hockx’s book *Internet Literature in China* (2015) on online fiction and post-socialist publishing, he points out that while so-called “obscene materials” containing erotic contents are banned in online fiction, the censors also stated that “literary and artistic works of artistic value that contain erotic contents are not regarded as obscene materials” (117). This ambiguity of where to draw the bottom line between artistic and vulgar, obscene and not obscene, makes it hard even for policy makers

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<sup>42</sup> 《中国网络视听节目服务自律公约》 For full policy, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E4%BA%92%E8%81%94%E7%BD%91%E8%A7%86%E5%90%AC%E8%8A%82%E7%9B%AE%E6%9C%8D%E5%8A%A1%E8%87%AA%E5%BE%8B%E5%85%AC%E7%BA%A6>

to distinguish between them (118–119). Precisely due to the ambiguity surrounding the terms in the 2012 policy, web series before 2017 experienced considerable amount of freedom, and danmei web series, although rejecting the heterosexual norm, thrived. However, this ambiguity towards what is considered obscene materials in web series was overturned in the 2017 policy. In chapter 4.8.6, the 2017 policy specifically points out types of obscene and erotic content that are prohibited:

1. Specifically showing prostitution, fornication, rape, masturbation and other plots;
2. Demonstrate abnormal sexual relationships and sexual behaviors such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual violence;
3. Display and promote unhealthy views of marriage and love, such as extramarital affairs, one-night stand, sexual freedom, wife change, etc.
4. Showing lengthy and intimate scenes in bed, of kissing, caressing, showering, and similar implicit and explicit performances related to sexual activity;
5. Scenes, lines, music and sound effects with obvious sexual provocation, sexual harassment, sexual insults or similar effects;
6. Display male and female sex organs, or cover them with only limbs or minimal clothing;
7. Contain sexually explicit scenes, lines, music, sound effects that are unacceptable to the underaged;
8. Use vulgar language, etc.;
9. Use adult movies, erotic movies, R-rated films, sneak shots, nudity, and various other provocative texts or images as the title, classification, or promotion strategies of videos.<sup>43</sup>

With the issuing of the 2017 policy that officially groups homosexuality within the realm of obscene and erotic content that is being censored, danmei web series now face a dilemma starkly different from that in the past. While previous danmei web series can voluntarily “de-danmei-fy” themselves to appeal to a larger audience outside the danmei community, the 2017 policy makes void the nature of danmei in web series and forces such adaptations to conform to heteronormativity. Thus, post-2017 danmei web series are forced to enter into a new stage where they need to respect the ethics of adaptation and try to keep the fanbase of the original novel by staying authentic

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<sup>43</sup>For full policy, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E8%A7%86%E5%90%AC%E8%8A%82%E7%9B%AE%E5%86%85%E5%AE%B9%E5%AE%A1%E6%A0%B8%E9%80%9A%E5%88%99/21508108?noadapt=1>

and fulfilling the fans' aspirations to see homoeroticism on screen, as they simultaneously struggle with the policy's banning of explicit homosexuality and have to code queer contents in ways subtle enough to pass the censors. This requires a combination of two forces: the will of the production team to code homosexual content, and the acuteness of the spectators to decode queerness. *Guardian* proved itself to be a successful attempt in doing this, and has set an example for future danmei adaptations under censorship.

Interviews of director Zhou Yuanzhou and two male lead actors Bai Yu and Zhu Yilong show that they have all read the original novel and have constantly used it as a reference to shape their acting and comprehension of the characters.<sup>44</sup> Bai recounts his concern that the danmei aspects would be hard to pass the censors after reading the original novel, but he also points out that although the story had to undergo major alternations, he believed the key to adapting *Guardian* was to preserve the authenticity of the characters' personalities, and to try to portray the characters in the most true-to-novel sense.<sup>45</sup> This intent of bringing queerness in the series resulted in many improvised moments of homoeroticism. For example, in one scene, Zhao, who is drunk, leans on Shen's shoulder. Shen pushes him away, but as Zhao leans on him the second time, Shen lends Zhao his shoulder and even adjusts his posture to make Zhao more comfortable. According to the interviews, this scene was not in the script,<sup>46</sup> but the director kept it, referring it to the original novel and deeming that such interactions were plausible. The actors' performance in this scene intricately balances the level of homophobia and homosociality.

Also contrary to the common tactic of de-danmei-fication which involves assigning heterosexual love interests to the male protagonists in order to reduce homosexual possibilities between the two, *Guardian* did not introduce female love interests for the two male protagonists, thus, keeping the potential for queerness. However, there is a female character named Zhu Hong in the original novel who has a crush on Zhao, and also expresses her love for him, but gets refused by Zhao as he is in a relationship with Shen. However, Zhu, portrayed as a strong and independent woman with a "butchness" to her character, moves on quite quickly, and later becomes supportive towards the homosexual relationship between Zhao and Shen. The fact that Zhu is rejected by Zhao, with a cliché reason saying "you deserve better,"

<sup>44</sup>For Zhu's and Bai's interview, see <https://www.weibo.com/5445663911/GmxTMwP2C?type=comment>

<sup>45</sup>See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2018-07-28/doc-ihfxszf7851004.shtml>

<sup>46</sup>See <http://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20180709A1BCK000?refer=spider>

eliminates the potential for a heterosexual plot line. Notably, Zhao's answer is generic enough to leave a considerable space open for interpretations as to why Zhao really rejects Zhu and, in the eyes of danmei fans, affirms the homosexual relationship between Zhao and Shen that they wish to perceive. Moreover, the character construction of Zhu being both butch and feminine, independent and caring, also signals to a type of woman different from the overly-feminine woman with little agency in traditional heterosexual narratives, thus, appealing to danmei fans' needs for strong female characters on-screen. But this plot line of Zhu having a crush on Zhao is possibly kept in the web series to signify a potential heterosexual relationship for the censors' approval.

The codes of queerness are also embedded in various aspects of character construction and *mise-en-scene*. The character Shen Wei embodies a softer masculinity that stands out from the typical image of the tough male in heterosexual narratives. In the series, Shen has dual identities: on the one hand he is a gentle and sophisticated university professor, on the other, he is the powerful guardian of the underworld, often appearing as a fully cloaked and masked figure holding a wand. Shen's body, freely morphing between these two starkly different identities signals a queerness in the character. This queerness is further supported by the inherent softness in Shen's personality. When he is cloaked and restores order between the two worlds, he abides by rules but often emits sympathy for aliens that meant no harm. In both the identities, he protects and cares for Zhao, cooks for him, tidies up his room, and voluntarily cuts himself and uses his own blood as medicine for Zhao who is harmed by evil powers, thus strengthening the bond between these two male characters. The queerness in Shen is also highlighted by the forty-four sets of costumes that Shen wears throughout the series, marking the series' emphasis on beauty as central to the nature of danmei.<sup>47</sup> Apart from the sheer number of costumes, the orientation towards details of Shen's dressing, like stuffing the ends of his tie into his shirt when he sits down, and using a cuff to hold the sleeves of his shirt in place (which is initially introduced by Zhu Yilong and later becomes Shen's signature), flag a queerness in Shen through *mise-en-scene*.

The ending of *Guardian*, however, sets fans of the original novel in rage. While the original novel ended on a happy ending

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<sup>47</sup>See <https://www.xuehua.us/2018/06/23/%E3%80%8A%E9%95%87%E9%AD%82%E3%80%8B%E5%89%A7%E7%BB%84%E4%B8%BA%E4%BD%95%E8%BF%99%E4%B9%88%E7%A9%B7%EF%BC%9F%E9%92%B1%E9%83%BD%E7%BB%99%E6%B2%88%E5%B7%8D%E4%B9%B0%E8%A1%A3%E6%9C%8D%E4%BA%86%EF%BC%8C/>

where Zhao and Shen lived happily ever after, *Guardian* ends on a tragic note, with the two characters sacrificing themselves to restore the order of both worlds by bringing sunlight to the underworld. The death of both the characters can be seen as signaling towards the failure of a potential homosexual relationship, but it still leaves a relatively queer space open for alternative interpretations. Towards the end of the series, we are informed that in the aftermath light is brought to the underworld, and aliens and humans live happily ever after. The series doesn't end as this articulation of a happy future fades to black, but instead, with a fade in, the screen shows a cosmic space where both Zhao and Shen are amidst the stars and the universe; they say goodbye to each other, but vow to meet again in another time and space. In this supernatural space between worlds and time, the two characters can be seen as fantasizing about a world where homosexuality is made possible and legal, and the series gives its best shot at queerness at the very end by not closing the story off but by preserving the chance of re-encounter.

The issuing of the 2017 policy designates that post-2017 danmei web series either face extinction or try to find alternative ways out that nod to both censorship and the danmei community. In the face of regulations, danmei web series do not have much freedom to express queerness but it can still be encoded within the series for spectators. And it is highly likely that queerness did get through to the danmei fans judging from the immense popularity that the web series received.<sup>48</sup> During the course of its airing, from 13<sup>th</sup> June to 25<sup>th</sup> July 2018, *Guardian* received over 28 trillion hits<sup>49</sup> making it one of the top three most popular web series aired around the time.<sup>50</sup> Up to 26<sup>th</sup> July, the official discussion page of *Guardian* accumulated 110.4 trillion hits, had almost 1 million fans, and 16.74 million posts were written about the series, making it the number one discussed web series on Chinese social media, Weibo. This can be attributed to a group of fans who named themselves “Guardian Girls (or Boys),” who were often readers and fans of the original novel or fans of larger danmei culture. Guardian Girls actively initiated heated discussions of the series on social media, creatively reworked existing material and produced fan clips, memes, and funny posts that went viral. Some of these included screenshots with changed subtitles to parody the hidden homosexual relationship between the two characters or recuts of all homoerotic

<sup>48</sup>For official statistics, see [https://www.weibo.com/6126633570/GrGi3kTjt?type=comment#\\_rnd1554481078384](https://www.weibo.com/6126633570/GrGi3kTjt?type=comment#_rnd1554481078384)

<sup>49</sup>The number is no longer available on Youku, as Youku announced that it will no longer disclose how many hits a series has received on its website. See <https://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2019-01-18/doc-ihqfskcn8187531.shtml>

<sup>50</sup><http://news.guduomedia.com/?p=29007>

moments in the series. Although the series affirmed no actual homosexual relationship between the two male protagonists, *Guardian Girls* seem quite content with reworking existing material and shaping it according to their homoerotic fantasies. Thus, even under censorship which bans explicit depictions of homosexuality on-screen, fan's aspirations have been fulfilled in the subtle play of homosexuality on-screen.

Further examining the danmus and comments *Guardian Girls* posted under the series indicate that danmei fans are aware of the current challenges faced by danmei web series adaptations. *Guardian Girls*, knowing that the danmus and comments they post on the platform were very likely to be monitored, self-censored themselves from explicitly mentioning the danmei aspects of the series in their posts so as to ensure a successful and "safe" airing of the series. As a substitution they invented other terms to implicitly allude to homosexuality, for example, calling the relationship between Zhao and Shen "Socialist brotherhood," which refers to homosexuality that could not be made explicit under state censorship (Fig. 2). As they initiated heated discussions over the series on social media, the platform Youku also benefitted economically from the immense popularity that *Guardian Girls* brought to the series and to the streaming platform. As a result, Youku bought outdoor advertising venues for *Guardian* on July 20<sup>th</sup> 2018 at HuanQiuGang Twin Towers in Shanghai to specially thank *Guardian Girls* and further promote the series. *Guardian* exemplifies how danmei web series can still effectively code homosexual content for danmei fans even under censorship, and bring considerable commercial revenue to both the series and the platform. Thus ensuring that platforms are more likely to continue to invest in future danmei web series due to their lucrative potentials, and creating a cooperative alignment between the platform and danmei fans that together combats censorship's curbing of this genre.

Although the 2017 policy makes it hard for danmei adaptations to survive and for the platforms to keep producing and airing future danmei web series, even as Chinese society is in urgent need cultural productions opposing the dominant gender discourses and mainstream cultures by challenge state censorship, *Guardian's* success hopefully makes way for more danmei adaptations to come.





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