submission, transcendence, and autonomy:

female *danmei* fandom in the post-2020s China

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the profound impact of *danmei* consumption on Chinese women born between the 1990s and 2000s based on the employment of Simon de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism theory. It highlights how *danmei* narratives — often perceived as misogynistic - challenged traditional gender norms and empowered female readers according to the perspectives of female fans. By examining these fans' perceptions of the portrayal of female characters in *danmei* fiction, the study reveals how these narratives offered a vision of autonomy and self-determination for readers, allowing them to transcend societal expectations and embrace their agency. Moreover, it uncovers how *danmei* provided a platform for female fans to conceive a world free from societal constraints, prompting reflection on identity, ambition, and self-discovery. While acknowledging the inevitable submission and possible misogyny of female fans under the dual pressures of traditional gender expectations and modern societal demands, the research argues that *danmei* has served as not only entertainment providing women with an escape from the unpleasant reality but also a catalyst for social change, empowering young Chinese female fans to envision a future where they are free to shape their own lives.

Key words: *Danmei*; Female fandom; Gender norm; Counterculture; Feminism

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

When scholars study contemporary Chinese popular culture, they will find that an unfamiliar term *Danmei* occupies a prominent part of it. *Danmei* (耽美), literally meaning "indulging in or addicted to beauty", is a special genre of Chinese web literature depicting male-male romance, primarily consumed and produced by heterosexual women (Yi, 2013; Yang and Xu, 2015, p.133). As the genre becomes increasingly prevailing, *danmei* fiction and its derivatives have created a massive Internet-based subculture in China that has great impacts on public entertainment (Zhou, 2017, p.94), media communication (Zhou, 2017, p.96-103), teenage education (Hu et al., 2023, p.13-14), state policy (Hu et al., 2023, p.1) and so on.

Originated from the Japanese Yaoi (やおい) comics, Boy's Love (BL) works first appeared in China in the early 1990s and then localized within small circles of female fans, who coined the Chinese term *danmei* to refer to this newly-imported narrative genre. Since then, *danmei* has gradually spread across the country through the Internet. In the early days, *danmei* fandom was quite limited and unstable, relying heavily on the voluntary efforts of enthusiasts (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.133-134). The reform of Jinjiang Literature City (*Jinjiang* for short) in 2008 to start to "charge a fee for access to certain "VIP" BL works, albeit controversial", marked the beginning of the commercialization and stabilization of the fandom (Feng, 2009, p.3), and *Jinjiang* has since evolved into the largest and most influential women's literature website in China (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.132), catering almost exclusively to contemporary Chinese women's interests and concerns (Feng, 2009, p.3).

Subsequently, *danmei* has entered a time of rocketing development and expansion. During this period, not only did a large number of *danmei* novels attract plenty of fans online and earn both word-of-mouth and financial success, but their adapted derivatives such as TV dramas (Ng and Li, 2020, p.479; Ge, 2022, p.1021) and audio dramas (Hu,

Jin and Liao, 2023, p.838-839) also became a big hit.

Nonetheless, the development of *danmei* in China has been fraught with challenges including the rejection of the traditional publishing industry (Chang and Tian, 2020, p.604), the marginalization and discouragement of Confucian patriarchal mainstream society (Yi, 2013; Tian, 2020, p.190-192), the ambiguous and variable attitudes of the government (Ng and Li, 2020, p.481), and the increasingly stringent state censorship (Yang and Xu, 2016, p.168-172), but none of them really stopped its growth. The development of *danmei* from "a secret topic discussed in small, closed, online communities" (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.133) to an influential cultural phenomenon with significant economic and social impacts is constantly intertwined with women's involvement since the main producers and consumers in this system are female fans (Zhang, 2016, p.250). Though previous research shows that it is common for *danmei* fictionists or fans to "leave the circle" due to the pressures from real life, especially after getting married and having children (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.134; Chang and Tian, 2020, p.615), this has not led to the decline of the fandom, as more and more new fans joined in.

1.2 Research Questions

As introduced, *danmei* culture now has a wide influence in China, building an extensive female-dominated fan base. Previous studies have shown that because of the sensitivity of homosexual works in mainland China, *danmei* culture has been largely based on the Internet, and the cultural production and consumption activities associated with it are highly digitalized, becoming a significant part of the digital life of those female fans. Taking the female *danmei* fandom in the post-2020 era as a starting point, this thesis is dedicated to exploring the relationship between the consumption of *danmei* and the rising feminist agenda among young Chinese women in recent years. The research question is, how does the consumption of *danmei* affect gender awareness among young Chinese women? It is further broken down into two sub-questions:

1) What are the experiences of female fans engaging with *danmei*?

2) Why are they particularly fond of *danmei*?

1.3 Roadmap

In the following sections, the literature review section critically examines existing perspectives on Chinese *danmei* culture and its female fandom, including both critiques and other nuanced viewpoints. The upcoming section then employs Simon de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism as the theoretical framework with a special focus on the three core conceptions: submission, transcendence, and autonomy. The methodology section outlines the approach to data collection and analysis. The analyses and findings section subsequently explores *danmei's* allure for female fans, its impact on their gender perceptions, and how it challenges traditional social gender norms. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes key insights, highlighting the multifaceted impacts of *danmei* on its female consumers and suggesting avenues for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews previous literature on Chinese *danmei* culture and its female fandom. It then identifies a research gap which fulfilled by this thesis project based on the review.

2.1 Chinese *Danmei* Culture

While having deep roots in Japanese and Taiwanese BL culture and being heavily influenced by Western slash fiction, Chinese *danmei* has several unique features that make its relationship with fans even more special compared to its foreign counterparts. Firstly, the rapid growth of *danmei* culture in China was made possible by the technological innovations in the Internet age (Chang and Tian, 2020, p.604). Literature works featuring homosexual themes, though not illegal, are generally considered abnormal or immoral by the authorities and mainstream society in China, resulting in them mostly being created and circulated online (Yang and Xu, 2017, p.4). This has given rise to a series of online literature websites and text-sharing platforms that are known for *danmei* works, for example, *Jinjiang*, Changpei Literature City, and LOFTER. Mainly occupied by female users, these platforms allow them to create tremendous female-dominated cyber-communities, which can hardly be seen in other areas in China.

Secondly, literary works have always occupied the absolute mainstream of Chinese *danmei* culture despite a number of derivatives, and their contents are usually highly censored or self-censored. Foreign BL works appear in a wide range of formats including manga, anime, TV series, and films, and often contain direct erotic depictions (Zhang, 2016, p.254; Chang and Tian, 2020, p.605), but in mainland China, *danmei* are facing special challenges because of their "dual association with homosexuality and pornography" (Yang and Xu, 2017, p.4). In the absence of clear regulations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government's attitude towards homosexual works has long been rather vague and fluid, thus both the platforms and the producers involved in BL

works creation are very cautious about the content of their works to avoid potential legal risks. Compared to graphics or videos, texts are much less subjected to state censorship and become a priority for creators (Chang and Tian, 2020, p.605).

In those works that were published or adapted into TV series, sections that explicitly depict the homosexual love between the protagonists have been removed or modified to a kind of so-called "socialist brotherhood (社会主义兄弟情)" using the strategy of "bromance-as-masquerade", which justifies the male characters' intimacy as that of "friends" rather than "boyfriends" to evade censorship and engage with the mainstream media, and relies on fans' own proactive imagination to perceive their "real romantic relationship" (Hu and Wang, 2020, p.675). In the meantime, the production and dissemination of erotic texts, either gay or straight, is a state felony that may lead to conviction and imprisonment (Chang and Tian, 2020). Hence on most publicly available websites in mainland China, only *danmei* works without any sexual depiction are allowed to be published. *Jinjiang*, the website mentioned above, is known for its extremely strict standards regarding erotic depiction, "other than mouth-kissing and hand-holding, no form of intimacy was allowed" (Yang and Xu, 2016, p.174), which is ironically summarized as "any depiction below the neck is forbidden" by fans.

Thirdly, as one of the most popular genres in Chinese web literature, *danmei*, though still regarded as a subculture by mainstream society, has formed a highly diversified community which is reflected not only in the variety of their styles, meanings, and subject areas but also in the plurality of the readerships' identities (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.138). Although there is no official statistical data regarding the exact number of female *danmei* fans in China (Zhang, 2016, p.255, p.250), the fandom is obviously huge and stable judging from the millions of hits received by hot *danmei* novels in *Jinjiang* (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.133), and the themes of *danmei* works are as diversified as their large readership. For example, there are over two hundred subcategory tags on *Jinjiang* (Jinjiang Literature City, 2024), ranging from traditional themes of romance like

detective, science, and history to newly-emerged ones such as war, aliens, zombies, mecha (giant robot fighters), electronic sports and so on, providing the readers with a wide variety of options and attracting fans with different interests.

After years of rapid growth, *danmei* in post-2020 is now facing a new dilemma. The "Internet Clean-up Campaign" launched by the CCP government in 2021 heralded a transition in authoritative attitudes toward *danmei* and its fandom, shifting from simple discouragement or indifference to "the current approach of rigorous injunction" (Hu et al., 2023, p.3). Because of "the detrimental role of *danmei* and male effeminacy on the healthy development of teenagers" (Hu et al., 2023, p.14), some popular works were forced to be taken down by literature websites with no formal explanation, and web series adapted from *danmei* works have been prohibited from being released. A series of feature articles published by state media or local news agencies since 2021 harshly criticized and depreciated the *danmei* fiction and culture, some of which even directly stated that "schools and parents should prohibit teenagers from reading *danmei* fiction or watching *danmei*-adapted series and be wary of the negative effects of *danmei* culture on the healthy development of teenagers" (Gu, 2021; Wu, 2021; Xu, 2021; Hu, 2022). Nevertheless, these seem to have little impact on the female *danmei* fandom. They continue to support *danmei* fiction on literature websites and to produce promotional articles or videos for their favorite works on different online platforms spontaneously. Under great pressure from the paternalist authority, girls have displayed a silent but surprising resilience and solidarity in their love for *danmei*, which seems to become a means for them to fight against the patriarchal social norms in cyberspace.

Take the case of *The Sound of Silence* (《默读》) as a representative. Written by the famous female *danmei* writer Priest, *The Sound of Silence* is one of the most popular *danmei* works in China and has earned a reputation in the mainstream literary circle for its marvelous language and social concern (Shao and Gao, 2019, p.131). In the fiction, the writer has expressed a strong feminist thought by focusing on a number of social

issues related to women that have long been ignored in literature works, such as the dual harm women suffer in domestic violence (from both their husbands' fists and their children's indifference), the obscenity and sexual abuse suffered by young girls, and the unique agony girls suffer in school bullying (for example spreading rumors saying that they are slutty). A famous line from the novel was once widely circulated online and later became a slogan of digital feminism activity to protect young girls from sexual abuse, "You can tell your girl to be alert and be wary of strangers, but you can't make her afraid of wearing a beautiful dress (你可以教孩子防备陌生人, 提高警惕, 但是不能让她害怕穿碎花裙子)". Shao and Gao argued that *The Sound of Silence* dealt with a central question for women, "How can the restricted personality and imprisoned mind gain freedom and love?", which marked the revitalization of women as human beings after a long period of self-constraint, self-gratification and self-healing (Shao and Gao, 2019, p.132).

In short, in the post-2020 era, China's *danmei* culture is characterized by deep digitalization, great reliance on literary texts, highly puritanical content, diversified subject areas, and vast readership. Although still suffering from the disdain, exclusion, and suppression from mainstream society, *danmei* and the women behind it have become a leviathan in contemporary Chinese popular culture that cannot be ignored. At the same time, unfortunately, their images in the eyes of the outside world still seem to be occupied by stereotypes and misconceptions.

2.2 The Female Fandom of *Danmei*

Current studies about the female fanbase of *danmei* can be summarized into a heated debate around whether the consumption of BL-themed works has a positive or negative effect on women and feminism, which finds its origin in a consistent agreement among researchers that women's love of BL stems from the fact that these works can fulfill their desires for the idealized intimate relationship based on equal gender identity, which can hardly be achieved in patriarchal Chinese society (Zhang, 2016, p.249;

Chang and Tian, 2020, p.610; Ge, 2021, p.244). Similar arguments and opinions can also be seen in studies of Japanese or Western female fans of BL works (see, for example, McLelland, 2006; Pagliassotti, 2008; Martin, 2012; Lamb and Veith, 2014). Below a brief review of some of the most influential and frequently stated arguments from both sides of the debate will be presented. It should also be emphasized here that some of them are intertwined with each other.

Scholars who criticize *danmei* claim that it deepens the heterosexual gender stereotypes (Zhou, Paul and Sherman, 2017, p.116; Wang and Ge, 2022), displays women's internalized misogyny (Ge, 2022, p.1021), worship of and dependence on men (Wang, 2010) and their submission to patriarchal order (Bo, 2011; Zhang, 2016, p.257-259). Given that the majority of the *danmei* works nowadays are commercial fiction posted on large literature websites and the writers' income depends on the number of purchases, writers must consider or even cater to the taste of mainstream readers, most of whom are women, for financial income (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.135), the desires, thoughts, preferences of female fans are all reflected in the novels they read or write. As Radway states, "The search for emotional gratification was the one theme common to all of the women's observations about the function of romance reading" (Radway, 1991, p.96). Following this logic, many researchers have focused their studies on women's gender identity and attributed women's passion for *danmei* to their desire for romantic fantasy and sexuality (Zhang, 2016, p.251-252; Zhou, Paul, and Sherman, 2017, p.109-111).

Female readers' ambivalent attitudes toward the depiction of male-male sexual intercourse in *danmei* works is one of the most denounced problems by scholars. On the one hand, *danmei* fiction serves as an outlet for women to explore and satisfy their sexual fantasies by positioning males as the objects of female desire without moral guilt or anxiety, just like what men have done in the traditional male gaze (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.136; Zhang, 2016, p.251). On the other hand, because of the dominating sexual puritanism in social norms and values (Zhang, 2016, p.254), Chinese women usually

have been instilled from an early age that it is important to maintain the 'purity' of their bodies, thus their ideal image of love in fiction is highly related to the so-called 'purity' of the protagonists, even if they are male. Against this context, "two adult male protagonists have never had sexual or even emotional experiences before each other" becomes a popular setting in *danmei* fiction. Some writers would even directly highlight in the introduction of their works whether the protagonist is still a virgin or not as a reminder to readers since there were a large number of readers who refused to read novels in which the protagonists had sexual experiences before because they cannot accept such 'impurity'.

In Confucian China, where "women's sexuality has long been tied up with reproduction and the family system" (Yang and Xu, 2015), men and women are inherently unequal in a romantic relationship, even when they are of the same socioeconomic conditions. Thus, the idealization of the intimate relationship between men becomes the only way for women to see the existence of "love for love's sake". This has led to the critique of *danmei* fiction as the product of women's unrealistic fantasies rooted in heteronormative gender stereotypes (Zhou, Paul, and Sherman, 2017). Scholars concluded that women reading *danmei* are either longing for the same privileges as men under patriarchy to "enjoy more sexual freedom" and treat the weaker gender as sex objects (Zhang, 2011) or dreaming of "idealized heterosexual partnerships" (Zhang, 2016, p.255).

The marginalization of women in *danmei* fiction is another target of critics. Zhang pointed out that there has long been a lack of female figures in BL, and female characters in *danmei* were frequently depicted as negative roles like "the third wheel to a homoerotic relationship" or "the mother of a gay protagonist who fiercely opposes her son's gayness" in order to "highlight the faithfulness and loyalty of the boys' love", but readers' seemed to show "a lack of identification with these women characters" (Zhang, 2016, p.255). In their work about digital feminism expression in China, Aivava

Xue and Kate Rose (Xue and Rose, 2022) mentioned Chinese feminists' critiques of *danmei* for the eulogization and idealization of men (p.153) and the bias against and marginalization of women (p.151). While admitting that *danmei* stories "offer a cathartic way for women to escape a heterosexual culture that instrumentalizes female bodies and identify with the egalitarian romantic portrayals of men" (p.151), they stressed that the currency and success of *danmei* "are rooted in patriarchal cultural domination" (p.151), which is an evidence of "female annihilation in popular culture" (p.153).

Similar views can also be observed in Ge's research, where the author found out that female characters would only be admitted or appreciated when they supported the male protagonists' love, and women showed strong hatred for those who might displace or disrupt the love story, exhibiting "an internalized misogyny, even a negative stereotypical jealousy that 'divides' women" (Ge, 2022, p.1030-1031). These, to some extent, can be seen as the reflection of the majority of current Chinese feminists' view on *danmei*, a notion further supported by Yang and Xu's research, in which they assert that "the most scathing critique of BL in China comes from critics with an ostensibly feminist leaning" (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.137).

Nevertheless, though the general opinion on *danmei* among feminists is quite negative, some scholars try to explore the merits of *danmei* for feminist discourses in China. Chang and Tian examined the power of *danmei* as a "counterculture" in excavating the "radical political potential of China's digital feminism" (Chang and Tian, 2020, p.609), and affirmed its functions of creating "a shared political vernacular" for Chinese young women to "manifest their distaste for the virulent patriarchal gender norms" and promote "the pervasion of feminist sensibilities" (p.616). They argued in their article that not all *danmei* works use sex depiction as the selling point and there has been a divergence within female authorship on "whether it is necessary to put sex under the spotlight in their works" (p.613).

Besides, many studies have shown that due to the increasingly strict censorship in mainland China, most popular *danmei* novels are devoid of any depiction of sexual intercourse, but their currency among female fans continues unabated. These suggest that while women show a wide acceptance of intensive sex plots, they are neither indispensable in the work nor a determining factor in judging whether a work is good or not (p. 613). Therefore, creating and reading fiction depicting male-male sexual intercourse can be regarded as a way for girls to strike back against the traditional Chinese patriarchal thoughts that have imposed huge restrictions regarding sex on women and men's long-term objectification of the female body through means such as distributing and viewing pornography, and to display their "confrontational stance against both state censorship and the Chinese ruling party's oldline preference for a puritanic discourse to dominate people's private lives" (p.616).

As to the critique of the marginalization of women in *danmei* works, Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu asserted that though the protagonists of *danmei* fiction are all male, it does not mean that *danmei* lacks the portrayal of female characters, especially positive female figures, they just show up with other identifications instead of lovers (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.138). This is further supported by information provided by Chang and Tian about the two main types of female characters in mainstream *danmei* fiction. The first is called "the bystander girl", normally "a close friend to one of the main characters and a kind-hearted observer of the male protagonists'", while the second is called "the assist girl", usually "an open-minded and cheerful relative (usually sister) or a close friend to one of the protagonists" (Chang and Tian, 2020, p. 611-612).

In addition, some scholars also paid attention to the humanistic care for groups and issues that have long been neglected or marginalized in *danmei* fiction, especially those most popular and widely praised classic works (Shao, 2019, p.128). Compared with the heterosexual romance that is "still obsessed with women's rivalries in the imperial

harem and feudal families", *danmei* fiction display "a wider range of social concerns and a more vivid imagination" (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.135) and provide "a revolutionary 'mental tool' that helps women imagine alternative gender relations, explore new self-identities and consider strategies for reinventing the big wide world outside the prison-house of patriarchal gender roles" (Xu and Yang, 2013, p.40; Yang and Xu, 2015, p.135), allowing them to be more resonant among well-educated young women who yearn for the broader spiritual world.

In sum, the discourse surrounding the female *danmei* fanbase reflects a complex interplay of feminist critique and appreciation. While some scholars contend that *danmei* perpetuates gender stereotypes and marginalizes women, others argue for its potential as a countercultural force that empowers women to challenge patriarchal norms. The debate hinges on whether *danmei* serves as a liberating outlet for women's desires or reinforces traditional gender hierarchies. However, amidst these contrasting views, there emerges a recognition of *danmei*'s capacity to explore marginalized issues, offer alternative gender relations, and foster feminist consciousness. Ultimately, the study of *danmei* fandom underscores the intricate dynamics between popular culture, feminism, and societal norms, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which *danmei* as a subculture intersects with women's gender awareness and empowerment in contemporary Chinese society.

2.3 Identifying the Gap and Significance of the Study

This section reviews two research areas: Chinese *danmei* culture and its female fandom. Scholars hold differing views on the merits and drawbacks of *danmei* for feminist agendas. However, while researchers are fiercely debating about the faults and benefits of *danmei* for its female fans, this debate, in my opinion, seems more like a condescending judgment based on the repeated analysis of the several most eye-catching tags of *danmei*. Few scholars really focused their attention on these girls and put themselves in the shoes of these girls to understand how *danmei*, as something that

occupies an important position in their lives, has influenced their gender-related thoughts and expressions.

Why are young Chinese women particularly fond of *danmei* among plenty of different types of entertainment in the Internet era? What motivates them to persist and flourish under great pressure from mainstream society and the official government? How do they themselves feel about the criticism and misunderstanding from the outside world? What do their experiences and thoughts tell us? Thus, identifying a gap existing in studies on *danmei* and its female fandom.

This paper attempts to examine the feminist sensibilities and expressions in the female *danmei* fandom from the perspective of young female insiders in the post-2020 and to explore the relationship between *danmei* culture and the grassroots feminism that has been on the rise among young women in recent years.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter introduces the pertinent theories and concepts utilized for the analysis and interpretation of data within the thesis. Grounded in the ontological and epistemological perspectives, this research predominantly relies on the feminist existentialism theory of Simon de Beauvoir, an intellectual intersection of existential philosophy and feminist theory. Feminist existentialism finds its roots in existential philosophy, particularly in the principles of individual freedom and responsibility, and offers a profound lens through which to examine the complexities of women's experiences, agency, and identity.

Simone de Beauvoir, a luminary in existential philosophy and a feminist, challenged the traditional gender roles of women with her famous saying "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.267), which serves as the bedrock of feminist existentialism. Her concept of "becoming a woman" and the existential implications of women as "the other" and "the second sex" become focal points in understanding existentialist contributions to feminist discourse (Tong and Fernandes, 2017, p.92-108). Beauvoir contends that the experience of "being" or "becoming" a woman is socially constructed. It entails living within a social framework that men have sought to impose upon women for their own benefit (Kruks, 1992, p.101). Consequently, existential freedom, in Beauvoir's view, becomes intimately linked with women's submission to their socially prescribed identity, and it is only through transcending societal constraints and asserting their autonomy that women can attain true freedom. Therefore, this chapter will review Beauvoir's theory from these three core aspects: submission, transcendence, and autonomy, and explain how this theory provides a feasible framework for conducting academic analysis in this study.

Although Beauvoir's works were initially revered by feminists, they faced various critiques and shifts in interpretation over the years, which is often related to her intimate relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, both emotionally and intellectually, as being not

critical enough of him (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p.399). While many feminists found inspiration in Beauvoir's life, emphasizing her "free" union with Sartre, her rejection of traditional roles like housework and motherhood, and her intellectual creativity, the theoretical aspects of *The Second Sex* were not always seriously engaged, leading to observations that the book was often worshiped but little read (Kruks et al., 2005, p.286). The 1980s saw increased discussions of Beauvoir's work within feminist circles, but it was often dismissed as methodologically naive and self-contradictory. Critics accused Beauvoir of being both an essentialist and a radical social constructionist, creating confusion about her stance on women's oppression. Furthermore, she was charged with male identification, misogyny, heterosexism, and possibly racism (p. 287-288).

However, this article argues that Beauvoir's philosophy provides invaluable insights into the nature of women's submission under the complex dynamics of patriarchy, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding its social, cultural, and existential dimensions. Her theory of oppression as othering elucidates how women internalize and perpetuate their subordination and underscores the crucial distinction between women's submission and their inherent nature. Beauvoir once said, "the whole of feminine history has been manmade" (1944, p.144). If a woman experiences such extreme oppression that her ability to express her thoughts and feelings is stifled, then her circumstances effectively determine her future, and she loses her capacity to act effectively or make moral choices (Kruks, 1992, p.102). In mainland China, as in many patriarchal societies, women's submission is often prescribed as a societal norm, reinforced by cultural traditions and expectations. By framing femininity as a social situation enforced through historical power relations rather than innate inferiority, Beauvoir illuminates how women's experiences of submission are shaped by external forces rather than intrinsic traits, challenging traditional perspectives that view this submission as a natural or moral choice (Garcia, 2023, p.204), and offering a nuanced understanding of women's consent to submission under social norms (p. 208).

The phenomenological method of Beauvoir's analysis offers a powerful tool for examining women's lived experiences of submission (p.206). "Situation" is a central concept in her arguments that overcomes the opposition between essentialism and nominalism, which emphasizes the contextual nature of women's experiences (p.204), allowing for the recognition of social norms conditioning women's existence while maintaining the potential for transcendence (p. 201). By prioritizing first-person narratives and multiple perspectives, Beauvoir reveals the subjective realities of women's lives under patriarchy, countering narratives that objectify and marginalize women's voices (p.206). This approach is especially useful in the context of mainland China, where women's experiences are often silenced or overlooked in mainstream discourse.

In analyzing Beauvoir's theory of women's submission, it is necessary to bring up the concept of "bad faith" introduced by Sartre (Sartre, 1993, p.160-169). Beauvoir applies this notion to women who conform to societal expectations without questioning or challenging them and argues that the existential journey involves a conscious rejection of bad faith, encouraging women to critically examine and resist the roles assigned to them by society (Mussett). The concept of "transcendence" proposed by her becomes pivotal here in understanding women's agency within societal structures (Beauvoir, 2000, p. 43). Transcendence, in this context, implies the need for women to transcend social gender expectations and confirms their agency in defining their destinies, through which they assert their autonomy and reclaim their subjectivity.

Beauvoir delineates specific scenarios where women's transcendence is inhibited, thus relegating them to a state of immanence (Pettersen, 2008, p.60). According to Beauvoir, submission doesn't entail giving up existing freedom but rather forsaking the pursuit of it. Compared to men, women, facing greater societal barriers, often find the pursuit of freedom more challenging and costly, making submission more appealing. Thus "it is not that women actively choose submission, but that they consent to the submission that

is prescribed to them by social norms" (Garcia, 2023, p.208). This theory reconciles the seeming contradiction in consenting to submission, highlighting how oppressed individuals, especially women, may endorse or even find comfort in harmful social norms due to the perceived costs of pursuing freedom, which is regarded to be particularly relevant in understanding behaviors such as women's preference for reading *danmei*, especially within the context of societal domestication and gender expectation.

Nevertheless, although Beauvoir's analysis of women's submission and transcendence demonstrates that women are often deeply bound and harmed by social doctrines and conditioning compared to their male counterparts, she also points out that men, like women, are actually victims of the patriarchal social structure (Rognlie, 2023, p.464). In a society where patriarchal values are deeply entrenched, the autonomy of both men and women is to varying degrees controlled and influenced by external forces. Human beings inherently possess autonomy during infancy and childhood. As Beauvoir observes, both sexes share existential identity in early development. Regardless of gender, a newborn infant is already an autonomous subject transcending themselves toward the world, apprehending the universe through their senses rather than their sexual characteristics (Beauvoir, 2000, p.283-284; Scholz, 2010; Levy, 2016). Despite any early social pressures a girl may face, her future passivity remains theoretical. She still perceives herself as an autonomous individual (Beauvoir, 2000, p.341). However, as they grow up, the divergence between sexes begins to manifest based on the different societal opportunities and expectations provided for men and women. In a world of "virile prestige", boys are pushed to pursue independence to gain social privilege, while girls are encouraged to relinquish their autonomy to please others, adopting the paradoxically narcissistic role of a "living doll" (p.294-295). In such an environment, the agency of both men and women is no longer solely belongs to their own but shaped by the external "situations".

Beauvoir argues that for a woman, the more unfortunate thing is that once she attempts to win back her autonomy, she would find the path to achieving this goal to be fraught with conflicting desires between aspiring to humanhood and pursuing feminine qualities (Rognlie, 2023, p.466). She states that when a woman "wants to live both like a man and like a woman" (Beauvoir, 2000, p.725), "her workload and her fatigue are multiplied as a result" (p.736). In other words, for women, balancing the aspirations of being a person with full agency and being a woman is often unattainable, as "the tension between the independent woman's humanity and her femininity makes it nearly impossible for her to truly retake herself, to repeat her autonomy" (Rognlie, 2023, p.466). Even if some women manage to achieve this goal after arduous struggles, they often have to endure tremendous effort and extraordinary sacrifices, deterring many potential followers. Those who are unwilling to pay such a price and "voluntarily choose" to give up the pursuit of autonomy, content with assuming a secondary gender role in a man's world, often face another type of condemnation. Therefore, Beauvoir believes that it is necessary to collectively sacrifice the values of being a "real woman" and a "real man" for women, men, and others to regain autonomy and live generously amidst the fundamental ambiguity of human nature (Beauvoir, 2000, p.766). This viewpoint holds significant importance in understanding the dilemmas faced by contemporary young women in China, as their upbringing teaches them to strive to study, work, and compete as an independent person like their male peers, yet upon entering society, they find themselves still treated as "the other sex" by societal standards.

To conclude, Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism illuminates how societal norms shape women's submission and hinder their transcendence and emphasizes the need for women to confront and transcend patriarchal norms, reclaiming autonomy and living authentically amidst the complexities of human nature, offering a profound framework for understanding women's experiences with *danmei* within patriarchal societies.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter elucidates the methodology employed in the research. Commencing with an examination of ontological and epistemological perspectives, the chapter encompasses the presentation of research strategy and design, an overview of the research process, and a reflection on the limitations and ethical considerations of the research.

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

This thesis adopts an interpretative approach to scrutinize the sociocultural experiences of participants within the female *danmei* fandom and assesses their impact on gender perceptions. Central to the research is the exploration of individuals' "common-sense thinking", encompassing their values, beliefs, and lived experiences. Aligned with interpretivism, which posits that truth and knowledge derive from subjective understandings rooted in personal experiences, the study emphasizes the cultural and historical contexts shaping individuals' viewpoints (Ryan, 2018, p.17). Grounded in a constructivist ontological stance, it asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continuously produced through interactions among social actors (Bryman, 2016, p.29), necessitating an interpretative strategy to grasp the subjective intentions behind social action (p.26).

Drawing on Alfred Schutz's argument, the research underscores the significance of common-sense constructs in shaping individuals' perceptions of their social reality (p.27). It contends that, akin to the divisive fragrance of durian, which elicits varied reactions, *danmei* engenders polarized responses, being both disliked by many and ardently embraced by its female enthusiasts. Recognizing the inadequacy of solely examining *danmei*'s objective characteristics, the study advocates for an inquiry into the subjective thoughts and experiences of fans to comprehend the motivating factors behind their social behaviors. Embracing an interpretative stance, the research seeks to reveal insights that may challenge conventional perspectives, highlighting the

importance of contextual understanding in deciphering the complexities of social phenomena (p.27).

4.2 Research Strategy and Design

This research employs qualitative interviews and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to intricately explore the impact of *danmei* on its female fans within the context of their interactions with BL culture. Embracing the diversity inherent in *danmei* fandom, this study adopts a case-oriented approach, prioritizing complexity over generalization.

The interview technique is widely utilized in qualitative research to elicit and capture the perspectives of specific groups, and the semi-structured format allows the researcher to maintain an open-minded approach toward the content. This flexibility enables concepts and theories to organically emerge from the data (Bryman, 2016, p.10). The interview structure draws inspiration from Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Radway, 1991, p.223-225), wherein the author scrutinizes the affection of American women for reading romantic fiction.

The processing of all primary data relies on the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within the chosen theoretical framework. CDA, as a variant of discourse analysis, diverges from considering discourse in isolation, viewing it as an integrated system that encompasses not only discourse itself but also related text and the socio-cultural context from which it emerges (Bryman, 2016, p.540-541). According to Norman Fairclough, CDA focuses on the dynamic interplay between discourse and other elements of the social process. It involves a systematic analysis of texts and addresses social issues in their discursive aspects, exploring potential ways to rectify or alleviate them (Fairclough, 1995, p.10-11). Given the nature of the research, which involves personal experiences, gender power relations, and sociocultural constructions, CDA stands as a fitting method for this study.

4.3 Research Process

Most of the data was gathered through fieldwork conducted in February and March 2024. I reached out to friends who are *danmei* fans and sent private messages to over 30 active IDs on various online platforms, including *Jinjiang*, Bilibili, a YouTube-like Chinese video-sharing website with over one hundred million active users (Statista, 2023), and RED, one of the most popular social media platforms in China that are largely dominated by female users born after 1980 (TF Securities Co., Ltd, 2022), to request interviews.

Each of these IDs had either released at least one blog, article, or video related to *danmei* or had commented under such works, making them eligible participants in the *danmei* fandom. Over 20 ID owners responded with positive or negative answers. In the end, 13 interviewees were confirmed—all female, in the 18–35 age group, residing in different regions of China, and possessing a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds, as anticipated.

All respondents claimed to possess (or be currently working on) at least one college degree, spanning disciplines from arts, finance, and social sciences to STEM fields[1]. Some of the women self-identified with a feminist stance upon inquiry, while others denied such a label or expressed uncertainty due to their limited knowledge of feminist theories. It is important to note that almost all of them conveyed support for women's independence, promotion of gender equality, and opposition to the gender injustices currently faced by women.

Given the fact that it was difficult to do face-to-face due to time and geographical limits, I conducted most interviews in February and March 2024 online, by video chat or texting, at around 90-240 minutes per interview, to collect qualitative data for analysis.

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[1] STEM is an umbrella term used to group together the distinct but related technical disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019)

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion where I encouraged the interviewees to tell me: 1) their experiences with *danmei* culture; 2) their motivations in becoming a *danmei* fan; and 3) if/how these interactions with *danmei* had influenced their gender awareness. The interviews were all conducted in Chinese and recorded by my personal equipment with consent. For the sake of data processing, all the records were later translated into English and as shown below, coded with separate code names.

Background Information of the Interviewees (13 in total)					
Code	Age	Major	Occupation	Sexual Orientation	Years of *Danmei* Experience
No.1	31	Arts&Humanities	Consulting work	Heterosexual	Over 10 years
No.2	30	STEM	Engineering	Heterosexual	About 15 years
No.3	23	Arts&Humanities	Teacher	Heterosexual	About 6 years
No.4	25	STEM	University Student	Heterosexual	About 15 years
No.5	22	Arts&Humanities	Civil servant	Heterosexual	Over 5 years
No.6	21	Finance/Law	University Student	Heterosexual	About 10 years
No.7	20	Journalism	University Student	Heterosexual	About 5 years
No.8	22	STEM	University Student	Bisexual	About 5 years
No.9	24	Arts&Humanities	Work related to the major	Heterosexual	About 5 years
No.10	20	Media Studies	University Student	Bisexual	Over 5 years
No.11	27	STEM	Manufacturing	Heterosexual	About 10 years
No.12	21	Arts&Humanities	University Student	Bisexual	About 8 years
No.13	23	Social Sciences	University Student	Heterosexual	Over 10 years

Table 1. Interviewees' profile

4.4 Limitations

Small Scale

Considering the vast population and highly diverse nature of the Chinese female fandom of *danmei*, the representativeness of this project is constrained by the limited scope of its data collection, particularly in terms of the age, educational background, and sexual orientation of the interviewees. All respondents are adult women in their twenties or thirties, with or about to obtain a bachelor's degree, and most of them are self-identified as heterosexual. This narrow demographic representation may not fully capture the varied experiences and perspectives within the broader *danmei* female fandom, which encompasses women of different ages and socio-cultural backgrounds, thus only representing a particular group of fans rather than all spectrums of the fandom. However, since the aim of case-oriented qualitative research prioritizes depth and

complexity over representativeness, this project can still offer valuable insights into the dynamics between the target research group and the focal social issue.

Personal Bias

Since I have a long history of consuming *danmei*, I am inherently a member of the fandom. This status afforded me advantages in connecting with and garnering trust from interviewees, thereby facilitating more seamless and profound communication and streamlining the data collection process. However, it also exposed the research to the influence of my personal stance. Throughout the research process, I continuously scrutinized and reflected on my own predispositions while analyzing interviews. While this introspective process enhances and enriches the understanding of the data, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential for bias that may persist despite my self-awareness and reflection. The potential bias stems from my subjective experiences and preferences within the *danmei* fandom, leading to a possible tendency to interpret data in alignment with my beliefs or emotional connections to certain aspects of *danmei*. Furthermore, as someone deeply immersed in the *danmei* community, unconscious biases or assumptions regarding the perceptions and behaviors of other members might also arise, potentially impacting the interpretation of research findings.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic regarding privacy, dignity, and certain political risks, ethical considerations are paramount in this research. While *danmei* culture and its fans currently experience a degree of legal and political leniency (Chang and Tian, 2020, p.617), recent years have witnessed a transition marked by state-initiated criticism and censorship against *danmei*, which is attributed to the governmental promotion of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcement of hetero-patriarchal social structures, and efforts to enhance the natality of young people (Hu et al., 2023, p.1-3).

In light of these complexities, ensuring ethical conduct throughout the research process

is imperative. This involves guaranteeing voluntary participation, obtaining informed consent, and safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality for all participants. Participants were afforded the right to withdraw from interviews and the research before the agreed deadline. Interview recordings were saved offline and promptly deleted after transcription into text, with transcriptions carefully omitting any personal details that could compromise participants' anonymity. Moreover, to uphold confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in the thesis, and key identifying information was blurred. All collected data stored offline will be securely deleted following the completion of the thesis defense.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter will analyze empirical data collected through the data collection process. Based on the theoretical framework, it will be divided into three sections, each corresponding to the three core aspects of the applied theory. Chapter 5.1 combines an exploration of the reasons why women are interested in *danmei* with Beauvoir's theory of "submission" to discuss the struggle and submission of contemporary young Chinese women under the dual pressures of society. Chapter 5.2, by exploring women's behavior in reading BL and combining it with the theory of "transcendence", analyzes how young female *danmei* fans deconstruct mainstream social norms through the female gaze in this unique experience. Chapter 5.3 goes further on the basis of the first two sections, approaching from the perspective of what constitutes "good *danmei*" in the minds of fans, analyzing the deep-seated impact of interacting with *danmei* on these female fans, and further addressing the core question of how the consumption of *danmei* affects gender awareness among young Chinese women.

5.1 Struggling and Inevitable "Submission" under the "Dual Pressure"

Why are young Chinese women so captivated by *danmei*? This is the question that scholars studying *danmei* are eager to answer. As previously discussed, the prevailing perspective in current research suggests that women are drawn to *danmei* because it satisfies their yearning for either privilege enjoyed by men as the "greater sex" or idealized intimate relationships rooted in equal gender identities — desires often unattainable within patriarchal Chinese society. However, with the flourishment of web literature in recent years, there have emerged several other literature genres that could also fit these desires, such as *baihe* (百合), the genre depicting female-female romance, *danvzhu* (大女主), the genre focuses on female growth as the main theme, shaping independent, proactive, internally strong, and resourceful heroines who generally possess strong personalities, clear goals, and independent thinking, not easily

influenced by others, and often achieve great success in both family and career, and Superior Women (*nvzun* 女尊), the genre featuring a new configuration of love, marriage, and family by imagining a matriarchal society where the Confucian maxim 'men are superior to women' (男尊女卑) is turned upside down (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.142), but these works, while gaining some success, have not shaken the prevailing status of *danmei* among young women, indicating that there may exist more underexplored reasons behind the question.

During the interview process, participants were asked about their reasons for enjoying *danmei*, especially when compared to other genres mentioned above that can also fulfill women's desires for equal love or gender privileges.

"No. 1: I rarely read BG (heterosexual romance between boys and girls), because I can't help but empathize with the female characters in them. Women have to face so many things that I don't want to confront in heterosexual relationships, so I prefer not to read them."

"No. 3: I dislike heterosexual romance works because they often portray unrealistic love between accomplished women paired and equally successful men, creating class disparities. As for the GL genre, I never watch them. Perhaps, although I'm reluctant to admit it, deep down I still have some difficulty accepting romantic relationships between women."

"No. 4: I love danmei for its ability to detach me from reality. The absence of reproductive desire in gay protagonists toward female characters is a relief from the discomfort I feel with heterosexual narratives where women are often reduced to reproductive vessels. I believe that unless we eradicate gender, women cannot truly attain freedom, and danmei, to some extent, achieves this in an imaginary world."

"No. 5: I enjoy danmei because I don't really want to see women as protagonists. I feel like women always endure more gaze than men in a story. Whenever there's a female protagonist, I will empathize with her, feeling uncomfortable regardless of her circumstances. Perhaps deep down in my heart, I believe that men and women should achieve the same outcomes with equal effort. But the reality is that women always have to pay much more than men to gain similar achievements."

"No. 6: Compared to other genres, I prefer danmei. I used it to escape from reality. I grew up in an environment with significant gender discrimination, so I internalized these sexual biases and subconsciously developed a dislike for my female identity."

"No. 7: I only read danmei now. BG is so tedious, portraying female protagonists as if they cannot exist independently of men. As for nvzun, they're quite boring. While they might be rather satisfying at first glance, when I continued to read more, they all seemed to be so identical and shallow. I feel like people can't even imagine what a world with reversed gender roles would truly be like."

It can be seen from the interviewees' responses that female fans tend to empathize with the heroines. In this empathetic process, any experience of the female protagonists, whether positive or negative, will resonate with them, leading them to either relate to their own past unpleasant experiences as a woman, or to perceive a contrast between the idealized fictional portrayal and the unfavorable reality, causing discomfort, pain, or even disgust among them. Some of the interviewees also admitted that their preference for *danmei* stems from their harboring or having harbored misogyny, which often arises from negative experiences of discrimination and injustice they faced due to their gender during childhood. In contrast, *danmei*, where both protagonists are male,

does not evoke such empathetic responses in them.

Moreover, the majority of the interviewees also believe that *danmei* works generally have higher quality compared to works with female protagonists, which is also a major reason for their preference for *danmei*. This higher quality is evident in various aspects, including more interesting storylines, protagonists with freer life experiences, etc. A more detailed discussion on this aspect will be provided in chapter 5.3.2.

These indicate that the particular preference female fans hold for *danmei* is indeed influenced to varying degrees by their own life experiences, which are closely tied to their inferior status as women in China's patriarchal society. All of my interviewees were born after 1990, and the era they grew up, while inheriting the legacy of a gender revolution in the Communist era, becoming more woman-friendly due to a series of favorable changes such as the implementation of the one-child policy, the widespread promotion of compulsory education, economic development, improvements in citizens' living standards, and the dissemination of Western ideas of freedom and equality following the reform and opening-up policies (Wolf, 1985; Judd, 1994). Against this backdrop, many girls have had the opportunity to access the same educational resources as their male peers. They are raised to be as educationally ambitious and high-achieving as boys (Gu, 2021). Census data from 1982 to 2010 recorded steady growth in women's educational attainment and a narrowing gender gap at all levels of schooling (Treiman, 2013). Growing evidence even suggests that Chinese girls are outperforming their male counterparts in education (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015, 2016; Yeung, 2013).

However, at the same time, the deeply entrenched male preference in Chinese society remains unchanged, so as the structural gender inequality (Yang, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Traditional stereotypes persist regarding the roles and duties of men and women in both the family and society, which continue to contribute to highly unequal situations, especially after the economic reforms (Zheng, 2010). In this context, mainstream

Chinese society has witnessed a shift towards a "dual-expectation" standard in moral education and value judgments concerning women caused by the two independent discourses relating to their social roles. The first embodies the model of a "neoliberal" woman, embracing ideals of gender equality and shared responsibility, while the second reflects traditional Chinese notions of femininity (Gromkowska-Melosik and Boron, 2023). In schools and workplaces, women face the same, if not greater, competitive pressures as men, while within the family, it is still widely believed that women should take on more household chores. They are often expected to excel in both family and career simultaneously (Bao and Wang, 2022).

This dual societal expectation places tremendous pressure on many women. Beauvoir once said, "Women are always faced with the dilemma of two conflicting roles: either to be a slave or to be an idol" (1949, p.88). The dual expectation requires women to be both idols in society and continue to bear the burden of domestic servitude. While the use of the term "servitude" may seem exaggerated here, there indeed exists an imbalance of rights and obligations in the gendered structure of households. If resources are scarce within a family, it is often girls, rather than their male siblings, who are the first to be sacrificed (Attané, 2012; Gromkowska-Melosik and Boron, 2023); if a wife wants to maintain her career while having a family and children, she must undertake double workforce unless her husband is willing to share her burden of housework, otherwise, it is always women who are exposed to moral criticism (Liu, 2021), and the cruel reality is that when both spouses are employed, the distribution of household chores remains highly unequal — in 2010, working women spent an average of 2.5 to 3 times more time on domestic tasks per day compared to men (Attané, 2012). In recent years, with the government advocating for families to have three children, the increasing fertility burden further exacerbates the plight of women, since the gendered childcare leave policies, coupled with discriminatory hiring practices make multiple childbirths and a successful career fundamentally incompatible (Zhou, 2018).

Under the forces of dual expectation, young women find themselves in this dilemma even when reading novels. This dilemma stems from a common challenge faced by modern women, as described by Simone de Beauvoir: the possibility of being "split subjects", which refers to the internal conflict and struggle experienced by women between the roles they want to play as wives and mothers and the selves they aspire to be in the broader world (Beauvoir, 1949, p.749; Kirkpatrick, 2019, p.292). This unfulfilled challenge continues to question every woman, making *danmei* fiction become rather alluring for them since it allows them to temporarily escape this dilemma by immersing themselves in narratives where women are not the protagonists. In *danmei* fiction, the male protagonists inherently enjoy exemption from such dual expectations, no need to seek balance or make choices between them, and are free from the anguish of public scrutiny after making such choices.

This might also be one of the reasons why GL is far less popular among women compared to *danmei* though they are both homosexual narratives. As expressed by one interviewee (No. 13):

> *"I've never watched GL because I'm afraid to. I am worried that it might affect or even change my sexual orientation. If I were to become a lesbian, my life would definitely become more difficult. I don't want to face that situation."*

Another interviewee (No. 7) said:

> *"I acknowledge the differences between men and women. I do believe that women are slightly weaker than men, their innate conditions are different, and men are indeed stronger. Thus, I can also accept the inequality in their social status. If women must demand an improvement in their status, they must pay more. This may not necessarily be a good thing for most women."*

In this sense, reading *danmei* novels can be seen as a way for women to escape the pressures of real life and indulge in the joy of a liberated world. However, this inevitable struggle and "submission" under the social structural pressures requires more discussions than critiques. Beauvoir's theory of freedom suggests that freedom is an urge felt by everyone and is a costly risk, especially for women since they are in a more difficult situation compared to their male peers (Garcia, 2023, p.208). If freedom is inherently unequal because the situations faced by different people are different (Bair, 1990, p.270), then submission is also unequal and should be viewed independently based on the different situations faced by women and men.

Furthermore, there is another noteworthy finding that some interviewees, when asked about comparing BL and GL, claimed that they do not harbor special aversion towards GL, but due to reasons such as the absence of people around them reading GL or lacking recommendations, they have not come across related works and believed that they may also enjoy GL if they read them. Due to the lack of sufficient relevant data, effective analysis cannot be conducted on this group of fans at present. Why is the prevalence of GL significantly lower than BL despite both being subcultures? Apart from the reasons discussed earlier, whether there are other underlying causes remains uncertain, and a definite answer cannot be provided until further research is conducted.

5.2 The Deconstruction of Mainstream Social Norms through Female Gaze

5.2.1 "We are all normal": the acceptance and support of homosexual relationship

As can be seen in its definition, one of the most prominent features of *danmei* fiction is homosexual men, thus its relationship with real homosexual people is a hot-discussed topic. Many previous articles have pointed out a significant gap between the portrayal of homosexual men in *danmei* novels by female authors and real-life homosexual men

(See, for example, Feng, 2009, p.6; Yang and Xu, 2015, p.137). In *danmei* novels, male homosexual protagonists often possess exceptional looks, excel in schools or careers, or exhibit certain special talents, while it's evident that real-life homosexual men are just ordinary individuals, far removed from the situations depicted in novels (Feng, 2009, p.6). Such idealized portrayal of homosexual men in *danmei* novels not only makes them appear "more adorable" in the eyes of female fans but also fosters a certain fantasy among female fans about the real-life homosexual male community. When they discover that reality doesn't align with their fantasies, they may sometimes experience reactions like "disappointment" or "rejection" (Zhang, 2016, p.256-257).

However, many previous articles have been built on the assumption that reading *danmei* novels inevitably influences female readers' perceptions and attitudes toward LGBTQ+ issues. Yet, this assumption has not been convincingly proven in academic research. Therefore, in my study, I carefully asked interviewees whether reading *danmei* novels had influenced their perceptions of LGBTQ+ issues, and if so, what that influence was.

According to the data I collected, firstly, the vast majority of interviewees stated that they were well aware of the over-glamorization of male protagonists in *danmei* novels. Some even pointed out that this phenomenon has intensified in recent years, as many readers desire to see elite male protagonists. Since many *danmei* novels are paid works on online platforms, authors modify the character settings to cater to the taste of readers and earn higher economic returns (Yang and Xu, 2015, p.135), resulting in male protagonists becoming even more "elite", sometimes even excessively so. As illustrated by an example mentioned by interviewee No. 13 (23) during the interview:

> *"No. 13: Have you heard that joke? Nowadays, all the top scorers in the college entrance exams are monopolized by male protagonists in danmei works. Those who score below 700 in the exams are not qualified to be the protagonists in danmei."*

Moreover, many of them also acknowledged that the male protagonists in *danmei* novels are different from real-life homosexual men, as said by Interviewee No. 3.

> *"No. 3: The gay men I met in real life seemed different from those portrayed in BL novels."*

However, when it comes to whether reading *danmei* novels has influenced their attitudes toward the male homosexual community and LGBTQ+ issues, they gave different answers. Some believed there was an influence, though the exact influence varies.

> *"No. 5 (22): Yes. I have never encountered a real gay in my life, but I think I am more friendly towards them now, even though I know they might not be as good as depicted in novels."*

> *"No. 8 (22): Before reading danmei novels, my attitude towards homosexuality was rather neutral, but after reading them, I became more supportive of the community. I know that in real life, homosexuals are just like ordinary people, and I understand that fiction idealizes them, but I still support them more because of reading danmei."*

Some others thought there was no impact for them, and the reasons are also different. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here that although not everyone believed that reading *danmei* novels had affected their attitudes toward homosexuality, all of them claimed that their attitudes toward homosexuality were inclusive or even friendly.

> *"No. 1 (31): Because I'm quite open-minded, I can accept homosexuality anyway, so reading danmei doesn't seem to have much influence on my perspective on*

homosexual people.”

“No. 2 (30): It has no impact on me. My attitude towards homosexuality has always been very accepting from beginning to end. I'm not an exceptionally kind person, but I believe that people should have more freedom to choose what kind of people they love.”

“No. 6 (21): I don't think so. I feel like it's important to separate fiction from reality. While there are gay men in real life, their situations aren't as idealistic as portrayed in novels.”

What caught my attention more during the interviews wasn't the influence of reading *danmei* fiction on female readers' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ issues but the fact that many interviewees mentioned that reading *danmei* novels was their first exposure to the homosexual community, or even the conception of homosexuality.

“No. 4 (25): I first discovered the conception of homosexuality through reading danmei, so initially, I thought real-life homosexuals were like those in the novels. I saw the positive images portrayed in the novels first, and then the less favorable realities, leading me to realize that gay men in daily life aren't as ideal as depicted in fiction.”

“No. 7 (20): My understanding of homosexuality was actually formed through reading danmei novels. Before that, I didn't even know about the existence of the gay community. So, when I later encountered homosexuals in real life, I didn't feel surprised or think it was strange at all.”

“No. 10 (20): When I first read danmei, I thought the world was only made up of heterosexual relationships. I was surprised to learn that two people of the

same sex could be together. Although I didn't feel repulsion, I struggled to understand it, but I gained a better understanding of same-sex relationships through engaging with danmei. After all, the person someone has feelings for happens to be the same gender as him/her isn't a sin. Why should I hold prejudice?"

"No. 11 (27): Before reading danmei, I knew almost nothing about LGBTQ+. It was only after reading danmei that I decided to do some research to learn more about it. I then realized that they are just ordinary people who happen to have a different sexual orientation from the majority. As I gradually learn more about this community, I try to maintain a positive attitude and avoid viewing them through biased lenses."

It can be seen from these answers that most of the interviewees started to *danmei* fiction during their middle or high school years, a period when their worldviews were still being shaped. Especially for those who grew up in relatively conservative family environments and had no opportunity to access information about marginalized groups like homosexual people, besides hearing terms like "deviant" or "abnormal" from their parents or elders. *Danmei* novels became their first, and in many cases, the only channel to understand the LGBTQ+ community for a long time.

According to Beauvoir, women are shaped by their experiences, which, within a society dominated by a patrilineal culture, are significantly influenced by the suppression of subjectivity resulting from the situations imposed upon them by patriarchal authority (Kruks, 1992, p.102). In China, sex education among young teenagers has long been severely lacking (Zhou et al., 2024) and has always been seriously influenced by cultures and politics (Qin and Zhang, 2023). The entrenched customs and standards prevalent in Chinese culture, including the emphasis on heterosexual matrimony, inflexible gender expectations, the importance placed on procreation, the authoritative

influence of parents limiting the independence of their children, and the adherence to Confucian principles such as respect, hierarchical structures, and collectivism, present significant obstacles to the implementation of comprehensive sex education (Steinhauer, 2016). For young Chinese kids, even heterosexual romance was not openly allowed before going to college, let alone same-sex romance. In recent years, a stricter prohibition on LGBTQ+ activism has been observed (Wang, 2023) and educational materials on LGBTQ+ topics in sex education curricula have been banned in schools, reflecting the government's unfriendly stance towards LGBTQ+ (Ji and Reiss, 2021, p.15). If there are no channels for accessing it, how can there be a more diverse understanding of this group? If it weren't for *danmei* novels, many girls would have to wait until college or even after work to really know about homosexuality. For someone who had always been exposed to the instructions that "homosexuality is deviant" for over twenty years, it would be less likely and more difficult for them to have a positive opinion about the issue.

Therefore, it is believed that whether *danmei* novels have a positive or negative influence on women's attitudes toward the homosexual community, or even whether they have any influence at all, is not the most important thing. The most important, and often overlooked point in previous research, is that *danmei* fiction provides a new opportunity and channel for a large number of female readers to understand the concept of homosexuality in a way different from the mainstream patriarchal education and instruction. This opportunity is significant, especially for those who grew up in the information cocoon, with no chance or channel to learn about homosexuality and to interact with marginalized groups. Because it not only allows them to know about gay people but also helps them realize that the gender norms taught by mainstream society are not sacrosanct and inviolable.

5.2.2 "Girls help girls": the relationship between female *danmei* writers and readers

As introduced before, the production and consumption of *danmei* are primarily driven by heterosexual women. However, previous research often focuses solely on either the consumers or the creators, treating them as two separate groups, with little attention paid to the interaction between them. Yet, during the data collection process of this study, it was found that women form a kind of mutual support relationship in the process of creating, reading, and sharing *danmei* works. Of particular note is the relationship between female readers and female writers.

Female writers have long been plagued by numerous obstacles and challenges, including a lack of sufficient cultural, intellectual, and experiential support due to the relatively brief history of women's access to education, the inability to balance multiple roles under the pressures of family and work, and the indifference attitude of the patriarchal society (Yuan, 2018). Consequently, the dominance in the literary realm has consistently remained in the hands of men despite the occasional emergence of some outstanding female authors.

The rise of online literature has lowered the barriers to writing, enabling female writers to begin their endeavors when they are at the university (and in some cases, even high school). Online platforms provide them with prompt emotional support from fans' comments and economic support through subscription revenues, thus offering favorable conditions for them to persist in their production in the long run. Against this backdrop, the past decade has witnessed the appearance of a large number of outstanding female writers of *danmei*.

Most of the writers who have been revered as the most outstanding ones within the *danmei* fandom are highly educated women. Among the 13 interviewees in this survey, 4 expressed their utmost admiration for Mu Su Li, a graduate of Tsinghua University; 4 favored Priest, who obtained a bachelor's degree from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and a master's degree from the University of Hong Kong; 4 preferred Huai Shang, a

graduate of the University of Melbourne; 1 favored Yi Shi Si Zhou, a graduate of Shandong University; 1 favored Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, a graduate of Jinan University; 1 favored Wu Zhe, a graduate of Anhui University. These universities are all world top-notch educational institutions. Although the identities of *danmei* writers are often concealed due to the anonymity of the internet, making it difficult to ascertain their specific identities, many interviewees claimed that they were aware of the educational backgrounds of their favorite authors and that they felt a heightened sense of admiration and pride because of this.

These female writers have attained elite status in the cultural domain through their achievements in education and literature, and thus "have accumulated the advantages of both sexes" (Beauvoir, 1963, p.189). They possess the ability to access experiences of submission without being silenced as many submissive women are (Garcia, 2023, p.206), which allows them to have the possibility to transcend their female identities. Moreover, their creation of *danmei* literature provides them with the opportunity to share their thoughts with a broader female audience. Many online platforms have designated areas for writers and readers to interact. For instance, *Jinjiang*'s "The Writer Have Something to Say" section allows writers to share their thoughts and life experiences, ranging from short reviews of books they read recently to daily schedules during exam week, at the end of each chapter. This setup fosters a sense of closeness between readers and authors despite the physical distance imposed by the internet. In the readers' minds, these writers, who share the same gender and grew up in the same era, face similar struggles and concerns and endure similar gender-based treatment. They are "the same". During interviews, one respondent mentioned:

"No. 5: I feel like only danmei are written for us because those writers are girls similar to me. The literature produced by men, whether they're popular literature or literary classics, is narrated from a male perspective. In those works, women are always sidelined. In contrast, reading danmei works made me ponder more

and delve deeper into myself, especially those well-written ones, which had a distinctly positive influence on me. In a way, these works substituted for teachers and parents, becoming my guides, imparting teachings to me, and the protagonists in the books somewhat become my leads. I am willing to trust and learn from them because I love these works and admire these writers."

This perspective was echoed by many other interviewees.

"No. 10: One important reason I enjoy danmei is because many of its creators are female. I feel that compared to male writers, women are more adept at understanding each other's thoughts and can really empathize with one another. Therefore, their works have a stronger impact on me, evoke a greater sense of attachment, and are more likely to resonate with me emotionally."

"No. 13: I even think that many problems I encountered in my life were solved by reading danmei… My relationship with my father was very bad. When I was young, he had very high expectations of me and would often scold and punish me. I understood he did it out of love, but emotionally, I resented him… Once, I read this line in a danmei novel: "Perhaps all the dissipation of enmity and resentment towards parents relies on both forgetting and empathizing." It hit me hard… I was brought up with the education that "parents are always right", and fathers are like kings in the family… When I read this line, I felt like someone finally acknowledged that fathers can be wrong, and children can dislike or even resent them for it, and it's not a crime for children to do so. I needed someone to admit that before I could convince myself to forgive my father. But no one had ever said that. Even in TV dramas, no matter how much a father hurt his child, the child would eventually forgive him."

From these insights, it can be observed that for some female fans, reading *danmei*

novels serves not only as entertainment but also as a pathway for learning. For these young female readers of *danmei*, compared to works created by male writers, they prefer works written by female producers who are "similar to them". Thus, they are more inclined to, or willing to, identify with the sayings within these works. When Beauvoir reflected on how women struggled to assert their independence and freedom in male-dominated historical narratives, she noted that although the cultural domain is more accessible to women attempting to assert themselves, no woman has actually been able to reach the peaks achieved by figures like Shakespeare and Dante, which is because culture has historically been the privilege of the feminine elite rather than the masses, while masculine geniuses often emerge from the masses (Beauvoir, 1949, p.123-124). This inequality of situations restrains women from fulfilling their agency.

In contemporary Chinese society, despite the implementation of mass education among women, the modern Chinese educational system has been profoundly influenced by Confucianism (Bahtilla and Xu, 2021), which not only views women as inferior beings (Gao, 2003, p.114) but also provides no guidance for women's behavior beyond the household, as ideally, they should have no connection with the outside world except through related males (Judd, 1994, p.166). In this context, education that allows women to break free from mainstream gender norms and teaches them how to be a "human" rather than just a "woman" remains a cultural privilege not easily accessible to everyone. The online creation of *danmei* works allows privileged elite writers to infuse their thoughts into the stories they create, transmitting them to female readers. These thoughts often involve the collision between women's self-awareness as an independent individual and mainstream social norms in a patriarchal society, contributing to the deconstruction of mainstream social norms from the female gaze.

5.3 The Construction of "NEW" Female Identity

5.3.1 "Those wonder women": female characters in *danmei* fiction

The marginalization and stereotyping of female characters in *danmei* have long been a

focal point of criticism from feminists and are considered by researchers to deepen the negative stereotypical impressions of women and internalized misogyny among female fandom (Zhang, 2016, p.255; Xue and Rose, 2022, p.153-154), making it an important aspect of exploring the impact of the consumption of *danmei* on gender awareness among its female fans. This study explores the perspectives of female fans on this issue and their genuine feelings regarding this aspect during their own interaction with *danmei*. The respondents' answers to the question can be divided into two categories based on whether they agree with the opinion. Some interviewees believe that there are indeed fewer female characters in *danmei* works, but their views on the reasons for this phenomenon and its impact vary.

"No. 1: I feel that the portrayal of female characters in danmei is indeed somewhat lacking, but in good works, both male and female characters are well-developed. It's inevitable for creators to focus more on the depiction of male characters due to the nature of danmei, resulting in relatively less space left for female characters. Anyway, for me, this isn't a big issue. Actually, heterosexual romance doesn't portray women very well too."

"No. 3: I think this phenomenon does occur, since danmei primarily focuses on male characters, it's natural for the narrative to center around them, and some creators might indeed have a bias against women, but it is not just a problem of danmei. Heterosexual works, even some literary classics, also have this problem."

"No. 8: I do notice that there are fewer female characters compared to male characters in danmei works, and their portrayal is often not as good, but I think this arises from the need for plot development, rather than indicating any disdain towards women from creators or readers. Thus, I didn't feel uncomfortable about it, nor do I think it's only a problem of danmei. In heterosexual romance, there are also primary and secondary female characters, and the portrayal of the

secondary female character might be negative or stereotypical, but nobody really sees it as a problem. Why has it suddenly become such a big deal when it comes to danmei?"

Many other respondents, in contrast, did not agree with this viewpoint.

"No. 9: While it's true that some female characters in danmei are poorly portrayed, many others are not. In fact, in most danmei, there are numerous well-developed female characters. They are not the central characters, and their appearances may not be much, but they are the absolute protagonists of their own lives. For example..."

"No. 9: The heterosexual romance stories nowadays portray women as cannot live without men, which feels so unrealistic and abnormal to me as a woman living in the 21st century. On the contrary, many women in danmei are round characters depicted from a female perspective, doing things that a woman would actually do."

"No. 12: The viewpoint you mentioned is too one-sided and absolute. I think the reason why those feminists and researchers say so is because they haven't really read much danmei. In danmei works, there are also many women appearing as round characters, such as... Although for the sake of the plot and the male protagonists' romantic storyline, female characters may not be prominent in danmei fiction, but their presence is still rather significant in the story."

"No. 13: In heterosexual works, women are often portrayed as objects, tied to men in various roles like mothers, wives, daughters, or lovers. They're not independent but serve to shape or decorate male characters. In contrast, maybe because the male protagonists lack sexual desire for women due to their sexual

orientation, female characters often manage to break free from this bound
relationship with men in danmei works, allowing the possibility for them to live
more freely."

It can be seen from these responses that although some respondents acknowledge the lack and stereotypical portrayal of female characters in *danmei*, they believe that this situation is caused by the necessary demands of the plot development of the stories and does not necessarily imply misogyny among creators or readers. Besides, this is not a problem exclusive to *danmei* but also exists in heterosexual stories, which fundamentally lies in women's inability to escape their identities as secondary beings in a patriarchal society. In patriarchal narratives, women are always confined to two roles: wives (lovers) or mothers, and their characteristics, especially merits, are inevitably connected to men as so-called "the myth of the Women" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.13), particularly within heterosexual relationships. Once a woman and a heterosexual man appear in the same story, she is subjected to the male gaze of desire and reproduction.

However, due to the sexual orientation of the male protagonists, women in *danmei* naturally lose their identity as wives. On one hand, this leads to women losing the rights and respect associated with this identity, but on the other hand, it provides them with an opportunity to break free from the constraints imposed by men through the family and to exist more independently in the wider world. Beauvoir once said, that since the oppression of women originates from the desire to maintain traditional family structures and preserve inherited wealth, if she breaks away from the family, she also breaks free from this complete reliance. Thus, if society moves away from the concept of family by abolishing private property, women's situation can improve significantly. (1949, p.98) *Danmei*, of course, cannot abolish private property and do have various limitations, but due to their unique background settings in romantic narratives, they to some extent provide women in it with an opportunity to escape from the shackles of

family. This essentially broadens the space for women to fulfill their autonomy, becoming a reason why some respondents firmly believe that the portrayal of female characters in *danmei* is not only not bad but rather excellent.

The existentialists have a famous saying, "Man is the sum of his actions" (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p.164). The charisma of these female characters does not exist in their beauty, wisdom, or kindness, but in the fact that they establish a "new" female identity. This identity allows them to act like independent individuals with full agency while being the supporting actors. Their actions are no longer always tied to men; they have their own lives and are no longer mere accessories in others' lives. The love many of the interviewees hold for these female characters further indicates that they indeed perceive the charm of these women, rather than solely indulging in the adoration of the male characters, as many feminists and past researchers have accused them of doing. Therefore, this study argues that the portrayal of female characters in *danmei* cannot be used as evidence to prove or deepen the misogyny among female fans, but instead contributes to the construction of a "new" female identity with higher autonomy.

5.3.2 "Looking for a broader world": idealized life instead of idealized relationship

Previous studies indicate that a significant motivation behind Chinese women's lasting love for *danmei* largely stems from their desire for an "idealized romantic relationship" that they cannot attain in real life, leading to the critiques that *danmei* reinforces heterosexual gender stereotypes, reliance on and idolization of men and submission to patriarchal norms among its female fandom (Wang, 2010; Bo, 2011; Zhang, 2016; Zhou, Paul, and Sherman, 2017; Ge, 2022; Wang and Ge, 2022). Therefore, in order to understand the impact of consuming *danmei* on gender awareness among its female fans, it is crucial to explore what brings them the most pleasure in their experiences with this homosexual culture.

Surprisingly, when asked whether romantic love between male protagonists is an indispensable component and a significant standard for evaluating a *danmei* work, although everyone agreed that the compelling depiction of love affairs is a crucial aspect of good *danmei* works, the majority (10 out of 13) of respondents claimed that it is not indispensable for them to enjoy *danmei*. This finding indicates that while romance between male protagonists is an important factor in attracting female fans, there are indeed other reasons beyond this, summarized by fans as the "high quality" of *danmei* works, which is mainly reflected in three elements: free protagonists, grand background settings, and captivating storylines.

"No. 1: I believe that freedom is a significant characteristic of Chinese danmei works. Many foreign readers find Chinese danmei to be rather surprising because while many foreign BL works often contain plenty of depictions of the discrimination suffered by the protagonists, Chinese danmei works, usually focus more on the characters' personal growth. The male protagonists in danmei are portrayed as a "third sex" who transcends the constraints of conventional gender norms. They are freer than women and even freer than men. They freely choose what they do, who they love, and how they live… Although women in modern society bear less oppression compared to our ancestors, we are also suffering from new shackles since we are expected to excel in not only family but also study and career. We are still far from having true freedom. In my opinion, danmei allows us to experience a sense of freedom that we cannot experience in our daily lives."

"No. 4: In real life, women always have to compromise to keep a good balance between their family and work in order to gain opportunities for career development, which really makes us suffer. But characters in danmei are free from such burdens. This is the freedom we seek — a freedom that does not require us to make such commitments and compromises."

"No. 5: There are plenty of doors in this world, but for women, many of these doors are naturally closed. But these doors are all open for the male protagonists in danmei."

"No. 8: I feel that the male protagonists in danmei fiction have their own complete and independent lives, which can always continue to keep going on. In heterosexual narratives, the male and female protagonists always end up getting married and having children, and everyone would think this is the perfect ending. But I don't think so, I think a person's life should be much more than that."

"No. 13: Danmei has so many different themes, and the male protagonists in danmei have much more career options than those in heterosexual works, making the stories have more possibilities."

From these responses, it can be seen that the reason why many fans consider *danmei* works to have "high quality", especially compared to heterosexual narratives, can essentially be understood as because they present readers with "a better situation". This situation is something that women not only cannot enjoy in real life but also rarely see in the imaginary worlds in heterosexual works since it is actually a privilege enjoyed only by men.

Feminist existentialists state that women are what they are not because of their essence but because of their situation (Garcia, 2023, p.201). What is the situation undergone by these young Chinese women who love *danmei*? Despite gains in autonomy since the 1950s due to advancements in education and protective laws, Chinese women still lack equality with men. Their situation has evolved ambivalently in the past three decades, with improvements in education countered by growing job insecurity and widening wage gaps. Women often remain economically dependent on men within relationships,

and their status is frequently inferior, especially in public life. Traditional gender roles persist within families and society. (Attané, 2012) This situation leads to the difficulty for a woman to find an idealized female identity that is not centered around family. During the interviews, many respondents complained that they were very dissatisfied with the fact that mainstream heterosexual films, television, and literary works always portray intimate relationships, marriage, and children as the perfect ending for a female protagonist's life. *Danmei* presents them with the broader world and freer life that they have been looking for but could not find.

As Beauvoir states when she analyzes women's situation and character, "How could one find daring, ardor, detachment, and grandeur in her? These qualities appear only where a freedom throws itself across an open future, emerging beyond any given. A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly." (1949, p.661) These female fans find the male protagonists in *danmei* highly appealing because women are no longer willing to be confined to a kitchen or a boudoir. They yearn for a wider world, a freer existence, and the same situation as men. While the equal romantic relationships between two men in *danmei* are indeed something women are longing for, what is more crucial for them is that these characters become independent and free selves before being together with someone else. Rather than seeking an idealized romantic relationship, what they really aspire to is an idealized life where the intimate partnership is not everything, nor the most significant aspect, but only part of the components.

They are expecting a world where all the doors are open for them, in which they can construct a new identity with free autonomy, in which, as an interviewee said, "they choose their careers because they are passionate about them instead of this job is more suitable for a girl since it would be more convenient for her to take care of the family and children; they act kindly because it's the right thing to do, not because a girl should

be mild, friendly, and compassionate; they build an intimate relationship with someone because they truly love them instead of a girl should find a husband and have kids; they choose to live in this way because they want to instead of they are forced into it by their gendered situations". *Danmei* provides a window for their female fans, allowing them to glimpse into this world they crave. They of course cannot obtain this depicted situation and idealized life solely through consuming *danmei* works, but at least they see what this situation and life could be like in this process. When they have to make cost-benefit calculations between consenting to submission or pursuing freedom one day in the future, they may have a clearer understanding of what lies on the other end of the scale.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis takes the phenomenon of the long-lasting popularity of *danmei*, among young Chinese women as a starting point, delves into the Chinese female fandom, and explores how the consumption of *danmei* has influenced gender awareness among these women, with utilization of in-depth semi-structure interviews on female consumers. Based on the critical employment of Simon de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism theory as the theoretical framework, this research conducts an elaborated analysis in the previous chapter.

At the forefront of this analysis is the portrayal of female characters within *danmei* fiction. While previous critiques have highlighted the marginalization and stereotyping of women in these narratives, a deeper examination reveals a more nuanced perspective. Despite the presence of limitations in character depiction, many respondents recognize the agency and autonomy afforded to female characters within *danmei*. Rather than conforming to traditional roles as wives or mothers, these characters are depicted as independent individuals with their own lives and desires. Therefore, though it is necessary to acknowledge that the unavoidable focus on male characters caused by plot demands of homosexual works has the potential risk of exacerbating the already deep-entrenched societal misogyny, the portrayal of many female characters in *danmei* also successfully challenges conventional gender norms and offers a vision of female identity characterized by autonomy and self-determination.

Central to the appeal of *danmei* literature is the representation of freedom and liberation. Within the confines of these narratives, protagonists are liberated from the constraints of societal expectations and gender norms. They are free to pursue their passions, forge their paths, and chart their destinies. For many female fans, this representation resonates deeply, offering a glimpse into a world where women are not bound by traditional roles and expectations. Through the lens of *danmei*, they are able to explore new possibilities and envision a future where they are the architects of their own lives.

Importantly, the allure of *danmei* extends beyond romantic relationships between male protagonists. While these relationships play a significant role, they are not the sole focus of *danmei* narratives. Instead, *danmei* offers readers a multifaceted experience, exploring themes of identity, ambition, and self-discovery. By engaging with these narratives, young Chinese women are prompted to reflect on their own desires, aspirations, and identities, challenging societal norms and expectations in the process.

To sum up, the consumption of *danmei* literature profoundly influences gender perception among young Chinese women, offering a space for exploration, empowerment, and self-discovery. Through the portrayal of female characters and the broader themes present in *danmei* fiction, women are able to envision a world where they are free to be themselves—to pursue their passions, forge their own paths, and chart their own destinies. In this sense, *danmei* literature serves not only as a form of entertainment providing women with an escape from reality but also as a catalyst for social change, challenging traditional notions of gender and identity in contemporary Chinese society.

As this exploration is concluded, several questions emerge, inviting further investigation. Despite both *danmei* and GL being subgenres within Chinese modern popular culture, there exists a significant gap in prevalence between the two. Are there underlying societal factors, cultural attitudes, or market dynamics contributing to this discrepancy? How do societal attitudes towards same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity influence the reception and popularity of GL literature among young Chinese women? Are there differences in the themes, character dynamics, and narrative tropes between *danmei* and GL works that contribute to variations in their respective audiences? These inquiries present avenues for future research, offering opportunities to delve deeper into the complexities of gender representation and cultural discourse within the realm of female *danmei* fandom.

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APPENDICES

Interview Guidelines

Personal Information:

1. Oral informed consent.

2. Ask about some basic personal information related to the topic

   (gender, age, sex, educational background, occupation, intimate relationship)

3. What do you usually do during your spare time?

Personal experience:

4. Ask about the experience in *danmei* fandom, how many years have you been reading *danmei*? When and how did you start? How often will you read *danmei* fiction? How many novels did you read? Do you enjoy the derivatives of *danmei* fiction such as TV series or audio dramas? Why or why not?

5. Have you ever tried or thought about writing *danmei* by yourself? Why or why not?

6. Will you consider yourself a loyal fan of *danmei*? Will you consider yourself an active member of the fandom (not only reading but also commenting, sharing, and talking with others frequently)? Why or why not? What are the motives behind it?

7. Have you ever had any unpleasant experiences within the fandom?

8. Have you ever had any unpleasant experiences because of this hobby?

9. Have you shared your experience with *danmei* with your friends or family members in real life? If yes, talk about the experience./If no, why not?

Knowledge and Evaluation of *danmei*:

10. Ask about your favorite *danmei* novel. What's the name? What type of story is it? Why do you like it? What would you say if you now have to recommend it to a friend? (same question plus a condition that if she hasn't read any danmei before)

11. Ask about your favorite *danmei* writer. What's the name? Why do you like her/him? (What is her/his) Which is her/his best work in your opinion?

12. What is the biggest attraction of *danmei* fiction for you? (listed three)

13. What is, in your opinion, the most important feature of a good *danmei* fiction? Why?

14. What is, in your opinion, the thing you'd like to see the least in a *danmei* fiction?

15. Do you consider the good and much description of romantic love between protagonists as the indispensable element for you to read a *danmei* fiction?

16. Who would you most like to be in this novel if you had the chance?

17. What's your opinion on the female characters in *danmei* works?

18. Do you also read other types of web fiction except for *danmei* such as BG (romance between man and women), GL (romance between women), or stories without romantic love (无 cp)? Why or why not? Is there any difference between *danmei* and GL in your opinion? If yes, what is it?/ If not, do you also enjoy them? If yes, among *danmei* and GL which one is your favorite? Why?/ If no, why?

Reflections:

19. Will *danmei* influence your real life? If yes, what kind of influence will you say it

is?

20. Will *danmei* influence your attitude toward gays and lesbians in the real world? Why or why not?

21. Do you consider yourselves as a feminist? Why or Why not? Does reading *danmei* have an influence on this?

22. Have you heard that *danmei* has been criticized by many feminists? What's your opinion on this?