

Student Podcast Transcript

CSUN Queer Studies Capstone Podcast of Spring 2021 digital exhibit

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Note: All interviewees requested to remain anonymous or to be referred to as pseudonyms. Their quotes will be read by Skate Courduff with slightly altered audio for clearer separation.

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Podcast Transcription: LGBTQ+ Censorship in Chinese Media and the Rise of Danmei

[MUSIC]

SC: Hello everyone! Welcome to another episode of the Queer Studies Capstone Podcast Collection. My name is Skate Courduff and today we are taking a look at LGBTQ+ representation in Chinese media and the rise of queer manhua/donghua. I will be exploring the world of danmei through a selection of subtopics. Plus, I have some super insightful quotes from danmei fan artists and fan writers that I had the chance to interview. I really hope you enjoy it!

[MUSIC]

Before we get into it, I want to quickly run through a few brief definitions for terms I will be discussing. The first is donghua.

[MUSICAL BEAT]

Donghua, in a narrow sense, refers to animation made in China. Next is manhua.

[MUSICAL BEAT]

Manhua are Chinese comics produced in China and in the Greater China region. The third is danmei.

[MUSICAL BEAT]

Danmei is a genre of literature and other fictional media, originating from China. The term itself means "indulgence in beauty." Danmei is similar to the Japanese genre of yaoi / boys love, aka BL in that it depicts homosexual relationships, specifically those between men, in fiction.

In the 2000s, danmei as a genre was slowly introduced to non-Chinese speaking fans around the world. For international fans, danmei became another word to replace BL or to signify another category within BL, specifically for works written by Chinese authors originally in Chinese.

While many danmei works focus on historical themes, it can also be applied to non-historical works. With the increasing popularity of danmei in the global sphere, it is interesting to see how the term and meaning will complement the BL industry's current development.

On the other side, there's the genre of baihe.

[MUSIC]

Baihe is a Chinese term for characters, themes, content, and is a genre involving lesbian relationships or female homoeroticism in light novels, manhua, donghua, video games, and related Chinese media. Some may be more familiar to the Japanese parallel genre of yuri. Now, without further ado, let's get started!

[MUSIC]

The LGBTQ+ community is so diverse and encompasses many unique identities. As a member of the community myself, I know just how important it is to see yourself represented. Many of the works we see, even on the international scale, tend to portray the stories of cisgender gay men. While they are definitely a part of the community, too, they are only one small section of a diverse group. Being inclusive of everyone is crucial.

The rise of male/male relationships in donghua and manhua has created an influx of LGBTQ+ fanworks and discussion around censorship in China. I see a lot of discourse about the romanticization of m/m relationships in these works, which is definitely an important conversation to have. However, with more titles being released and the fan culture becoming more prominent online every single day, I want to drive the conversation in a different direction and actually start including f/f relationships and non-binary characters into the mix.

Before I can get into that, though, I do want to talk about a brief history of homosexuality in China in a socio-historical context.

[MUSIC]

When talking about identity, it is important to know that there is an endless stream of factors affecting it. The relationship someone has with their identity is shaped through their experiences, cultural background, and oftentimes the social expectations placed onto them. The LGBTQ+ history of China is a complex one. I really wanted to see how the attitudes regarding homosexuality within the country have changed.

I came across something very interesting in the book titled *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* by Bret Hinsch, a professor of history at Fo Guang University in Yilan, Taiwan. In it are some fascinating accounts of homosexuality in ancient China. In this book, it acknowledges the fact that modern China does not readily accept homosexuality; however, that the modern attitude is heavily contrasted with ancient findings. Hinsch asserts that before the 19th-century homosexuality and homoeroticism were not just accepted, but actually, in a way, celebrated. For example, during the Western Han era (dated 206 BC-8 AD) there were eleven emperors. It is stated that ten out of these eleven emperors actually had at least one lover of the same sex, or otherwise expressed some propensities of same-sex desire.

There is also the famous work written by philosopher Han Fei. The “love of the shared peach” is a common euphemism for same-sex male relationships in modern China. According to Kody Gerkin in his journal, *The One-Child Policy, Gay Rights, and Social Reorganization in China*, this is derived from an ancient story dating back to the third century B.C., when Duke Ling of Wei shared a peach with his minister and lover, Ni Xia. There are so many stories detailing the history of same-sex male relationships in China that it would take an entire collection of podcasts to tell them all.

However, the point I want to draw from this comes in the form of a question. What about female/female relationships? Same-sex love between women was just as common as men throughout China’s history. However, James Neill explains in his book titled *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies* that, like other societies throughout history, literature was produced by men and for men, so “anything that didn’t revolve around a penis didn’t get put to paper.”

Written word was popular among the middle class leading into the Ming dynasty, which lasted between 1368 into the 17th century. This resulted in stories becoming more diverse. In these new works, there was an increase in explorations of female sexuality, but they still revolved around men for the most part. Historically, same-sex male love may have been more consistently explored and written about, but same-sex female love in China grew just as strong... just more silently.

As I was speaking with creators and doing my research, the topic of language came up. Language and the words we have to help us define identities and the like can reveal a lot about

the culture. In “Looking for Lesbians in Chinese History” from the book *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, the author Vivian Ng notes that, the word ‘Homosexuality’ is translated into ‘tongxing a’ or ‘tongxing lee en’ (which literally means same-sex love). Even though ‘tongxing lee en’ is translated from the West, in its mistranslation, something is transmogrified, lost, and reconfigured for ‘tongxing lian’ or same-sex love, an emotion, is not the same as the clinical species of homosexuality. She goes on to note that many LGBTQ+ Chinese are said to view these terms as being too clinical. “Tongzhi” literally means “same will”. Furthermore, in translating Chinese back to English, there is a double-crossing, a doubly ‘lost-in-translation’-ness. In the Chinese lexicon, ‘lesbian’ is a translated word from the West. If thoughts are defined by words, she says, “then in the Chinese imagination, there are no ‘lesbians.’”

There was also an interesting article titled *The Gradual Rise of Gender-Neutral Pronouns in Chinese* by journalist Cathy Lai. I’m not going to be going into more detail regarding this, but what I wanted to show was that as our understanding of gender evolves, so does the language we use to describe it.

My original curiosity about wanting to see more representation of female/female and non-binary relationships and identities got flipped on its head. Even just looking at the language itself, there is a constant flux happening with the modern conversation regarding gender in China. It is also important, for me included, to be reminded that not all of the identities and concepts applied within the Western academic world can be applied universally.

As pointed out in an article written by Lakshmi Gandhi for NBC News, “The globalizing influence of the internet and the fact that many Asian Americans continue to have connections abroad mean LGBTQ+ people on both continents continue to influence one another when it comes to language, culture and even politics.” Gandhi goes on to mention that, “The struggle to find the right vocabulary, labels, words, etc. to describe nonbinary identities or same-sex attraction is more common than many assume. A wide range of people have said they often find themselves at a loss to find terminology that is both affirming and accurate in their ancestral language due to the existing vocabulary being stereotypical, nonexistent, or even offensive. Community advocates say that’s why in the last several years many members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies have been working to create more inclusive words and phrases that can fully encompass the LGBTQ+ umbrella.”

Using or relying on only English words and vocabulary to describe one’s sexuality or gender identity can reinforce the false notion that queerness is a Western idea. Even just in this podcast, using words like homosexuality, for example, comes at a cost. This word, as explained earlier, does not have a direct and perfect translation into Mandarin.

Petrus Liu, an Associate Professor of Humanities at Yale-NUS College, discusses this idea of harmful Western applications of labels and the possible inaccuracy of discourse in his book titled *Chinese Queer Theory: Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*. He mentions that there is a definite trend when it comes to discussing gender and sexuality studies in China. "Anyone writing in Chinese on queer topic," as Liu puts it, "is assumed to be working with a translated Western concept rather than articulating an original thought." He goes into the words that I mentioned earlier and theorizes that unsatisfactory terms like "tongzhi" are subsuming under the Western category of queer. He goes on to say that, "The linguistic development of Chinese queer theory suggests a suppressed connection between sexual struggles and Marxist intellectual practice. This point is worth stressing because a colossal body of contemporary queer studies in Chinese is fixated on nomenclature debates, asking whether it is culturally imperialist to equate Chinese 'tongzhi' with Western 'queer', or to conflate Taiwanese and Chinese experiences under the same category of 'tongzhi'."

It's important to realize the context of the language being used to describe and label... especially when it is something so personal like attraction and identity. In today's modern China, specifically in Hong Kong, there is a globally visible queer culture that should not be overlooked. There has been a significant growth in recent years, so this discussion about language, censorship, and past examples of queer theory and contributions should be further examined.

I didn't want to solely speak on this as someone who is not Chinese and identifies as a female, so I asked one of my friends to comment on the topic. He is from China and lived there until he was 15. He identifies as a cisgender gay male.

He wished his name to remain anonymous, but he said this when I asked them about it: "As a Chinese-American looking from the outside-in, I do have to say that in China, a lot of the homophobia and censorship is mostly due to the older generations. For newer generations, the general sentiment is that they don't care since it doesn't bother them. Actually, younger generation youths are pretty open-minded. One example I can think of off the top of my head is the trend of guys wearing women's clothes and looking pretty/wearing makeup. That's just what I witnessed, at least. Mostly, since the Chinese government is mostly made up of the older generation, the censorship and such is mostly due to the gerontocracy. It really depends on the specific person though. Some people are more open than others, and that's just how things are. I am personally a fan of danmei and appreciate how it is becoming popular all around the world. China is still overall a place with lots of censorship, and I felt uncomfortable being out over there. Being here, and admittedly with the help of seeing the popularity of danmei works, I have found it safer and a bit more reassuring of my place here in the US and back home in China. The language barriers we have are broken, but sometimes the translation leaves some

disconnect behind perhaps the true meanings. Regardless, Danmei, in its own way, kind of is spreading the idea that these stories are more than just romance. They can be used as a way to break social borders as well as language borders. Love is universal.”

[MUSIC]

Now, I would like to discuss the topic of stereotypes within the danmei genre. My original questions regarding the danmei genre were focusing on the lack of non-binary, gender non-conforming, transgender, and f/f relationship dynamics being explored. However, I wanted to ask people far more qualified than me if those were the questions I should even be asking.

I want to start with this quote I received from a Chinese danmei fan-artist who wished to be referred to as Lili. I asked her about her thoughts regarding the recent surge of danmei content. She said, “I absolutely love them! On Western television, you have stories that tend to follow a predetermined narrative. Essentially, the Western model of love stories is very point by point. In danmei, and in Chinese dramas in particular, you get plots with magical settings and angst. The thing that makes it different from Western love stories, LGBTQ+ or not, is that the romance is not arbitrary, but rather an irresistible part of a genre-filled tale. Even though there is a cultural pushback to queer content in China and these can be seen as falling under the title of being niche content, we get to see these powerful ensembles of epic tales in the ones we do have.”

Danmei is somewhat controversial, similar to Japan's yaoi genre. Male characters are quite often placed into the heteronormative roles of masculine and feminine, which can be argued reinforces harmful stereotypes. Danmei is also usually made by heterosexual women for the straight female gaze, instead of being created by actual members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, the genre is still considered by many to be a positive step in representation as it puts LGBTQ+ romance into the Chinese mainstream.

In terms of understanding what media consumers should be expecting for LGBTQ+ content within China and specifically within the genres of danmei and baihe... the lens has to be shifted.

Lili also told me this: “The danmei genre is flawed in some ways. Honestly, that’s why I think the entire aspect of fans should be focused on. Us making transformative works, whether they are art, fanfiction or something else, has a certain presence and power even within China. We shouldn’t try to uphold a lofty standard in terms of expecting the very best from every story. What we should be looking for, and especially if you want to focus on gaining more stories canonically about lesbians or non-binary people, is what we need to do to allow the space for creators to be free to do that. China has censorship restrictions that put a wall between what can and cannot cross the line. Danmei and baihe exist in a space outside Western expectations. LGBTQ+ Chinese people have significantly different social pressures on them versus within

Western culture. Even on top of that, though, the pressure differs between males, females, and gender non-conforming people.”

It can be argued that this last point she brought up can be widely related to. Gay men versus gay women, for example, face very different forms of pressure even in Western culture. While not all cultures within China are patriarchal, the modern patriarchal structure did apply to the majority of the population in recent history.

There are conflicting views on where currently China stands, but a brief mention of China’s recently ended one-child policy could definitely help illustrate the differences in expectations depending on gender. Due to cultural norms dating back to the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius, male children are still preferred to female children in Chinese society. The one-child policies’ effects fell disproportionately on the country’s LGBTQ+ community.

For many, family pressure is still of the utmost concern despite the policy being gone. Noted in *Post-Oppositional Queer Politics and the Non-confrontational Negotiation of Queer Desires in Contemporary China* by Shuzhen Huang, “while female queer subjects often experience marital pressure at an earlier age with higher intensity because womanhood is still significantly defined by domestic life, male queer subjects often experienced more enduring marital pressure because they are less likely to be considered as ‘too old to get married’ than women.” One chance at raising a child who meets all of the expectations of parents puts enormous burdens on members of the LGBTQ+ community, keeping them closeted and leaving many people to live lives trapped in unwanted familial arrangements. While this does not apply to every single one, it can be argued that quite a few definitely still feel this way.

Chinese culture is quite often described as being family oriented. The practice of heterosexual marriage is seen as being important, especially by the older generations, to maintain the quote “traditional” family values in Chinese society. Essentially, the pressure that some LGBTQ+ Chinese people might be feeling is not solely due to perhaps the fear of hurting the family’s reputation, but something very material: some parents view a gay or lesbian child as a possible threat to their care as they age.

“This is very true,” says Lili. “Families here in China put so much pressure on their children. I have felt it from my own parents. Luckily they are accepting of me, but others I know are not so lucky. In terms of relating back to danmei, the fact that more works feature male/male relationships and that they are far more popular in fan circles definitely is a reaction (conscious or not) to the stigmas and pressures due to policies like the one-child law. Also, the pressures surrounding reproduction could definitely play a role in favoring male/male versus female/female.”

In the danmei genre, the men are oftentimes portrayed as having a light, feminine side to them regardless of their standing as perhaps a famous swordsman. There's a fluidity in these works, showing how identity is not stagnant. There is power in existing within the shift between masculine and feminine, and also power in being yourself rather than adhering to a solo label.

Danmei helps LGBTQ+ and queer-sensitive audiences understand and validate their own desires in what is still a heteronormative society.

[MUSIC]

Looking into different cultures and their history can provide lots of information about the kinds of queer media are being produced within that respective country, as well as how they are being received.

The types of identities and relationships that are represented also can paint a very telling picture of the social climate of the respective culture and the results of their historical stance on the matter. As much as I would like to, I don't have time to fully detail the stories of popular danmei works. However, I can pull some important aspects and themes that are popular within them.

Danmei novels are popular in China, mostly among young female audiences. In one of the earlier quotes, it was discussed why they are so popular. For example, a popular novel titled *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (also known as the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation) has been given numerous official adaptations, including a Chinese drama that was released on Netflix titled *The Untamed*. It's a fantasy murder mystery that also talks about the importance of family, and it has a beautiful LGBTQ+ love story. So, yes... the gay love story is canon in the original.

If you ask around the fan communities that create fanart and fanfiction why they create what they do, oftentimes your answer will be this: Characters in Danmei are always handsome. They are also passionate and daring in everything that they do. The stories themselves often have exciting settings and plotlines. For the younger generations growing up in China today, perhaps we could say that these stories satisfy a desire for adventure their parents may not completely understand. The inevitable ties in a conventional romance, marriage and childbirth, and perhaps the idealized concept of love may play a part in Danmei's popularity.

A fanfiction writer under the pseudonym "Nara" that I had the chance to message with agreed with this idea. She wrote, "As a transgender lesbian Chinese female, I can say that my love for the genre stemmed from being deprived of media that I truly enjoyed and could see myself in. I see myself in danmei, although I am not male. I see powerful LGBTQ+ characters, I'm in. My only wish, like many, is that baihe could have more titles. It's not a matter of wanting it to become mainstream, though. My worry is that Western audiences would put too much

pressure on the Chinese writers. There are already so few in comparison to danmei writers, that I really just think we should encourage authenticity over quantity. The quality is important. I want to see transgender people in more Chinese media, too... trust me. That would be a personal win for me and would mean a lot. It's hard to put into words how baihe is being received as in China since it is not receiving the major coverage like danmei is... but I think with more titles slowly coming out and people talking more about it that it is on the rise. At least, I would hope so."

Considering Nara's point, I want to revisit Huang's article. Huang states that, "the practices of Danmei fandom could be read as a gesture of embracing queer sexualities, a commentary of dominant heteronormative culture which may contribute to a more queer-friendly environment. Perhaps even the increasingly popularity of danmei culture outside queer communities may contribute to a more queer friendly discursive environment in contemporary China."

[MUSIC]

So, is there f/f representation? Yes, absolutely. In baihe titles such as *Night Flowers Shirking From the Light of the Sun* where a cultivator insists on repaying her life debt to a demoness to *The Reconciliation* which focuses on a more modern setting with actors... there are a variety of f/f dynamics currently being explored.

My personal favorite is a manhua called *Tamen de Gushi* by the creator Tan Jiu. In it, Chinese high school girl Sun Jing spots another girl, Qiu Tong, at a bus stop and instantly falls for her. The story follows the blossoming friendship between the two girls and asks the question: does Qiu Tong return Sun Jing's feelings? It is so vulnerable and natural, which seems like such a contrast to the overly passionate and harsh drama of many Western romantic stories.

One theme that I particularly appreciated in this story is how hard it is to discern the platonic-romantic boundary in a budding gay relationship. This is played with throughout the comic, as Sun Jing and Qiu Tong wrestle with the added meanings behind simple public interactions like hugs, handholding, and roughhousing as their feelings evolve. What does it mean to be doing these things? What does it mean to the other girl? And what does it mean to everybody else?

[MUSIC]

I also wanted to briefly comment on the idea of representation. I think there is definitely a difference between media written to be representation and different fandoms turning media into representation. What do I mean by this?

Well, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and a fan of danmei and baihe, I recognize that these works are typically not meant to be seen as progressive in the Western sense of the word. These works do have wonderfully written LGBTQ+ characters and I definitely believe that it is fair for fans to take the canon parts of the story and find meaning in them.

However, it is also crucial to note the flaws of both the danmei and baihe genres and how they cater to certain audiences. Finding perfect representation in one specific work might be a lofty standard. What I'm trying to say is that when I speak about danmei, baihe, or any other kind of LGBTQ+ work... the term representation is meant in the transformative sense. The content created helps alter the course of LGBTQ+ works and opens up more possibilities to explore.

Going into this project, I had been focusing my research on trying to talk about specific novels, shows, etc. Instead, I found myself more interested in the people creating them, the fans getting something out of them, and the socio-historical context that informs the ways these stories are being received today.

This podcast ended up being less about the plots and stories of danmei and baihe, but instead shifted the focus to explore the implications surrounding the translation and sharing of LGBTQ+ works and the cultural differences of language, depiction, and representation that comes along with them. It's interesting to see the surge in popularity of LGBT+ content in China while the Chinese government itself often places homosexuality in the same ranks as incest, describing both as "abnormal sexual relations." There is an ongoing shift and in the media.

As also pointed out by Nara, "Regardless if it is a lesbian relationship or a gay male relationship, the Chinese government is taking notice and knows about these new waves of media being popular. They are aware that we, the LGBTQ+ community, are here regardless of their views on us or the censorship they try to use to silence us. The dynamics explored in this genre (danmei) are sometimes problematic, I'll admit it. But let's be real, Western LGBTQ+ representation can be quite rough, too. What I'm trying to get at here is that these types of representations that toe the line in between 'good' and 'bad' are only the buildup. I don't believe in getting rid of a change in media representation for marginalized groups, but in order to make a difference, the media must adapt to become more aware. We, with the support of overseas fans as well, must push it in that direction. I love China. It is my home. My only hope is that more people who write danmei, baihe, or any kind of LGBTQ+ will one day see a China where that can be openly accepted."

[MUSIC]

Moving forward, LGBTQ+ are making their own history by creating a more diverse array of works that feature a cornucopia of identities. Hopefully, in the future, more representation of

non-binary, transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming individuals can be published and explored through a wide array of stories not just in China, but globally.

Each country, culture, etc. have their own background and values. The important thing to consider here is how to move forward and create a safe place within each of them to help explore and include as many identities as possible.

Though representation of any kind, though inaccurate, can be acknowledged as a remarkable first step, there's always miles to go, and the only change possible comes from our conscious intent to realize and understand the shortcomings of the representation we see in the media and undo prejudices one by one.

Some dynamics and identities may be more popular in terms of reach, but that doesn't mean that just because baihe does not have the same amount of popularity or amount of works as danmei that those identities are any less important. Some kinds of stories and relationship dynamics will be considered preferential over others depending on the historical context and social issues within that given part of the world, but having even just the ability to freely and openly express that is a step in the right direction.

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the Queer Studies Capstone Podcast Collection! I really hope you enjoyed it.

[MUSIC]

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]