



Masculinity in crisis? Reticent / *han-xu* politics against *danmei* and male effeminacy

Tingting Hu

Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University, China

Liang Ge 

King's College London, UK

Ziyao Chen

Wuhan University, China

Xu Xia

Wuhan University, China

Abstract

This article examines the tension between public gender expressions and official regulations in mainland China. Utilizing a critical discourse analysis, we investigate a transition in state-initiated criticism and censorship against the *danmei* genre and male effeminacy. Focusing on the pandemic period, we use official regulations and state media feature articles as data, 'reticent / *han-xu*' politics as a grounding theoretical basis, and statements from mainstream media platforms as secondary resources. We argue that *han-xu* politics functions as the Chinese party-state's strategic response to a perceived 'crisis of masculinity'. They first invisibilize and marginalize soft masculinities, and if this is not effective, then suppress and prohibit cultural forms that violate hegemonic masculinity, which works to perpetuate the hetero-patriarchal social-familial system.

Corresponding author:

Liang Ge, Culture, Media and Creative Industries Department, King's College London, UK.

Email: liang.ge@kcl.ac.uk

Keywords

censorship, crisis of masculinity, *danmei*, *han-xu*, male effeminacy, reticent politics

Introduction

When *Addiction* (Shangyin, 2016) lifted the curtain on the great popularity of male homoerotic *danmei*-adapted web dramas in mainland China in the beginning of 2016, it was quickly blocked by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). However, in the following years, several more prevailing *danmei*-adapted web dramas emerged into the Chinese mediascape, including *The Guardian* (Zhenhun, Youku TV, 2018), *The Untamed* (Chenqingling, Tencent TV, 2019), and *Word of Honour* (Shanheling, Youku TV, 2021). Each adopted the strategy of *bromance-as-masquerade*, depicting male–male romance under the guise of homo-social bromance to pass censors and engage with the mainstream media (Hu and Wang, 2021). The most recent case, *Word of Honour*, adapted from Priest's novel *Faraway Wanderers* (Tianyake) and produced by Youku and Ciwen Media, achieved over 1.3 billion views when its finale was released on 27 March 2021.¹ However, in August 2021, one of the leading actors, Zhang Zhehan, was listed as an 'immoral celebrity' by the party-state, resulting in the blocking of all his relevant social media accounts and works, including *Word of Honour*. This incident originated from his 'anti-fans' discovering that he had photographed the buildings of the Yasukuni Shrine in Japan and posted it on Instagram in 2018, which triggered the considerable accusation of him being a 'national traitor' and a boycott of him by more than twenty brands and the performing industry association of China, and ended up with him being eliminated from domestic cyberspace. This action played a part in the 2021 'Internet Clean-up Campaign', which marked a policy change towards more direct, severe criticism of and crackdown on the *danmei* genre and male effeminacy from the state level.

The *danmei* genre, which frequently features male protagonists with non-normative masculinities, has long been criticized and censored by Chinese authorities, with its dual association with homosexuality and pornography, making it especially vulnerable to state censorship (Yang and Xu, 2016b). Although the censors have primarily targeted graphic depictions of sex and nudity (Xiao, 2013), either gay or straight, *danmei* was rarely directly or explicitly mentioned in these regulations previously. However, a recent policy change towards both the *danmei* genre and male effeminacy happened in 2021. It began with multiple state media feature articles criticizing how *danmei* triggers excessive entertainment and consumption, and makes youngsters depart from the mainstream aesthetics and values.² The Central Propaganda Department (CPD) issued the Notification on Carrying Out Comprehensive Management of the Field of Culture and Entertainment on 2 September 2021, banning *danmei*-adapted dramas.³ This was followed by an official announcement by the SARFT on 17 September 2021, boycotting the *danmei* genre. Beyond the *danmei* genre, the state media, including *Guangming Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, published a series of feature articles in 2021, rigorously criticizing male effeminacy, using the label of 'sissy pants' (*niangpao*) and emphasizing its 'deformed aesthetics'.⁴ The CPD's notification also involved eradicating media

representations of ‘sissy pants’ and banning the idol-training type of talent shows, which often feature young male stars with a feminine appearance. In addition, the Beijing Municipal Radio and Television Bureau (BMRTB) then swiftly stated its support for eliminating the aesthetic of sissy pants and forbidding its dissemination on 18 September 2021.⁵

Feature articles published by the state media in 2021 suggest a change in authoritative attitudes toward both the *danmei* genre and male effeminacy, shifting from simple discouragement to the current approach of rigorous injunction. On the one hand, as queer groups have long been absent in Chinese mainstream media, *danmei*-adapted dramas, which have been popular since 2016, might be considered an audiovisual form linking queer members on Chinese mainstream media platforms over the past decade. On the other hand, ‘sissiness’ has often been associated with queer stereotypes. In this sense, the prohibition of both *danmei* and male effeminacy may imply a change in the Chinese authorities’ attitudes toward queer groups. Meanwhile, the state has been promoting the hypermasculine ‘wolf warrior’ archetype in foreign and domestic affairs for years. This was especially true during the pandemic period, when nationalist sentiment was intensively utilized as a mechanism for the party to maintain its power in Chinese society (Huang, 2022). Against this backdrop, we are particularly interested in how authoritative regulations have changed as compared with previous criticisms against male effeminacy and *danmei*, to what extent the Chinese authorities attempt to suppress male effeminacy and *danmei*, and how this change in policy can be interpreted in China’s socio-political discourse. Employing a critical discourse analysis of official regulations and state media feature articles, we investigate a transition in state-initiated criticism and censorship against the *danmei* genre and male effeminacy, and suggest that reticent/*han-xu* politics functions as the Chinese party-state’s strategic response to a perceived ‘crisis of masculinity’.

Admittedly, the regulation of *danmei* is more complicated than a top-down decision, and it might be a result of multiple occurrences, in Zhang’s case, with radical nationalism as the trigger. Some scholars claim that the state does not always suppress the *danmei*-adapted web drama, because it brings huge commercial value to the entertainment industry, and in this way the state can gain benefits as well. For instance, the *People’s Daily* published a small article titled ‘*The Untamed*: Writing the beauty of national style’ that seemingly praises this show.⁶ However, this article was published in the overseas version of *People’s Daily* (rather than the domestic version) on 28 June 2019, one day after its premiere on Tencent, primarily emphasizing elements of traditional culture in the drama (e.g. *guqin* and ancient poetry) and allying the show with nationalistic sentiment without mentioning its genre. On the one hand, China’s nationalist ideological propaganda has hardly engaged with the queer/LGBT discourse via the *danmei*-adapted web series, while the LGBT group has long been marginalized in the mainstream mediascape of mainland China. On the other hand, integrating nationalist sentiment in *danmei*-adapted dramas is more likely to be the tactic for the producers to pass censorship rather than an authority-approved communication strategy to rebrand Chinese nationalism. Therefore, we can still detect the contradictions and negotiations between the neoliberal market and authoritarian state around *danmei* and non-normative masculinities, which aroused our interest in the logic behind the seemingly one-sided

negative construction of *danmei* and male effeminacy in the top-down media discourse frame, as well as the state's use of gender framing strategies.

Situated in Chinese masculinity studies, we have begun by contextualizing the dynamic between the state and masculinity, then challenging the traditional theorization of Chinese masculinities and looking back at the latest censorship against *danmei* and male effeminacy to make clear how we established the research aims. In the next section, we provide a systematic literature review of Chinese masculinity studies and *danmei* studies, and frame our criticism of the optimistic views of Chinese queer and *danmei* studies, respectively, which leads the way to the specific research questions and theoretical framework.

Literature review

The new millennium saw burgeoning research on Chinese masculinity across the fields of Chinese literature, history, film, media, anthropology and cultural studies (see Osburg, 2013; Song, 2004; Song and Hird, 2013, 2018). These works predominantly deal with issues such as (1) the dynamic between soft masculinity and soft power; (2) the correlation between westernization and modernization in China in relation to masculinity; (3) the types of wealthy and feminized masculinities in the Chinese context; and (4) how these new types of Chinese masculinities negotiate with internationalization (Louie, 2014). The 'crisis of masculinity' has become a heated topic discussed in both Chinese and global contexts. In the western context, the 'crisis of masculinity' primarily refers to men's uncertainty and confusion since the traditional gender order of male superiority and power over women has been challenged by feminism (Song, 2004). In the Chinese context, the 'crisis of masculinity' is mainly attributed to the prevalence of soft masculinities in popular culture, and is regarded as a symbol of waning national power (Song, 2021), which has stirred up a certain amount of 'sissyphobia' in response to anxiety over national virility and patriarchal power. As a result, the state has initiated a top-down project of censoring gender expressions and promoting an authority-favoured hypermasculinity, epitomized by the film series *Wolf Warrior* (Hu and Guan, 2021). Therefore, this article aims to canvass the ways in which this top-down project works to suppress soft masculinity, particularly targeting male effeminacy and using the *danmei* genre as a scapegoat, in order to open a pathway toward national remasculinization and reinforce the hetero-patriarchal dominance.

The masculinization of the state is primarily evident in the relationship between state institutions and hegemonic masculinity, with hegemonic masculinity and state power supporting each other (Connell, 1996). Hence, masculinity is institutionalized in this structure while becoming a significant individual character or personality trait (Connell, 1996), making it an ideology that justifies male domination (Song, 2004). Hegemonic masculinity has been discussed widely across various fields since the early 1980s; based on the presumption that non-hegemonic masculinities are subordinate, this concept also represents a process that works in many international settings (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, historical research shows that masculinities are in a continuous state of change (Kimmel, 1996), with one term being insufficient to cover the various types and constantly changing masculinities. Therefore, 'hybrid

masculinities', referring to 'men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, 246), has become an accepted term to make sense of the growing scholarship on masculinities. It also allows more discussion on different patterns of masculinity beyond the western context, such as the multiple and varied forms of masculinity in Chinese, Japanese and Korean contexts.

Particularly in China, traditional masculine ideals fit the paradigm of *wen* (cultural attainment) and *wu* (physical prowess), which was first theorized by Louie and Edwards (1994) and then further specified by Louie (2002). In contrast to the western image of macho men, entailing physical strength and unerring silence, the Chinese macho hero counterbalances cerebral and brawny characteristics, with the cerebral model often seen as superior (Hu and Guan, 2021). In neoliberal post-socialist China, youth culture and new media have stimulated new ideals of Chinese masculinities that depart subtly but significantly from the traditional forms. While these new forms still exhibit the essential characteristics of *wen-wu*, they further engage with softened and feminine features (Louie, 2012). These ideals include 'the metrosexual' – featuring urbanized, white-collar beautiful men in the moneyed class (Louie, 2012), and 'flower-like men' (*Huameinan*) – girlishly beautiful men, who not only frequently appear in TV series in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and mainland China, but also dominate a highly commercialized popular literature and manga genre called boys' love (BL) in Japan or *danmei* in China. While the metrosexuals are embraced by men as 'winners' within the patriarchal framework, the status of 'flower-like men' remains controversial. Louie (2014) writes that this softer and feminized masculinity is still aligned with the traditional value of *wen*. As *wen* is generally considered superior to *wu* in traditional Chinese values, this softer masculinity is still alive and cherished in China today (Louie, 2003). However, we believe this argument to be questionable, especially in mainland China during the pandemic, precisely because of the collaborative establishment of anti-male effeminacy and anti-*danmei* media discourses we examine in this research.

Chinese *danmei* fiction features male-male romantic and/or sexual relationships, and first appeared at the end of the 1990s under the influence of Japanese BL manga and fiction through the transit ports of Taiwan and Hong Kong. After more than twenty years of development and indigenization, this genre has become one of the most popular in China's flourishing online literature, prompting a burgeoning cultural industry encompassing manga, anime, audio dramas, live-action films and television dramas, video games, and other media forms. Chinese *danmei* is influenced by both Japanese BL manga and fiction, and, to a lesser extent, Euro-American slash fiction, but it has also developed its own characteristics. However, like its counterparts in Japan and Euro-America, Chinese *danmei* works are often scrutinized from the perspectives of gender and sexuality because of the male homoerotic content, as well as its widespread female readership, including the underaged.

Chinese *danmei* scholars have thus far tended to pay attention to story types through textual or content analysis, such as the father-son incest narrative (Yang and Xu, 2013) and the heteronormative gender stereotypes in *danmei* stories (Zhou et al., 2018). Some other academics have examined how the *danmei* subculture acts as a participatory space for female engagement; specifically, how the *danmei* cultural space acts as a queer online

(counter-) public sphere in China (Ge, 2021; 2022; Yang and Xu, 2016a), and how the *danmei* scene acts as a participatory space created via female imaginative power and affective engagement (Martin, 2017). More recently, *danmei* adaptation web dramas have become a research focus in the mainland Chinese context, while three highly popular dramas, *The Guardian*, *S.C.I. Mystery* and *The Untamed*, have been discussed by Ng and Li (2020), Hu and Wang (2021) and Ge (2022) respectively in terms of the dramas' adapting strategies and fans' engagement. Censorship is also a significant topic in Chinese *danmei* studies, researched across the contexts of mainland China (Bai, 2022; Tian, 2020; Yang and Xu, 2016b), Hong Kong (Liu, 2009), and transnationally (Wood, 2013). Nevertheless, while these studies pay particular attention to novels, fanfictions and *danmei*-adapted web dramas, the works on censorship are mainly conducted from the fandom side and focused on typical cases, neither teasing out the skeleton of censorship nor seeking its negotiation with Chinese masculinities. Hence, this study aims to fill in this gap by mapping the genealogy of *danmei* censors in mainland China, and further interrogating the political logic and gendered implications behind the current national campaign against male-effeminacy in the guise of anti-*danmei*.

Danmei stories in the Chinese context represent a close correlation between gender ideology and male homosexuality. Although the *danmei* genre has long been considered different from real-life gay experiences due to its particular emphasis on women's fantasy, the relationship between queer groups and the *danmei* subculture is more complicated. Scholars have demonstrated that the Chinese *danmei* subculture has had to resist its potential to support and speak for queer groups (Lin, 2020), while some popular *danmei* novel writers are allegedly gay men, yet circumvent realistic issues faced by sexual minority groups such as homophobia and AIDS panic.⁷ Researchers with optimistic views believe that the low threshold of online publishing and relative freedom of cyberspace have provided an opportunity for young Chinese women to express their desires and aspirations, particularly in *danmei* subcultural communities (Yang and Xu, 2015), given the invisibility of 'real' queer stories in mainstream media.

From another perspective, optimistic views can also be found in Chinese queer studies, which have captured the complexity of queer selfhood and experiences primarily by adopting a bottom-up framework and focusing on individual agency through an optimistic interpretation of cultural visibility; namely, through the production and circulation of independent queer films and docuseries as a form of media activism (Bao, 2018, 2019). However, given these works are forbidden in mainland China's mainstream media and are only available to certain limited groups, optimistic Chinese queer scholars fail to answer how this alleged political potential could be realized, and to what extent it is enabled and/or limited by China's social, cultural, and political climates (Song, 2021). Therefore, we deem it necessary to take systemic forces and the critical condition of media content into account, especially political and media censorship, as they engender the systemic structures of people's mindsets and everyday life expressions that not only pose direct challenges to the lives of people with non-mainstream values, but also exert long-term effects by shaping how sexual non-conformity is perceived among the mainstream public. In this article, we neither attempt to equate *danmei* with queer stories nor try to figure out queer experiences in mainland China. Through an analysis of *danmei*-related policies, we aim to challenge the current optimistic views by canvassing

the tensions between public gender expressions and official regulations against *danmei* and male effeminacy. Thus we ask: How has male effeminacy been criticized in relation to *danmei* and queer groups? How has the censorship of the *danmei* genre changed over time? And how can the state's changing policies toward male effeminacy and *danmei* be interpreted in the context of Chinese socio-political discourse?

Theoretical framework

We developed this article from the concept of 'reticent / "*han-xu*" politics' proposed by Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding (2005; Liu et al., 2007). '*Han-xu*' is often translated as 'conservative' or 'reserved', which represents the Confucian aesthetic of appealing to individuals to be modest and reserved. However, as pointed out by Liu and Ding (2005), '*han-xu*' also works as a form of reticent homophobia in the Chinese socio-familial system. In their analysis of the fiction *The Unfilial Daughter (Nini)* by Du Xioulan in 1996, the tragedy of the lesbian protagonist Angel and the suicide of her ex-lover Qing-qing are the results of the reticent homophobia which functions as 'the reigning proper order in speech and action (at work, at home, in the socius) to sustain the notion of an untouched, unsullied, harmonious whole' (Liu and Ding, 2005: 49) in the Chinese socio-familial continuum. '*Han-xu*' (reticence) literally means both '*han* (holding back)' and '*xu* (storing up)'. Such reticent politics functions to perpetuate certain effects of homophobia through silent words and reticent tolerance in quotidian life. In this article, situating our focus on governance regarding masculinity at the official level of mainland China, we intentionally use '*han-xu* politics', instead of 'reticence', to highlight the two-fold oppressive governance strategies implemented by the Chinese party-state power. On one side, the '*xu* (storing up)' signifies a default invisibilization and marginalization strategy, which is exemplified in the Chinese government's policies and regulations concerning male homoeroticism. On the other, the '*han* (holding back)' denotes a crackdown approach that condemns and hopes to amend the overheated male effeminacy and *danmei* culture. Moreover, it is noteworthy that '*xu*' and '*han*' are often entangled together at both the micro and the macro level.

In the discussion sections, we carefully examine how the intensity of *han-xu* politics has been strengthened alongside the flourishing of *danmei* culture and soft masculinities in the Chinese cultural landscape from 2014 to 2021, then how '*xu*' strategy has been overtaken by a more salient and tougher '*han*' strategy, particularly in 2021.

Differing from Liu and Ding's context of contemporary Taiwanese society and paternalist familial relations, we first focus our attention on mainland China to closely examine its historical contingency and socioeconomic and cultural context; second, we focus on the state's top-down governance regarding *danmei*, male effeminacy and male homosexuality, which have been working together to construct the state's preferred masculinity; third, we expand our discussion past reticent homophobia toward hegemonic masculinity and its dispossession of non-normative masculinities, which is tightly associated with hetero-patriarchy, sissyphobia, homophobia and transphobia. Through an examination of four strands of official-level regulations, statements, and news reports from 2014 to 2021, we reveal the dark side of *han-xu* politics, showing how the Chinese government masterfully regulates non-normative masculinities and perpetuates

hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity as the embodiment of the party-state. The 2021 policy change suggests a state-level transition to move against LGBTQ+ groups – represented by the *danmei* subculture and the media associated with male homoeroticism – via prioritizing heterosexist hegemonic masculinity, changing the previous invisibilization in-visualization strategy to one of censure and prohibition by framing *danmei* and male effeminacy as unhealthy. Then we suggest that this *han-xu* politics functions as the primary strategy employed by the Chinese party-state responding to the ‘crisis of masculinity’: invisibilizing and marginalizing soft masculinities, and if not efficient, cracking down and prohibiting cultural forms which violated the hegemonic masculinity in order to perpetuate the hetero-patriarchal social-familial system.

Methodology

Grounded in the socio-political context of mainland China, this article adopts a method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse how interactions between authoritative policies and state media’s criticism of male effeminacy and the *danmei* genre can be interpreted in the context of broader social and political discourses. Aiming to move beyond description and interpretation to explore the relationship between discourse and social structures, CDA helps to investigate social changes by examining how social inequality is produced and perpetuated, as well as how it is remedied or modified, including any other potential implications for adjusting it (Fairclough, 2010 [1995]). CDA focuses on how power abuse, dominance and inequality are presented in discursive social and political contexts, and emphasizes how a social group’s mental state is affected by social structures that may have an impact on how people highlight significant information in a text (van Dijk, 2003). Given its crucial role in uncovering hidden ideologies and canvassing the presence of power in media discourse, in this study CDA is used to investigate the transition in state-initiated criticism and censorship against male effeminacy, especially during the pandemic period, using official regulations and state media feature articles as prominent data, ‘reticent / *han-xu*’ politics as grounding theoretical basis, and statements from mainstream media platforms as secondary resources. We critically analyse four strands of data: (1) state regulations issued by official departments targeting male effeminacy and *danmei*; (2) feature articles about male effeminacy and *danmei* published by official state media (e.g. Xinhua News Agency, *Guangming Daily*, *People’s Daily*, etc.); (3) official statements published by mainstream media platforms (e.g. Jinjiang Literature City, Sina Weibo, etc.) influenced by state policy; and (4) other relevant official regulations relating to pornography, violence and illegal publications, as *danmei* has often been targeted under the pretence of targeting these issues.

A genealogy of official discourse on masculinities: from 2014 to 2021

We choose 2014 as the starting point as it is from this very year that Chinese media and cultural landscapes witnessing the popularity of male femininity, that is, the phrase *du jour* – ‘little fresh meat (Mandarin: *Xiao Xian Rou*)’ – which refers to young male

stars with effeminate physical appearance and delicate make-up that does not conform to stereotypical masculinities. Admittedly, as early as 2005, a phenomenal ‘*zhongxing* culture’ (literally meaning ‘neutral sex and/or gender’, see Li, 2015) emerged in Chinese popular culture, along with the hit of the winner of the extremely popular television talent show *Super Voice Girls*: Yuchun Li, also known as Chris Lee. Coinciding with this new star’s popularity, ‘*zhongxing*’ evoked public anxiety about gender transgression and triggered heated discussion among both the state media and the public concerning female masculinity. For instance, Chris Lee was nicknamed as ‘Chun Ge’ (Brother Chun) for her masculine appearance on screen, and many male netizens even created memes to scoff at her masculinity (Liu et al., 2013). By contrast, Chinese state media, including *China News* and *China Youth Daily*,⁸ maintained a relatively positive tone, reporting ‘*zhongxing*’ sensibility as the embodiment of women’s power. Compared to the proliferation of male effeminacy in the Chinese mediascape since the 2010s, the prevalent female masculinity in the first decade of the 21st century did not stimulate any critiques from the state media. It is worth noting that there is a history of female masculinity in China, drawing from the Mao era when women were encouraged to be ‘iron ladies’ (*tie niangzi*) – that is, to dress and behave in genderless ways, and to participate in public affairs (Honig, 2002), which partly contributed to the acceptance of female masculinities. However, male effeminacy, as the counterpart of female masculinity, is facing relentless critiques from the state media. In the following discussion, we primarily interrogate the discourse around male effeminacy, the sissy man, and male femininities. We identify three key nodes through which the upsurge of official-level condemnation against male effeminacy was channelled.

The first node emerged in 2014, when the state initiated its first large-scale ‘Purifying the Internet Campaign’ (*Jingwang Xingdong*)⁹ from April to November 2014. During this campaign, *danmei* became a major target, as the state saw the genre as likely to contain obscene and pornographic content. The ‘obscenity’ here refers to the non-normative male homoeroticism and the non-hegemonic masculinities depicted in *danmei* fiction. Around the same time, the term ‘little fresh meat’ was popularized among Chinese female fans to refer to young male stars embodying feminine beauty (Song, 2021). The first-generation male stars with massive data traffic (known as ‘*sida liuliang*’, which literally means ‘four major data traffic [stars]’) also appeared in 2014 – Lu Han, Chris Wu, Li Yifeng and Yang Yang. Subsequently, the *People’s Daily* published a feature article describing male teenagers with soft masculinities as having a spiritual ‘calcium deficiency’.¹⁰ Such an acrimonious metaphor constructs male adolescents who are not spiritually dauntless and physically strong as sick, as the ‘beat generation’, a phrase directly used by the state media in its very literary meaning. Ironically, they did not realize the ‘beat generation’ per se in America who were prominent in the decades after the Second World War and celebrated non-conformity and spontaneous creativity, led to the emergence and burgeoning of various subcultures in post-war Euro-American societies (Campbell, 2001). The booming mediascape of ‘little fresh meat’ and its multitudinous female audiences since the 2010s de facto serve as the embodiment of the ‘she economy’ in China, which underlines ‘the role of women in driving economic growth as consumers and entrepreneurs’ (Yu and Cui, 2019: 430).

The second node appeared in 2018, when the boy-group reality show *Idol Producer* premiered on iQiyi, a major Chinese online video platform, and achieved great success. A week after the finale was released on 6 April 2018, the overall views of the 12 episodes had reached over 3 billion.¹¹ The nine highest-ranked contestants debuted as Nine Percent, who were also regarded as ‘little fresh meat’, as their effeminate physical appearance and delicate make-up did not conform to the norms of hegemonic masculinity. It is also in 2018 that the *danmei*-adapted web drama *The Guardian* (Mandarin: *Zhenhun*, 2018, Youku Video) screened and achieved significant popularity among young female audiences who enthusiastically proclaimed themselves ‘The Guardian girls’ and actively promoted the male–male romance and the two male stars, Zhu Yilong and Bai Yu (see Ng and Li, 2020). In the same year, a series of attacks were mounted by the state media, including Xinhua News, the *People’s Daily*, *Banyuetan* and *Global Times*. The attacks framed trending male effeminacy images in China as the ‘Feminine Wave’ (Mandarin: *Yinrou Zhifeng*).¹² While they admitted the diversity of gender expression, this admission acted as a cover to criticize male femininity as an excessive subculture resulting from imperfect families and poor education.¹⁴ As pointed out by Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity denotes a cultural ideal that naturalizes and legitimizes the interests of powerful men, and creates hierarchical relationships both among men and between the binary genders. Saliently, the official media see male effeminacy and *danmei* as subcultures, subjugated to hegemonic masculinity. The governance not only attacked men who were outside of normative masculinity, but also criticized women’s indulgence in imagining non-normative male protagonists and their plastic, romantic male–male relationships. On 13 April 2018, Weibo published an official statement to initiate a three-month campaign against illegal content that contained violence, pornography, and homoeroticism.¹³ Moreover, the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) and the National Work Group began a campaign for ‘Combating Pornography and Illegal Publications’ – a special rectification concerning internet literature. Although the campaign’s name was not specifically targeted at *danmei*, Jinjiang was fined RMB 25,000 for violating the Regulations on the Administration of Online Publishing Services;¹⁴ this was not the case for male-oriented internet literature websites such as Qidian. No statements were given to explain which specific paragraph Jinjiang violated. In the same year, *danmei* writer Tianyi was sentenced to ten years for producing and selling obscene articles for profit.¹⁵ A notable event linked with this inception of the condemnation of male effeminacy and another wave of censoring male homoeroticism is the implementation of the two-child policy since 2016,¹⁶ allowing Chinese couples to have two children to help address society’s ageing issue, yet its effect seemed not successful. The year 2016 witnessed a transient increase in the birth population to 1.8 million, but from 2017 the number of births has declined for four consecutive years.¹⁷ The sustained low fertility rate also incited great anxiety in the Chinese socio-familial continuum in which the reproductive discourse perpetuates itself by interpellating women’s procreative bodies. The male homoeroticism and its associated non-normative masculinities are hence regarded as non-procreative by the heterosexist reproductive matrix of regulatory power.

The third node appeared in 2021, which was the most stringent to date. In 2021 the strands of official-level regulations and media coverage implemented attacks and

restrictions against both male effeminacy and *danmei* simultaneously, marking the first time the state media closely associated *danmei* with representations of male effeminacy. As mentioned in the Introduction, the flashpoint for the 2021 crackdown was the immensely popular *danmei*-adapted web series *Word of Honour* (Youku TV, 2021), which aired from February to May 2021. Swathes of female fans celebrated the soft masculinities embodied in both the male protagonist Zhou Zishu and the actor Zhang Zhehan. The state media began their attack during its release period. For example, on 17 April 2021, *Guangming Daily* published a commentary article condemning the *danmei*-adapted works that had deformed the ‘healthy’ public aesthetic by featuring increasingly feminized men and which would seriously affect both women and men.¹⁸ In September 2021, SARFT announced its regulations to prohibit all media platforms from producing content related to ‘sissy pants’ deformed aesthetics. Subsequently, state media celebrated such an infallible ban by the party-state. The *People’s Daily*, for instance, wrote that the party-state used an iron fist to discipline both the vulgar culture and the deformed aesthetics of ‘sissy pants’.¹⁹ On 8 September 2021, the CPD and SARFT invited administrators from major social media platforms, including Tencent, Weibo, and NetEase, for a meeting on clearing up ‘bad’ cultures. According to the news report published by Xinhua News,²⁰ the government urged these platforms to strictly follow the announcement issued on 2 September 2021 and firmly boycott ‘bad’ cultures such as ‘sissy pants’ and *danmei*. Such an intense condemnation and then crackdown on *danmei* and male effeminacy also reflect the increasing uneasiness of the Chinese social-familial system as the newborn population continued to drop – to 10.62 million in 2021,²¹ although the party-state further amended its family planning policy and officially initiated the three-child policy in August 2021.²² In the following sections, we analyse the discourse around the four strands’ reports on *danmei* and male effeminacy and debunk the ‘*han-xu*’ governance strategy employed by the party-state.

Xu/storing up: invisibilization and marginalization

In this section, we discuss the two facets embedded in the ‘*xu*’/ storing-up strategy employed by the Chinese party-state media and their regulations against *danmei* and male homoeroticism: invisibilization and marginalization respectively. One of the most notorious official policies employed by the Chinese party-state against LGBTQ+ groups is the ‘not encouraging, not discouraging and not promoting’ policy (Schultz, 2013). Notably, such an invisibilization strategy has penetrated the party-state’s regulation of Chinese sexual minorities throughout the post-millennial era. Before 2021, both the state regulations issued by official departments and the state media deliberately kept an ambiguous tone, condemning *danmei* for its vulgarity, obscenity, and deformed aesthetics without explicit reference to male homosexuality or male effeminacy. In 2018, the National Work Group for ‘Combating Pornography and Illegal Publications’ imposed a fine of RMB 25,000 on Jinjiang, but did not state which specific paragraph of the Regulations on the Administration of Online Publishing Services Jinjiang had violated.²³ Similarly, in September 2022, Jinjiang stated that updates of the *danmei* column would be paused for two weeks until 21 September 2021 due to requirements of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC).¹⁵ Typically, there was no account either on Jinjiang

or on the official website of CAC as to what precise content infringed the ‘Internet information communication order’ and ‘bright and healthy cyberspace’. The party-state and its mouthpieces intentionally maintain this ambiguity in order to show that their regulations and censorship are not targeted at male homoeroticism depicted in *danmei*; it was because of something undeclared that the *danmei* were censored, thus functionally absolving the party-state from blame for LGBTQ+ censorship. This form of censorship without stating explicit reasons implemented by the Chinese party-state endeavours to silence the *danmei* culture as well as the tightly associated male homoeroticism and force it to remain a subculture at a distance from the mainstream cultural landscape. Another epitome of such a vicious strategy is the sudden removal of *The Guardian* web series from video platforms in 2018. Eight days after the release of the final episode of this drama series, *The Guardian* was suddenly blocked by the Youku Video platform administrators on 2 August 2018 for unknown reasons, despite the strong discontent among ‘The Guardian girls’. Interestingly and insidiously, the drama reappeared on Youku Video on 10 November 2018, although some romantic scenes between the two male protagonists were deleted (Zhang, 2018).

Apart from invisibilization, the party-state has also made use of marginalization strategies to keep *danmei* and male effeminacy under the dominance of heteronormative mainstream cultural values. By naming *danmei* as a subculture popular among female teenagers, it becomes differentiated from and peculiar in relation to the mainstream culture. In the commentary published by *Guangming Daily* in August 2021, the author stated that:

[d]anmei-adapted web series are essentially a self-contained subculture. However, because of the great success of certain works, creators of *danmei*-adapted web dramas become unwilling to locate in their own circles.... If not well controlled, such cultural works will definitely cause damage to the mainstream culture and mainstream values, lead the public aesthetics astray. (Yi, 2021)

The connotation underlining such a critique is that *danmei* culture is supposed to be a subculture, deviant from the mainstream, namely, the cis-heteronormative cultural ideology, limited within a ‘reasonable’ number of audiences, and should not transgress into the public scene.

Likewise, the state media also employ marginalization strategies to frame male effeminacy. In the feature article published by Xinhua News in August 2018, male effeminacy was claimed to be part of the contemporary diverse culture and aesthetics, while remaining in a subordinate position.²⁴ Furthermore, in the conclusion paragraph, they emphasize that masculinity should not be over-feminized, and that parents and schoolteachers should use mainstream cultural values to ‘correctly’ guide teenagers. Again, the centre–periphery discourse penetrates this article. The hetero-patriarchal cultural value that masculinity is expressed by men and femininity is expressed by women lies at the centre; all non-normative masculinities, as well as femininities, can only remain at the periphery. Such discourse embraces the hegemonic masculinity that relentlessly repudiates and excludes the feminine, and shapes We argue that the 2021 policy change suggests a state-level transition to move against LGBTQ+ groups via prioritizing

heterosexist hegemonic masculinity, represented by the *danmei* subculture and the media associated with male homoeroticism, changing from the previous invisibilization strategy to one of censure and prohibition by framing *danmei* and male effeminacy as unhealthy. ‘real’ men as manly, daring and aggressive (Kimmel, 1997). Admittedly, the very Chinese masculinities, either as suggested by Louie (2002) in his conceptualization of ‘*wen*’ masculinity in the *wen–wu* dyad, or Song’s (2004) framing of scholar masculinities, afford an allowance for feminization. Thus, such an affordance explains the party-state’s *xu*/storing-up strategy in regulating and censoring *danmei* and male effeminacy from 2014 to early 2021. However, because the three phenomenal *danmei*-adapted web series – *The Guardian* (2018), *The Untamed* (2019), and *Word of Honour* (2021) – consecutively achieved great popularity, Chinese young women engage with male effeminacy far more actively than ever before (see Ge, 2022). In such a circumstance, the policy change has been witnessed that the preceding regulatory strategies from ‘*xu*’/storing up are altered to silencing and marginalizing, as the great popularity of *danmei* and currency of male effeminacy in Chinese mediascape have already proved the fact such a strategy was losing its effectiveness. Consequently, ‘*han*’/holding back, a sterner and harsher measure was employed by the party-state in late 2021 to directly crack down and prohibit male effeminacy and *danmei* culture.

Han/holding back: crackdown and prohibition

Compared to the *xu*/storing-up strategy, we suggest *han*/holding back as a sterner approach implemented by the paternalist Chinese party-state in the fall 2021. Since the wide currency of *danmei*-adapted web series, numerous young female audiences have shown indulgence to the softened and feminine masculinities embodied in the male protagonists as well as the male stars. Simultaneously, as discussed in the historical periodization, the prevalence of ‘little fresh meat’ young male idols, exemplified in the reality shows such as *Idol Producer* and *Produce 101* since 2018 still maintain their popularity in the Chinese mediascape. Such an unprecedented pervasiveness of male femininities, at that point, was regarded as a salient threat to the hegemonic masculinity since the emasculation of masculinities in these popular cultural forms drove the hypermasculine and heteronormative party-state to feel the oncoming crisis of masculinity. As the preceding sections have shown, in the hierarchy of masculinities, effeminate masculinity is constantly invisibilized and marginalized, while the proliferation of non-macho masculinity in Chinese popular culture somehow prevailed in the spring of 2021 in the form of the great hit *Word of Honour*. Take the view on Douyin (the Chinese domestic version of Tik Tok) as an example. By 24 June 2021, the total views of short videos related to this drama series exceeded 10 billion, though its final episode was only released at the beginning of May 2021, while other dramas on the 10 billion views list were all aired before 2021.²⁵ Consequently, when the hypermasculine party-state cannot silence effeminate masculinity, they then decide to push it out by cracking down and prohibiting the proliferating and ‘threatening’ male effeminacy.

When analysing the articles published by state media and official documents released by the government, such as CPD, SARFT, and CAC intensively published in September 2021, we find that the most common terms they employed are the ‘healthy’ internet

environment, the ‘healthy’ development of teenagers, the ‘healthy’ aesthetics, and ‘healthy’ gender expressions. In using the term ‘healthy’, the state media assume a healthy version of masculinity as opposed to the unhealthy version of masculinity embodied in *danmei* and male effeminacy. The so-called healthy masculinity, as suggested by Andrea Waling (2019), privileges and sets up hegemonic masculinity as the only authentic expression of gender that boys and men are supposed to follow. Simultaneously, privileging a ‘healthy’ version of masculinity devalues femininity in the form of male effeminacy.

Intensively referring to *danmei* and male effeminacy as unhealthy first appeared in spring 2021. The classification and privilege of healthy masculinity functioned as a vanguard to the condemnation of and crackdown on the prevailing ‘unhealthy’ masculinity embedded in *danmei* and young male stars’ male effeminacy. The crackdown logic was followed by the invisibilization and marginalization strategy. When the party-state power found *danmei* and male effeminacy’s visibility to exceed that of a marginal position, they initiated the *xu*/holding back approach: crackdown and prohibition. Thus it was no wonder that, in September 2021, SARFT issued a prohibition against *danmei*-adapted web series and effeminate male stars. A principle for the party-state power is that, if the non-normative subculture is too visible and popular to be in the subordinate position, tougher measures must be taken to crack down on the high-profile cultural form in order to maintain the heteronormative ideology.

Moreover, an article published in March 2021 by *Banyuetan*, a twice-monthly magazine serving as the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China, states:

This subculture may be innocuous if operating within its own circle. However, if large-scale BL-adaptations were shown on the screen, transgressing the original subcultural circle and trespassing the mainstream cultural landscape, we should be very careful about its adverse effects, in particular for teenagers who are still too wet behind the ears.²⁶

Such a statement is typical of a series of articles published by the state media in 2021, namely, depreciating and rejecting the BL culture in the name of protecting the youth and taking an uneasy and anxious paternalist tone. The notification published by the CPD in September 2021 similarly, emphasized that officials should pay more attention to the negative influences of the burgeoning vulgar *danmei*-adapted wave on teenagers. Notably, in the notification the CPD did not employ a precautionary tone, but, on the contrary, they affirmatively believed that the BL-adapted dramas had already exerted a bad influence on Chinese youth, and hence such an unwelcome cultural phenomenon should be corrected or even eradicated. Notably, there exists a persistent paternalist discourse in the state media coverage as they constantly emphasize the detrimental role of *danmei* and male effeminacy on the healthy development of teenagers. ‘Teenagers’ or, more specifically, male teenagers, are their primary concern, and their healthy physical and mental development are the priority among priorities. This ‘healthy’ version of masculinity expects that boys must be active, tough, daring, and dominant, which the state also names as mainstream values (Wang and Wang 2021). The paternalist discourse endeavours to restrict masculinities to the male-assigned sexed body and thus perpetuate the hetero-patriarchal social-familial system.

Concluding remarks

In summary, based on our critical discourse analysis of four strands of official-level regulations, statements as well as news reports from 2014 to 2021, we suggest that *han-xu* politics functions as the Chinese party-state's strategic response to a perceived 'crisis of masculinity', aiming first to invisibilize and marginalize soft masculinities and, if this is not effective, then to suppress and prohibit cultural forms that violate hegemonic masculinity. As indicated by Song (2021), masculinity in mainland China is closely bonded with national power as hypermasculinity. Male effeminacy, hence, is regarded as the collapse of the social-familial system and the waning of the governance of national power. Therefore, the party-state has interpenetrated a top-down project of censoring gender expressions via *han-xu* politics.

When facing this 'crisis of masculinity', the party-state craftily and flexibly employs the *xu* (storing up) / *han* (holding back) strategy to discipline *danmei*, male-male eroticism and male effeminacy, and to perpetuate the cis-heteronormative social-familial system where hegemonic masculinity rigorously epitomizes men. Drawing on Connell's (1996) iconic concept of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes the critical focus on certain patterns of masculine power, particularly domination, subordination, and oppression, we deem that the current Chinese socio-political discourse presents masculinity not only as a personal quality and individual trait, but, more importantly, the embodiment of male-centred society, of the paternalist social-familial system, and the hyper-masculinist nation-party-state. Significantly, Moller (2007) has criticized Connell's (1996) hegemonic masculinity for thematizing power in a typological way, equating 'power' with 'domination' and locating this power in the hands of exemplary men, thereby overlooking the complexity and nuances of masculinity per se and obscuring the researcher's ability to see masculinity in any terms other than 'political', which echoes the limitation of structuralism favouring pre-determined structural forces. Although our study still adopts a political perspective and the typology of masculinity to locate the party-state's vicious invisibilization and marginalization of, and crackdown on the transgressive *danmei* and male effeminacy, both *danmei* and male effeminacy are shown to bear tenacity and potential, celebrating fluidity, movement, and contingency. When the state power chose to adopt a tougher approach to prohibit *danmei* in the pandemic year of 2021, it also reflected the fact that the non-normative *danmei* culture and male effeminacy sensibility had become too visible to invisibilize or marginalize due to the enormous number of participants and the transgressive power it contained. In other words, the *danmei* culture and male effeminacy sensibility per se, as a counter-cis-heteronormative culture that has grown from the periphery of the hetero-patriarchal society, is always plastic and persistent, even when facing relentless marginalization and censure. Therefore, we take this opportunity to call for more future research on *danmei* and male effeminacy toward the incoherence, diversity, and specificity of hybrid masculinities.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions. Any mistakes contain herein are our own.

ORCID iD

Liang Ge  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1519-455X>

Notes

1. See more at: <https://yule.360.com/detail/2784073>
2. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1694531301264976852&wfr=spider&for=pc>
3. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1709785998893349785>
4. https://news.gmw.cn/2021-10/27/content_35262974.htm
5. http://gdj.beijing.gov.cn/zwxx/gzbg1/202109/t20210918_2497216.html
6. <http://culture.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0628/c1013-31200814.html>
7. For example, Feitianyexiang is one of the top *danmei* novel writers, mostly publishing his works on Jinjiang Literature City. Established in 2003, Jinjiang is one of the earliest and most influential Chinese literature websites.
8. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/news/2006/2006-01-12/8/677411.shtml>; http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2005-08/28/content_1167264.htm
9. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0414/c1001-24890250.html>
10. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/0718/c78779-25297556.html>
11. https://www.sohu.com/a/229609215_305277
12. <https://xhpfmapi.xinhua.com/vh512/share/4221386>
13. <https://www.jiemian.com/article/2056159.html>
14. http://www.cac.gov.cn/2016-02/15/c_1118048596.htm
15. <https://news.ifeng.com/c/7htoACeRP3w>
16. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/27/c_134955448.htm
17. <https://www.yicai.com/news/101046293.html>
18. https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-04/07/nw.D110000gmrb_20210407_1-14.htm
19. <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0902/c437700-32215672.html>
20. http://www.news.cn/2021-09/08/c_1127841712.htm
21. http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-01/21/c_1128288231.htm
22. <http://m.news.cctv.com/2021/08/20/ARTImBATjuDmmhi9otvfTvRY210820.shtml>
23. https://www.sohu.com/a/417093728_161795
24. <https://card.weibo.com/article/m/show/id/2309404272647218274076>
25. https://3g.163.com/dy/article/GDM6394D05529174.html?spss=adap_pc
26. <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404615277244449171>

References

- Bai M (2022) Regulation of pornography and criminalization of BL readers and authors in contemporary China (2010–2019). *Cultural Studies* 36(2): 279–301.
- Bao H (2018) From ‘celluloid comrades’ to ‘digital video activism’: Queer filmmaking in post-socialist China. *JOMEC Journal* 12: 82–100.
- Bao H (2019) The ‘queer generation’: Queer community documentary in contemporary China. *Transnational Screens* 10(3): 201–216.
- Bridges T and Pascoe CJ (2014) Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass* 8(3): 246–258.
- Campbell J (2001) *This Is the Beat Generation: New York–San Francisco–Paris*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Connell RW (1995) *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Connell RW (1996) New directions in gender theory, masculinity research, and gender politics. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 61: 157–176.
- Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829–859.
- Fairclough N (2010 [1995]) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd edn. Harlow: Longman.
- Ge L (2021) Problematizing heteronormativity: Performativity, resignification and A/B/O fiction in Chinese danmei literature. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 7(2): 241–254.
- Ge L (2022) Dual ambivalence: The Untamed Girls as a counterpublic. *Media, Culture & Society* 44(5): 1021–1033.
- Honig E (2002) Maoist mappings of gender: Reassessing the Red Guards. In: Brownell S and Wasserstrom JN (eds) *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 255–268.
- Hu T and Guan T (2021) ‘Man-as-nation’: Representation of masculinity and nationalism in Wu Jing’s *Wolf Warrior II*. *Sage Open* 11(3) (July): n.p.
- Hu T and Wang CY (2021) Who is the counterpublic? Bromance-as-masquerade in Chinese online drama—*S.C.I. Mystery*. *Television & New Media* 22(6): 671–686.
- Huang ZA (2022) ‘Wolf Warrior’ and China’s digital public diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18(1): 37–40.
- Kimmel M (1996) *Manhood in America*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kimmel M (1997) Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame and silence in the construction of gender identity. In: Gergen MM and Davis SN (eds) *Toward a New Psychology of Gender*. New York: Routledge, pp. 223–242.
- Li EC (2015). Approaching transnational Chinese queer stardom as zhongxing (‘neutral sex/gender’) sensibility. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 1(1): 75–95.
- Lin X (2020) The engaged spectator: Reading BL novels in contemporary China. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 13: 233–257.
- Liu J and Ding N (2005). Retacent poetics, queer politics. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6(1): 30–55.
- Liu J, Parry A and Ding N (2007) *Penumbrae Query Shadow: Queer Reading Tactics*. Taoyuan, Taiwan: National Central University Center for the study of Sexualities.
- Liu L, Zhang J, Tang J, et al. (2013) *Media Studies from a Gender Perspective*. Beijing: Communication University of China.
- Liu T (2009) Conflicting discourses on boys’ love and subcultural tactics in mainland China and Hong Kong. *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 20: 1–32.
- Louie K (2002) *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Louie K (2003) Chinese, Japanese and global masculine identities. In: Louie K and Low M (eds) *Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan*. London: Routledge Curzon, pp. 1–15.
- Louie K (2012) Popular culture and masculinity ideals in East Asia, with special reference to China. *Journal of Asian Studies* 71(4): 929–943.
- Louie K (2014) Chinese masculinity studies in the twenty-first century: Westernizing, easternizing and globalizing *wen* and *wu*. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9(1): 18–29.
- Louie K and Edwards L (1994) Chinese masculinity: Theorizing *wen* and *wu*. *East Asian History* 8: 135–148.
- Martin F (2017) Girls who love boys’ love: BL as goods to think with in Taiwan (with a revised and updated coda). In: Lavin M, Yang L and Zhao JJ (eds) *Boys’ Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 195–219.

- Moller Y (2007) Exploiting patterns: A critique of hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Gender Studies* 16(3): 263–276.
- Ng E and Li X (2020) A queer ‘socialist brotherhood’: *The Guardian* web series, boys’ love fandom, and the Chinese state. *Feminist Media Studies* 20(4): 479–495.
- Osburg J (2013) *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China’s New Rich*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Schultz S (2013) Life remains difficult for gays and lesbians in China. *Spiegel*, 8 March. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/life-remains-difficult-for-gays-and-lesbians-in-china-a-887674.html>
- Song G (2004) *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Song G (2022) ‘Little fresh meat’: The politics of sissiness and sissyphobia in contemporary China. *Men and Masculinities* 25(1): 68–86.
- Song G and Hird D (2013) *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China*. Leiden: Brill.
- Song G and Hird D (eds) (2018) *The Cosmopolitan Dream: Transnational Chinese Masculinities in a Global Age*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Song L (2021) Straightly Chinese: The emergence of systemic homophobia in China. In: Hoon CY and Chan Y (eds) *Contesting Chineseness: Ethnicity, Identity, and Nation in China and Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 305–317.
- Tian X (2020) More than conformity or resistance: Chinese boys’ love fandom in the age of internet censorship. *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* 1: 189–213.
- van Dijk TA (2003) Critical discourse analysis. In: Schiffrin D, Tannen D and HE Hamilton (eds) *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 352–371.
- Waling A (2019) Problematising ‘toxic’ and ‘healthy’ masculinity for addressing gender inequalities. *Australian Feminist Studies* 34(101): 362–375.
- Wang X and Wang J (2021) The emergence of new mainstream audio-visual culture, starting the gate of mainstream social communication. *Guangming Daily*, 27 October. Available at: https://news.gmw.cn/2021-10/27/content_35262974.htm (accessed 30 January 2023).
- Wood A (2013) Boys’ love anime and queer desire in convergence culture: Transnational fandom, censorship and resistance. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4(1): 44–63.
- Xiao Z (2013) Prohibition, politics, and nation-building: A history of film censorship in China. In: Biltereyst D and Vandewinkel R (eds) *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship Around the World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 109–130.
- Yang L and Xu Y (2013) Forbidden love: Incest, generational conflict and the erotics of power in Chinese BL fiction. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4(1): 30–43.
- Yang L and Xu Y (2015) Queer texts, gendered imagination, and grassroots feminism in Chinese web literature. In: EL Engebretsen and Schroeder WF with Bao H (eds) *Queer/Tongzhi China: New Perspectives on Research, Activism and Media Cultures*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press.
- Yang L and Xu Y (2016a) *Danmei*, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China. *Communication and the Public* 1(2): 251–256.
- Yang L and Xu Y (2016b) The love that dare not speak its name: The fate of Chinese *danmei* communities in the 2014 anti-porn campaign. In: McLelland M (ed.) *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 163–183.
- Yi J (2021) Be cautious of danmei leading the public astray. *Guangming Daily*, 26 August. available at: https://news.gmw.cn/2021-08/26/content_35111285.htm (accessed 30 January 2023).
- Yu H and Cui L (2019). China’s e-commerce: Empowering rural women? *China Quarterly* 238: 418–437.

- Zhang H (2018) The Guardian re-released after 3 months with some scenes disappearing. *Beijing News*, 12 November. Available at: <https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/154191794714710.html> (accessed 30 June 2022).
- Zhou Y, Paul B and Sherman R (2018) Still a hetero-gendered world: A content analysis of gender stereotypes and romantic ideals in Chinese boy love stories. *Sex Roles* 78: 107–118.

Author biographies

Tingting Hu is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Media and Communication, Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University. She received her PhD at Macquarie University and taught at University of Technology Sydney. Her research interests lie in the articulation of film, media and cultural studies with feminist theories, transmedia studies in various social and cultural contexts. Her recent publications appear in *Media, Culture & Society*, *Television & New Media* and *Journal of Contemporary China*.

Liang Ge is a PhD candidate at the Culture, Media and Creative Industries Department, King's College London. Their doctoral project explores the body, desires and embodiment in Chinese boys' love culture community. Their research interests include cultural sociology, gender and sexuality studies, and East Asian popular media and culture. They received a BLit in Chinese Language and Literature from Peking University, and their MSc in Sociology from the London School of Economics.

Ziyao Chen is a postgraduate student at the School of Journalism and Communication, Wuhan University. She is particularly interested in subculture and communication in China.

Xu Xia is a postgraduate student at the School of Journalism and Communication, Wuhan University. She is particularly interested in popular culture, media and communication in China.