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To cite this article: Tingting Hu, Liang Ge & Cathy Yue Wang (2024) A state against boys' love? Reviewing the trajectory of censorship over *danmei*, Continuum, 38:2, 229-238, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2024.2357335](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2024.2357335)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2024.2357335>



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Published online: 22 May 2024.



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A state against boys' love? Reviewing the trajectory of censorship over *danmei*

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ABSTRACT

Practices of online censorship around boys' love (*danmei*) in mainland China have exhibited continuous change, with varying media targets and nominal justifications. This article explores dynamic transformations in the strategies employed by authorities, media platforms, and *danmei* creators throughout different time periods. Based on the authors' archival research, the censorship of *danmei* can be classified into three distinct stages: the years 2004 to 2015, 2016 to 2020, and 2021 to the present. These periods are distinguished by the primary *danmei* media form that authorities most often target for censorship. We argue that China's digital censorship apparatus has given rise to an unrelenting and intensifying suppression of *danmei* content, which is further bolstered by the sustained promotion of a media discourse that fosters a culture of disdain for *danmei*, and hence, has limited spaces for the expansion of *danmei* fandom and its practitioners' creativity. Moreover, we suggest that there is a continuous and combative interplay between *danmei* culture and censorship, wherein creative practices become highly responsive to government regulations and vice versa.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 16 February 2023
Accepted 8 May 2024

KEYWORDS

Boys' love; *danmei*;
censorship; queer; China;
web drama; online literature;
digital

Introduction

Boys' Love (BL) is a genre that portrays male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships. Its origins can be traced back to Japanese comics in the 1970s, and it has gained significant popularity in the Chinese media landscape during the past two decades. In the Chinese context, this genre is commonly referred to as *danmei*, a term that directly translates to 'addicted to beauty,' borrowed from the Japanese word '*tanbi*.' While BL and *danmei* can often be used interchangeably, *danmei* is the preferred term within the Chinese media sphere. The *danmei* genre made its debut in China towards the end of the 1990s, primarily influenced by Japanese BL manga and fiction, with its introduction facilitated through transit ports in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In contemporary times, *danmei* in China has evolved to establish its distinct identity, seamlessly integrating

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with a diverse array of local and global media and celebrity cultures. It has developed into a transnational, all-encompassing, and predominantly female-driven meta-fan culture (Hu, Jin, and Liao 2023).

Danmei culture encompasses a wide spectrum of media formats, including fiction, manga, anime, games, audio drama, web series, music, and cosplay. Nevertheless, due to its dual association with homosexuality and sexually explicit content, *danmei* stories often find themselves in the crosshairs of state censorship and the regulations imposed by media platforms, particularly those works featuring explicit male-male sex scenes (Chao 2016; Yang and Xu 2016). In China, some critics have accused the *danmei* genre of excessively featuring male effeminacy, leading to its suppression under the party-state's *han-xu* (reticent) politics (Hu et al. 2023). This governance strategy primarily involves rendering *danmei* culture invisible, including removal of the *danmei*-adapted dramas on video platforms, online blocking of certain *danmei* fiction, and removal of discussion posts on *danmei* works on social media. If these measures prove ineffective, more stringent actions are taken, including banning cultural forms that challenge the prevailing hegemonic masculinity. This politics is enacted, in turn, to perpetuate the existing heteropatriarchal socio-familial system (Hu et al. 2023).

This article focuses on the dynamic interplay between censorship around *danmei* culture and *danmei* participants' responses to censorship in mainland China. We investigate how authoritative censorship, media platforms' self-censorship, and *danmei* creators' responses have shaped the trajectory of *danmei* censorship over different time periods. Drawing from the authors' investigative archival research, the variations in the censorship over *danmei* can be classified into three stages (2004–2015; 2016–2020; 2021–present), each targeting a specific *danmei* media form. Mainland China's digital censorship consistently targets the *danmei* genre, transitioning its focus from online literature to web dramas. This shift throughout the three periods has resulted in an unyielding and escalating suppression of *danmei* content. The establishment of an enduring media discourse that fosters contempt for *danmei* further reinforces this suppression, which not only limits the spaces for the expansion of *danmei* fandom but also leads to self-censorship from *danmei* practitioners themselves. We suggest that *danmei* culture and the state censorship are mutually responsive, giving rise to new forms of visibility – and invisibility – for *danmei* communities. Therefore, the marginalization does not only apply to *danmei* creation and production but also extends to a wider range of narratives depicting homo-intimacy. This research aims to build on existing scholarship on digital censorship in China (e.g. Li 2023; Wacker 2003) highlighting its impact on the cultural landscape and gender-related digital policies in mainland China.

From 2004 to 2015: stigmatizing *danmei* as obscenity

The *danmei* genre emerged in mainland China during the 1990s, primarily finding its footing in the realm of fiction published online. In its early days, the bans on *danmei* were particularly concerned with explicit sexual depictions and labelled online literature with homosexual-related content as obscene. In 2004, the Committee of Internet Society of China and Internet News Information Service introduced the 'Website Self-discipline Regulations of Forbidding to Disseminate Obscene, Pornographic, and Other Negative Information.' This regulation included a clause that initially aimed to prohibit

the portrayal of homosexual intercourse and other forms of perceived sexual perversion.¹ Notably, this regulation marked the first instance of a state-level official document specifically claiming homosexuality as obscenity and classifying the representation of male-male sex scenes as sexual perversion. Given that *danmei* works frequently involve explicit depictions of male homoeroticism, this genre has come to be regarded as obscenity as well.

Since 2011, Chinese authorities have consistently imposed long-standing regulations on online literature platforms, including those hosting *danmei* content. This led to the shutdown of numerous *danmei* and queer-related forums and websites. An illustrative case of legal action against *danmei* online literature unfolded in Zhengzhou, Henan Province in 2011. It involved the closure of a *danmei* fiction website and the arrest of its male founder and several contracted writers, mostly young women. The founder was subsequently sentenced to one and a half years of imprisonment and fined RMB100,000 (USD13,903). The fate of the writers involved in this case remains uncertain.² Media reports on this case primarily emphasized *danmei*'s 'abnormal' homosexual and pornographic content and its perceived negative influence on young people.³

In 2014, *danmei* communities faced significant repercussions due to the national anti-porn campaign that aimed to eliminate the pornographic content in online novels. Under the higher level of pressure, the online literature platforms had to practice self-censorship, especially for the *danmei* genre that involves male-male erotic depictions.⁴ For instance, Baidu, the Chinese Internet giant, blocked several *danmei*-related Tieba (literally post bar, online interests-based forums hosted by Baidu), including *Danmei Bar* and *Funü Bar*.⁵ Jinjiang Literature City (hereafter Jinjiang) took a different approach by renaming its *danmei* channel as '*chun'ai*' (literally 'pure love') to distance itself from *danmei* and present a more 'sanitized' version of male homoeroticism.⁶ Furthermore, Jinjiang implemented stricter content guidelines, exceeding government expectations by banning any depiction of body parts 'below the neck.' Intimate scenes with sexually explicit content, except for mouth-kissing and handholding, were strictly prohibited by Jinjiang's self-censorship (Yang and Xu 2016).

In response to Jinjiang's increased censorship, the platform's contracted novelists had to significantly self-censor and adapt their creative styles to avoid explicit sexual depictions. Instead, they employed various techniques to convey subtle sexual undertones in their writings, such as metaphors, coded language, and satire. Some writers even resorted to using hyperlinks to direct readers to external websites that allowed more detailed sexual content (Wang 2019). However, in 2021, Jinjiang officially prohibited external links to sexual content, making them unpublishable.⁷ Simultaneously, since the 2010s, many readers and more experienced writers turned to Changpei as an alternative, due to Jinjiang's excessive self-censorship.⁸ However, this relative freedom on Changpei was short-lived. Once Changpei grew into a fully-fledged commercial website for publishing and consuming *danmei* stories, the party-state censorship system also began to recognize Changpei and to exert its regulatory power. At the same time, to sustain its operation, Changpei also began to self-censor its platform by removing content and directly urging its writers not to publish sexually explicit scenes.

Overall, censorship during the 2004–2015 period primarily targeted online novels, both heterosexual and homosexual, under the guise of 'anti-porn' measures. While the authorities started to propel the top-down censorship, the online literature platforms played

a key role in practicing self-censorship under state pressure, and paid special attention to the *danmei* genre. However, *danmei* culture managed to survive after this national Internet 'anti-porn' campaign, with *danmei* creators on mainstream online fiction websites avoiding explicit sexual depictions to continue their work.

From 2016 to 2020: the rise of web dramas and the crackdown on 'illegal' publications

The second stage, spanning from 2016 to 2020, witnessed a remarkable surge in the commercialization of *danmei*, particularly its adaptation into web dramas and entry into mainstream media. This surge attracted a considerable influx of new fans. In this phase, the focus of censorship over *danmei* shifted from online novels to *danmei*-adapted web dramas.

The year 2016 marked a significant milestone for Chinese *danmei* fandom through the first well-known *danmei*-adapted drama, *Addiction*, which was widely popularized through streaming websites.⁹ However, this show was abruptly blocked by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) on 26 February 2016, even though the series remained unfinished. Simultaneously, as evident from subsequent media coverage, the two leading actors, Jingyu Huang and Weizhou Xu, were prohibited from appearing together in any show or public occasion. This turn of events exemplifies the challenges faced by the *danmei* community in gaining mainstream acceptance and the subsequent government intervention in response to its growing visibility.

The ban on *Addiction* had profound implications, not only for the morale of *danmei* fans but also for the entertainment industry. While the show had provided hope and incentives to the industry, its ban signified the rejection of *danmei* culture's entry into the mainstream. The catalyst for this divide can be traced back to the release of the 'General Rules of TV Drama Production' by the China Television Production Committee and the China Television Drama Production Association. These rules came into effect on 2 March 2016, and outlined the content that was not allowed in television dramas. Within the section on pornography and obscenity, one item prohibited the depiction of abnormal sexual relations and behaviours, including incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, rape, abuse, and violence.¹⁰ The enforcement of these rules, which remain unchanged at the time of this publication, effectively meant that storylines from *danmei* novels and explicit portrayals of male-male romance could not pass the censors. This presented a significant challenge for adapting these novels into streaming media. In response to this restriction, Chinese *danmei*-adapted web dramas adopted a strategy of 'bromance-as-masquerade.' This strategy allowed them to depict male-male romance under the guise of homosocial bromance, enabling them to pass censorship and engage with mainstream media (Hu and Wang 2021). Examples of such web dramas include *Guardian* (2018), *S.C.I. Mystery* (2018), *The Untamed* (2019) and *Word of Honor* (2021).¹¹ In these dramas, the intimate relationships between male characters are portrayed as 'friends' rather than 'boyfriends,' allowing *danmei* fans to actively engage their imaginations and enjoy male homoeroticism while watching these adapted BL stories (Ge 2022).

During Stage Two, the censorship over *danmei* in online fiction shifted from top-down authoritative censorship to increased self-censorship by platforms. This phase also saw a more severe legal crackdown by the National Office Against Pornography and Illegal

Publications, which in some cases pursued criminal sentences against writers. This new approach led to the sentencing of two young amateur *danmei* writers, Tianyi and Shenhai Xiansheng, in the Anhui and Hubei provinces, respectively.¹² Tianyi was sentenced to ten and a half years in prison for the production and sale of obscene materials for profit, with a fine of RMB150,000 (approximately USD23,500), as per official reports. While her arrest, along with publishers, editors, and printers, occurred in 2017, the case was only made public in November 2018 when Tianyi was sentenced (Tian 2020). In the second case, Shenhai was arrested in 2017 and received a four-year prison sentence along with a substantial penalty for illegal business operations (RMB1,180,000, approximately USD 18,530,000 according to official reports) in 2019.¹³ This phase of censorship involved a widespread reporting system, where informants within fan communities reported writers for ‘pornography’ to the authorities, resulting in arrests or bans on their works. The campaign from the National Office Against Pornography and Illegal Publications made peer-to-peer reporting a common practice within online fan communities, with some portraying themselves as ‘fandom police,’ using censorship as a weapon to report ‘illegal’ comments from rivals, escalating fan conflicts (Wang and Ge 2023). During this period, there was an increase in Netizens using government censorship mechanisms to persecute individuals with opposing viewpoints, and this practice was widely documented until at least 2019 (Zheng 2019).

These two instances of criminalizing *danmei* writers not only pressured online platforms to intensify their self-censorship, but also created widespread panic among *danmei* writers and fans. Many felt compelled to remove or significantly censor their works, especially those with sexual content. Following investigations by the National Office Against Pornography and Illegal Publications, several online literature platforms, including Jinjiang, Fanqie (also known as ‘tomato’), and Midu, were reprimanded for the perceived negative impact of pornography on teenagers, and were required to undertake self-rectification measures.¹⁴ In a significant move, Jinjiang, one of the most influential platforms, announced a server disconnect for 15 days in July 2019, without specifying the exact reasons for this action.¹⁵ During this period and continuing into 2020, numerous fictions, including well-known works like Moxiang Tongxiu’s *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, were blocked and have not been re-released.¹⁶ These developments were a source of significant concern for the *danmei* community. In 2020, the influence of censorship extended to Lofter, a Chinese platform for publishing and consuming fanfiction and other forms of fan arts. Lofter removed many *danmei*-related tags, texts, and images, citing a data adjustment as its official reason, although this move was widely interpreted as a manifestation of the censorship challenges faced by the *danmei* community.

Before 2016, a growing number of novelists and creators had participated in custom printing through amateur self-publishing, inspired by the success of fanzines/*dōjinshi*. Many of these publications were authorized by the writers themselves before 2014, but gradually, such self-publication practices waned as control tightened around publications without official ISBNs. As noted by Zheng (2019), Chinese fan communities developed an efficient network for *dōjinshi* production and sales during that period. Writers typically promoted their printed works through social media, with fans purchasing print versions as souvenirs since they had already read the stories online. However, prosecutions launched under the guise of policing illegal publications had a chilling effect on both *danmei* writers

and fans who did not seek formal publications, as indicated by the cases of Shenhai Xiansheng and Tianyi above (Bai 2021). Contracted *danmei* writers were forced to downplay the depiction of sexual relationships, and more writers followed the path of early pioneers by seeking publishers in Taiwan and Hong Kong to secure complete versions in hardcopies. While there is no official statement openly declaring opposition to queer content, the stricter crackdown on *danmei* writers in the name of combatting pornography creation implies that queer-related media will also be targeted as so-called taboo content. Curtailing *danmei* novelists' self-publishing through potential legal threats has proven to be a significant deterrent for all *danmei* practitioners, cutting off their incentive to pursue opportunities for publishing completed versions beyond mainland China. It implies the mainland China's discouragement for novelists from publishing uncensored versions outside of China in order to prevent the risk of authors' publishing controversial material abroad. While some individuals may use VPNs to access blocked websites or circumvent censorship measures, they may not necessarily be effective for publishing content that violates Chinese censorship laws.

From 2021 to the present: crackdown on *danmei*-adapted web dramas and establishing the anti-*danmei* media discourse

In the third stage of censorship over *danmei*, which began in 2021, a new regulatory approach emerged, utilizing state media criticism as the initial step, followed by top-down authoritative measures to compel digital platforms to self-censor. This stage saw a significant clampdown on *danmei*-adapted dramas, especially after state media published a series of critical articles branding them as a form of 'vulgar culture' in line with the 'Internet cleanup campaign' initiated in August 2021.

Editorials from the Xinhua News Agency in March 2021 contended that *danmei* stories excessively fuelled irrational fanaticism and consumption among adolescents, and therefore needed to be regulated.¹⁷ An article published by the *Guangming Daily* in August that same year emphasized the perceived vulgarity in male-male flirting, the distorted aesthetics of male femininity, and the promotion of authorities' preferred hyper-masculinity, while depreciating opposing viewpoints that were deemed detrimental to young people's values.¹⁸ In September, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) issued the 'Article of Comprehensive Management of the Cultural and Entertainment Sector,' which pointed out concerns related to 'traffic and commercial dominance,' 'distorted aesthetics,' 'fandom community chaos,' and *danmei* adaptations as new issues contaminating the social environment and as particularly harmful to teenagers.¹⁹ CPD and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) officials also convened a meeting with major game production companies and new media platforms, including Tencent and NetEase, to emphasize the need for heightened political awareness.²⁰ On September 16, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) held a conference in Beijing to officially declare their stance on boycotting *danmei* adaptations and addressing the perceived issues within fandom communities.²¹ Since then, *danmei*-adapted dramas have faced a stark decline, in contrast to the few years of prosperity buoyed by *Addiction* in 2016. The previously utilized bromance-as-masquerade strategy is no longer accepted by the state, resulting in many completed *danmei*-adapted dramas remaining unreleased, such as *Immorality* and *You by My Side*.²²

The state media's anti-*danmei* discourse has effectively equated *danmei* adaptation with male effeminacy, creating a foundation for intensive denunciation of the genre and stirring heated opposition against *danmei* in online spaces. Non-normative expressions of masculinity within *danmei* content are seen as substantial threats by the hypermasculine party-state, whose authoritative power and promotion of hegemonic masculinities were significantly reinforced during their strict pandemic control measures from early 2020 to late 2022 (Hu et al. 2023). In this environment, numerous popular media platforms encompassing online literature, manga, and audio dramas, where *danmei* content was prevalent, were compelled to implement stringent self-censorship measures. Specifically, platforms like Jinjiang, Fanqie, Bilibili Manga (a manga and anime platform), and Miss Evan (an audio drama platform) removed their *danmei* channels. While *danmei* works were not deleted, users could only access them by directly searching for specific titles. Jinjiang went further by blocking some well-known *danmei* fiction without specifying reasons, especially those for which copyrights had been sold for web drama adaptation.²³ Additionally, in October 2021, Jinjiang announced the implementation of a grading system based on genre, style, and readers' age, without disclosing specific criteria.²⁴ Authors of the blocked novels provided no explanation but indicated that they were revising their works. Consequently, many fans speculated that these authors may have been pressured by drama production companies to remove their original male-male romance novels. Through the removal of the original source material, the web drama adaptations could be presented as 'original' works without any connection to *danmei* themes. This strategy appears to have emerged in order to navigate the boundaries of state censorship, and it enables completed web series to be released without any risky links to the original *danmei* authors.

Concluding remarks

This article highlights a significant shift in the primary target of *danmei* censorship over the last two decades, and illuminates the dynamics between state censorship, self-censorship from digital platforms, and responses from *danmei* producers in mainland China. Before 2016, the focus of state regulation was primarily on *danmei* fiction serialized online, but it shifted to hardcopies of self-published works between 2016 and 2020. Since 2021, state regulators have heightened efforts to remove all forms of *danmei*-adapted web dramas, such that web dramas now seek to remove associations with the *danmei* texts from which they have been adapted. The censorship system has changed from a simple top-down practice initiated by authorities over the past two decades to a more complex system involving collaboration between state authorities, official media, commercial media and digital platforms, and netizens who 'report' on their peers through digital platform tools linked to government censors. This comprehensive crackdown goes beyond targeting *danmei* and queer-related content in the broader new media space: it has also subtended a growing media discourse that promotes the hatred of *danmei*. This finding resonates with Li's (2023) argument that China's Internet censorship system defies simple characterization as a top-down instrument of punitive control. Rather, Chinese authorities have tactically developed approaches that foster self-regulation practices among both citizens and Internet service providers (ISPs). Correspondingly, many Chinese Internet users also employ direct and indirect methods to challenge the

government's censorship system, highlighting the potential for censorship to provoke creative forms of resistance – albeit, within notable constraints.

This review article predominantly employs secondary data derived from pertinent official documents, statements, announcements, and media reports on *danmei* censorship, rather than primary data from digital platforms. Consequently, we do not have more spaces to link our discussion with the data acquired from our direct interactions with *danmei* participants, which may prevent us from offering more detailed analysis of *danmei* practitioners' relationships to digital censorship. To address these constraints, we call for a comprehensive evaluation of diverse perspectives within the *danmei* culture and broader Chinese queer media domains in future research to explore further the dynamics among producers, consumers, media platforms, commercial capitals and the Chinese party-state.

Notes

1. <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2004-06-10/18513398843.shtml>.
2. <http://www.changjiangtimes.com/2012/04/383407.html>.
3. <http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2011/03/21/006215682.shtml>.
4. See a throughout review in Yang and Xu (2016).
5. Baidu Tieba (literally Baidu Post Bar) is the largest Chinese communication platform provided by the Chinese search engine company, Baidu. It is an online community bound tightly with Internet search services, one of the main business of Baidu. The website functions by having users search or create a bar (Forum) by typing a keyword, and if the bar has not been created before, it is then created upon the search.
6. Jinjiang Literature City (jjwxc.net, 2003–), published between 2012 and 2013. Jinjiang is regarded as one of the most influential commercial websites for online fiction production and consumption in China. The website covers a broad range of literary genres, including original heterosexual romance, boys' love, girls' love, and other kinds of fanfiction. For details, see <http://www.jjwxc.net/aboutus/>.
7. Based on the authors' personal networks with Jinjiang contracted novelists.
8. For Changpei and its author, see Chen (2017).
9. It is adapted from Chai ji dan's BL novel, published on Liancheng online literature website in 2013 and tells the story of two high-school students' romance.
10. See Item 6, Section 5 at https://baike.baidu.com/reference/19428353/ee68WPx6AB86fZJMSsZjk4VNSpB2xzKF0e431oqgPQ2PHAyM50D6Sj31fTO-C0T8EHdXPLkCJRQN_nZqR8nIA_6k0NICybeTtx4NjtfzuQ1lg5jno0b4bL6vXUT898WTA.
11. *Guardian* (Youku Video 2018) was adapted from the famous writer Priest's fantasy novel published on Jinjiang between 2012 and 2013. *S.C.I. Mystery* was adapted from Er Ya's popular novel *S.C.I. Mystery Season 1* (2011). *S.C.I. Mystery Seasons 1–5* (2011–) is a detective genre fiction posted on Jinjiang as a fanfiction emerging from the renowned slash fandom of Mouse/Cat. The Mouse and Cat characters originated from classical Qing Dynasty Chinese novel *San Xia Wu Yi*, literally, the three heroes and five gallants, and are thus endowed with cultural specificity, the novel's popularity would likely not be so great had it not been adapted. See more details in Hu and Wang (2021). *The Untamed* (Tencent Video) is adapted from one of the top *danmei* writers, Moxiang Tongxiu's highly popular *xiuzhen* (immortality cultivation) novel *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* published on Jinjiang between 2015 and 2016. *Word of Honor* (Youku Video 2021) is adapted from Priest's martial arts novel, *Faraway Wanderers*, published on Jinjiang in 2010.
12. See more detailed analysis of the two cases in Bai (2021).
13. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1642304700408294465&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

14. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1639200578583061882&wfr=spider&for=pc>; <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/uqceDisBRaBblcbSpD6mqA>; https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/mh_IZQR6oukWX1wqijpAVw.
15. https://www.cqcb.com/entertainment/2019-07-15/1743927_pc.html.
16. Some online rumours also said that the writer Moxiang Tongxiu was arrested, whereas Jingjiang officially announced to receive no information about that. See <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1642304700408294465&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
17. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1694531305774994366&wfr=spider&for=pc>; <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1694531301264976852&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
18. https://news.gmw.cn/2021-08/26/content_35111285.htm.
19. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1709785998893349785>.
20. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1710338011159896850&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
21. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1711100221028272697&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
22. *Immorality*, production finished in 2020, is adapted from Roubao buchirou's popular *xianxia* novel, *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*. *You By My Side*, production finished in 2020, is adapted from Wu Zhe's *xianshi xiang* novel *Follow the Light*.
23. Blocked online fictions include Priest's *Guardian*, *Faraway Wanderers* and *Stars of Chaos*, Moxiang Tongxiu's *Heaven Official's Blessing*, and Roubao buchirou's *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*.
24. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/GNI6T28J05371BIW.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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