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## AMBIVALENT AFFECTIVE LABOR: DATAFICATION OF *QING* (AFFECTS and DESIRES), AND DANMEI WRITERS IN THE CREATIVEINDUSTRY

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### Introduction

*Danmei* 耽美 culture, which features male-male romance and/or erotica, emerged in mainland China in the late 1990s. In the beginning years, *danmei* culture was heavily influenced by Japanese boys' love (BL) comics when pirated copies entered mainland China via transiting in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The term '*danmei*' was also borrowed from the Japanese '*tanbi*', which literally means indulging in beauty. Since the 2010s, Chinese *danmei* culture has developed its own dynamic ecology and evolved into a transmedia cultural landscape, including fiction, animation, comics, audio drama, web series, films, games, music, etc. (Ge, 2022). *Danmei* has also become the preferred term among its participants. Henry Jenkins (2006) employs 'transmedia storytelling' to refer to the co-existence of traditional and new media and the 'new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence - one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities' (pp. 20-21). While Jenkins' celebration of the audience/fan's immersive experience in an ever-expanding world which is constructed and maintained by transmedia storytelling, the other side of transmedia is the creative labor co-opted by capitalism (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Johnson, 2013).

*Danmei* participants are renowned for their intensified *qing* 情 invested in their producing and consuming male homoeroticism. *Qing*, or the phrase *qinggan* 情感 or *ganqing* 感情 (aroused *qing*), does not merely mean affects, but refers to both affects and desires. First, herein I do not differentiate the distinctions among affects, feelings, and emotions as the Tomkins-Sedgwick school (Sedgwick, 2003) or the Spinozist-Deleuzian approach (Massumi, 2002). Following Sara Ahmed, I consider affects as 'the feeling of bodily change' (Ahmed, 2004, p.5), and 'the attribution of feeling is an effect of encounter, which moves the subject away from the object' (ibid., p.8). Second, in debt to the cult of *qing* in Chinese literary thoughts in the late Ming dynasty (between the sixteenth and seventeenth century), I suggest that *qing* per se also includes desires. In

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the late Ming dynasty, as exemplified *Mudanting (the Peony Pavilion)* by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) and the collection of male homoerotic stories *Bian Er Chai (Hairpins beneath the Cap)* by Zuixihu Xinyue Zhuren in the early seventeenth century (Stevenson and Wu, 2013, p.170), Chinese literati scholars began to revalorize *qing* by embracing *yu* 欲 (desires) as to reinvent and/or challenge the Confucian cultural heritage which is held under chronical control by Neo-Confucianists (Huang, 2001).

*Qing*, including affects and desires, can be exploited and employed by the social institutions, or more precisely, capitalism and the state machinery for governance. Because of their enormous investment of *qing*, *danmei* participants work as devoted affective laborers in the *danmei* cultural industry. In the present research, through in-depth interviews with *danmei* participants, including 24 contracted writers on Jinjiang, the hitherto largest website for producing and consuming *danmei*, I carefully examine how they work as affective labors and how their intensified *qing* has become the target of the capitalism for exploitation. First, *danmei* writers as affective laborers, their temporality is governed by writing male-male romance and erotica, and the flexible hours significantly disorders their work-life balance. Second, driven by data, *danmei* writers are constantly self-exploiting themselves by inputting more *qing* in writing the homoerotic romance to achieve higher rankings on the literature website, while they are also experiencing anxiety, insecurity, and depression. Pleasures and pains are both involved in doing the ambivalent affective labor.

Then by exploring the datafication of *qing*, I examine the distinct feature of *danmei* writers as ambivalent affective labor. For *danmei* writers, the datafication and monetization of *qing* leads to increasingly formulaic writing. By selecting, appropriating and combing the elements in the database of *qing*, *danmei* writers are able to swiftly generate a male homoerotic love story that efficiently and effectively invoke the affects and desires of readers for better monetization.

However, the ambivalence emerges when these affective labors are constantly presenting their own creativity and subjectivity that can transgress the logic of capital. The transformative potential of these devoted affective labors is tightly linked with the multiple ambivalences in the *danmei* cultural ecology, where scenes of possibilities are being constantly generated and intensified in the male-male romances and erotica. Rather than unilaterally mapping out how *danmei* writers are exploited, managed, and disciplined by the capita logic in their affective production, I also attend to the transformative potential of affective labor: the unalienated affective agency of *danmei* writers, which exceeds the capitalist control and regulation.

By illuminating the datafication of *qing*, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of *danmei* writers as ambivalent affective labours. Pleasures and pains are both involved and exploited in their input of *qing* throughout their production of *danmei* stories in the cultural industry, while the affects and desires

per se cannot be fully manipulated – transformative momentum is embedded in the water-like *qing* all the time.

## Methodology

Considering the overarching popularity of Jinjiang among *danmei* participants, I used purposive sampling to enrol writer-interviewees who are under contract with Jinjiang. In 2008, Jinjiang introduced the freemium business model and VIP payment system. Readers are required to pay for the subscription of following chapters after reading the initial dozen chapter for free. The profit from subscription has formed a major income source for contracted writers. Jinjiang designates that for registered users, the average charge is 0.05RMB/1000 characters. One chapter usually has about 3000 to 6000 characters, so it costs circa 0.15 to 0.30 RMB per chapter. The authors share 50% of the avenues from the subscription if users access the chapter from the web, while 60% if from the mobile app and WAP gateway.

Eligible *danmei* writers were contacted by private messaging them on Weibo, one of the largest Chinese largest media platforms. I then recruited those of writers who expressed interests in my research project. All interviews were conducted between July 2021 and January 2022, with some follow-up interviews from March to September 2022. The interview length ranged from 60 min to 210 min either online or in person. Online interviews were conducted via social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ with the real-time video and voice call function. Follow-up interviews were all scheduled online. All the 24 interviewees were born in and after the 1980s. Among them, 15 out of 24 informants were born in the 1990s. The numbers of participants who were born in the 1980s and after 2000s are 7 and 2 respectively. Moreover, the majority of my interviewees (23 out of 24) consider themselves as cis-gender women. Their sexualities are far more diverse, including heterosexual women, bisexual women, and lesbian. To protect the confidentiality of interviewees' personal information, I refer to them by pseudonyms in the present research.

Notably, I did not conduct once-for-all interviews with each participant. Apart from some essential following-up interviews, I have also kept in touch with my interviewees, chatted with them concerning specific *danmei* works or events concerning *danmei* culture. I regard my interviewees as friend-respondents. As Tillmann-Healy (2003) suggests, practicing friendship as a method denotes that we research with ethics of friendship and invite respondents further into our (as well as their) lives.

For the full version of this research, please kindly check Ge, L. (2024). Ambivalent affective labor: The datafication of *qing* and *danmei* writers in the cultural industry. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 0(0).

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