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Love Encoded: Reading Queer Subtext under State Regulation

Contemporary global media is often viewed as an open space for expression, yet this perception is significantly complicated by the widespread practice of state censorship, particularly within authoritarian regimes. In the People's Republic of China, a flexible regulation system actively attempts to impose political and moral orthodoxy upon popular culture, treating matters of sexuality and gender nonconformity as threats to political stability and social discipline. However, the severity of this control has not resulted in the erasure of marginalized voices; instead, it has necessitated a broad and sophisticated effort of artistic resistance. By turning systemic limitations into a creative tool, authors and fans of the boys love genre, *danmei*,¹ have established a subtle but significant response known as "socialist recoding," which, in turn, has inspired an internal critique that actively resists the state's attempt to neutralize queer desire into mere homosociality. Therefore, an analysis of *danmei* novels and their adaptations demonstrates that state censorship does not result in the erasure of queer expression but rather necessitates socialist recoding, proving that the expression of basic human desire is a more potent and adaptable force than state-level political suppression.

While explicit political opposition is quickly suppressed, the regulation of sexual expression has been weaponized as a subtle yet effective mechanism of state control, allowing the party-state to suppress expression under the guise of combating "pornography." This

¹ For more information on the terminology used in this essay, see the appendix.

strategy, defined as an “absorptive censorship model” by Ge Chen, operates across three tiers—“political pornography, commercial pornography, and peripheral sex-related content”—to elevate matters of individual freedom into domains of political stability and market discipline (5). Chen argues that under this framework, the censorship process is designed to reshape the communicative ecosystem so that “even tolerated expression reinforces, rather than destabilizes, state authority” (37). Xi Lin suggests that this systemic limitation of expression, stipulated by mandates that require the revision or deletion of content depicting “abnormal sexual relationships or conduct, such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, sexual predation, sexual abuse, or sexual violence,” creates a discriminatory environment for any form of queer visibility (31–32). This underlying conflict between the genre’s queer romantic focus and the government’s harsh official policy has greatly influenced the production and dissemination of *danmei*, an immensely popular form of female-authored, male-male homoerotic fiction.

The direct suppression of sexual expression is complicated by a firmly established cultural system of control. Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei argue that what often appears as silent tolerance, or *moyan kuanrong*, is a powerful means of discipline, which is “re-figured through ‘silent words and reticent tolerance,’ passing, as it were, for the most ‘traditional’ of virtues in modern ‘democratic’ guise” (30). This argument directly implicates the subtle nature of mainland Chinese censorship, which does not eliminate queer content entirely but mandates its invisibility through conversion into nonromantic narratives. The restrictive power of this so-called reticent poetics ensures that queer expression is relegated to “the realm of ghosts” and denied a “proper place—vis-à-vis the socio-familial continuum” (Liu and Ding 32). This reticent demand for self-erasure is the exact system that *danmei* authors resist: the forces of “silent tolerance” compel queer identity to cooperate in its own “invisibility and quiescence,” a

condition that necessitates a coded language to smuggle subtext into the mainstream (32). The concerns, then, are fundamentally an issue of survival and visibility. *Danmei* authors and fans are actively involved in a significant struggle to prevent queer existence from being completely relegated to “the realm of ghosts” by using socialist recoding to reclaim public space for their stories and identities.

This pressure is a constant threat. However, in focusing exclusively on these top-down constraints, scholars risk overlooking the community agency that responds to state action. The constant threat of censure has forced artists and creators to develop intricate methods of subversion, transforming narrative works into case studies of implicit protest and cultural circumvention. The *danmei* genre, in its coded form, stands as a prominent example of digital innovation, demonstrating how marginalized communities can advance their interests by turning systemic constraint into a strategic advantage.

This subversion, known as “socialist recoding,” is the community’s primary tactical response, a term that Ruichen Zhang defines as practices that “reframe controversial contents in a socialist discourse to circumvent censorship” (126). Zhang points out that this strategy stemmed directly from the *danmei* community in response to the 2018 live-action adaptation of the novel *Guardian*, where fans created a specific vocabulary to shield their interests from the “unwanted attention from the censors” (126). This circumvention is exemplified by the way fans “coined ‘socialist brotherhood’ to describe gay romance in this drama to conform to the mainstream values of heterosexuality and socialist ideology” (126). By adopting the official, ideological language of the state and applying it to nonconforming content, the community transforms what the state deems “abnormal” into something that, on its surface, appears to support state-approved social values (127). The severity of censorship, therefore, has not

minimized queer expression; rather, it has necessitated a more sophisticated, collaborative form of communication where the audience must actively participate in decoding the love story hidden between the lines.

The explicit language of Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's second *danmei* series, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation: Mo Dao Zu Shi*, immediately demonstrates the impact of censorship on queer desire. The fundamental difference exists in the novel's clear representation of the protagonists' romantic relationship when compared to its 2019 drama adaptation, *The Untamed (Chen Qing Ling)*. The most immediate and undeniable distinction between the novel and its live-action counterpart lies in the unambiguous declaration of romantic, possessive love between the two protagonists, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji. Where the drama relies on stolen glances and suggestive shared silence, the novel offers the clarity of direct speech, often enabled by instances of vulnerability or drunkenness that ignore social constraint. For example, during a moment when Lan Wangji is drunk, Wei Wuxian tests the boundaries of their relationship by asking him about his feelings for various people, eventually leading to a definitive claim of ownership. When Wei Wuxian asks, "What about this one?," while pointing at himself, Lan Wangji offers an immediate, single-word response: "Mine" (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 1: 334). This assertion is not a statement of brotherhood or loyalty but a clear, possessive declaration of romantic intent. The single word carries the weight of Lan Wangji's entire character arc, in which a man bound by thousands of rules and characterized by emotional restraint completely abandons the pretense of platonic brotherhood. His decision not to categorize Wei Wuxian alongside others, like Jiang Cheng, who receives a dismissive "Humph," or Wen Ning, who receives a disinterested "Heh," isolates Wei Wuxian as an exclusive object of desire (1: 334).

Beyond individual confessions, the novel's story further solidifies the romantic nature of the relationship by carrying out a private, albeit incomplete, wedding ceremony that functions as an internal declaration of commitment. While visiting the ancestral hall of Lotus Pier, the former seat of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect and Wei Wuxian's childhood home, the two protagonists perform two of the three traditional bows required for a marriage. During this act, Wei Wuxian internally declares the significance of the gesture: "Please consider those two bows our wedding bows to the Heaven, the Earth, the father, and the mother" (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 4: 242). The act of bowing to heaven, earth, and the ancestors—the core components of a formal marriage—establishes a binding union in the protagonist's mind, deliberately disregarding the need for state or social recognition.

This explicit theme of formal commitment is revisited and further sexualized in the novel's extras (chapters that take place after the end of the main story, similar to epilogues), where the lifelong pairing is framed using the terminology of cultivation culture. Wei Wuxian formalizes their relationship status when he tells the younger Lan Wangji, "In another few years, we'll become cultivation partners" (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 5: 245). He then immediately clarifies this, stating he means "the kind that practices dual cultivation every day. It was a formal and official wedding—we even did our three marriage bows" (5: 245). This declaration is extremely important, as it directly incorporates the spiritual and romantic ideal of the "cultivation partner" with the reality of an "official wedding" and daily dual cultivation. The inclusion of the "three marriage bows" within this context retroactively confirms the earlier scene at Lotus Pier as a self-sanctioned queer marriage, making the declaration of a committed, sexual, and permanent relationship an indisputable element of the source material's argument. Beyond these declarations, the novel includes multiple scenes of explicit physical intimacy that entirely

remove the possibility of a platonic reading, all of which are systematically excluded from the live-action adaptation.

The significant differences between the original novel and its adaptation—the inclusion of private wedding vows, explicit sexual acts, and direct, possessive romantic confessions—demonstrate areas where censorship happens most severely. By providing a clear, detailed, and uncensored depiction of a male-male romantic and sexual partnership, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* offers a source text that is fundamentally and explicitly queer. The novel's explicit text ensures that the core of the relationship remains defined by desire, commitment, and physical intimacy, providing the necessary evidence that the drama's coded language must constantly strive to reference and reclaim.

The official clampdown on sexually explicit content, especially that which falls outside heterosexual norms, requires a careful examination of how media adaptations of highly popular *danmei* novels, referred to as *dangai*, manage to convey their core romantic relationship while outwardly conforming to the state's requirement for "pure" homosociality. The television series *The Untamed* provides a primary case study in this circumvention. On its surface, the show presents the relationship between the two main characters, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, as one of profound, soulmate-level friendship, or *zhi ji*. However, the series embeds numerous visual and verbal cues that preserve the novel's romantic intent, thereby creating a story that is simultaneously acceptable to censors and legible as a romance to its intended audience.

One of the most persistent methods of establishing an intimate connection is the consistent use of given names. Traditional Chinese etiquette dictates that given names (in this case, Wei Ying and Lan Zhan) are reserved for close family members, elders (mainly teachers), and significant others, whereas courtesy names (here, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji) are used by

friends and acquaintances as a sign of respect. Throughout *The Untamed*, Wei Wuxian refers to Lan Wangji almost exclusively by his given name, “Lan Zhan,” establishing a degree of familiarity and intimacy that goes beyond the bounds of simple friendship. Lan Wangji reciprocates this by nearly always addressing Wei Wuxian as “Wei Ying.” This constant use of given names stands in direct contrast to the interactions observed between the characters and their other friends or family members, suggesting a special dynamic that the narrative privileges. This dynamic is especially noticeable during moments of tension or high emotion, such as the disagreement at the end of episode 20, where the characters switch to more formal addresses only to revert to their intimate given names almost immediately after the conflict has been resolved. The consistent and privileged use of given names thus serves as a subtle yet persistent form of socialist recoding, serving as a linguistic marker that signals a deep commitment while outwardly preserving the state-mandated facade of homosociality.

Similarly, moments of perceived jealousy are also used to suggest romantic attachment. In episode 13, when Lan Wangji is trapped in the Xuanwu cave with Wei Wuxian, the latter talks about saving Mianmian, claiming that the brand mark he got in the process “represents that I once protected a girl that will never forget me her entire life.” Lan Wangji’s reaction is an immediate, sharp questioning of Wei Wuxian: “So you know that she’ll remember you forever?” This dialogue alone reads as homosocial irritation, but the subsequent exchange recodes the interaction as romantic possessiveness. The conversation culminates in Wei Wuxian’s playfully suggesting that Lan Wangji likes Mianmian. Lan Wangji’s nonverbal response—a deliberate, intense gaze at Wei Wuxian, paired with romantic piano music—suggests that his irritation stems from the implication that he likes Wei Wuxian and believes the other would choose Mianmian over him. His earlier warning to Wei Wuxian, “If you don’t mean it, you shouldn’t flirt with

anyone,” reads not as a friend’s advice but as the rebuke of a jealous partner who views Wei Wuxian’s actions toward Mianmian as a romantic infidelity. The entire exchange, therefore, is a case study in visual circumvention, compelling the audience to actively decode the romantic subtext beneath the surface-level platonic dialogue.

Additionally, visual and symbolic elements drawn from the novel function as coded signals of the relationship’s true nature. Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon is probably the most explicit of these signals, as it functions as a visual metaphor for lifelong commitment. Lan Wangji himself tells Wei Wuxian in episode 6 that the Lan ribbon can only be touched by the wearer’s family or significant other (00:08:20–25). This rule grants several moments with clear significance. In the Xuanwu cave in episode 13, Wei Wuxian, in a moment of desperation to save his friend’s leg, removes Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon to fashion a splint (00:34:50–35:00). This gesture, necessitated by crisis, performs a ceremonial function of violating a boundary meant only for a spouse. Even more compelling is the moment in episode 6 where Lan Wangji uses the ribbon to tie his own wrist to Wei Wuxian’s wrist, binding them together (00:25:00–25:15). By utilizing the ribbon’s meaning in the context of both emergency and commitment, the series uses a seemingly innocuous piece of costuming to articulate a symbolic promise of commitment that goes beyond the label of “friendship.”

While visual elements articulate emotions, musical motifs are possibly the most direct way the television series communicates the central romance to the informed viewer, a method that is entirely dependent on the source novel’s narrative. In episode 14, Wei Wuxian, wounded and near passing out, asks Lan Wangji to sing for him (00:22:10–25). Lan Wangji complies, humming a tune that slowly transitions into the title song named “WuJi.” The song itself is a deliberate play on the characters’ courtesy names—Wu from Wuxian and Ji from Wangji—a

compositional choice made by the showrunners to replace the original novel's explicit title for their love song, "WangXian," which is also the fan-created "ship name" for the pairing. "WuJi" directly translates to "unrestrained," which is also the direct translation of the title of the series, *Chen Qing Ling*, albeit the two titles are written using different Chinese characters. This title alternative serves as a clear allusion to censorship circumvention, signaling to the audience that the "untamed" or "unrestrained" nature of their love persists beneath the surface-level narrative of friendship. This significance is emphasized in the final moments of the series, where, as the men part in episode 50, Wei Wuxian's voice-over tells Lan Wangji, "Next time we see each other, you better have a name for this song," to which Lan Wangji replies, "Way ahead of you" (00:39:42–50). Because the show never explicitly states that the name is "WuJi" or "WangXian" within the audible dialogue, it maintains the illusion of an unconfirmed friendship-level affection for the censors. Yet the emphasis on naming the song, which is already known to the informed audience to be the characters' "love song," ensures that this exchange functions as a coded declaration of affection.

This disguised musical theme is further supported by an almost imperceptible mouthing of the phrase "WangXian" by Lan Wangji right after humming the song in episode 14. Because Wei Wuxian is near passing out during the scene, the moment is visually blurry and lacks distinctive audio, forcing a reliance on lip-reading by the audience (00:25:20–25). However, a behind-the-scenes clip confirms that the director instructed actor Wang Yibo to say the fan-created ship name and original title to the song, establishing a direct, uncensored line of communication from the showrunners to the audience that circumvents the censorship of the audiovisual product itself ("《陈情令 The Untamed》"). This use of a thinly veiled visual cue, subsequently confirmed by an external production clip, argues that the creators leveraged the

expectation of censorship to establish a hidden means of communication, actively subverting the state's intent to neutralize queer desire by providing the audience with postrelease evidence of romantic content.

This use of coded imagery also appears in moments of vulnerability. The scene in episode 36 where Wei Wuxian questions a drunk Lan Wangji about why he is helping him provides another example of a coded declaration. The next morning, Lan Wangji's extreme horror and dread when Wei Wuxian suggests he confessed something he likes, telling Wangji he said, "For example, 'I like . . .,'" strongly implies that Lan Wangji was afraid he had verbally admitted his true romantic feelings while intoxicated. His relief when Wei Wuxian finishes the sentence with "I like rabbits" is a coded acknowledgment that a romantic confession was indeed the feared transgression.

This same drunken vulnerability allows for a discreet signal toward marriage in that same episode when Lan Wangji, while drunk, gives Wei Wuxian a rooster (00:11:25–40). In traditional Chinese customs, particularly among the Miao ethnic group, the chicken operates as a significant symbol within the marital process. Xianghong Feng notes that the "chicken is a symbol throughout every stage, from courting, proposal, betrothal, and wedding, to having children" (4). By associating Lan Wangji's offering with this deeply embedded cultural marital symbol, the show utilizes a coded, nonverbal action to signal romantic and domestic intent, circumventing the need for overt verbal confession while grounding the expression of desire within a traditional cultural ritual. The act of the male lead presenting a rooster, which is often associated with the groom, recasts the scene from a simple drunken antic into a proposal of sorts, highlighting how the show recontextualizes traditional rituals for modern, queer subversion. These symbolic gestures allow the series to imply lifelong commitment without ever verbalizing

it, reinforcing how adaptation relies on visual and cultural translation rather than explicit declaration.

The evolution of *danmei* literature and its *dangai* adaptations illustrates a persistent and successful campaign of circumvention against structural censorship. Through implicit language, coded terms, and narrative loopholes, creators continue to articulate queer desire and complex identity. These texts actively break the structural silence by validating love and identity that the state seeks to erase, providing a source of hope for queer individuals. The success of these narratives in reaching a massive audience and fostering powerful emotions demonstrates that the state's control over media expression is not absolute. The capacity of art to innovate and articulate the forbidden is a greater force than the means of suppression, ensuring that queer narratives in China, though often subtle, will always find their way to their intended reader.

The enduring global popularity of *danmei* and its ability to continually invent new modes of implied expression function as a significant perspective into the politics of representation and adaptability under authoritarian regimes. For fans and queer individuals in China, these works validate their identities and experiences in a hostile social and political climate, providing a space for both psychological escape and collective recognition. For scholars and policymakers, this research matters most because it demonstrates that censorship, particularly in the digital age, is a porous, adaptive, and ultimately defeatable force. The ingenuity of the *danmei* authors and fan communities serves as a blueprint for resistance, proving that creativity can always outpace state control. The capacity of a subtle song title or the use of costuming to convey profound romantic meaning shows that the expression of fundamental human desire cannot be hidden, only modified into something subtextual for those who know how to read between the lines.

Appendix: Terminology

Courtesy name: A formal name given to men at age twenty (though some novels may change the age) to signify adulthood and used by friends and acquaintances as a sign of respect.

Cultivation: The practice of spiritual and martial arts to understand the “will of the universe.”

***Dangai*:** Live adaptation of *danmei*.

***Danmei*:** Boys love genre in China, similar to Japanese *yaoi*.

Dual cultivation: The sharing of spiritual energy between partners. Often used as a euphemism for sex.

Given name: A personal, intimate name used only by one’s closest family members, elders, or a spouse or significant other.

***Zhi ji*:** A deeply intimate and profound bond between two people, translated as a “soulmate” or “bosom friend” connection, often used as a euphemism for a queer romantic relationship in censored media.

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