

Transmedia Adaptation, Sonic Affect, and Multisensory Participation in Contemporary Chinese *Danmei* Radio Drama

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Abstract

Danmei, a genre also known as boys' love, first developed in China in the 1990s under the influence of Japanese subculture in the 1990s, but it has diverged from its Japanese antecedents in the last decade. Recent Chinese cultural products of *danmei*, no longer confined to a subcultural group, have attracted mainstream attention and been widely adapted into a variety of popular media forms. In this paper, with the case study of radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (2016), I examine how queerness is explored and experienced through the affective expressivity inherent in voice as well as the interactive interface of *danmaku*, with which listeners can experience and articulate queer fantasy in a relatively unobstructed way. As the genre of *danmei* has been subject to persistent state censorship, this paper further explores strategies of containment and tactics of negotiation deployed by both content producers and cultural consumers.

Keywords: *danmei*, radio drama, vocal timbre, transmedia adaptation, contemporary China

Danmei 耽美, a translingual loanword from the Japanese term *tanbi*, refers to a type of fictional representation that depicts romantic relationships between attractive male characters and is commonly known as boys' love (BL).

In China, danmei culture first developed in the 1990s with the import of Japanese subculture,¹ but it has diverged from its Japanese antecedents in significant ways in the last decade. Recent Chinese cultural products of danmei, no longer confined to a hobby consumed by subcultural groups, have attracted mainstream attention and been widely mediated and adapted across a variety of media forms.

In this paper, I trace the transmedia adaptation of danmei literature in popular media with the focus on the form of radio drama. While the phenomenon of adapting danmei transmedially testifies to the generic elasticity of this literary genre, each media form utilizes their medium specificities and negotiates with state regulation and platform interfaces to manufacture a distinct aesthetic and affect of queer intimacy. With the case study of radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* released on audio platform Miss Evan, this paper illustrates how queer fantasy is explored and experienced through the affective expressivity inherent in voice as well as the interactive interface of *danmaku*. As the genre of danmei has been subject to persistent state censorship, this paper further explores strategies of containment and tactics of negotiation deployed by both content producers and cultural consumers. While sexual or romantic elements are modified or eliminated, transforming depictions of queer desire into “bromantic” homosociality,² avid danmei fans nevertheless deploy skills of close listening and collaborative storytelling to recover such narrative compromise.

1. See Jin Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (2009): 1–7; and Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below,” in *Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, eds. Maud Lavin, Ling Yang, and Jing Jamie Zhao (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press), 3.

2. See Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, “A Queer ‘Socialist Brotherhood’: *The Guardian* Web Series, Boys’ Love Fandom, and the Chinese State,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (2020) 479–95; Tingting Hu and Cathy Yue Wang, “Who Is the Counterpublic? Bromance-as-Masquerade in Chinese Online Drama—*S.C.I. Mystery*,” *Television & New Media* 22, no. 6 (2021): 671–86; Angie Baecker and Yucong Hao, “Fan Labour and the Rise of Boys’ Love TV Drama in China,” *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2021): 17–20.

From Subculture to the Mainstream

Borrowed from *tanbi*, a Japanese word meaning “addictions to beauty,” danmei designates fictional representation of queer romance between male characters.³ With the importation of Japanese BL comics in the 1990s, especially through media piracy and with the mediation of licensed translation in Taiwan, danmei culture flourished in the Chinese mainland, often with the cyberspace as its fan base.⁴ Fan sites of Japanese BL and forums on danmei literature have been created since the late 1990s,⁵ in which danmei readers expressed their enthusiasm for the genre by engaging in discussion, translation, and fan-fiction writing of danmei comics and literature. This initial stage of Chinese danmei was developed largely under the influence of Japanese boys’ love, when Japanese cultural products, especially comics and novels, were favorably consumed and served as a model for the localization of BL in China.⁶ This transnational flow of danmei attests to what Iwabuchi Koichi conceptualizes as the regional globalization in East Asia, in which Japanese popular culture circulates and inspires “familiar but different modes of Asian indigenized modernities in both cultural production and consumption.”⁷

From the very beginning of danmei culture in China, the Internet serves as the primary cultural venue for Chinese fans, predominantly female, to build interest-based groups and exchange queer fantasies. The relatively light

3. Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty,’” 5.

4. Yang and Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below,” 4–5; Chunyu Zhang, “Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women’s Paradoxical Fandom of ‘Boys’ Love’ Fiction,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 39, no. 3 (2016): 249–50.

5. Popular *danmei* sites in this period include Sunsun Academy (founded in 1998 and closed in 2015), Lucifer Club (1999–), and Jinjiang Literature City (2003–), which continues to be the largest online community for danmei literature.

6. Xu and Yang, “Forbidden Love: Incest, Generational Conflict, and the Erotics of Power in Chinese BL Fiction,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 1 (2013): 31–32.

7. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 18.

regulation of the Internet compared to print media, along with the freedom that anonymity offers, enables danmei fans to explore queer sociality and intimacy in ways that are otherwise impossible in a deeply heteronormative society. Some scholars hence identify these female fans as counterpublics, whose engagement with danmei culture “challenge mainstream heteronormativity in a liberating manner.”⁸ A contending view, however, suggests that despite their presumed interest in queerness, danmei fans are predominantly interested in the idealized, romanticist representation of male-male relationships while concerning themselves little with the realistic representation or real condition of homosexuals in China.⁹

In the twenty-first century, especially since the 2010s, Chinese danmei culture has made remarkable developments in formal and thematic diversity and metamorphosed from a subcultural, underground interest into a lucrative cultural enterprise that receives mainstream visibility. No longer a cultural derivative of or local response to Japan’s regional influence, it actively engages with and contributes to the changing mediascape of the Chinese contemporary culture industry. In Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu’s research, they observe that the field of Chinese danmei now consists of three prominent groups: the original danmei circle of Chinese-language fiction, the Japanese circle that consumes and re-creates Japanese BL, and the Euro-American circle that focuses on Western media and slash culture. While each of the circles has their own trajectory of development and consumes different media products, the boundaries between these circles are relatively fluid and porous, making cultural cross-fertilization a common phenomenon.¹⁰

8. Feichi Chiang, “Counterpublic but Obedient: A Case of Taiwan’s BL Fandom,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2016): 224. See also Hu and Wang, “Who Is the Counterpublic?,” 671–86; Yang and Xu, “Danmei, Xianqing, and the Making of a Queer Online Public Sphere in China,” *Communication and the Public* 1, no. 2 (2016): 251–56; Jiang Chang and Hao Tian, “Girl Power in Boy Love: Yaoi, Online Female Counterculture, and Digital Feminism in China,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 4 (2021): 604–20.

9. Chiang, “Counterpublic but Obedient,” 228–33.

10. Yang and Xu, “Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below,” 8.

The popular consumption of domestic and Euro-American media products as well as extensive contacts with an international BL community (in particular, through the fan-fiction site Archives of Our Own) significantly diversifies the field of danmei culture in contemporary China, in which Japanese BL is no longer the sole source of influence. Moreover, among these three circles, the original danmei circle develops most rapidly and has aggregated the largest fan base.¹¹ These original Chinese-language danmei titles are often serialized on major danmei literature sites, especially Jinjiang Literature City, on a subscription basis.

Original danmei novels have taken on a variety of themes, such as school romance, science fiction, martial arts, historical novel, and immortality cultivation, among others. The mechanism of subscription provides economic incentives for both the service provider and the author to produce original works more and faster, and platforms usually embed a commenting system that allows readers to interact with the author and provide immediate responses, and even inspiration, regarding the plot, characters, and style.¹² The system has thus enabled a form of literature-production that is often fan driven, in which readers are encouraged to play an active role in the creation and development of a story. It also generates data that quantifies reader engagement and helps the platform and authors to track the popularity of different genres and works, identify emerging trends, and make predictions about what subject may resonate with readers. Although some novels will eventually get published and circulated in print form, especially through book publishers in Taiwan,¹³ these danmei sites still serve as the primary

11. Xi Tian, "More than Conformity or Resistance: Chinese 'Boys' Love' Fandom in the Age of Internet Censorship," *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* 1 (2020): 192.

12. Discussion about the author-reader relationship in Chinese Internet literature platforms can be found in Yuyan Feng and Ioana Literat, "Redefining Relations Between Creators and Audiences in the Digital Age: The Social Production and Consumption of Chinese Internet Literature," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2589–2600.

13. Cathy Yue Wang, "Officially Sanctioned Adaptation and Affective Fan Resistance: The Transmedia Convergence of the Online Drama *Guardian* in China," *Series—International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 5, no. 2 (2019): 47.

venue for original literary works to circulate and reach an ever-increasing readership on the Internet.

As the cultural impact of original danmei literature continues to grow, some novels have garnered the attention of major entertainment companies and video-streaming platforms. In light of the substantial commercial potential of the danmei genre, production companies have shown interest in purchasing the rights to adapt danmei novels into other popular forms of media. Recognizing danmei as a marketable cultural asset, they often refer to it as *intellectual property* (IP), a term that is used in the Chinese context to highlight the legal rights and economic prospect of a given cultural work, especially Internet literature. Production companies rate a given IP by metrics of S, A, B, and C, with a S rating indicating the most marketable. In the IP economy, if a danmei novel is categorized as S, then the companies will invest heavily to transform the novel into other popular media, ranging from web drama and animation to mobile games. As web drama is a particularly popular one among all these media, production companies often recruit A-list actors to star in the web-drama adaptation.

While an IP is not the same as a media franchise—for essentially all transmedia adaptations of an IP still are based on and follow the original story line—the economic drive and commercial mechanism nevertheless operate in a similar logic as branding and franchising,¹⁴ in which production companies adapt an IP across many media forms with the goal to enhance its visibility and profitability. In the transmedia migration of an IP, ideally, each of these mediums, by retelling the same story through “recreations, remakes, remediations, revisions, parodies, reinventions, reinterpretations, expansions, and extensions,”¹⁵ would contribute to the unfolding of the story in their own ways and generate discrete attractions of entertainment. However, in the case of adapting danmei in China, the question of media

14. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press), 19.

15. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2013), 181.

regulation inevitably arises, especially considering the liminal space that queer imagination occupies and the uneven degree of regulation that each media platform is subject to. Unlike danmei literature that does not require a license to serialize on the Internet, when the genre is adapted and disseminated into visual, audio, or haptic media, permissions from state authorities are usually required. Thus, explicit representation of queer sexuality has to be modified, revised, or removed in order to subordinate the story to the scrutiny of regulators. In a way, instead of each medium making its unique contribution to the unfolding of the original fiction, each of these popular media adaptations exposes processes of compromise and traces of ambivalence in an effort to contain explicit queer content.

In 2016, a web drama series called *Addicted*, adapted from Chai Jidan's novel *Are You Addicted?*, aired on iQiyi and Tencent TV, two of the largest video-streaming platforms in China. When the sexual intimacy between the male leads became too obvious, the web drama was quickly taken down by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). Despite the ban, *Addicted* continued to circulate underground through piracy, and its extensive popularity and the rapid rise to fame of the actors fueled the confidence of producers and assured them that there was an immense market in adapting danmei. The challenge that the production companies and streaming platforms had to grapple with, then, was how to negotiate between the popularity of the homosexual subject and regulation by the NRTA, which strictly censored cultural products depicting "abnormal sexual relations or sexual behaviour."¹⁶

Addicted is generally perceived as the prototype of web dramas adapted from danmei literature (*dangai ju*), and thus it is often referred to as *dangai* 1.0. Two years after, an adaptation of Chinese danmei author Priest's *Guardian* was released on Youku, another major video-streaming platform. Unlike *Addicted*'s explicit depiction of queer intimacy that makes the web

16. Baecker and Hao, "Fan Labour and the Rise of Boys' Love TV Drama in China," 18.

drama deemed promiscuous by the authority, the treatment of the same-sex relationship between the male leads in *Guardian* is much subtler. Portrayed as close colleagues and soul mates, the two protagonists undertake together the mission of safeguarding peace and order. Their queer relationship that is elaborately depicted in the original novel is now camouflaged as socialist homosocial brotherhood, though a more seasoned audience could hardly miss the romantic ties between the protagonists. *Guardian*, to a certain extent, reconciles the conflict between the popular appeal of homosexual romance and NRTA's restriction on queer content. Yet the drama was still removed from the streaming platform one week after the series concluded. It was only after a few scenes that contained "supernatural or harmful content" were deleted three months later that *Guardian* was made available again.

In 2019, web drama *The Untamed* was aired on Tencent TV. An immediate hit after its release, it broke new ground in danmei adaptations. The web drama was adapted from a novel by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (2016), which was serialized on Jinjiang Literature City from 2015 to 2016. A danmei fiction of immortality cultivation, the story revolves around two young lords, Wei Wuxian and Lan Zhan, who investigate dark happenings in the world of Daoist cultivation, and the central story line is concentrated on the protagonists' development of affection for each other. Just like *Guardian*, the queer romance between the protagonists is only alluded to in the web drama, and yet it still constitutes the central appeal of the show and captivates a large number of viewers. It is the most viewed web drama in 2019 with over four billion views, and by 2022, it has a total count of over ten billion views.¹⁷ The web drama also helped the streaming platform develop paid services such as advanced on-demand screening, and it is estimated that the advanced viewing of the final episodes created a revenue of over 150 million yuan (\$21,405,978 USD).¹⁸

17. Wang Yingmin, "Viewership of Chinese TV Dramas in 2019," *Lianhe zaobao*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.zaobao.com/zentertainment/movies-and-tv/story20200113-1020684>.

18. Fan Dongcheng, "Dangai ju at the Crossroads," *The Paper*, March 29, 2021, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11932215.

Prior to *The Untamed*, most dangai ju targeted a small audience of danmei fans. What makes *The Untamed* truly exceptional is how it has been simultaneously recognized by the mainstream media. On June 28, 2019, the overseas edition of *People's Daily*, a major state media outlet for overseas publicity, published a review on this web drama. Entitled “*The Untamed: Writing the Beauty of Chinese Style*,” the essay lauds the web drama’s extensive incorporation of Chinese traditions, which demonstrates “not only the shape of traditional culture, but the soul of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*).”¹⁹ In this way, the reviewer applauds *The Untamed* for its efficacy in “expressing cultural confidence” and “cultivating positive values.” The review’s curious, and perhaps intentional, neglect of the plot of queer romance that constitutes the mainstay of the story encapsulates the core paradox of danmei in contemporary Chinese mediascape: while the state recognizes the effectiveness of the genre to promote -mainstream values and enhance soft-power publicity, the nonheteronormative origin of the genre has to be concealed to contain any transgressive potentials.

Transmedia Adaptation: From Text to Voice

Aside from the immensely popular web drama adaptation *The Untamed*, *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* also appears in animation, radio drama, and mobile games. The transmedia circulation of the story proves to be a successful marketing strategy that promotes the prominence of the IP, and it also attests to the formal elasticity of the danmei genre to be molded across different media forms and generate discrete experiential pleasure. In the following section, I examine the radio drama adaptation of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* released on the audio platform Miss Evan. This is considered by many fans the most authentic adaptation of the original novel. Compared to its web

19. Hu Xin, “*The Untamed: Writing the Beauty of Chinese Style*,” *People's Daily* (Overseas Edition), June 28, 2019, <http://culture.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0628/c1013-31200814.html>.

drama counterpart, I argue that the affective expressivity inherent in voice and the interactive interface of the radio drama platform enables listeners to engage with and articulate queer fantasies in a relatively unobstructed manner.

Radio drama, also known as audio drama, was a popular cultural form widely consumed in China in as early as the 1970s. In a time when TV sets were still largely unavailable to ordinary households, radio structured people's daily activities and functioned as the primary medium of receiving information. As Nicole Huang's study of auditory culture in 1970s China shows, edited films were widely broadcasted in radio programs, which contributed to the sensory pleasure of the everyday amid a totalizing revolutionary soundscape.²⁰ Many films were repurposed for radio broadcasting, in which original film recordings were heavily edited to fit into the format of radio storytelling, and a third-person narrative was often inserted to provide contextual information for radio listeners.

In the subsequent two decades, radio drama continued to flourish in the Chinese mediascape: the popularity of edited films persisted, and there were also radio broadcasting of literary classics and serialized novels.²¹ While radio drama became marginalized by newer, audiovisual mediums of TV, film, and the Internet since the 1990s, the creation of mobile audio platforms, such as Himalaya FM (*Ximalaya*) and Miss Evan (*mao er*), by making listening a much more portable experience, rekindled users' passion for audio cultural products.²² Moreover, the emergence of professional voice-acting studios as well as amateur enthusiasts also provides essential talents for the popularity of radio drama.²³

20. Nicole Huang, "Listening to Films: Politics of the Auditory in 1970s China," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 187–206.

21. Ke Xu, "Cat and the Plumber: An American Radio Drama in China," *Comparative Literature Studies* 57, no. 3 (2020): 421.

22. Joe Yizhou Xu and Jeremy Wade Morris, "App Radio: The Reconfiguration of Audible Publics in China Through Ximalaya.FM," in *Engaging Social Media in China*, eds. Guobin Yang and Wei Wang (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021), 6–7.

23. Since 2013, a number of dubbing studios have been founded to specialize in radio drama as well as TV drama and animation dubbing. Leading studios include TrioPen, Voice Bear, and Voicegem. Many of them have received professional training in the dubbing department of film academies, but there are also a number of self-taught voice actors.

In Linda Hutcheon's classical study of adaptation, when discussing adaptations presented in the form of radio drama, she considers that this audio medium "brings the importance of the aural to the fore."²⁴ Therefore, radio drama, as an aural form of performance, requires that "each character/voice must be aurally distinguishable, there cannot be too many of them. . . . Music and sound effects are added to the verbal text to assist the imagination of the listener."²⁵ In other words, in radio drama, as the vocal performance of a literary text, the differentiation of different voices—those of the characters and the narrator—as well as the addition of sound effects are of pivotal importance for listeners to follow the story line and understand the characters. In my discussion of the radio drama adaptation of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, I seek to bring to light yet another aspect of vocal performance: vocal timbre, which constitutes and cements the affective appeal of danmei fantasy.

Radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* was produced by TrioPen Studio, a dubbing studio founded in 2014 that specialized in voice acting. Unlike the original fiction that employs a third-person narrator, TrioPen's adaptation consists solely of dialogues between the characters, who address each other in the first person. This change, by making voice a central identifier of characters, invites listeners to pay attention to not only the semantic expression of language but the timbral quality of each individual voice. Although the function of differentiation, as Hutcheon explicates, continues to matter in the process of storytelling, it is equally important to attend to what kind of listening experience, auditory and affective, that vocal timbre can afford for the listeners. Here, I deploy the concept of vocal timbre to understand the sensory and affective experience when listening to the texture of voice. Vocal timbre, or *Klangfarbe* ("tone-color") in German, refers to the vocal quality of the voice that extends beyond semantic description or musical notation. As Andrew Jones theorizes, timbre encapsulates

24. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 41.

25. Hutcheon, 42.

and reflects the acoustic trace of the resonating body that produced it. As an embodied and sensory artifact, timbre possesses irreducible historical specificities that are “indexically linked to the people, the instruments, or even the locales and moments that produced them.”²⁶ By acknowledging and listening to the extrasemantic quality of timbre, we can grasp the intricate ways in which the human voice communicates and conveys affective experiences.

In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, vocal timbre, rather than make each character a disembodied voice emanating from the abyss of the ethernet, indexes the actually voicing body of the speaking subject. The corporeality of timbre hence allows listeners to imagine the characters as concrete beings with whom they can embody their danmei fantasy. One listener relays their experience of listening to the vocal timbre in the comment section of the radio drama, writing, “When I listen to the radio drama, I don’t feel at all that this is voice acting. It is entirely the real person of Wei Wuxian speaking. [The performance of voice], full of emotions and incredibly versatile, engenders a strong sense of immersion.”²⁷ The comment, by focusing exclusively on the timbral quality of voice, captures the affective appeal of radio drama listening: both the sonic pleasure of voice and the auditory experience of total immersion. Receiving a considerable number of upvotes, the message is representative of the shared auditory experience that many listeners receive. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that many fans of danmei radio drama feel strong attachment to the vocal timbre of vocal performers, which they associate with certain characters, and production companies often employ the same group of voice actors to perform characters in transmedia adaptations to strengthen such vocal identification and sonorous pleasure.²⁸

26. Andrew F. Jones, *Circuit Listening: Chinese Popular Music in the Global 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 173.

27. ddl shi yuandongli, “Kudos to Mr. Lu,” posted in the comment section of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, season 1, episode 10, on Miss Evan, August 6, 2018.

28. For instance, the web drama version of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* and the animation adaptation employed the same set of voice actors to dub main characters.

In an interview on the production of radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, Cai Mao, chief operating officer of Miss Evan, recalled the process in which they collaborated with dubbing studios to find suitable voice actors. The vocal timbre of voice actors, according to her, served as the primary criterion in the selection process.²⁹ In fact, when danmei radio dramas recruit voice actors, rather than prioritize acting experience or acting skills, they place much emphasis on vocal timbre. In job advertisements posted on Mohello, a Chinese-language online community of voice acting, danmei radio drama producers often have specific descriptions of vocal timbre that they intend to look for. Popular labels, for instance, include “fragile *uke* voice” and “alpha *seme* voice.”³⁰ Here, vocal timbre indexes both sound’s expressive capacity of embodying the personality of a given character and its effectiveness of conveying sexual intimacy in a queer relationship.

As radio drama makes voice—in particular, dialogues between characters—the primary medium of expression, the polysemic, elusive, and extrasemantic nature of voice makes it an effective way in evading censorship. While it is convenient to censor images or text by locating depictions of obscene content, it is, by contrast, much more challenging to identify the transgressiveness of voice, especially when voice is used for its nonsemantic quality. The radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, when it comes to scenes of queer intimacy, often deploys the sound of whispers, breathing, and vibrato quaver to allude to the romantic encounter between the male leads. The absence of direct verbal expression serves the dual purpose of setting up barriers for regulators to track transgressive content and allowing listeners to freely imagine queer intimacy.

29. Shao Maomao, “Radio Drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* Having Been Played for over 20 Million Times,” *Jiemian News*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/2324030.html>.

30. *Uke*, literally meaning “to attack,” refers to the top in a homosexual relationship, whereas *seme*, “to receive,” indicates the bottom position. Advertisements looking for voice actors can be found under the recruitment section on Mohello, <https://www.mohello.com/zhaomujijiehao>

In the original novel of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, there is a classical episode in which Lan Zhan, in his complete drunkenness, reveals his affection for Wei Wuxian. In the web drama adaptation, Lan's confession, along with the intimate interaction between the male protagonists, is completely taken out, and instead, the drama opts to show the bromantic devotion between the two. The budding affection is only vaguely suggested through close shots of their eye contacts. The radio drama, by contrast, preserves the queer relationship in a much more elaborate manner. In the same scene, the voice actor playing the character of Lan Zhan deployed rhythmic variations in his speech, such as delay, pause, and the breathiness of voice, which manifested both the physical state of drunkenness and the romantic ambience of affectionate intoxication between the two. Through these nonverbal vocal performances, the representation of the queer interaction becomes legible and profoundly enjoyable to listeners.

Moreover, when listening to the radio drama, danmei fans often use a technique that can be approximated as "close listening." As Charles Bernstein has conceptualized it, close listening refers to a practice in which listeners consciously attend to the vocal performance of a text and attune themselves to the dynamic interplay between sound and semantics.³¹ Through the practice of close listening, listeners become aware of the ways in which voice acting, vocal timbre, intonation, rhythm, and other sonic qualities shape and enrich the expressivity of the text. Many listeners of the radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* exhibit a heightened degree of intermedial attentiveness to the textual and sonic representation of the story. In one testimony, for instance, a listener recounts the revelatory experience that they had when listening to the radio drama. Much more than simply reading out loud the original text, voice actors, with their vocal performance of the prolongation of syllables, delays between words, and change of intonation, effectively convey the complexity of the

31. Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4–7.

psychology of the characters, which, as the listener comments, would otherwise go unnoticed when they read the novel.³² Such reflection illustrates the intertextual and intermedial process of listening that avid fans perform, in which they demonstrate a keen awareness of the medium specificity of radio drama, and when listening, they skillfully integrate their sensory experiences of reading and listening to enhance the pleasure of consuming the danmei genre.

Danmaku as Collaborative Storytelling

Since 2018, radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* was serialized exclusively on Miss Evan and became an immense hit, with each of the paid episodes garnering more than one million play counts. By 2022, it is the most-played radio drama on the platform. Miss Evan, founded in 2010, is one of the largest audio-streaming platforms in China that provides audio products ranging from popular music to autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR). It is particularly known as the hub of Chinese-language radio dramas adapted from Internet literature and, in particular, danmei literature. Aside from *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, Miss Evan has purchased copyrights of a few other popular BL titles, and these radio dramas are among the most popular paid products on the platform.

Rather than broadcasted through traditional radio stations, contemporary radio dramas are primarily produced by and circulated on Internet audio platforms and yet they are still commonly referred to as radio dramas (*guangbo ju*) by both audio platforms and listeners. The retainment of the name *radio* despite shifting distribution methods, on the one hand, helps to position these digital audio products within the genealogy of radio drama

32. ying fei zhu ri, "On Wei Chao's Dubbing of Lan Zhan," posted in the comment section of *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, season 1, episode 5, on Miss Evan, September 16, 2019.

in the twentieth century and illuminates how audio storytelling persistently captivates listeners through the use of sound effects, music, voice acting, and vocal timbre. On the other hand, it highlights the presence of state media regulation and control that are reminiscent of the practice of traditional radio broadcasts, which continue to loom over the production and consumption of Internet-based radio dramas in the contemporary Chinese mediascape.³³

In the study of media in contemporary China, it is almost impossible not to address the censorship of media contents by state authorities. Yet preoccupation with state regulation risks assuming a simplistic binary between state control and individual agency, oppression and resistance, which may lead one to overlook the murky terrain of media politics triangulated by regulators, platforms, and users. Researchers have recently advocated ideas such as self-regulation or delegated censorship to highlight the dynamic, multilevel, and multilayered process of censorship, one “with a hardened core but flexible periphery.”³⁴ This renewed view maintains that, rather than blunt censorship that directly comes from the state, Internet platforms moderate media content with relative autonomy and based on their own interpretations that do not align squarely with the demand of the state. In the case of Miss Evan, such incongruity between the state and the platform is discernible at several levels, from the interface design of the mobile app to the embedding of an interactive commenting system of danmaku. While the state is apprehensive about the transgressive potential of queer culture, the platform, seeing the impressive revenue that this genre can generate, cautiously promotes danmei radio drama while ensuring compliance with regulations.

Unlike other popular streaming services that use algorithms to display personalized content to users, Miss Evan features a navigation menu that

33. Xu and Morris, “App Radio,” 9.

34. Taiyi Sun and Quansheng Zhao, “Delegated Censorship: The Dynamic, Layered, and Multistage Information Control Regime in China,” *Politics & Society* 50, no. 2 (2022): 194. See also Mengying Li, “Promote Diligently and Censor Politely: How Sina Weibo Intervenes in Online Activism in China,” *Information, Communication & Society* (2021): 1–16.

allows listeners to browse radio dramas by subject, status, and update schedule. Yet far from providing the liberty for listeners to explore freely, the app deploys a popularity ranking system that promotes and solidifies the visibility of audio dramas that have already aggregated considerable play counts. In terms of subject, radio dramas are subdivided into five categories on the platform: romance, modern, ancient style, Republican era, and others, and unsurprisingly, there is not a separate group for danmei.

These categories may seem confusing, as they represent distinct criteria, with some denoting genre while others indicating time periods. A closer examination of radio dramas under each of the categories, however, reveals the underlying logic: whereas romance refers exclusively to heterosexual love stories, popular titles under the remaining four categories are predominantly danmei radio dramas, which are grouped by time periods from ancient settings to contemporary. Though the platform carefully conceals the subject of danmei that a keyword search for the genre would yield no result, the classification system makes it handy for avid listeners to distinguish heterosexual romance from queer content and locate danmei radio drama of their preference.

Whereas the platform Miss Evan straddles between the promotion of danmei radio dramas and the concealment of the danmei genre, it incorporates the function of danmaku (“bullet screen”) within its audio-playback interface that allows listeners to present their discussion and interpretation of queer story lines and relationships in a more unobstructed manner. Despite the ambivalent stance of the platform, the introduction of the danmaku interactive system provides an essential digital infrastructure for listeners of danmei audio drama to express and celebrate their queer fantasy and forge communal belonging.

Danmaku is an interactive commenting system first offered by Japanese online video site Nico Nico, which enables real-time comments to fly across the video like bullets barraging the screen. Combining “visual content of moving images with paratextual information of peer interpretations and feedback,” danmaku transforms the experience of video viewing into that

of social communication.³⁵ In China, this commenting interface has been popularized by video platforms Bilibili and ACFun since the 2010s and was later adopted by major video-streaming sites and was even introduced to film exhibition in the movie theater. Existing studies of danmaku in the contemporary Chinese mediascape tend to understand the phenomenon as a form of social interaction in which the paratextual (danmaku) displaces the visual (video), and communication matters much more than content.³⁶

The use of danmaku on video-streaming platforms is often characterized as playful or disruptive, in which danmaku either engenders visual spectacles that “barrage” video play or parodies the original content with techniques such as *soramimi* (“mishearing”) to create comic effects.³⁷ However, the use of danmaku on Miss Evan is markedly different. Here, it serves more functional purposes of facilitating information transmission and encouraging feedback and discussion of listeners. Rather than being used for playful deconstruction or parody, danmaku on Miss Evan synthesizes the role of information and communication.

Danmaku posted on *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* and, by extension, other danmei radio dramas on Miss Evan generally consist of the following types: (1) subtitling: to provide textual transcription of audio; (2) interpretation: to discuss plot, characters, and relationship; (3) supplement: to supply information that is edited out or deleted due to censorship of queer content; (4) expression: to reveal affection for characters or the queer relationship; and (5) community-building: to interact with other listeners

35. Jinying Li, “The Interface Affect of a Contact Zone: *Danmaku* on Video-Streaming Platforms,” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4, no. 3 (2017): 235.

36. See Li, “The Interface Affect of a Contact Zone,” 233–56; Xuenan Cao, “Bullet Screens (*Danmu*): Texting, Online Streaming, and the Spectacle of Social Inequality on Chinese Social Networks,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 3 (2021): 29–49.

37. Nakajima Seio, “The Sociability of Millennials in Cyberspace: A Comparative Analysis of Barrage Subtitling in Nico Nico Douga and Bilibili,” in *China’s Youth Cultures and Collective Spaces*, eds., Vanessa Frangville and Gwennaël Gaffric (New York: Routledge, 2019), 105–6; Zhen Troy Chen, “Slice of Life in a Live and Wired Masquerade: Playful Prosumption as Identity Work and Performance in an Identity College Bilibili,” *Global Media and China* 5, no. 3 (2020): 332.

and create a sense of communal belonging. If danmaku on video sites encapsulates a competition between the textual and the pictorial for the attention of users' vision, to embed danmaku in the interface of audio playback, in contradistinction, signifies the process of mutual complement between listening and viewing. Danmaku on Miss Evan, particularly through functions of subtitling, interpretation, and supplement, enhances the listening experience and establishes a meaningful logic between the audiovisuals.

Soramimi, first developed in Nico Nico, also becomes popular in the danmaku culture in China. *Soramimi*, literally meaning “sky ears,” describes the phenomenon of when the listener hears something that is not what is actually being said, as if it were coming from the sky. With *soramimi*, viewers mischievously mishear and send danmaku that replaces the original word with implausible homonyms to engender humor. Moreover, viewers often strive to distinguish their misheard homophones from each other to manifest individual wit and creativity. The practice, by contrast, is largely absent in danmei radio dramas. Instead, listeners aim to facilitate the listening experience with textual clarity, precision, and authenticity to the original. Signature lines, rather than being replaced or displaced by *soramimi*, are collaboratively posted and accurately repeated by listeners to barrage the screen, in which the density of the textual overlay functions as the barometer of their affective intensity. In a key scene in *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, when Lan Zhan declares that Wei Wuxian belongs to him, the screen is covered fully with the overlay in which listeners unanimously repost the same phrase uttered by the protagonist.

Even though audio storytelling poses a greater challenge to media regulators,³⁸ depictions of explicit queer sexuality are still removed on Miss Evan to prevent radio dramas from being taken down by state authorities. On those occasions, danmaku affords listeners the opportunity to discuss, interpret, and supplement the queer story line that has been moderated. In scenes

38. Fan Yang, “Feminist Podcasting: A New Discursive Intervention on Gender in Mainland China,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2022): 11–12.

when protagonists interact intimately with each other, as the radio drama mainly deploys extraverbal expressions of quavers and gasping breaths to imply the strong affection developed between the male characters, many listeners opt to fill in the semantic gap by sending danmaku that cites the original text or presents close readings to make explicit the queer relationship. The mechanism of danmaku thus affords a collaborative form of storytelling, in which vocal performance of voice actors and visual-haptic response from listeners jointly engender the discrete pleasure of queerness.

In the realm of auditory culture, scholars often characterize listening as a highly private and intimately inward-looking experience.³⁹ When one listens to an audio product, the listener engages with the outside world by silently and solitarily mediating one's interior feelings and exterior narratives provided by the audio content.⁴⁰ Yet in the case of Miss Evan, the feature of danmaku complicates the practice of listening by simultaneously activating other senses—in particular, sensory experiences of the visual reading of scrolling comments and haptic feedback of typing and sending danmaku. The synthesis of senses contributes to the engendering of a more immersive and holistic listening experience, one that transforms the engagement with danmei radio drama from a private, contemplative auditory activity to a collective and interactive multisensory one. As is demonstrated in the analysis above, especially on occasions when the narrative of radio drama is partially compromised, danmaku proves to work effectively in that it provides listeners with a platform to reclaim queerness through the collective and multisensory labor of reconstructing the queer story line.

Writing on the use of danmaku in the process of community-building, existing scholarship reveals the illusory nature of such communal belonging

39. See, for instance, Jonathan Sterne, "Introduction," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–17; Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

40. See Lukasz Swiatek, "The Podcast as an Intimate Bridging Medium," in *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*, eds., Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 173–87.

that despite the impression of simultaneous viewing, there is no synchronic interaction among danmaku commentators.⁴¹ In the case of danmaku on Miss Evan, the sense of simultaneity and its promise of real-time interaction matters less in the process of forging of a fan community. Instead, communal bondage and solidarity hinge upon a shared interpretive capacity of listeners of danmei radio drama to recognize the queer story line, reveal the implied, and supplement the lack. In other words, a type of danmei literacy performed in the process of listening and danmaku posting is indispensable to cultivating a sense of collective ownership of the cultural property and substantiating the sense of communal identity.

Listeners of danmei radio drama have demonstrated admirable sophistication in response to moderation and censorship. Showing a deep understanding of the cultural and sociopolitical ecology of contemporary Chinese media, they are well aware of the precarity of the genre, which prompts them to safeguard the genre from total elimination while avoiding direct confrontation with the logic of censorship. In their danmaku, listeners do not criticize the production team for complying with regulations, nor directly attack the NRTA for censoring queer content. Rather, taking censorship as a given condition and showing little willingness to challenge the status quo, they express appreciation and gratitude that the queer romance can still be partially presented.⁴²

Conclusion

The present paper, with the case study of radio drama, offers preliminary research of the transmedia adaptation of danmei literature in contemporary China. The transmedial journey not only demonstrates the versatility

41. Li, "The Interface Affect of a Contact Zone," 247–51.

42. This phenomenon can be best illustrated by the finales of most danmei radio dramas, where listeners post predominantly *danmaku* to express their gratitude and respect to the production team who made the audio renditions possible despite challenges inherent to the genre.

of the genre across different media forms but brings to light their distinctive medium specificities and affective expressivity. With a focus on auditory and affective experiences of queerness that danmei radio drama affords, the study reveals the distinct sonic affect that the medium, platform, and interface of radio drama manufacture. In so doing, it moves beyond a plot-centered approach to Chinese danmei culture that often gravitates toward the narration and articulation of queer imagination, as well as a discursive framework that attends primarily to the media politics of queer culture.

The nonsemantic and extrasemantic elements, such as vocal timbre and the interactive interface of danmaku, exemplify how production companies, digital interfaces, and ordinary listeners negotiate between media regulations, economic revenues, and queer fantasy. Furthermore, the focus on sound media, an increasingly important medium in contemporary Chinese mediascape, illuminates the importance of understanding the medium affordance and media politics with which audio content is produced and consumed, and the vantage point of sound also reveals the potential of the sonic in shaping collective agency and communal belonging. While existing scholarship has focused heavily on the audio medium of podcast, the current study, by looking at danmei radio drama and the interfacing effects of danmaku, reveals participatory and multisensory experiences enabled by this audio-based form of communication.

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