



**Chinese Danmei Curation**  
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Pop culture, through my understanding, is the popular trend that grabs the attention of the public en masse and leads cultural fazes throughout identifiable communities. Rather than one specific media for this curation, I will be expressing a genre-based perception of pop culture through a genre called *danmei*, mainly within the context of author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (hereafter referred to as MXTX)’s works. Danmei is the Chinese term used to define a genre of web novels that depicts romance between two male leads. There are many facets which make up danmei fan culture, including (but not limited to) cosplay, charm, plush, figure collecting, fan content, and the various media into which novels are often adapted (i.e., manhua, audio drama, live drama, and donghua). Danmei, like many other forms of East Asian content, is making its way into Western spaces and I will be discussing in detail how this content is consumed within the Western lens.



*Figure 1*

Danmei and Chinese anime/manga (donghua/manhua), are something I would consider to be growing alongside the tail end of K-pop culture and the exponential rise its presence has had within Western countries. These fandoms, including Japanese media, are well-entwined with each other through aesthetic trends and the active desires of the communities that keep them moving. Anime conventions for Japanese media are seeing more and more other East Asian media and thus those communities are gaining exposure. My first experience with any kind of danmei media had been at such a convention, where I had been celebrating an anime series with close friends, cosplaying the main characters. Within our traditional Japanese costumes and our long black ponytails, we were mistaken for characters from a series called *Mo Dao Zu Shi*. I had never heard the name of a series like that, but the curiosity of the *clearly not Japanese title* urged me to investigate it. Upon my research, I found myself within an entirely different Culture, Chinese Culture.

This collection provided my life with a whole new subculture of fandom outside of what, at the time, had been the social norm. The types of media that I was able to consume danmei in were not unusual to me, but the vast amounts of Chinese Culture, aesthetics, language, and tropes, that each title was steeped in was a context that I had never considered in the same lens as my other interests. Over the years Danmei, as well as genres such as *xianxia* and *wuxia*, have gained immense traction and become deeply widespread, allowing for the now easily accessible publication of MXTX's officially translated source material. MXTX's three web novels and similar material were formative for me to explore another Culture's pop culture that was only just starting to breach the Western world, teaching me fundamental lessons about content within its cultural contexts.



Figure 2

Almost synonymously with danmei exists Japanese BL (Boys Love), which for the sake of this essay, I will treat them as such. BL as a genre has overtaken a part of our local society within popularity, which in many fandoms has moved to make changes to the source material itself. In this way, even within its somewhat niche (but still growing) spaces, it has become an overwhelming pop culture. The communities consuming it and thus the material too, have evolved together. The 'pop culture' I've decided to identify is hard to reduce further than the overall genre, because there are so many social and cultural facets that go into partaking in said pop culture. Outside of a situation in which there is isolated consumption of the media without further discussion, the conversation on danmei is nuanced to perception and active participation.

In BL consumer culture there is the type of fan called a *Fujoshi*; the way this consumer is typically categorized is within the restrictive labels of a cis-het woman who enjoys and partakes in the reading and viewing of MLM (Men Loving Men) content. Social media discourse around fujoshi culture has now existed for decades on whether their actions source from just appreciation—or if they stem from fetishization. Therein is also the issue of modern gatekeeping which occurs in Danmei fandoms in more than one way. In the previously mentioned context, it comes in the form of: Who truly has the right to consume queer content? In the war waged to normalize queer representation there is suddenly this aspect that it should be kept safe from heteronormative spaces in the fear of fetishization. The argument is fair in that classic fujoshis don't consume danmei as a portion of a larger whole of the content, rather it's the strict genre of enjoyment. But this argues the question of how much one's consumed content reflects on their morals and desires. This topic becomes more difficult to dissect when most authors, including MXTX, are cis women themselves.

Modern cancel culture creates a sense of diversion with fans as Western consumers act towards Chinese consumers with a sense of moral superiority over Orientalism, with a claim that their culture is *immoral*. In most Asian countries, common social practice adheres to a familial form of address, even towards those considered strangers. And when the topic strays into danmei protagonists affectionately calling one another 'gege' (elder brother), western fans have had a history of sharing their unrestrained opinions, without allowing space for Cultural contexts. Trier-Bieniek (12) proposes the idea that "Collectively, we learn a set of beliefs and values through images and narratives that take on the appearance of normality" which provides a social context for the entitlement Western consumers seemingly have over this contention because the popular 'normal' doesn't include the same type of language. The passion within these public

arguments and the constant need to feel self-justified within their fandom spaces shows the social prevalence of the genre, and how truly engrained it is becoming within shared spaces.



Figure 3

Of the ‘five dimensions of global cultural flow’ (Appadurai 296), I found the most prominent is the ethnoscape impacted by this fandom, as it includes both communities already consuming East Asian content but also those who started through more common media such as television or K/C-pop. The environment that was created by this content’s presence in the Western world is culturally different than most have been exposed to. The debate of epistemology is strong within danmei through the discourse between Western consumers and native Chinese consumers about the nuances of cultural appreciation and perception. The Western way of knowing is fundamentally different from that of the East Asian way of knowing which produces a dichotomy of what is morally acceptable and socially justifiable. This

furthermore devolves into where individual ideology is taken with a closed mind without the educated introduction into a new environment.

Western contexts tend to have a lack of familiarity with those around them and don't associate themselves as close to those who walk next to them on the streets. Perhaps that distinction is a symptom of the capitalist viewpoint of *every man for themselves* vs. the communism of China. In Chinese cultural concepts, although the person may be a stranger to you, there is an expectation to address them with either casual familiarity or formal respect, using familial terms with other community members despite having no relations with them. Westerners view most things as commodities due to the status quo they survive within, creating hegemony on whose form of consumption has dominance. Other hegemonies are found within gender hierarchy as a very prevalent aspect of danmei content. The provided contexts of MXTX's works are fantasy historical dramas that are overrun by male dominance and purely male perspective. It is worth noting that this may be a result of the overarching patriarchy within China and the hidden biases the author may have unknowingly weaved into her stories.

The greater the popularity of the fandom grows, the less respect there is for closed communities, where avid consumption and material goods take precedence over the wishes and legal copywrites of the author. MXTX's copy write claims that no person may profit in any way from things related to or inspired by her works. In the past, this contributed to a beautifully curated fan space where consumers would partake in P4P (Pay for Production) or even trading. As time goes on, there's an influx of the content available and it becomes much harder to monitor who is selling vs. trading and who is following the rules designated by the creator. In the same vein, there is less attention put forth to the deeper topics within media as this shift occurs.

In a cinematic universe such as that in a magical historical China, intersectionality is stripped away in many ways, leaving bare bones and an unproblematic environment for the characters to exist in, there are no consequences for those with privilege (high-rank cultivators). This is dangerous to do with danmei considering the very fragile position this content is created in, inside conservative China where homosexuality is considered graphic content to be censored. There is very little to be said about gender nuance but a LOT to say about the queer content's 'taboo' nature. Often this is downplayed by Western consumers with a lack of awareness. These creative and fandom spaces are victims to the voices of Queer and Chinese consumers being washed out of the active spaces because they lose value with the shift from *niche interest* to *pop culture*.



## References

*Figure 1.* Beaudoin, Alyx. “Animethon 2019 MDZS Meet-up”. Edmonton 12 Aug. 2019.

*Figure 2.* Barns & Noble, Hurst Texas. Three books on store display, featuring *The Scum Villain*

*Self Saving System, The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation, and Heaven Official's Blessing.* Twitter, 14 Dec. 2021,

<https://twitter.com/BNHurstTexas/status/1470799947939426311>.

*Figure 3.* Coco, @cocopines. Shelf filled with various MXTX collectables. Twitter, 22 Mar.

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### Cover Collage

Top Left:

Nel, Ma. Hand holding book *Grand Master of Demonic Cultivation* In front of a curated bookshelf. Twitter, 24 Dec. 2021,

<https://twitter.com/Manel810/status/1474352122330292229>.

Top right:

Beaudoin, Alyx. “Animethon 2019”. Edmonton, 12 Aug. 2019.

Bottom Left:

Poster for the series *Survivor’s Guide to Novel Transmigration*. Baikie Baidu, 2020,

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Bottom Middle:

Poster for the series *The Untamed*. IMDb, 2019,

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Bottom Right:

Cover for the series *Heaven Official’s Blessing*. Baikie Baidu, 2019,

<https://baike.baidu.com/pic/%E5%A4%A9%E5%AE%98%E8%B5%90%E7%A6%8F/23780912/1/d058ccbf6c81800ac7ce025abe3533fa828b47bf?fr=lemma&ct=single#aid=1&pic=d058ccbf6c81800ac7ce025abe3533fa828b47bf>.