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Emily Williams
williej@bgsu.edu

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Bowling Green State University

BL and Danmei

The Similarities and Differences Between Male x Male Content and its Fans in Japan
and China

Ezra Williams

ASIA 4800

Christopher Frey

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Introduction

BL and *danmei* are two terms that mean the same thing; both mean male/male romantic or sexual fiction in Japan and China respectively. However, despite similarities in content and historical connection there are still some differences in fan culture. Culture, laws and the nature of the internet lead to some of the key differences that will be explored in this paper: namely the differences caused by the censored Chinese *danmei* and the relatively uncensored Japanese BL.

The Basics (History and Terminology)

BL

To understand the similarities and differences between BL and *danmei*, one must first have a general basic understanding of the history and terminology of these genres. BL (short for “Boy’s Love”), media such as manga, anime, and light novels that depict (primarily) beautiful young men in same-sex relationships and are created by and for a mostly female audience started appearing in Japan around 1970 (Welker, 42). Early works were called *shōnen-ai*, literally “boy’s love” and early ones often featured younger characters inhabiting romantic foreign settings (Welker, 45). In 1975 the first Comic Market (also known as *Komiketto/Komike*) was held; back then there were only about 700 attendees and it was a one-day event. Now *Komike* spans three days and has 120,000-210,000 attendees per day (Welker, 53). *Komike* is easily associated with the creating, selling, and buying of *dōjinshi*, or fan-made/amateur *manga*. In the beginning of *Komike* adolescent girls were a big percentage of the participants, which meant a lot of *shoujo* (for adolescent girls) content was made and sold, including *shounen-ai*

content (Welker, 54). *Dōjinshi* featuring the “eroticization and homoeroticization” of male rock stars, many of whom were foreigners, were quite popular in the late 1970’s (Welker, 54).

In the 1980’s the better-known term *yaoi* came into use; *yaoi* being an acronym for *yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi* or “no climax, no punchline, no meaning” (Welker, 55). The word started as the title of a particular BL manga, then later was used as part of the title of an anthology before cementing itself as a name for the genre (Welker, 55-56). The amateur market with *dōjinshi* and magazines like *JUNE* and *Allan* helped the popularity and proliferation of BL media, prepping the market for the commercial boom in the 1990’s (Welker, 63). Throughout the 90’s and beyond *yaoi* became more professional and commercial and blended a bit with *shounen-ai*, which had lost its foreign settings *shōnen-ai* fell into disuse in the 90’s and the English “Boy’s Love” (*boizu rabu*), eventually being shortened to BL, became popular though *yaoi* was still used (Welker, 64-65). While some think a distinction exists between *yaoi dōjinshi* and BL *manga*, others, both fans and scholars, treat the terms as synonymous (Welker, 66). Fans (female ones) of BL are called *fujoshi* or “rotten women,” because of their love of something that is against the “common sense” of heterosexual romance. The *fujoshi* has even become a parody character archetype in other forms of media (Welker, 67). The BL market has expanded beyond manga into light novels, visual novels, drama CDs and more as well as expanding to a more global network in recent years, such as a Yaoi-Con existing in San Francisco since 2001 (Welker, 67).

Danmei

BL came to China from Japan through Taiwan in the early 1990's (Feng, 4). The term *danmei* uses the same kanji/characters as the Japanese word *tanbi* (耽美), a word which means "aesthetic" that was often used to refer to media that catered to the tastes of young women such as BL in Japan (Feng, 4). From the beginning until now *danmei* fandom in China has primarily existed on the internet thanks to societal stigma on homosexuality and strict censorship of pornographic material (Feng, 4), in contrast to the published and physical magazines and *dōjinshi* of Japan. The creation of female-centered literature websites like *Jinjiang* and *Xianqing* helped to create an online community for fans of *danmei* in China. In China, circles still exist of fans primarily interested in BL imported from Japan as well as fans of translated "slash" fic from Western countries (Yang and Xu, 8).

Why are BL and Danmei Popular?

Despite stigma and, in China, legal action, BL and *danmei* remain fairly popular subgenres of romance in Japan and China as well as other nations. The theories on the popularity of BL and *danmei* largely overlap and no major theories for either that conflict with each other nor is there any reason to believe there would be a difference between the reasons for the popularity of BL and *danmei*. One of the theories behind the popularity of BL and *danmei*, in particular its popularity with female audiences, is rooted in the ideas of transgressive intimacy and pure fantasy. Pure fantasy because male/female or female/female is far too close to reality to truly enjoy (Galbraith, 213). To interpret the pure fantasy concept farther, in my own experience, which is echoed by

many people I've spoken to about BL, is that the "pure fantasy" is appealing not just because it is separate from daily life but also because it is separate from the female body. Escaping from the ever-present sexualization of the female body through a setting devoid of sexual female characters is a selling point of BL (and *danmei*) for a number of fans, myself included. It is the subversion of the male gaze that pervades all things, allowing for a true female gaze where the male characters are truly subjected to a female voyeurism (Zhang, 251). In other words, female fans of BL and *danmei* turn to male x male content both to avoid the pervasive sexualization of women and to, for once, be the "sexualizer". BL and *danmei* are devoid of the anxieties and shames that come from sex for women: pregnancy, misogyny, and the stigma against sex for pleasure are missing in these works (Zhang, 254). Many of these factors can make a woman uncomfortable with sex. Women who are made uncomfortable by these very real issues being present in their fiction and specifically erotica will look for fiction and erotica where it is absent. The idea of transgressive intimacy is about the latent romantic, emotional, and erotic potential both within and separate from the everyday (Galbraith, 213). It is about the joy of reinterpreting and transforming the strong feelings that often already exist between characters, playfully imagining intimacy from tensions and everyday touches (Galbraith, 213). Fans of BL and *danmei*, especially when it is fanfiction of existing fictional content, love to explore relationships in new lights.

Another theory behind the popularity of BL and *danmei* is that the empowerment that can be found in the challenging of gender roles and heteronormativity that is within the genres. Some criticize the genre, claiming it reinforces heteronormativity by giving

the *uke/shou* more feminine traits, however readers and creators of BL and *danmei* construct masculinity and femininity in different ways (Zhang, 251). However, that resistance of heteronormativity often only exists within the fantasy and for many *fujoshi/fūnǚ* it is not brought into real life (Zhang, 252).

Of course the above are only theories on its popularity with women, so why does BL have male fans, including straight ones? Nagaike believes that it is a form of “self-feminization” in response to pressures by society to be more manly (Nagaike, 193). Another factor is the status of BL as “purer” love stories than others, with concepts of being “meant for each other” being abundant, this idea being furthered by the fact that many self-proclaimed straight fudanshi tend to prefer the more romantic works and avoid more sexually explicit ones (Nagaike, 195). Perhaps even more interesting than men enjoying this female-oriented genre is the fact that many identify more with the *uke*, more passive or submissive, one, furthering the idea that they enjoy BL in a self-feminizing way (Nagaike, 196). Unfortunately there wasn’t much research on male fans of *danmei* to be found in English so it is difficult to compare but there is not much reason to believe, at this point, that there would be much difference. Lack of research into demographics aside from straight women in China may be due to the relative anonymity given by the online *danmei* community.

Gay Rights in Japan and China

Japan

While there are arguments from some gay rights groups that BL (and by extension *danmei*) are not proper depictions of homosexuality and are therefore

homophobic (Nagaike, 190), the legality and views on gay people in Japan and China are important. In Japan, sodomy was only illegal for a relatively brief period of less than 10 years in the late 1800's, most likely due to Japan's desire to appear more "civilized" and like European countries and even when it was illegal very few court cases were recorded (Sanders, 14). While same-sex marriage is not yet legal in Japan and many law-makers seem to be refusing to consider it, there is a definite push for change in Japan. In 2019 there were six lawsuits filed by gay and lesbian couples wanting to marry (Dooley). Popular opinion backs change as well, with almost 80% of people over 60 claiming to be in support of same-sex marriage in Japan (Dooley). However, lawmakers like Mio Sugita have called gays and lesbians "unproductive members of society" and claimed that allowing same-sex marriage would cause Japan to collapse in the face of its current aging population crises (Dooley). Many other lawmakers cite Article 24 of the Japanese constitution, saying that same-sex marriage would be against it as Article 24 states that "marriage shall be based only on consent of both sexes and "shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis" (*Japan Times*). Despite efforts by same-sex couples and because of these views by lawmakers it could be years before anything is decided, but in the meantime the court ruling that gave a broken-up lesbian couple who had married in the United States the legal protections of a common law marriage is a good step forward (*Japan Times*). Of course the issue of same-sex marriage is not the only issue facing LGBT people in Japan, for example, as of 2011 LGBT people have no legal protections from discrimination in housing or the workplace (Human Rights Watch). Still popular

opinion and general media depiction of LGBT people is fairly decent in Japan and there is hope for change on the way.

China

The stigmatization and eventual criminalization of homosexuality happened during the late Qing Dynasty, likely through missionaries from Europe entering the country and the increased studies of Westerners following the loss of the Opium Wars and continuing through Mao's China (Schiavanza). It was decriminalized in 1997 and removed from the list of mental disorders in 2001 (Chen) but even up to 2013 vocal supporters of gay marriage like Li Yinhe were reportedly told by politicians to "shut up" (Schiavanza). Still, younger generations are more accepting of homosexuality and the number of lesbian and gay people in China who don't plan to come out in the near future is decreasing (Zhou). Older generations still hold a stigma and many LGBT people in China don't come out to more than a small circle of close family and friends (Zhou).

Similarities Between BL and Danmei and Their Fans

Terminology

Since *danmei* was created after BL and because of Japanese BL's popularity in China it stands to reason that the terminology has some overlap in meaning. As mentioned above the word *danmei* uses the same characters as the Japanese word *tanbi* meaning aesthetic. In early twentieth century Japan, *tanbi* referred to an anti naturalist literary movement and eventually the word became synonymous with works popular with women (Feng, 4). It was often used to refer to Western literature with

homoerotic subtext (Welker, 52). While Feng and other scholars connect *tanbi* and *danmei* because of *tanbi*'s relation to literary or more subtextual homoerotic content, nothing I found explores why *tanbi*, of all the Japanese terms for BL, was chosen to be translated into Chinese. Other terms that mean the same thing in the respective languages are the words used to denote the top and bottom in sexual intercourse. In Japanese *seme* and *uke* refer to the top and bottom in a sexual relationship, and in Chinese *gong* and *shou* are used, both literally meaning attacker and receiver respectively (Yang and Xu, 8). Lastly the name for (female) fans of the genres in both countries uses the same kanji/characters (腐女); in Japanese *fujoshi* and in Chinese *fǔnǚ* both mean rotten woman (Zhang 250). Rotten, because they are viewed as being unfit for marriage because of their "strange" tastes and obsession with queer narratives.

Demographics

The main fan demographics of the two genres are also much the same, however information about *danmei* fandom demographics is less detailed most likely due to censorship and the fully online nature of *danmei*. While primarily and stereotypically fans of BL and *danmei* are female, there are male fans that exist. In Japanese they are called *fudanshi* or "rotten men, and report varying sexual identities with not a small number of them calling themselves straight (Nagaike, 191).

Differences in BL and Danmei and their Fans

While *danmei* was born from BL and in many ways the two are the same in definition, there are still a few key differences between the two. These differences that will be explored in this paper primarily come down to censorship or lack thereof. In

Japan, there is very little content censorship and there is no removing the homosexuality from live action and animated adaptations when they are made. In China, while *danmei* itself isn't illegal, sexual content is, which can lead to many authors getting arrested and adaptations are often heavily censored. This difference in legality and censorship or lack thereof leads to differences in the fandom culture. For example, while *dōjinshi* are an important part of BL culture in Japan, in China *danmei* is kept almost entirely online. A fully online community for *danmei* in China allows for fans to have a greater impact on the media they enjoy through comments and threads where they can have direct arguments with authors.

Dōjinshi and Censorship in Japan

Earlier I brought up *dōjinshi* and how clearly important amateur fan comics were to early BL fandom and culture. Not only are *dōjinshi* popular and quite often of pairings from non-BL media, they are freely sold at conventions like *Komiket* and even in stores. Though to an American it may seem strange and like a breach of copyright laws, through keeping profits low, *dōjinshi* artists manage to avoid legal action from the authors of works from which they borrow the characters and settings. Early *dōjinshi* started through mailing lists, where one person read it and then mailed it to the next person, somewhat similar to mail-order fanzines in America (Roh, 60). While *dōjinshi* and American fanfiction hold many similarities, *dōjinshi* is far more accepted in the mainstream (Roh, 63). The main difference is that *dōjinshi* is sold, especially at conventions, during which an insane amount of buying and selling is done, but also in most regular commercial stores that sell manga; in fact, most of the *dōjinshi* that is sold

in commercial manga stores is BL (Roh, 76). But what makes *dōjinshi* so special that it can be sold? It shouldn't count as parody by the copyright laws of Japan, which are quite similar to American copyright laws, so therefore should not be legal. However, Roh argues that *dōjinshi* is necessary for the health and communal wealth of the manga industry and creative community in Japan (Roh, 83). There are many theories as to why copyright laws are so lax in regards to *dōjinshi*; an inherent cultural aversion to litigation, the lack of rewards in pursuing legal action in Japan, Japanese artists understanding influence and borrowing in creative arts, and a simple lack of lawyers in Japan (Roh, 86).

Recently Australian Senator Stirling Griff has come into the news for his desire to ban (many kinds of) anime on the basis that it is “a gateway to child exploitation material” (MacLennan). This is not the first time that a Western country has questioned the morals of fictional media from Japan and, most likely, will not be the last (McLelland, 1). Western countries often consider Japanese media to be under-regulated (McLelland, 1). Some efforts for regulation do, however, exist, though these regulations are more in line with ensuring underaged audiences do not have access to pornographic material than actually censoring the pornographic material itself (McLelland, 12-13). There was even an action taken in the 2000's which removed BL from shelves in Sakai city, making them only accessible to adults who specifically requested them, leading to backlash from feminist organizations that found that the targeting of media by and for women was discriminatory (McLelland, 13). In 2012, a bill was passed in Tokyo (only for Tokyo) that targeted media depicting sexual acts that would be illegal in real life, such

as child sexual abuse, rape, and bestiality, to be “glorified” in fiction (McLelland, 14). This bill was opposed by many people in the creative industries in Japan, both creators and consumers (McLelland, 14-15) and it is unclear how much this bill was actually enforced.

Censorship in China

Censorship in China is quite a bit stronger than in Japan. In 2018 a *danmei* author known by the pen name Tianyi was arrested and sentenced to over 10 years in prison for selling over 5000 copies of pornographic material (Gan). Her case led to outrage on the internet with many people believing her sentencing is far too harsh (Gan). While it is still unclear whether the outrage will lead to a lessening of her sentence, the outrage goes to show that the *danmei* community is not completely silent and is also not *being* silenced, at least in cases like this.

So what is the internet and internet censorship like in China? In 1987 the first email in China was sent, in 1995 the internet was opened to the general public, and by 1998 the first arrest for a political violation committed entirely online was made (Elizabeth C.). Many thought that the Internet coming to China would ease censorship, but it only seemed to make it stronger, even dragging American companies into helping limit free speech (Dowell, 112). In China, Google filters out politically offensive websites (Dowell, 112). As the growth of the Internet continues to explode many believe that eventually the Great Chinese Firewall, which uses American software meant to block children from seeing things their parents don't want them to, will fail, but that moment doesn't seem to be coming any time soon (Dowell, 113). However, truth often leaks

through on events that the government attempts to cover up; such as in the Deng Yujiao case in which a woman stabbed and killed a party official that attempted to rape her. Initially she was committed to a mental hospital, but people uncovered the truth and were outraged and due to that outrage her case was ruled self defense (Elizabeth C.). The government fears the use of the Internet as a vehicle for dissent and there seems to be a constant tug of war between the government's attempts to block information and people's desire and ability to uncover that information (Elizabeth C.)

Information is not the only thing that is often censored; sexually explicit material and pornography are illegal in China (Chao, 66), leading to Tianyi's case mentioned above. Her case is not the only one, in 2011 thirty-two *danmei* authors were arrested for writing sexually explicit material (Chao, 66). To combat this, many *danmei* sites are low-profile or devoid of erotic elements; one *danmei* sharing site in particular "Lucifer's Club," is a membership-only site in which potential readers must take quizzes over popular *danmei* works to gain access (Chao, 66).

While *danmei* novels only face legal issues when it comes to depicting sexual acts, that is not the only way in which *danmei* gets censored in China. Popular *danmei* novel by author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (often referred to in English as *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*) has been adapted into multiple different formats, including both a *donghua* or animated series, a live action drama, a *manhua* or comic, and an audio drama. Many of these adaptations, in particular the two television adaptations, cut out the explicitly romantic moments. Aside from romance, these adaptations also cut out moments of moral ambiguity from the protagonist, implying

both homosexuality and the morally ambiguous actions of the protagonist are things that must not be endorsed by being shown on T.V. One *danmei* live action drama adaptation that dared to openly display the romance was taken off the air. *Addiction* was a popular 15 part drama, based on a novel by Chai Jidan, that was banned after 12 episodes had aired, for seemingly “no reason” (Campbell). In general, the CCP has a policy of “don’t support, don’t ban, don’t promote”(Campbell), wherein “supporting and promoting” seem to mean not allowing positive, or at least a more diverse range of, depictions of homosexuality outside more small, low-profile internet communities.

Offline Fujoshi Communities

Due to censorship in China the *fūnǚ* community remains mainly online. While *fujoshi* in Japan, especially nowadays, also has a large online community there is more chance for an offline *fujoshi* community to form. In his article “Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy Among “Rotten Girls” in Contemporary Japan” Galbraith interviews a group of *fujoshi*, but more importantly he listens in on their conversations. These conversations can easily occur online and, in fact, often do in both Japanese and Chinese contexts, but they are easier to have in person and easier to listen in to in Japan than in China. Therefore it is easier to find fellow *fujoshi* in real life in Japan as a *fujoshi* but also as a scholar.

Not only can these conversations exist in real life but in Japan even events/places like Ikebukuro’s Boy’s Love Academy can exist. It is a character cafe, similar to the more well-known maid cafes in Japan, and just like maid cafes, not only are food and drinks served but also fantasy. All the waiters at the cafe are handsome

young men and are dressed in what looks like high-school uniforms in order to look like they have just walked out of a school-life BL manga, customers are also treated as if they are students of this same school, with a punch-card made to look like a student ID (Coello). Some menu items are more about buying a scripted romantic scene between two of the waiters/"students", than the food (Coello).

Despite this greater opportunity for events and activities, *fujoshi* in Japan are still somewhat stigmatized. Many *fujoshi* will hide their interests and identity as *fujoshi* in their daily life and in most situations, only being obvious about their identity as *fujoshi* in fandom spaces and around other *fujoshi* (Okabe and Ishida, 212-213). In fact, in some *fujoshi* circles they will tell each other stories about narrowly avoiding being "outed" as *fujoshi* (Okabe and Ishida, 213). *Fujoshi* will often attempt to present themselves as "normal women" with only the interests of a "proper woman" (Okabe and Ishida, 216-217). This is often because they still want to be considered desirable to a man, in the case of heterosexual *fujoshi*, or simply because they want to appear "normal" to avoid stigmatization. So while *fujoshi* in Japan may have more public events and a bit more freedom than their Chinese counterparts, they still face a lot of pressure to not be too public with their interests and identity.

Online Literature in China

In 1990's in China there was a growing commercialization of literature, due in great part to the lessening of government controls and an increase in semi-official market driven publications, which involves a lot of privately distributed books (Hockx, 27). The practice of privately distributed books began in the 1980's and was often

associated with illegal material like pornography (Hockx, 27). From the 1990's on, the publishing system in China worked with state-owned publishers that collaborated with private entrepreneurs (Hockx, 27). The first online journal dedicated to literature was started in 1994 and in 1995 Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) was launched, which had some original works but was mostly copies of works from Taiwan (Hockx, 30-31). The first online book to become a print bestseller in China was a romance novel from Taiwan in 1998 (Hockx, 31). In 1997, one of the major literature websites, "Under the Banyan Tree," began, going public in 1999 and gaining both commercial success and having some authors who would later gain literary fame on the site (Hockx, 35-36). The site housed not only original works, but also various discussion boards on literature and more (Hockx). By 2011, Banyan Tree was no longer the main website for sharing literature (Hockx, 43).

The "Starting Point Model," named after the site that would popularize it, for online literature in China started in the early 2000's, it consisted of a site operating standard forums for publishing writing and holding discussions, but also contracting popular "VIP" authors whose writing would be serialized with early chapters being free, but later readers would have to pay to access, the typical fee leading to an author getting 2.1 cents for 1000 words (Hockx, 110). This model is quite popular for literature sharing sites, including of course the major sites for sharing *danmei*. Online fiction has even changed language, the word for literature *wenxue* now often being used to refer to more "aesthetically oriented" works (Hockx, 112). One of the most important differences

between these online novels and other books is that with this online fiction, readers and authors have immediate discussion and feedback.

The online format is quite important for *danmei* content. For one it provides anonymity and a space to produce *danmei* content as desired, because official publications must and do (because many exist) cut out the sexual content (Feng, 8). This online format also greatly affects the *danmei* community as well, namely through the immediate interaction online posting entails. This leads to two important things, readers influencing the work they read and writers influencing the readers perception of the book. Since these books tend to be serialized like the Starting Point Model, the audience of online *danmei* novels can interact with each other and have conversations that turn into negotiations about the plot or characters (Feng, 11). This interaction can help the author insure the popularity of their novel but also, through comment responses and author notes, make sure their novel's meaning is understood. While this can have its downsides, primarily in negative comments and overbearing fans, it lends to an interesting community being formed in the comment threads, whose discussions can often go behind the novel into issues like homosexuality, polygamy, or even political satire (Feng, 11).

Conclusion

The differences this paper looked into were not the only ones that exist. Another difference between BL and *danmei* lies within what subgenres are popular. In Japan, school-life or other realistic fiction BL comprise most of the popular works while in China much of the popular *danmei* is science fiction, *xianxia*, or *wuxia* (old martial arts

genres). However due to time constraints as well as limitations on my access to research materials due to the novel Covid-19 situation, I was unable to fully form an analysis of those differences. In order to properly analyze the genre differences, and discover other possible differences such as portrayal of female characters, how realistic the portrayal of gay (and bisexual) male characters are, and differences in tropes and portrayed kinks, I would have had to be far more methodical about reading the most popular and well-known BL and *danmei* throughout the years. The BL and *danmei* that I have read are not representative of the genres enough to use for a proper and complete analysis.

In many ways, such as terminology and fan demographics, BL and *danmei* overlap but still they have some differences. Culture, politics, and more cause fundamental differences in the two, not all of which could be explored in this paper. Even the difference in censorship and distribution between Japan and China discussed in this paper are not polar opposites. While China may have laws against pornographic content and may censor television adaptations but there are no laws against *danmei* content existing. Also while Japan may have more room for events and activities being held in person for fans of BL, there is still a stigma against those fans. Still the differences lead to different fandom cultures between Japan and China. In particular, the difference of *danmei* fans having a more online community giving them greater anonymity and ability to affect the media they consume through their comments, features not always present in BL fandom. Regardless of similarities and differences BL and *danmei* remain fascinating phenomena and will continue to grow and evolve both in

similar and different ways, as cultures, laws, and the internet change and evolve as well.

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