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DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc\\_00051\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00051_1)

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Ge, L. (2021). Problematizing heteronormativity: Performativity, resignification and A/B/O fiction in Chinese danmei literature. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 7(2), 241-254. [https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc\\_00051\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00051_1)

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East Asian Journal of Popular Culture  
Volume 7 Number 2

© 2021 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. [https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc\\_00051\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00051_1)

Received 20 November 2019; Accepted 1 July 2021

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# Problematizing heteronormativity: Performativity, resignification and A/B/O fiction in Chinese danmei literature

## ABSTRACT

*The literary form of danmei, in which male–male romance and/or erotica is portrayed, is a flourishing genre in China which has received significant attention from academia in recent years. This article focuses on a notorious subgenre of danmei, A/B/O fiction, which introduces three additional sexes, alpha, beta and omega, into mankind, alongside the male/female binary sex/gender system. By focusing on a popular but atypical example of this subgenre, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how female danmei writers constantly question the hierarchical and heteronormative system in the A/B/O world and interrogate the fixed identities of gender, sexuality and class, by imagining love, sex and intimacy among male protagonists. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender*

## KEYWORDS

A/B/O  
danmei  
male–male romance  
heteronormativity  
performativity  
resignification  
technology

1. Chinese names in this article are presented following the Chinese surname name order.

*performative theory and resignification politics, this article suggests that the behaviour of the characters in these texts engenders reciprocal and equal relationships, reverses the various heteropatriarchal norms through the employment of technology, and questions the compulsory regulatory power embodied in the biological pheromone in A/B/O. Simultaneously, this study also identifies the notion of 'love' itself as a limiting factor of this genre of male–male romantic and/or erotic writing.*

Danmei (耽美) is a fiction genre portraying male–male romantic and/or erotic relationships which has gained wide currency in China in recent years. It is a genre predominantly produced and consumed by women (Feng 2009; Zheng 2016). Danmei fiction was initially introduced into mainland China through Japanese yaoi manga in the 1990s (Yang and Xu 2017). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, danmei has also been influenced by Euro-American slash fictions. During this time, an extensive range of danmei works in various forms, including original fictions, fan fictions, manga, animations, audio series and TV dramas, has been created, consumed and circulated on the internet. As a result of this process of participant-generated continuous creative development, danmei has evolved into a complex cultural phenomenon. Male–male romance fictions, also known as boys' love (often abbreviated as BL, a term widely accepted by Chinese danmei fans and used interchangeably with danmei), originated in Japan in the 1970s (McLelland 2001). At the same time, slash fictions also began to develop among *Star Trek* fandom in the West: female fans started to write romantic and/or erotic stories involving two male characters, Kirk and Spock. The relationship between these two came to be referred to as 'Kirk/Spock' which is where the name 'slash' originated (Jenkins 1992). Slash fiction currently refers to any fan fiction portraying male same-sex romantic and/or erotic stories. This article will use danmei solely to denote the Chinese cultural phenomenon.

Within original danmei fictions, there are many subgenres, one of which is Alpha/Beta/Omega (hereafter abbreviated to A/B/O), a popular subgenre that emerged in the 2010s, gaining a somewhat notorious reputation. Yang Ling and Xu Yanrui (2017)<sup>1</sup> have identified three prominent circles among Chinese danmei fandom: the original danmei circle, in which participants write, read and adapt original Chinese-language danmei fiction; the Japanese circle, which focuses on translating, consuming and creating fan fictions based on Japanese BL works; and the Euro-American circle, which is devoted to translating, producing and consuming slash fictions inspired by Euro-American cultural products. The primary setting of A/B/O originated among *Supernatural* (2005–20) fandom and reached China via the Euro-American circle in 2011 (Zheng 2015). In the A/B/O world, human beings are further divided into three sexes, alpha, beta and omega, a reference to wolf pack hierarchy (Busse 2013); these are in addition to the male/female binary sexes, which still exist: each person is therefore male or female as well as alpha, beta or omega: consequently, there are six sexes in A/B/O stories. However, it is noteworthy that it is the A/B/O system that plays the dominant role in determining core physiological features and social status in A/B/O stories. Omegas are weak and are intended to become the partners of alphas: when they reach adulthood, they go into heat periodically, releasing a pheromone which strongly attracts alphas. Only when alphas bite omegas, thus marking

them, do they stop going into heat. Both female and male omegas can become pregnant after mating with alphas. Alphas are at the top of the hierarchical system, physically strong, impulsive and intelligent; they are supposed to fall in love with, marry and impregnate omegas. By contrast, betas form the majority of the population in the A/B/O world. Their physiological structure is almost the same as that of real-life humans, with the exception that it is difficult for them to become pregnant. These aforementioned features consist of the primary setting of the A/B/O world, but additional settings are usually introduced by different danmei writers according to their preferences and imaginations.

Since A/B/O settings by their very nature contain conspicuous erotic elements relating to the details of mating between alphas and omegas, A/B/O stories gained notoriety for their sexually explicit content as the subgenre started to spread among danmei fandom in China. As a result, a number of danmei fans who embrace male–male pure romantic love have nonetheless expressed disgust for this subgenre (Zheng 2015). However, because of increasingly strict censorship by the Chinese government, explicit sexual scenes in A/B/O fictions currently published on Chinese popular online literature websites, such as Jinjiang Literature City (hereafter Jinjiang),<sup>2</sup> have gradually disappeared, either through self-censorship on the part of the authors or because such content is deleted by website editors.

Through the analysis of a popular but atypical example of A/B/O fiction, this article explores the complexity in danmei works in terms of gender and experimentation with sexuality, technology and reproduction. This analysis argues against previous scholars' optimistic assessments of the danmei genre's potential to significantly open up new possibilities for their participants to challenge dominant discourses on gender and sexuality (Yang and Xu 2013; 2016; Feng 2013; Hu and Wang 2020). On the one hand, the present research acknowledges that there still exists a great deal of heteronormative content in the danmei world, such as the A/B/O settings in which the weak omega ends up being subsumed into the alpha's power. On the other hand, there are danmei writers who continue to creatively explore alternatives with the aim of interrogating and reconstructing the unequal regulatory norms through their writing. A good illustration of this is to be found in the atypical A/B/O fiction *Bu Zhuang B* (2016, hereafter BZB) by Yue Er.

By engaging with Judith Butler's (1990) performativity theory and resignification politics, I suggest that BZB engenders the potential to question the regulatory power that determines fixed gender and sexual identities in the hierarchical and heteronormative A/B/O setting. I also draw on detailed analyses on the atypical elements of this A/B/O fiction, which concentrates on the long-ignored beta's struggle and their love story with an alpha (in contrast to normative A/B/O stories, which tend to centre on romantic and erotic relationships between alphas and omegas), to elucidate the manner in which the author creatively and critically challenges the normative settings of the A/B/O world with respect to gender, sexuality and class, as well as how BZB deconstructs the binary alpha/omega system and reconstructs the dynamics among alpha, beta and omega by depicting the love stories of two couples. At the same time, this article reveals that danmei writers' explorations in this subgenre have also remained within the bounds of the romance fantasy which proclaims 'love' as the overarching power to eliminate every obstacle.

2. Jinjiang was officially established in 2003 and is hitherto the largest website for producing and consuming danmei fiction. Available at: <http://www.jjwxc.net>. Assessed 31 January 2021.

## DANMEI AND GLOBAL 'BOYS' LOVE' TEXTS: FEMALE FANTASY AND RECONFIGURING MASCULINITIES

Since the emergence of boys' love (BL) writing in both the West and Japan in the 1970s, significant academic attention has been paid to this cultural phenomenon. Research into Chinese danmei, however, remains relatively undeveloped in comparison to studies on slash fiction and Japanese BL fiction. Despite the heterogeneous social, historical and cultural contexts, scholars tend to suggest that boys' love texts are primarily directed towards female fantasies (Jenkins 1992; McLelland 2000; Welker 2006; Feng 2009; Yang and Xu 2017). It is generally assumed in slash, Japanese BL and danmei studies that fans of these genres are predominantly women, and in particular, most intellectuals tend to categorize the majority of fans as heterosexual women. Joanna Russ ([1985] 2014) made the well-known claim that slash fictions represent 'the only sexual fantasy by and for women', and Constance Penley (1992), Henry Jenkins (1992) and Virginia Keft-Kennedy (2008) also state that slash fiction fans are mostly heterosexual adolescent girls. While recognizing that danmei fandom is constituted by a much more diverse base than just heterosexual women, this article also deploys the general perception that danmei writing is speaking primarily for female fantasies, in order to subsequently explore how these fantasies are presented in the text with the aim of challenging and/or maintaining the regulatory norms of gender and sexuality.

One concept under close scrutiny is that of reconfiguring masculinities: this is evident in slash studies (Jenkins 1992; Woledge 2005), Japanese BL studies (McLelland 2000; Saito 2011; Wood 2013) and danmei studies (Ning 2014; Zheng 2016). Following Jenkins' (1992) classical argument, slash fiction researchers refer to the 'soft masculinity' which this genre displays, where male characters' softness and tenderness are expressed. McLelland (2000) further argues that BL manga depicts androgynous figures, referring to their 'slim figures, big eyes, long hair'; he understands the depiction of gay men as feminine as in a sense representing women's ideal selves (McLelland 2001), which ostensibly blurs the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity and detaches these figures from specific genders. The two men enjoy sexual pleasure in the way that women imagine to be ideal: reciprocal and emotional, and bereft of the burden of reproduction. However, in A/B/O stories, omegas are physically weak and able to be impregnated, which would appear to contradict McLelland's claim of being free of the burden of reproduction. The present study proposes that male-male romance or erotica offers no guarantee of freedom from this burden: on the contrary, the ostensibly heteronormative setting *de facto* entails a deeper discussion of the reproductive role and its associated burdens.

Another issue is that androgyny as a term is ill-defined in McLelland's argument, and the way in which androgyny – namely, the reconfiguration of masculinities and femininities – functions to disrupt the binary genders is not explicitly articulated. Lamb and Veith (2014) argue that women enjoy the Kirk/Spock stories because they are fascinated by the possibility of romantic love between two equals – a seemingly impossible goal in real-life heterosexual relationships. Both Spock and Kirk are portrayed in slash fictions as androgynous, possessing both masculine and feminine qualities (Lamb and Veith 2014). As a result, Kirk/Spock narratives present a transcendent love relationship, wherein genders appear to lose much of their significance. Danmei scholars similarly claim that Chinese danmei writings also depict androgynous

characters whose masculinities are reconstructed (Feng 2009; Ning 2014; Xiao 2016). However, it is noteworthy that there exists a gong (the inserter during sexual intercourse)/shou (the insertee) distinction in both Japanese BL and Chinese danmei. Previous analysis (see McLelland 2000; Feng 2009) inappropriately focus more on the character of shou, whose masculinities are reconfigured with feminine characteristics, while neglecting more detailed explanations of how the masculinities of gong, who plays the inserter's role, are negotiated and reconstructed in the text. There remains, therefore, a lack of clarity regarding how and to what extent the gong/shou distinction refers to and rebels against the binary gender system: this aspect will be addressed in this article by means of textual analysis of a popular but atypical A/B/O fiction.

### AN ATYPICAL A/B/O STORY: THE ALPHA/BETA ROMANCE

*Bu Zhuang B* (不装B), which literally means 'Never Pretend to Be a Beta', was written by Yue Er and published in 2016 on her personal account on Weibo,<sup>3</sup> the Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter. BZB has 43 chapters; the final chapter was released on 13 April 2016.<sup>4</sup> What distinguishes this fiction from mainstream A/B/O settings is that BZB narrates the love story between an alpha and a beta, instead of the more typical alpha/omega couple. Consequently, when BZB was first published online, these novel features received significant attention and gained popularity among danmei fans, in particular those readers with a preference for the A/B/O subgenre. After the release of the final chapter, the full text was widely recommended and circulated among danmei fans on various social media platforms.<sup>5</sup> The author additionally portrays a supporting alpha/omega couple in order to facilitate the exploration of A/B/O politics through narratives. By means of the specific A/B/O setting, as well as through the protagonists' introspections and confessions of their gender and sexual identities, the author not only depicts the fluidity of genders and sexualities, but also reconstructs masculinities and femininities through multiple explorations of gender/sexuality identities, technology and reproduction.

The plot of BZB can be concisely summarized as follows: Sheng, a male alpha and the successful chief executive of a large company, is attracted by the pheromone released by an unknown omega in the vicinity. As a result, he ends up having sex with a member of his staff, Xun, a male beta. As the plot unfolds, Xun and Sheng gradually realize that they do not merely have a crush on one another, but are deeply in love. Meanwhile, Sheng's mother is urging him to marry a male omega, Xiaoheng, who grew up with Sheng. Xiaoheng deeply loves Sheng and uses an aphrodisiac in an attempt to make Sheng have sex with him. A misunderstanding ensues, as Xun believes that Sheng has mated with Xiaoheng, although in fact Sheng managed to successfully control himself in the end. Fortunately, Sheng finally proves his innocence and makes up with Xun with the help of Xun's younger brother, Mo.

Another couple provides supporting roles in BZB: Mo, a male omega, and the popular star Cheng, a male alpha. Mo hates his body as an omega and endeavours to artificially synthesize pheromones to enable omegas to penetrate alphas. Cheng, on the other hand, is using suppressants to hide his alpha scent, pretending to be a harmless beta. These characters' struggles, rejections and reconciliations with their own A/B/O identities illustrate the explorations into and reflections on the fixed identity regulatory powers from multiple perspectives.

3. Yue Er's public profile on Weibo shows she is a female, which she has also confirmed in her posts related to topics regarding women in China.
4. The original version of BZB published on Weibo was deleted and the author Yue Er's personal account disabled, because the censors detected the explicit sexual content in 2017. However, danmei readers have kept the text file and circulated it online privately. I obtained the text through personal networking with Yue Er's fans.
5. Since the original Weibo posts of BZB were deleted because of censorship, and it was mostly circulated among danmei fans underground, it is almost impossible to quantify the readership and popularity of BZB. However, a number of popular Weibo bloggers specializing in recommending and commenting on good quality danmei fictions, including Xiaozi (with over 200,000 followers), have recommended BZB in their posts, which offers some insight into BZB's popularity from one perspective.

6. All translations from Chinese in this article are mine.

## PERFORMATIVITY, RESIGNIFICATION AND DYNAMIC RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP IN BZB

Drawing on the concept of interpellation, in which individuals are 'hailed' through ideology, as proposed by Louis Althusser (1971), Butler (1990) further suggests that interpellation can occur in daily rituals. An unborn infant is referred to as 'it', only for the infant to be immediately interpellated with a sex/gender identity after birth. Similarly, a girl is expected to obey instructions from parents, school and the media, which all tell her how to behave as a 'proper' girl. Thus, in line with Althusser's argument that a social actor always misrecognizes interpellations, Butler articulates gender as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance' (1990: 43) and to naturalize itself. Butler further proposed the idea of a heterosexual matrix of regulatory power which defines cultural intelligibility. At the same time, as suggested by Saba Mahmood (2005), Butler constructs a paradox of subjectivization: that is, the very process of presumption of the subject's subordination also provides the means by which an individual can recover its agency, namely, the reiteration of 'performativity'.

In BZB, the four characters act as atypical, abnormal, deviant and transgressive, and they all resist and endeavour to re-signify the politics of A/B/O in their everyday life. In traditional A/B/O stories, heteronormativity infiltrates characters' personality traits and relationship dynamics. Alphas normally demonstrate masculine qualities: they are physically strong, and act as gong, playing the penetrative role in sexual activities. By contrast, omegas display feminine characteristics: they are physically weak, easily impregnated, and act as shou, being penetrated during sex. The gong/shou order in danmei and BL has been criticized by a number of scholars for its replication of hierarchical and patriarchal power in real life (Aoyama 2013; Dai 2017; Zhou et al. 2018). However, unlike in conventional A/B/O settings, the A/O – gong/shou order is critically reconstructed in BZB. Firstly, this story revolves around the alpha/beta romance and erotica, and the dynamic between alpha and beta is reciprocal and egalitarian. Although the image of the alpha/gong Sheng is one of physical strength – 'The man wears a form-fitting suit, and his shoulders are wide and powerful, with ideal hip-ratio range' (Yue 2016: Ch.1)<sup>6</sup> – Sheng's personality traits are soft and attentive. By contrast, Sheng's boyfriend, Xun, the beta, is more active in dating, taking the initiative to confess his love for Sheng; also, when they fall in love, Xun calls Sheng the 'princess', a nickname which Sheng readily adopts without fearing that revealing his tenderness may damage his hetero-masculinity. Butler (1990) suggests that the compulsory regulatory power naturalizes and designates consistency in sex, gender and sexuality, and as a consequence masculinity represents man while femininity represents woman. BZB not only softens the masculinity of gong, as previous scholars such as Mark McLelland (2000) have established and emphasized, but also reimagines the dynamics between gong and shou, making the relationship reciprocal, and reversing the passive personality of shou.

The reciprocity is further embodied in the depictions of sexual activities in BZB. The dominant narratives in danmei fictions tend to portray the dichotomy that gong/alphas enjoy penetrative sexual pleasure, while shou/omegas enjoy the pleasure of being penetrated during sexual intercourse, after initially experiencing pain. The author of BZB does not simply replace the omega protagonist with a beta, but confers agency and initiative on Xun. Xun achieves orgasm not merely through physical sexual stimulation in the



anus by the penis, but on occasion also tries to play the penetrative role. For example, in Chapter 43, Sheng is fondly kissing Xun when Xun accidentally touches Sheng's chest muscles, and subconsciously grasps Sheng's breast again, expressing a wish to use his breast to masturbate. Surprisingly, Sheng agrees, although the author omits further details in the text. In these specific plot elements, therefore, as suggested by Fujimoto (2015), the gong/shou distinction is more of a grouping strategy than a replication of the patriarchal, binary sex/gender roles. In BZB, the gong/shou order is further weakened by the author through reconstruction of gong/shou dynamics in sexual activities.

### **PERFORMATIVITY AND TECHNOLOGY: REVERSING THE HETERONORMATIVITY IN A/B/O SETTINGS**

The other two main supporting roles, the omega Mo and the alpha Cheng, display performativity by reversing the norms of the A/B/O setting. Mo is fed up with the ascribed A/B/O roles, and continually questions their inequality:

I hate my A/B/O gender! Why do Omegas have to be protected? Why is everything – even finding a job – so very difficult for Omegas? Everyone thinks that, ultimately, Omegas must have babies, but I am much smarter than the others – even than most Alphas; yet, when any opportunity arises, I am always at the bottom of the list. Whenever I think I will eventually be paired with an Alpha, that I will be marked and possessed like an object, I just want to throw up! My Omega shell is utterly constricting: why cannot I change it? Pretending to be a Beta with suppressants is ridiculous, is self-deceiving! Let's be honest: I also have a penis, I am also potent!

(Yue 2016: Ch. 8)

Mo, as a researcher, then endeavours to invent a new medicine to make omegas potent enough to penetrate alphas. The default A/B/O setting is that male omegas have both a penis and a genital atrium, which is indeed compatible with the penetration of alphas by omegas. However, most A/B/O stories centre around the A/O couple, hardly ever discussing the penetrative possibility of omegas. At the same time, these mainstream A/B/O stories explore how omegas fight for independency and equal relationships with alphas, while maintaining the dichotomy of alpha/gong/active/inserter – omega/shou/passive/insertee. The representation of the couple Mo and Cheng offers a more radical exploration of omegas' rights and significantly challenges heteronormativity by reversing the A/B/O norms.

By contrast, Cheng, an alpha, pretends to be a beta, due to a high school trauma: Cheng used to be a member of the school basketball team, in which six of the eleven players were alphas. During one match, however, an omega among the spectators broke into a heat, and the players on the basketball court competed furiously for the mating right. The experience of seeing his intimate teammates suddenly fighting each other insanely distresses Cheng: 'I hate myself when I am out of control. Actually, it is extremely upsetting to be so easily influenced by pheromones' (Yue 2016: Ch. 14). Subsequently, Cheng starts to hide his alpha scent by taking suppressants regularly, pretending to be a beta. It is quite unusual for an alpha to conceal his own identity, since alphas are regarded as superior in the A/B/O world: they are elites, belong to the wealthy class and exert power, possessing the majority of resources in society. Cheng's experience, resulting in the betrayal of his own identity,



7. *Junxiaosheng*, which literally means 'cadets' in English, was written by Die Zhi Ling and published on Jinjiang in 2014. Available at: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1954760>. Accessed 7 November 2020.
8. *Ranshang Nide Xinxisu*, literally 'affected by your pheromones' in English, was written by Qi Huan Nian on Jinjiang in 2020. Available at: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=4213173>. Accessed 7 November 2020.

reveals the absurdity of the A/B/O world, where the naturalized and unavoidable pheromones serve as a metaphor for the patriarchal and hierarchal norms. Butler (1990) argues that changes to the fixed binary gender system are encompassed within discontinuities and failures in the repetition of compulsory heteronormative power. Consequently, Cheng draws on his performative practices in which he rejects his alpha identity and pretends to be a beta, thereby questioning the regulatory power of the A/B/O world. Moreover, when Mo and Cheng first meet, Cheng calls Mo a sweet, tender and harmless omega, an interpellation which Mo strongly resists: 'When Cheng tried to lift up Mo's jaw, Mo seized his hands instantly, and said grimly, "Never assume omegas are compliant"' (Yue 2016: Ch. 20). In subsequent developments, Mo applies his new medicines on the alpha Cheng, allowing Mo to play the penetrative role in sexual intercourse. With the application of technology, therefore, the stable settings of A/B/O are completely reversed and re-signified by Mo.

Furthermore, Mo's invention also serves to reconstruct the relationship between gender and technology. In her seminal monograph *TechnoFeminism*, Judy Wajcman (2004) analyses the gendered nature of technologies and presents a feminist examination of technoscience. In the A/B/O world, technology is also gendered: omegas have to take suppressants to control the release of pheromones, and only then are they allowed some freedom to enter the public domain. A substantial number of A/B/O fictions, such as *Junxiao Sheng* by Die Zhi Ling (Jinjiang 2014)<sup>7</sup> and *Ranshang Nide Xinxisu* by Qi Huan Nian (Jinjiang 2020),<sup>8</sup> use a plot device in which an omega pretends to be a beta by continuing to take suppressants after their secret has been revealed by an alpha. Mo and Cheng subsequently fall in love with one another. However, the problem remains that it is always the omega who bears the burden of pheromones and must therefore use medicine to avoid going into heat and being sexually attacked by alphas. In Chapter 6 of BZB, as a means of retaliation against alpha's sexual violence and assault, Mo devises a new drug to make alphas impotent, removing the potential danger for omegas to experience non-consensual sex. Wajcman (2004) suggests that the relations between technology and gender are de facto fluid, which denotes the potential of technology and inventing new technologies to promote gender equality. Therefore, the way in which technological advances influence gender and power relations needs to be critically and concretely examined. Mo's employment of technology acts to reverse the status quo of omegas and alter the unequal nature of the A/O relationship, thus constituting his challenge to the heteronormative A/B/O world.

### PHEROMONE AS A METAPHOR AND BETA AS THE DISRUPTOR IN THE A/B/O REGULATORY SYSTEM

The present section will examine the roles of pheromones in the A/B/O world, and how Xun, as a beta, disrupts the A/B/O hierarchical and heteronormative system. The dominant narrative in A/B/O fictions revolves around the strong mutual attraction between the alpha/gong and omega/shou, driven by love and pheromones. BZB replaces the omega with a beta who does not need to concern himself about being controlled by pheromones. In the A/B/O world, although betas make up the majority of the population, they are largely neglected and structurally excluded from elite positions: it is alphas who occupy positions of power, dominating primary resources and possessing the majority of the economic, cultural and social capital. Consequently, the A/B/O system is

not only gendered but also class-differentiated; A/B/O fictions like BZB question this structural inequality in which gender and class hierarchies intersect, leading to the structural exclusion of betas and (especially) omegas. In contrast to the dominant binary A/B/O narrative between alpha/gong and omega/shou, BZB contributes to a reconstruction of triadic dynamics in the A/B/O world: firstly, the beta does not function merely in a background role, but fully engages in challenging the unequal hetero-patriarchal system dominated by alphas; secondly, the unconventional nature of the two couples – alpha/beta, and omega/alpha – necessarily engenders a reconsideration of the dynamics among alphas, betas and omegas, leading to a remodelling of the A/B/O world.

The properties of possession (or not) of pheromones and being influenced (or not) by pheromones serve as a metaphor for the hierarchical system prescribed by the A/B/O identities. For instance, when Xun's mother realizes that Xun's beloved boyfriend is an alpha, and his younger brother Mo (an omega) has fallen in love with a beta (at this stage she does not know that Cheng is in fact an alpha), she almost cries, saying:

I just can't figure out why you two want to take the uncommon path. You are with an Alpha, and Little Mo can find a Beta as a boyfriend. Have you been brainwashed by those people who spend all their time fighting for equal rights? Don't you know what your father and I have been worried about? Why do you think Alphas need to be with Omegas, and Betas with Betas? Because love alone won't keep two people together, but pheromones will! You know, pheromones are the very foundation! Since small conflicts in life are unavoidable to begin with, why choose a partner who is also going to be distracted by other people's pheromones? It really is beyond me!

(Yue 2016: Ch. 30)

Assuming the determinant influence of pheromones, long-term relationships between alpha and beta are believed to be impossible, since alphas can easily be affected by the pheromones released by omegas. Xun has been constantly urged by his family to give up loving and marrying an alpha: this illustrates how the compulsory heteronormative regulatory power comes into play in daily life. In the subsequent narrative, Xun's father also strongly expresses his disapproval:

But you know, since natural pheromones are innate, Alphas and Omegas are bound to attract each other. This is not something that reason or emotion can control: it is an irreversible, unchangeable physiological response. Do you know how happy your mom and I were when you became an adolescent and we found out you were a Beta? We didn't want our children to be an Alpha who is born to excel or an Omega who can so easily procreate; we just hoped our children would be ordinary Betas, so they would be able to live their lives as they wished. Xun, life is not easy. We're already pushed and pulled by mundane trivialities, but if on top of that you also have to worry about being pushed and pulled by your own hormones, how can you be happy?

(Yue 2016: Ch. 30)

When Xun, as a beta, does not behave in the way prescribed by the A/B/O regulatory system, he is punished and disciplined by the heteronormative

power. For example, after Xun decides to leave home and live with Sheng, he finds Sheng in bed with another omega, Xiaoheng: he can smell the scents of both alpha and omega pheromones. Consequently, he misunderstands Sheng, believing him to have had sex with the omega, unable to resist the temptation of the pheromones. Xun is so shocked and upset that he suffers aphasia. Subsequently he breaks up with Sheng, in the belief that humans cannot be free of the control of pheromones, and decides to go back to being a 'normal' beta. Xun thus submits to the pheromones, which function as the very symbol of the hierarchal and heteronormative A/B/O regulatory system. When pheromones take effect in this plot, it is both gender and class differentiation that pull Sheng and Xun apart. As a member of the wealthy elite, Sheng is expected to love and marry an omega from a family of equal status such as Xiaoheng, in accordance with his mother's advice. Xun, however, is not only a beta but also from a lower-status, working-class family, and therefore does not match any of the presumed requirements.

Eventually Xun discovers that Sheng in fact succeeded in controlling himself and did not have sex with the omega, who had used artificially synthesized pheromones to forge a sexual attraction. Consequently, Sheng and Xun make up and Xun recovers his voice. They then persuade both Xun and Sheng's parents to accept their relationship. This plot illustrates the typical way of handling conflict in danmei novels: love is the supreme power which overtakes gender and class. It is the absolute love for Xun that helps Sheng to resist the temptation from the omega and escape the control of pheromones, and to reject biological determinism, while at the same time it is Xun's love for Sheng that allows him as a beta to break from the prescribed A/B/O order and fall in love with Sheng. Employing an A/B couple as the protagonists in A/B/O fiction poses a greater challenge to the hierarchy and heteronormativity, since they have to face both gender and class issues in their relationship. Nevertheless, it should be noted that BZB also draws on 'love' as the solution to the problem that the A/B couple has to tackle. In the final chapter, the author proposes the idea of a 'spiritual bond' between Xun and Sheng, which could transcend the power of pheromones. As Sheng explains, 'the spiritual bond consists of two-way marks on our spirits, and it means that neither of us will be affected by physiological factors' (Yue 2016: Ch. 43). The 'spiritual bond' is generated from the couple's deep love for each other, which functions to prevent the A/B couple from the influences of pheromones. The logic of love as the supreme power is able to address conflicts in A/B/O fictions in a utopian way, but, as a matter of fact, the author uses love to conceal the real problems relating to gender and class. Although the beta's fight for love with the alpha challenges the hierarchal and heteronormative A/B/O regulatory order, the disruptive effects are de facto limited, since love is used as a metanarrative, avoiding the need to provide substantial solutions.

### **CONCLUSION: WOMEN'S WRITING OF GENDER, SEXUALITY, CLASS AND TECHNOLOGY**

By drawing upon Butler's (1990) performativity theory and her conceptualization of resignification politics, this article firstly provides a detailed analysis of the way in which the A/B/O fiction BZB functions to significantly blur the boundaries between masculinities and femininities, and to reconstruct

the reciprocal dynamics between gong and shou, rather than merely concentrate on shou's androgyny or soft masculinities, as previous scholars have claimed in danmei fiction. Secondly, I argue that in BZB, characters employ new technology to change the previous gendered technologies and reverse the norms of the A/B/O prescribed identities. Thirdly, I examine how the very notion of pheromones serves as a metaphor in the A/B/O world, reflecting the hierarchical and heteronormative order, and how the love between beta and omega questions the validity of this compulsory and regulatory power. Moreover, I also draw attention to the fact that BZB, like many other danmei fictions, uses 'love' as the supreme power to settle all conflicts, but such a solution bypasses the real problems of gender and class inequalities in real life, thereby weakening the disruptive effects of the A/B couple's struggle. Therefore, such findings reveal the paradoxes in Chinese danmei fiction: heteronormativity and counter-heteronormativity persistently coexist in danmei stories. This article acknowledges the fact that a great deal of heteronormative content does exist in the danmei male–male romance world, such as the A/B/O hierarchical system and the normative narration in which the omega, despite their intelligence, diligence or resistance, will end up being subsumed into the alpha's power under the discourse of love. However, via the case study on BZB, I suggest that there are danmei writers like Yue Er who are constantly and creatively exploring alternative ways to deconstruct and reconstruct the normative settings through performativity and resignification strategies. Thus, this article, beyond analysing how BZB resignifies the gong/shou dynamics, reverses the binary A/O system and forms a fluid A/B/O world, also contributes to current danmei studies by revealing the heterogeneity within Chinese A/B/O stories and danmei, and demonstrating Chinese danmei writers' persistent endeavour to question the heteronormativity outside and inside danmei. BZB as an A/B romantic story is a subgenre of a subgenre (i.e. an A/B/O setting in which the A/O story dominates) in danmei, reflecting the infinite imaginary exploration of danmei writers to challenge every fixed, engraved and regulatory meaning, and re-imagining a more fluid, inclusive and reciprocal world in danmei fantasy. The present research informs future danmei scholars about attending to the heterogeneity of danmei and the very paradox in danmei stories. When doing research on danmei, it is therefore dangerous to assume a monolithic and static danmei narrative as danmei fiction is both counter-heteronormative and heteronormative, and is constantly innovating at the same time.

As acknowledged at the beginning of this article, Chinese danmei fictions, including the subgenre A/B/O, are predominantly produced and consumed by women. The A/B/O fiction BZB thus represents Chinese women's expression and exploration of gender, sexuality, class and technology through male–male romantic and erotic descriptions. However, as Henry Jenkins suggests, there is a danger of celebrating gay men's experience at the expense of 'developing alternative feminine identities' (1992: 195). In danmei texts, stories centre around romance and/or erotica between men, while female characters are less important; the female body is absent from the narrative, even though women's desires are embodied in their writing and reading practices. Consequently, future studies should involve a critical examination of the lived experience of these women's writing and reading of A/B/O texts and other danmei literature, in order to investigate whether and how this alternative femininity is imagined and constructed in their daily practices.

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### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Ge, Liang (2021), 'Problematizing heteronormativity: Performativity, resignification and A/B/O fiction in Chinese danmei literature', *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 7:2, pp. 241–54, [https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc\\_00051\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc_00051_1)

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