

Male Writers of *Dānměi* Literature: An Analysis of Fēitiānyèxiáng

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate *dānměi* as a ground-breaking literary genre by means of scrutinising an illustrious male writer pseudonymed Fēitiānyèxiáng, and I propound that his works are exemplary as online writing. As a growing Chinese Internet literature, the female-oriented *dānměi* genre, aka Boys Love, has attracted legions of heterosexual fangirl producers and consumers as well as a meagre amount of their male counterparts. Among male *dānměi* writers, who are in an absolute minority, Fēitiānyèxiáng is celebrated for a wide range of innovative themes and magnificent storylines, and his fiction is replete with profound literary and historical allusions and elaborate and meticulous depictions. Furthermore, notwithstanding a non-reversible bipartite dichotomy between seme (top) and uke (bottom) roles, Fēitiānyèxiáng's writing is not featured by feminisation of uke, which is clichéd characterisation in not only the *dānměi* subculture, but also classical and modern Chinese literature. More significantly, Fēitiānyèxiáng's narratives are reality-oriented, addressing adverse circumstances in a real-world context and hence rendering characters more multi-faceted, and he does not circumvent realistic issues or create over-romanticised representation, analogous to his equivalent pseudonymed Nánkāngbáiqǐ.

Keywords: Dānměi; male writers; Fēitiānyèxiáng; non-feminised; reality-oriented

Abstrak

Dalam artikel ini penulis meneliti *dānměi* sebagai genre sastra yang inovatif, dengan mempelajari karya penulis pria terkenal bernama samaran Fēitiānyèxiáng. Penulis mengemukakan bahwa karya Fēitiānyèxiáng patut dicontoh sebagai tulisan online. Sebagai bentuk literature internet China yang sedang berkembang, genre *dānměi* yang berorientasi pada wanita, alias Boys Love, telah menarik banyak sekali produsen dan konsumen *fangirl* heteroseksual serta sejumlah kecil rekan pria mereka. Diantara penulis *dānměi* laki-laki yang merupakan minoritas mutlak, Fēitiānyèxiáng dirayakan karena berbagai tema inovatif dan alur ceritanya yang luar biasa. Fiksinya penuh dengan kiasan sastra dan sejarah yang mendalam serta penggambaran yang rumit dan cermat. Disamping itu, terlepas dari dikotomi bipartite yang tidak dapat dibolak-balik antara peran *seme* (atas) dan *uke* (bawah), tulisan Fēitiānyèxiáng tidak ditampilkan oleh feminisasi Uke yang merupakan karakterisasi klise tidak saja dalam subkultur *dānměi*, tetapi juga dalam sastra Tiongkok klasik dan modern. Lebih penting lagi, narasi Fēitiānyèxiáng berorientasi pada kenyataan, menangani keadaan buruk dengan konteks dunia nyata, oleh karenanya penggambaran karakter menjadi lebih beraneka ragam. Dia tidak mengelak dari masalah yang realistis, maupun menciptakan romantisme berlebihan dalam karyanya, sesuai dengan nama samaran Nánkāngbáiqǐ yang setara.

Kata kunci: Dānměi; male writers; Fēitiānyèxiáng; non-feminised; reality-oriented

Introduction

In the realm of Chinese Internet literature that emerged in China's cyberspace during the 1990s, there is a transgressive genre attaining renown and embracement, viz. 耽美 *dānměi* (Zheng 2014, Hockx 2015: 114), which literarily means 'indulgence in beauty' and concerns same-sex romance and eroticism between 'beautiful' pubescent boys and youthful men (Yang and Xu 2016, 2017a, 2017b, Zhang 2016). Chinese *dānměi* literature was initially in a form of a Japanese cultural export

dubbed as *shōnen'ai* ‘Boys Love’, aka BL, which evolved from romanticised comics featuring ‘beautiful young men’ and targeting specifically at female audiences of the 1970s (McLelland 2000, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). Since the 1990s, audio-visual and textual *dānměi* works have been proliferating from a marginalised niche market (Liu 2009, Yang and Bao 2012, Zhu and Zhang 2015) into an increasingly popular subculture with legions of fan producers/consumers (self-)referred to as 腐女 *fūnǚ* ‘rotten girls’ (Chao 2016, 2017), coined after a Japanese terminology *fujoshi* (Galbraith 2015, Hester 2015, Nagaike 2015). Given its essence as female-oriented fantasies, the *dānměi* fandom is predominantly comprised of adolescent girls and adult women, who amount to 91% to 93% of the entire fanbase and are generally surmised to be heterosexual (Louie 2012, Xu and Yang 2014, Zhou and Li 2016, Zeng 2017) and underage (Zheng 2017, Wang 2018).

In the current *dānměi* subculture, fiction serves as the most-consumed subcategory (Wei 2014), rather than ACG (Anime, Comic and Games). A pioneering and leading online platform accommodating *dānměi* content is named 晋江文学城 *Jinjiāng wénxué chéng* ‘Jinjiang Literature City’ (henceforward *Jinjiāng*), which has attained substantial commercial success since its launch in 2003 (Linder 2005, Feng 2009, 2013, Wang 2019): this well-organised, multi-functional website has hosted more than 3.89 million narratives with over 97.3 billion Chinese characters by January 2021 (*Jinjiāng* 2021). The impressive achievement and quintessential status of *Jinjiāng* are also manifested by an upsurge in its contracted writers and registered users: in 2012, the numbers were approximately 300,000 and 5 million respectively (Xu

and Yang 2013), whereas these figures have exceeded 1.68 million and 44.15 million respectively by January 2021 (Jinjiāng 2021). As can be observed from data provided by Jinjiāng, users massively outnumber writers, which justifies the postulation that the overwhelming majority of Chinese ‘rotten girls’ are consumers, instead of producers, because the latter entails sufficient creation time and literary aptitude (Wang 2011, Xu 2015).

Albeit being a female-oriented subculture, *dānměi* has attracted a number of male fans, who are (self-)referred to 腐男 *fūnán* ‘rotten boys’, following a Japanese terminology *fudanshi* (Welker 2006, Hester 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015). Nonetheless, compared with their female counterparts, ‘rotten boys’ are substantially less active and visible in terms of online and offline interaction and nurturing a prosperous literary industry (Wang 2011, Wei 2014, Xu 2015). Furthermore, a considerable proportion of claimed *fūnán* ‘fans forge their identity online in order to seduce heterosexual girls intrigued by ‘rotten’ allusions (Xu and Yang 2014). Analogous to male fans who only occupy a trivial minority of *dānměi* readership, the amount of male *dānměi* writers is also meagre, compared with their female counterparts (Zhao 2015).

It is notable that among all fictional works published on Jinjiāng in February 2012, 73.13% were non-fanfiction (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013), which indicates that in the current *dānměi* market, original creation surpasses its fanfiction equivalent (Xu and Yang 2014). Therefore, in this research I investigate original *dānměi* fiction published on Jinjiāng exclusively. Moreover, despite the small quantity, *dānměi* narratives composed by male writers demonstrate high quality

and deserve hermeneutic and interpretive scrutiny, so I explore non-fanfiction writing of male contracted Jinjiāng writers.

In this paper, I explore the *dānměi* genre by means of analysing the works of an illustrious male *dānměi* writer pseudonymed 非天夜翔 Fēitiānyèxiáng (henceforward Fēitiān), who is affectionately nicknamed by fans as 肥田 *fēitián* ‘fertile/chubby land’ as the homophone of ‘Fēitiān’ and 母鸡 *mǔjī* ‘hen’ due to his metaphor comparing authors to hens that produce eggs,¹ as in Example (1).²

(1) 吃了一个好吃的鸡蛋，请不要对母鸡产生太多兴趣；喜好，母鸡表示由衷的幸福与感谢，母鸡爱你。吃到一个雷人的臭蛋，也请不要痛恨母鸡；讨厌也罢，母鸡只能说声哦，对不起。

Chī le yī gè hǎo chī de jī dàn, qǐng bù yào duì mǔ jī chǎn shēng tài duō xīng qù; xǐ huān zuì hǎo, mǔ jī biǎo shì yóu zhōng de xìng fú yǔ gǎn xiè, mǔ jī ài nǐ. Chī dào yī gè lèi rén de chòu dàn, yě qǐng bù yào tòng hèn mǔ jī; tǎo yàn yě bà, mǔ jī zhǐ néng shuō shēng o, duì bù qǐ.

‘When eating a tasty egg, please don’t get too interested in the hen; it would be great if you liked it—the hen would love you and feel pleased and grateful. If the egg tastes awful, please don’t hate the hen either; even if you dislike the egg, all the hen can do is to say “oh sorry”.’

(Fēitiān. Trans. Mine)

I postulate that Fēitiān’s fiction is characterised by preeminent artistic value, non-feminisation and reality-orientedness. The artistic value of Fēitiān’s writing can be manifested by a wide range of innovative themes and ideologies, vivid imagination and imagery-evoking depiction, rich literary and historical allusions, as well as elaborateness and meticulousness. Furthermore, Fēitiān’s works are reality-oriented, replete with virile characters.

Method

In this paper, I explore *dānměi* by means of scrutinising Fēitiān's fiction that has attained comprehensive embracement from readers and online literary platforms and thus massive attention from media. Fēitiān has been publishing on Jinjiāng since the release of his 2008 narrative 天之战记 *Tiānzhīzhàn Jì* 'An Account of a Heavenly War', and his latest novel 山有木兮 *Shānyǒumù Xī* 'Trees in the Mountain' is still in progress. According to my calculation, Fēitiān, being a prolific writer, has thirty-three original narratives and six book reviews published on Jinjiāng, which are constituted of 15,527,213 Chinese characters in total. One of Fēitiān's chefs-d'oeuvre, 图灵密码 *Tú líng Mì mǎ* 'Turing's Code', has received on average of 482,727 views per chapter and in total 241,843 comments by February 2021. Jinjiāng, therefore, has been commending Fēitiān by means of bestowing successive awards upon him. For instance, eight of Fēitiān's novels have won Jinjiāng's 'Outstanding *Dānměi* Work of the Year', and he has been listed as Jinjiāng's 'Influential Writer of the Year' for four times. Driven by the popularity, the majority of Fēitiān's narratives that were initially hosted by Jinjiāng have been published in hard copy in both simplified and traditional Chinese language and become best-selling in domestic and overseas markets, exemplified by the 2012 online tale 与时光擦肩而过 *Yǔ Shíguāng Cājiānérguò* 'Passing by with Time' that has over a million hits (Economic Times 2016). Additionally, an array of novels such as 夺梦 *Duó Mèng* 'Dream Snatching' and 天地白驹 *Tiāndì Báijū* 'White Horse of the World' have been or will be adapted into audio-visual formats, including ACG, TV serials and radio plays (Sohu 2019).

More significantly, readers' recognition contributes to that from the mainstream literary and academic fields, embodied by the fact that Fēitiān has been voted and nominated as a top 'Influential Writer' among over one thousand candidates for three times (Sina 2017, Liu 2019, China Daily 2020), and is hence acclaimed as the one of the five 'Exemplary Online Writers' by scholars on Chinese Internet literature (Shao 2019a). Fēitiān is exalted as 'the well-established *nanshen* of female-oriented Internet writing' (女频网文界公认的“男神” *nǚpín wǎngwénjiè gōngrènde 'nánshén'*) (Xiao 2019, Shao 2020) as well as 'the only male *dashen* on female-oriented websites' (“女性向”网站中唯一的男性大神 '*nǚxìngxiàng' wǎngzhànzhōng wéiyīde nánxìng dàshén*), in which *nánshén* ('male divinity') and *dashen* ('big divinity') are readership-based neologisms metaphorically denoting top-ranked digital literature writers (Shao 2019b). Note that the amount of Chinese Internet writers is estimated to be 19.36 million in 2019 (Ni 2020), whereas those who can be classified as *dàshén* based on the size of their readership are less than 500 (Shao 2019b), which epitomises the iconic status of Fēitiān acknowledged by both readers and researchers.

Furthermore, readers have extended their affection for Fēitiān's writing to himself as a writer/person. Owing to moral scrutiny and government surveillance imposed upon *dānměi*, along with the dispersiveness of its virtual communities, there is void of official data concerning the exact size of *dānměi* fandom (Wei 2014, Zhang 2016), nor an accurate figure regarding Fēitiān's readership. Nevertheless, the enormity of Fēitiān's fans can be embodied by his popularity on social media platforms. On Weibo, a micro-blogging platform with approximately 550 million monthly active users in March 2020 (Weibo 2020), Fēitiān's

account has attracted 1,659,835 followers by February 2021. There is also a dedicated Weibo ‘super topic’ virtual community established for Fēitiān, which has garnered intense attention: it has accumulated 401.82 million visits and 40,216 posts by February 2021. Therefore, it is justifiable to postulate that Fēitiān has a prodigious fanbase.

It is worth mentioning that apart from Fēitiān, there are at least three other pseudonyms arguably ascribed to this author. According to conjecture on cyberspace, apart from serving as a screenwriter for hit TV serials and a lyricist with various noms de plume, Fēitiān has composed a famed *dānměi* novel 乱世为王 *Luànshì Wéiwáng* ‘King of Turbulent Times’ under a feminine pen name 顾雪柔 *Gù Xuěróu* (NetEase 2018, 2020). By virtue of its homosexual nature and connection with obscenity (Suzuki 1998, Nagaike 2003, McLelland 2005, 2016, 2017), in contemporary China, *dānměi* is subject to stringent official censorship and surveillance imposed by the party-state (Yi 2013, Ng 2015, Zhang 2017, Wang 2019). For the sake of self-protection, Chinese *dānměi* producers write and publish pseudonymously (Xu and Yang 2013, Zeng 2017), rendering it arduous to pinpoint authors’ real identities behind noms de plume. Through hermeneutically comparing and contrasting ‘King of Turbulent Times’ and fiction clearly ascribed to Fēitiān, I propound that Gu Xuerou is indeed his another pen name, in that these ‘two’ authors are analogous in terms of characterisation, portraits of protagonists’ demeanour and sexual intercourse, employment of an uncommon preposition *cháo* metaphors concerning stallions (see Example (5) below), etc.

Literature Review

Chinese literature during both the classical and modern periods abounds with feminised masculinity of pubescent boys and youthful men assuming a penetrated role in male-male anal sexual intercourse. Analogously, feminisation of 受 *shòu* ‘uke’ (bottom; receptive) and even 攻 *gōng* ‘seme’ (top; insertive) characters is also commonly attested in *dānměi* content.

Late-imperial Chinese literature during late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1912) dynasties witnesses gender ambiguity and gender deviation, namely, a gradual disintegration of traditional division between the two sexes in social life, caused by ‘[f]lourishing commerce, a surplus of wealth, widespread education, a booming printing industry, rising individualism, prevailing hedonism, and the cult of *qing*’ (Zhou 2003: 15). Ming-Qing romantic literature saliently concerns male homosexuality involving feminised male bodies (Tian 2015), which challenges Confucian precepts of filial piety and chastity (Volpp 2002). The three most prominent late Ming collections of male homoerotic pornography that have survived numerous waves of censorship (Vitiello 1992, 1996) are: 1) 弁而釵 *Biàner Chāi* ‘Cap and Hairpins; Hairpins Beneath the Cap’ as a syncretic negotiation of ideologies and crossed gender boundaries (McMahon 1988: 73-78, Vitiello 2000b, Wu 2017); 2) 龙阳逸史 *Lóngyáng Yìshǐ* ‘The Forgotten Stories of Longyang’ as a ferociously satirical portrait of male prostitution (Vitiello 2000a, 2000b, 2014); and 3) 宜春香质 *Yìchūn Xiāngzhì* ‘Fragrant Essences of Spring’ involving exquisite sexuality sported by the elite of equal status,

which signifies refinement (Ruan and Tsai 1987, Wu 1995, McMahon 2002). The construal of feminised males in homoerotic relationships can also be attested in Peking Opera in the Qing era, in which youthful epicene actors sing and perform in a *dan* role as female impersonators; these androgynous boys serve as social and/or erotic entertainers at literati banquets or permanent bondservants of ‘connoisseurs’ from the moneyed class (Mackerras 1972: 47, Wu 2003, 2004: 113-115, Stevenson and Wu 2013: 59).

In the iconic masterpiece 红楼梦 *Hóng Lóu Mèng* ‘Dream of the Red Chamber/Mansion; The Story of the Stone’ composed by the intellectual 曹雪芹 *Cáo Xuěqín* (1724-1764), there are also implicit and explicit portraits of male-male obscenities (Edwards 1990, Liu 2009, Wu 2017), and the receptive partners in homoerotic intimacy are depicted to be ‘timid and bashful as a girl’, ‘shrinking and gentle’ and ‘as beautiful as flowers’, and to possess feminine attributes such as ‘winsome looks and gentleness of manner’ (Chapter 9/28. Trans. Hawkes 1973). Similarly, in a realistic social novel 金瓶梅 *Jīn Píng Méi* ‘The Plum in a Golden Vase’ featuring heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity (Cheng and Lei 2014, Yao 2017), there are depictions of epicene boys who fall prey to the sexual exploitation of lecherous men occupying a higher social status (Lau and Ng 1989, Volpp 1996). Analogous descriptions of feminised youthful boys as receptive partners can also be attested in Ming-Qing compilations such as 情史 *Qíng Shǐ* ‘History of Love/Qing’ gleaned by 冯梦龙 *Féng Mènglóng* (1574-1646) and the 1632 collection 龙阳逸史 *Lóngyáng Yìshǐ* ‘The Forgotten Tales of Longyang’, as well as those under the genre of 志怪 *zhìguài* ‘accounts of miraculous paranormality and abnormality’, exemplified by 聊斋志异 *Liáozhāi*

Zhìyì ‘Strange Tales/Stories from a Chinese Studio; Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio’ composed by 蒲松齡 Pú Sōnglíng (1640-1715) and 子不語 *Zǐ Bù Yǔ* ‘What the Master Would not Discuss’ by 袁枚 Yuán Méi (1716-1798).

Modern Chinese literature, parallel to classical literature, is also replete with narratives depicting the enfeebled masculinity of young passive partners in male-male homosexual relationships. For instance, in an illuminating novella 兔 *Tù* ‘Rabbit’ composed by 舒庆春 Shū Qìngchūn (more renowned as 老舍 Lǎo Shě) (1899-1966), the protagonist is a female impersonator of Peking Opera performance, who is surmised for homosexuality and male-male prostitution (Wang 1989, Kang 2009: 140), and this actor is characterised by epicene traits such as 白淨 *báijìng* ‘fairness’, 瘦弱 *shòuruò* ‘emaciation’ and 腼腆 *miǎntiǎn* ‘bashfulness’. Feminised male images also appear in 白先勇 Pai Hsien-yung’s pioneering LGBTQ work 孽子 *Nièzǐ* ‘Crystal Boys’ published in 1977 (Ji 2012, Jiang 2019) as well as 李碧华 Lǐ Bìhuá’s novel 霸王别姬 *Bàwáng Biéjī* ‘Farewell My Concubine’ (Zhou and Wu 2011, Li 2017). As for the realistic, thought-provoking online novel 北京故事 *Běijīng Gùshì* ‘Beijing Story’ which has been adapted into an award-winning film 藍宇 *Lán Yǔ*, although it does not equip the protagonist assuming the passive role with excessively effeminate appearance (Example (4)), he is typically in a socially inferior position in relation to his penetrator partner; this top-bottom chasm accords with the traditional construal that anal penetration between males is intertwined with classism and ageism (Sommer 1997), so men are permitted to

sexually penetrate social inferiors of both genders to manifest their social superiority (Chou, 2001).

(2) 他长得不算白,但脸上很干净,面目十分清秀,鼻子直的,嘴唇闭得很紧,似乎没什么表情。

Tā zhǎng de bù suàn bái, dàn liǎn shàng hěn gān jìng, miàn mù shí fēn qīng xiù, bí zi zhí zhí de, zuǐ chún bì de hěn jǐn, sì hū méi shén me biǎo qíng.

‘He was not fair but had an even skin tone, delicate features and a straight nose; he pressed his tips tightly and remained expressionless.’

(*Běijīng Gùshì*. Trans. Mine)

Result and Discussion

In this paper, I argue that Fēitiān’s writing is featured by artistic value, non-feminisation and reality-orientedness.

The artistic value of Fēitiān’s fiction lies in four aspects: 1) a wide range of innovative themes and ideologies; 2) vivid imagination and imagery-evoking depiction; 3) rich literary and historical allusions; and 4) elaborateness and meticulousness.

First, Fēitiān’s narratives demonstrate myriads of distinct themes and storylines, ranging from Western fantasy, time travel, science fiction and online game at an early stage, to urban fantasy and Eastern fantasy at the current stage; moreover, his works are so innovative that they constantly inspire imitations and followers in the field of female-oriented writing (Shao 2019b). For instance, Fēitiān’s 2015 novel 国家一级注册驱魔师上岗培训通知 *Guójiā Yījí Zhùcè Qūmóshī Shànggǎng Péixùn Tōngzhī* ‘Training Announcement of Level-One State Registered Exorcists’ pioneers a niche ‘exorcism’ theme and introduces a new subcategory into the existing urban fantasies (Shao et al 2015); the ground-breaking 2014 novel 金牌助理 *Jīnpái Zhùlǐ* ‘Top-Ranking Assistant’ initiates an era of composing fiction regarding the

entertainment industry. Particularly, in a 2011 online novel entitled 二零一三 *Erlíng Yīsān* ‘2013’ that was renamed as 末日曙光 *Mòrì Shùguāng* ‘Dawn of the Doomsday’ in print in 2013, Fēitiān has created an astonishing apocalyptic world replete with zombies, which is regarded as a milestone in China’s apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction and has triggered a prevailing composition trend on Jinjiāng throughout the whole year of 2012 (Xiao 2019).

Moreover, Fēitiān’s writing conveys magnificent ideologies such as heroism, patriotism and humanism, and illuminates his reflection on positive values (Xiao 2019). Taking the 2020 fantasy 定海浮生录 *Dìnghǎi Fúshēng Lù* ‘A Chronicle of Tranquil Ocean and Drifting Life’ as an example: Fēitiān creates an atypical hero, who is not blessed with superpower or propitious luck, but falls prey to arduous and doomed fate and his own occasional vulnerability as an ordinary person; however, the protagonist eventually obtains success relying on his determination to safeguard the peace, which encapsulates Fēitiān’s construal that one is supposed to assume responsibilities and hold adamant mindset (Shao 2020).

Second, Fēitiān’s artistic accomplishments can be encapsulated by a fecundity of imagination and richness of imagery-evoking representation. Impinged upon by Hollywood blockbusters and other popular media, Fēitiān’s writing, represented by the best-selling book ‘2013’, outshines mediocre web-based pulp fiction by means of evoking film-like imagery of landscapes (Shao 2019b, Xiao 2019). His active, innovative imagination is also embodied by the wide range of themes and plot lines.

Third, the high quality of Fēitiān's fiction can be epitomised by profound historical and literary allusions, along with integration of fully-fledged genres of 演义 *yǎnyì* 'exposition/explication of meaning of events in history' (McLaren 2006, Ge 2007) and 武侠 *wúxiá* 'martial chivalry; Chinese knighthood' (Liu 1967: 2, Teo 2009: 2, To 2019). In a 2017 novel 天宝伏妖录 *Tiānbǎo Fúyāo Lù* 'A Chronicle of Subduing Demons in the Tianbao Period', Fēitiān combines the traditional *yanyi* and 东方奇幻/玄幻 *dōngfāng qíhuàn/xuánhuàn* 'Eastern fantasy' (Chao 2012: 114) with *dānměi* narration, thereby placing the female-oriented online romance to a broader picture (Xiao 2017, 2018). Fēitiān is highly competent in embedding *dānměi* romances in historical contexts: apart from 'A Chronicle of Tranquil Ocean and Drifting Life' and 'A Chronicle of Subduing Demons in the Tianbao Period' that have settings in the turbulent Eastern Jin (317-420) and the flourishing Tang (618-907) dynasties respectively, he has composed 我和姐已抢男人 *Wǒ Hé Dàjǐ Qiǎng Nánrén* 'Snatching the Man from Daji' that concerns the archaic Shang dynasty circa the 2nd millennium BC and the semi-mythical Yellow Emperor and Jiang Ziya, as well as 战七国 *Zhàn Qīguó* 'Seven Warring States' that concerns the unified stage under the reign of Qin Shi Huang (259-210 BC). There are, of course, period narratives in which Fēitiān intentionally omits to specify historical periods, exemplified by 将军们的情书 *Jiāngjūnmende Qíngshū* 'Love Letters from Generals' and 放开那个受 *Fàngkāi Nàgè Shòu* 'Let Go of That Uke'. In these novels, Fēitiān depicts historic events, sites and personages in a serious manner, yet his humorous expressions render the texts entertaining simultaneously.

Fěitiān's fiction is also characterised by rich literary allusions, illustrated by the title of his Jìnjiāng column, 海上生明月 *Hǎishàng Shēng Míngyuè*, which is extracted from an exemplary Tang poem 望月怀远 *Wàng Yuè Huái Yuǎn* composed by 张九龄 *Zhāng Jiǔlíng* (673-740), as in Example (3).

(3) 海上生明月，天涯共此时。情人怨遥夜，竟夕起相思。灭烛怜光满，披衣觉露滋。不堪盈手赠，还寝梦佳期
Hǎi shàng shēng míng yuè, tiān yá gòng cǐ shí. Qíng rén yuàn yáo yè, jìng xī qǐ xiāng sī. Miè zhú lián guāng mǎn, pī yī jué lù zī. Bù kān yíng shǒu zèng, huán qǐn mèng jiā qī.
 'Over the sea the moon shines bright; We gaze at it far, far apart. You might complain how long is night, And you would rise, lovesick at heart. I blow out candle, still there's light, I don my coat soon moist with dew. I can't hand you these moonbeams white But go to bed to dream of you.'

(*Gazing at the Moon and Longing for One Far Away*. Trans. Xu 2004:

161)

In addition to Tang poems, 词 *cí*-poetry flourishing during the Song (960-1279) dynasty (Wang 2007, Tao and Zhao 2010) is also cited in Fěitiān's fiction, such as 相见欢 *Xiāngjiàn huān* 'Ecstasy of Encounters', the title of which is a tune name. Similarly, in a historical story 国师帮帮忙 *Guóshī Bāngbāngmáng* 'Preceptor's Succour' set in the Tang dynasty, two volumes are entitled with tune names 扬州慢 *Yángzhōumàn* 'Slow Tune of Yangzhou' and 霜天晓角 *Shuāngtiānxiǎojiǎo* 'Horn at Frosty Dawn', and the other two volumes are entitled with 秦王破阵乐 *Qínwáng Pòzhèn'è* 'Pozhen Music of the King of Qin' that is a large-scale musical performance popular in the Tang court (Li 2016, Bai 2018) and a piece of sheet music 沧海龙吟 *Cānghǎi Lóngyín* 'Loong's Chanting in Ocean' of the Ming (1368-1644)

dynasty. In a 2010 work 武将观察日记 *Wǔjiàng Guānchá Rìjì* ‘An Observation Diary of Martial Officials’ that features renowned martial officials during the Three Kingdoms (220-280) period, I propose that Fēitiān adopts the format of long narratives known as 章回小说 *zhānghuí xiǎoshuō* ‘fiction in chapters’ during the Qing (Hegel 1994), in that he uses chapter titles summarising pivotal information concisely with fixed syntactic structure (Yuan 2020) and classical expressions, e.g. 盛世承平帝位易主 *Shèngshì Chéngpíng Dìwèi Yìzhǔ* ‘Succession to the Throne in the Peaceful Heyday’ (Chapter 70) and 万里河山英雄黄土 *Wànlǐ Héshān Yīngxióng Huángtǔ* ‘Heroes Buried in Enormous Land’ (Chapter 71). Additionally, the title of the final chapter is disparate from previous ones involving identical number of Chinese characters, viz. 青山依旧在·成败转头空 *Qīngshān Yījiù Zài·Chéngbài Zhuǎntóu Kōng*, which I suggest is adapted from the introductory *ci* in 三国演义 *Sānguó Yǎnyì* ‘Romance of the Three Kingdoms’ (Chun 2017), the pinnacle of *zhanghui xiaoshuo* and one of the four great masterpieces of Chinese literature (Hsia 1980: 35-36, Cook 2014), as in (4).

(4) 滚滚长江东逝水，浪花淘尽英雄。是非成败转头空。青山依旧在，几度夕阳红。白发渔樵江渚上，惯看秋月春风。一壶浊酒喜相逢。古今多少事，都付笑谈中。

Gǔn gǔn cháng jiāng dōng shì shuǐ, làng huā táo jìn yīng xióng. Shì fēi chéng bài zhuǎn tóu kōng. Qīng shān yī jiù zài, jǐ dù xī yáng hóng. Bái fà yú qiáo jiāng zhǔ shàng, guàn kàn qiū yuè chūn fēng. Yī hú zhuó jiǔ xī xiāng féng. Gù jīn duō shǎo shì, dōu fù xiào tán zhōng.

‘On and on the Great River rolls, racing east. Of proud and gallant heroes its white-tops leave no trace. As right and wrong, pride and fall turn all at once unreal. Yet ever the green hills stay To blaze in the west-waning day. Fishers and woodsmen comb the river isles. White-crowned, they’ve seen enough of spring and autumn tide To make good company over the wine jar, Where many a famed event Provides their merriment.’

(From *Niànyīshǐ Tán cí*. Trans. Roberts 1999: 2)

Fourth, Fēitiān's fiction is detail-enriched and precise. In addition to various types of spectacular scenery in fiction of different settings, Fēitiān explicitly and elaborately portrays a myriad of authentic and fictional objects, acts, events and venues in his fiction, e.g. a series of actions to starve, feed, train and befriend an untamed eagle (鷹奴 *Yīng Nú* 'Eagle Slave'; Chapter 26-27), a fierce battle and the fire, depredation, decease and exile it causes (江東雙璧 *Jiāngdōng Shuāngbì* 'Jade to the East of the River'; Chapter 8), a splendid bordello in Xi'an of the High Tang era and a traditional snack called 櫻桃饅饅 *yīngtáo bìluó* ('A Chronicle of Subduing Demons in the Tianbao Period'; Chapter 27), the full execution procedure of a barbarous penalty in the imperial period called 凌遲 *língchí* 'death by a thousand cuts' ('Ecstasy of Encounters'; Chapter 126), etc.

In terms of non-feminisation, it is embodied by the fact that characters in Fēitiān's fiction, especially semes, are marked by virility.

In *dānměi* literature, apart from androgynous demeanour highlighted by delicacy, emaciation and fair countenance, characters are also inclined to exhibit the so-called 撒嬌 *sājīāo* conduct. *Sājīāo*, a complex umbrella notion integrating a wide range of deeds such as whining, pouting and flirting, can be interpreted as 'petulant; coquettish' (Farris 1988: 300), 'to show pettishness, as a spoiled child' (Farris 1994: 12-13), 'play cute' (Yueh 2013: 167), 'performed winsomeness/lovability' (Puzar and Hong 2018: 333), etc. As a feminine strategy of communication or a sexually suggestive posture (Chuang 2005, Sundararajan 2015: 125, Starr et al 2020), *sājīāo*-ness is the incarnation of societal infantilisation of pubescent girls and adult women so as to accommodate fetishes, so

this approach is deployed by females to manoeuvre and seduce (potential) partners, as well as to convince and demand peers and seniors of both genders (Farrer 2002: 85, Chuang 2005, Yueh 2013, 2017: 64). *Dānměi* fiction composed by female writers abounds with *sājiāo*-ness, as in novels featuring 娘(炮)受 *niáng (pào) shòu* ‘sissy uke’ and those involving *sājiāo* semes labelled as 少女攻 *shàonǚ gōng* ‘maiden seme’ or 萌攻 *méng gōng* ‘cute seme’, e.g. 家有萌攻 *Jiāyǒu Ménggōng* ‘Cute Seme at Home’, 反派他过分美丽 *Fǎnpài Tā Guòfēn Měilì* ‘The Antagonist is Excessively Beautiful’ and 人渣反派自救系统 *Rénzhā Fǎnpài Zìjiù Xìtǒng* ‘The Evil Antagonist’s Self-Rescue System’; the terminology *sājiāo* is even employed as a title of a novel pertaining to the show business by 狐狸不归 *Húlíbùguī*.

Nonetheless, divergent from the conventional stereotype of homosexual men in traditional literature and the clichéd representation in *dānměi*, Fēitiān’s characterisation of male characters is featured by both physical and mental masculinity.

As for appearance, Fēitiān’s seme characters are predominantly tall and athletic, featured by a dark complexion, bulging muscles and martial strength, as in Example (5). Similar portraits of protagonists and deuteragonists can be attested in narratives such as 灵魂深处 *Línghún Shēnchù* ‘Deep in the Soul’ (Chapter 1), 星辰骑士 *Xīngchén Qíshì* ‘Star Knight’ (Chapter 1), 么儿 *Yāoér* ‘The Youngest Son’ (Chapter 1), 朝圣 *Cháoshèng* ‘Pilgrimage’ (Chapter 2), 锦衣卫 *Jǐnyīwèi* ‘Imperial Guards’ (Chapter 6), etc. Even the uke characters, who are effeminate-looking and delicate-featured in an overwhelming majority of *dānměi* fiction, do not exhibit androgyny in Fēitiān’s novels, as in Example (6). Although Fēitiān’s aesthetics for masculine demeanour and personality attributes

accords with that of homosexual males in contemporary China (Zheng and Zheng 2015, 2016, Zheng et al 2016), it may not be able to accommodate ‘rotten girls’, because Chinese heterosexual women typically prefer feminised male faces, in stark contrast to homosexual men (Liu and Wu 2016, Zheng 2019).

(5) 二十八岁的英俊青年，皮肤黝黑，身材瘦长，腹肌有力，胸肌瘦削结实，身材好得像条骏马，半长的头发湿淋淋地朝下滴水。
Er shí bā suì de yīng jùn qīng nián, pí fū yōu hēi, shēn cái shòu cháng, fū jī yǒu lì, xiōng jī shòu xuē jiē shí, shēn cái hǎo de xiàng tiáo jùn mǎ, bàn cháng de tóu fǎ shī lín lín dì cháo xià dī shuǐ.
 ‘This twenty-eight-year-old tall man was dark-skinned and handsome. His athletic body was slim yet featured by a rippling six-pack and bulging pectoral muscles, rendering him as sexy as a stallion. His hair was still dripping with water and could do with a haircut.’

(Guójiā Yǐjī Zhùcè Qūmóshī Shànggǎng Péixùn Tōngzhī. Chapter 1.

Trans. Mine)

(6) “看这模样，也十七八了罢，你要找怎么不找个漂亮点，像女人的。”但寻常人青睐的都是温柔旖旎的少年，游淼作男宠的话也偏大了，看上去更没有女子柔弱之姿。
Kàn zhè mú yàng, yě shí qī bā le ba, nǐ yào zhǎo zěn me bù zhǎo gè piào liàng diǎn, xiàng nǚ rén de. Dàn xún cháng rén qīng ài de dōu shì wēn róu yǐ nǚ de shào nián, yóu miǎo zuò nán chǒng de huà yě piān dà le, kàn shàng qù gèng méi yǒu nǚ zǐ róu ruò zhī zī.
 “‘He looks already seventeen or eighteen. Why don’t you find a prettier and girlier one?’ Men normally preferred soft and winsome boys, yet You Miao was too old to be a toy boy, and he wasn’t feminine at all.’

(*Luànshì Wéiwáng*. Chapter 32. Trans. Mine)

As for personality, the semes and ukes created by Fēitiān are indomitable and audacious, not only in historical stories abounding with wars, slaughters and assassinations, but also in stories of modern and apocalyptic settings. In sharp contrast to entertaining characters created by his counterparts, such as those affectionately referred to as 四大骚攻 *sì dà sāogōng* ‘top four coquettish semes’ in the *dānměi* fandom, semes

in Fēitiān's fiction tend to be reliable yet sombre, exemplified by the silent seme who is nicknamed as 'mute' in 'Eagle Slave' (Chapter 2).

As can be seen from the non-feminisation of Fēitiān's narration, he does not ingratiate himself with *dānměi* readers, discrepant from a considerable proportion of online producers. In as early as 2013, the indispensability of 'rotten girl' readers was pointed out by a phenomenal male online writer 徐磊 Xú Lěi (pseudonym: 南派三叔 Nánpàisānshū), who is celebrated for the award-winning tomb-raiding adventure series 盗墓笔记 *Dàomù Bǐjì* 'The Grave Robbers' Chronicles' (Liang 2014): according to Xu, 一个腐女百万兵, 得腐女者得天下 *yīgè fǔnǚ bǎiwàn bīng, dé fǔnǚ zhě dé tiānxià* 'one rotten girl equals millions of soldiers; whoever wins their heart conquers the world' (Trans. Mine) (Xinhua News 2016, Wang 2020). Gigantic profit and fame have been bestowed upon 'The Grave Robbers' Chronicles' by its massive fanbase, so on Weibo the author exhibits a tolerant attitude towards 'rotten' fans' act of 'shipping',³ even if the genre is not *dānměi* (Qiu 2015), which indicates author-audience interaction and its preponderant commercial ethos (Feng and Literat 2017).

What is noteworthy is that although Fēitiān does not intentionally ingratiate himself with 'rotten girls', he demonstrates appropriate respect for female readers: in narratives exemplified by 破罐子破摔 *Pòguǎnzi Pòshuāi* 'To Smash a Cracked Jar', female characters are not reduced to an inferior status as men's possessions, but described as intelligent participants and proactive creators of history (Xu and Yang 2014).

In terms of reality-orientedness, I posit that among Fēitiān's writing, there is list of reality-oriented, thought-provoking works, which

enriches female-oriented literature with precious male experience (Shao 2019b). For instance, one of his representative novels is entitled 北城天街 *Běichéng Tiānjiē* ‘Paradise Walk’, which is extolled as an exception to cliché-ridden *dānměi* narration that is prone to excessively and surrealistically fantasise male-male romantic/erotic entanglements from a female perspective. On the contrary, this realistic, dolorous novel boldly unravels promiscuity, one-night stands, AIDS and decease, as well as the sense of bewilderment and loneliness and social and mental pressure of ordinary homosexual men in a modern metropolis (Zhao 2015). Moreover, as a Guangdong-born man living in Chongqing (Economic Times 2016), Fēitiān chooses the setting in Chongqing and names the novel after a local retail complex, instead of deploying fictional cities and venues. Through portraying or simply alluding to stores and places in Chongqing, Fēitiān successfully creates a convivial atmosphere and evokes readers’ memories and impulse to visit there, as indicated by related reviews and discussions on Douban (a popular Chinese review website for books, films and music) and Zhihu (a Chinese socialised Q&A website parallel to Quora).

Furthermore, Fēitiān addresses issues beyond romance and does not circumvent difficulties characters may encounter in a real-world context, even if they are protagonists. That is to say, his realistic fiction bears no similitude with a subcategory of the so-called 爽文 *shuǎngwén* ‘feel-good writing’ (Shao et al 2015, Shao 2019b, 2020), which is unflatteringly dubbed as 种马文 *zhǒngmǎ wén* ‘stud fiction’. As pointed out Feng (2013: 10), male-authored Web-based ‘stud fiction’ blatantly presents male protagonists equipped with supreme artistry to reverse

history and vigorous sexual prowess to simultaneously attain numerous beautiful women (Feng 2013: 38); moreover, in time-travel ‘stud’ fantasies, an authorial 金手指 *jīn shǒuzhǐ* ‘golden finger’ enables heroes to conquer the past via modern technologies (Feng 2013: 93). When consuming Fěitiān’s fiction, however, readers are sometimes deprived of ‘good feeling’ owing to the lack of a ‘golden finger’. To be more specific, albeit being protagonists, characters are plagued with adverse circumstances in the real world, rather than emotional entanglements in conventional romances, e.g. marginalisation and defamation (‘Ecstasy of Encounters’; Chapter 46), impoverishment and low-paid employment (‘Training Announcement of Level-One State Registered Exorcists’; Chapter 4), bipolar disorder and discrimination (‘White Horse of the World’; Chapter 15), orphanhood and mockery (‘A Chronicle of Subduing Demons in the Tianbao Period’; Chapter 5), etc.

More significantly, Fěitiān’s fiction frequently fails to comply with the fandom expectation of 双洁 *shuāng jié* ‘both purity’, viz. an Internet neologism denoting the chasteness of both partners in hetero-/homosexual relationships. I posit that the prevailing preference for *shuangjie* in the current *dānměi* fandom, along with its heterosexual romance equivalent, can be accounted for by the relatively sparse life/sexual experience of underage online readers. Among China’s 940 million netizens, 49.7% of them have experience consuming digital literature, whereas approximately 56.5% of the entire netizen cohort are below the age of 30 (China Internet Network Information Centre 2020). As for the *dānměi* community, fans under 22 years old occupy 78.43% of the whole readership, with 82.35% of them start consuming *dānměi* content prior to the age of 18 (Zheng 2017). To accommodate underage

fans, Jinjiāng writers are expected to 排雷 *pái léi* ‘clear mines’, i.e. to post warnings, in the 文案 *wénàn* ‘introductory pages’, if the seme and/or uke protagonists have multiple sexual partners or even previous sexual experience. By contrast, in fiction with a contemporary setting, Fēitiān normally does not generate a surrealistic situation that attractive men are still void of sexual and/or love experience in their twenties or even thirties: for example, in 飘洋过海中国船 *Piāoyángguòhǎi Zhōngguó Chuán* ‘A Chinese Ship Sailing from Afar’, the protagonist has a long-term ex-boyfriend, and in ‘Top-Ranking Assistant’, both protagonists have ex-girlfriends.

Moreover, Fēitiān’s fiction sometimes entails a plot line regarding heterosexual marriage, which I propose is perceived as a typical 天雷 *tiānléi* ‘thunderclap; ridiculously bad plot’ (Feng 2013: 1) in *dānměi* fandom. For example, in ‘Eagle Slave’ with an imperial setting, both the seme and uke marry their empresses in two incarnations. More significantly, in a 2012 novel 王子病的春天 *Wángzǐbìngde Chūntiān* ‘Spring of Prince Syndrome’ with a modern urban setting, the seme marries a woman he likes, encouraged by the uke (Chapter 52), which embodies Fēitiān’s realistic style of writing. In the contemporary Chinese society, homosexuality tends to be construed as deviance from social norms (Kang 2012), and most Chinese people hold conservative attitudes towards homosexuality: according to statistics released by the Chinese General Social Surveys, approximately 78.53% of the respondents deem same-sex sexual encounters wrong (Xie and Peng 2018). Therefore, in contemporary China, notwithstanding flourishing LGBTQ rights movements (Micollier 2005, Schroeder 2015, Zheng

2015), including fast-growing advocacy of same-sex marriage (Jiang 2013), there are contract/cooperative marriages between gay men and lesbians so as to circumnavigate the intensive matrimonial pressure (Engebretsen 2014: 104-106) and to tacitly subvert the hetero-patriarchal and heteronormative institution as an innovative intimate alliance (Kam 2010: 87-88) and silent resistance (Kam 2012: 99-103, Zhu 2018); additionally, there is even ‘marriage fraud’ that closeted homosexual men establish pretended heterosexual matrimonial relationships with unwitting, non-complicit women (Zhu 2018).

In this sense, Fēitiān’s characterisation and depiction are analogous to another male Internet writer pseudonymed 南康白起 Nánkāngbáiqǐ, whose chef-d’oeuvre is 浮生六记 *Fúshēng Liùjì* ‘Six Accounts of Life’. In this semi-autobiography, Nankangbaiqi’s same-sex partner is described as an average-looking man without elegant taste or behaviour (Example (7-9)), in sharp contrast to stereotypical *dānměi* which is ‘indulgence in *beauty*’, as can be seen from the terminology.

(7) 老公是头猪, 工作不到一年胖了二十几斤, 喝凉水都长肉。...一走路身上肉直颤, 每天晚上一翻身床就咯吱咯吱响。 *Lǎo gōng shì tóu zhū, gōng zuò bù dào yī nián pàng le èr shí jǐ jīn, hē liáng shuǐ dōu zhǎng ròu...Yī zǒu lù shēn shàng ròu zhí chàn, měi tiān wǎn shàng yī fān shēn chuáng jiù gē zhī gē zhī xiǎng.*

My hubby was a big—he put on over ten kilograms in less than a year after graduation. He would get fat just drinking water...His flesh shook while walking, and the bed creaked when he rolled over every night.’

(*Fúshēng Liùjì*. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

(8) 短碎发, 脸有点长, 有很多痘痘和坑坑洼洼, 霰弹枪打过似的。小眼睛, 一边双一边单, 鼻子不高不低, 大嘴大下巴。只能说丑, 老公这样评价自己。

Duǎn suì fà, liǎn yǒu diǎn cháng, yǒu hěn duō dòu dòu hé kēng kēng wā wā, xiǎo yǎn jīng, yī biān shuāng yī biān dān, bí zi bù gāo bù dī, dà zuǐ dà xià bā. Zhǐ néng shuō bù chǒu, lǎo gōng zhè yàng píng jià zì jǐ.

‘He had short hair and a long face full of zits and blemishes. One of his small eyes was monolid, yet the other one had a double eyelid; he had an ordinary nose and a big mouth and jaw. According to himself, he could barely be called “not ugly”’.

(*Fúshēng Liùjì*. Chapter 3. Trans. Mine)

(9) 我们也试过杂志上说的那种精致的生活, 谈谈诗词、聊聊法国新浪潮的电影, 可惜老公不合作, 他宁可看足球。...插句题外话, 老公常说“不臭怎么叫男人”, 于是抖动着自己的袜子说“闻一闻, 疏筋活络, 抖一抖, 精神抖擞”。理直气壮地对杂志皱皱鼻子说: 我就是俗!

Wǒ men yě shì guò zá zhì shàng shuō de nà zhǒng jīng zhì de shēng huó, tán tán shī cí, liáo liáo fǎ guó xīn làng cháo de diàn yǐng, kě xī lǎo gōng bù hé zuò, tā nìng kě kàn zú qiú... Chā jù tí wài huà, lǎo gōng cháng shuō bù chòu zěn me jiào nán rén, yú shì dǒu dòng zhe zì jǐ de wà zi shuō wén yī wén, shū jīn huó luò, dǒu yī dǒu, jīng shén dòu sǒu. Lǐ zhí qì zhuàng de duì zá zhì zhòu zhòu bí zi shuō: wǒ jiù shì sù!

‘Influenced by posh magazines, I tried to be pretentious, rambling on poetry and French New Wave films, but my hubby wasn’t cooperative and would rather watch football...Btw, my hubby kept preaching that “a man without stink is not a real man”, so he often waved his sock in the air and said: “the smell of it makes you robust and puts you in high spirits”. He justly wrinkled up his nose at posh magazines and declared: “I am vulgar!”’

(*Fúshēng Liùjì*. Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

Conclusion

As one of the male producers who account for a trivial minority in the *dānměi* market, Fēitiān, ‘the only male *dashen* on female-oriented websites’, is famed for diverse themes and ideologies, active imagination and imagery-evoking portrayal. Furthermore, Fēitiān’s writing is marked by historical settings and poetic allusions, as well as detail-enriched and elaborate depictions. More importantly, disparate from the stereotyped characterisation of classical and modern literature abounding with enfeebled masculinity of young passive partners in male-male same-sex dyads, male characters in Fēitiān’s narratives are

featured by both physical and mental virility. Such masculinity, however, fails to comply with the prevailing preference for androgyny among *dānměi* fangirls. Fēitiān has also composed reality-oriented, thought-provoking works that are discrepant from online ‘feel-good writing’: instead of over-romanticising homosexual intimacy, his writing concerns realistic issues such as heterosexual marriage. Additionally, Fēitiān does not ingratiate himself with underage fans who expect surreal ‘both purity’, and creates imperfect yet multi-faceted characters. In this sense, Fēitiān bears similitude with his counterpart Nánkāngbái qǐ whose chef-d’oeuvre is a realistic semi-autobiography depicting ordinary homosexual men in the real world.

Endnotes

1. Note that this metaphor was first employed by a renowned writer and scholar 钱钟书 Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) upon the publication of his best-selling chef-d’oeuvre 围城 *Weicheng* ‘Fortress Besieged’, so as to discourage readers from showing interest beyond the book itself (Yang 1986).
2. In this paper, all quotations as well as titles and extracts of *danmei* fiction are translated by myself, unless specified otherwise.
3. The neologism ‘shipping’s is a slash terminology derived from the word ‘relationship’, which denotes fan practice of supporting particular real or imagined hetero-/homosexual relationships; fans are hence referred to as ‘shippers’ or CP 粉 *CP fen* ‘coupling fans’ in Chinese.

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