

Cliché-ridden Online *Danmei* Fiction? A Case Study of *Tianguan ci fu*

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Abstract: Popular literature online is often misconstrued as being cliché-ridden and formulaic, and has thus not attained as much critical attention as ‘serious’ literature. I propose that popular literature published in China’s cyberspace deserves more attention and hermeneutic scrutiny, and I place an emphasis on *danmei* (耽美) fiction that features male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships and is predominantly published on a female-oriented website called Jinjiang Literature City. In this research, I investigate an online *danmei* novel entitled *Tianguan ci fu* (天官赐福) that concerns a homosexual romance against a background of ‘immortality cultivation’ (*xiuxian* 修仙 or *xiuzhen* 修真), which had been maintaining the highest ranking on readers’ voting list since its release on Jinjiang Literature City in 2017. I postulate that *Tianguan ci fu* does not deploy clichéd plots pertaining to quasi-heterosexual relationships, which frequently occur in *danmei* fiction. Apart from conveying the theme of love, the narrative concerns the complexity of human nature via an array of characters possessing multifaceted personality traits. More significantly, with a setting of mortal and immortal realms, the narrative entails religious ideologies, especially the indigenous Daoist ascension, mortality-immortality polarity and *yin-yang* integration. Furthermore, ethic-religious Confucian precepts such as benevolence and filial piety are also demonstrated, along with the Sinicised Buddhist creeds of reincarnation and retribution, which embodies the amalgamation of (sub)religions as a preponderant ideal of ‘the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism’ (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一). Therefore, analysing this exemplary online novel can shed light on (a)theistic attitudes adopted by creators and consumers of Internet *danmei* literature.

Keywords: *Danmei* literature, BL, Internet literature, Jinjiang, *xiuxian/xiuzhen* fiction

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1. Introduction

Boys Love (aka BL) is a literature genre featuring male-male romantic and/or erotic relationships, predominantly produced and consumed by heterosexual adolescent girls and adult women (MCLELLAND 2000, 2009, 2017, MCLELLAND and WELKER 2015, WELKER 2015). BL literature is comprised of anime, comics and games (ACG) as well as other textual and visual pieces (SUZUKI 2015, ZSILA and DEMETROVICS 2017a, 2017b). BL subculture originated in Japan in the early 1970s and spread to Hong Kong and Taiwan within a decade (DASGUPTA 2006, LIU 2009). Since the era of socio-economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, overseas media and cultural products have been imported into Mainland China (SHAO 2016, ZHAO 2017), including BL, which entered China's niche market in the mid-1990s as a Japanese cultural export. The equivalent of BL in China is *danmei* (耽美), and its literal meaning is 'indulgence in beauty; addicted to beauty', in which the 'beauty' traditionally denotes that of youthful male characters exclusively.¹ In contemporary China, *danmei* subculture has attracted a prodigious number of female creators and audiences (FENG 2009, XU and YANG 2013, GALBRAITH 2015, HESTER 2015, NAGAIKE 2015, YANG and XU 2016, 2017a, 2017b), who are referred to as 'rotten girls' (*funü* 腐女) that is coined based on a Japanese terminology *fujoshi* (GALBRAITH 2015, HESTER 2015, NAGAIKE 2015).

Owing to its dual interconnection with homosexuality and pornography, *danmei* literature in China is stringently regulated and subjected to moral scrutiny and state censorship (NG 2015, MCLELLAND 2016, ZHAO et al. 2017, WANG 2019). As for audio-visual forms of *danmei*, although radio plays and animations adapted from fiction may retain homosexual implications, media representation is under the review of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, so in online serials, the visibility of homosexuality must be eliminated via 'top-down expurgation' (WANG 2019). In order to create erotic representations while not be subjected to state censorship, some Jinjiang writers resort to innovative circumvention strategies, which illuminates their resistance (see WANG 2020a for detailed discussions). In addition to rebellion, *danmei* producers and consumers also manifest tactful collaboration with the consumer culture and conformity to the official discourse and legal regulations (WANG 2018, TIAN 2020). For instance, Chinese *danmei* practitioners create and publish under noms de plume for self-protection (XU

¹ As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, *danmei* literature has been developing with the passage of time and has been diverging from its original definition. There have emerged narratives entailing elderly protagonists labelled as *dashu* (大叔. Lit. 'big uncle'), such as works composed by a writer pseudonymised Lanlin 蓝淋.

and YANG 2013). Having said that, the restriction on *danmei* subculture has its positive influence, in that it induces and nourishes women's enterprise: female fan communities in China have developed an efficient network of production and sales based on a Japanese-style archetype (ZHENG 2019).

In China, the most-consumed subcategory of *danmei* literature is textual narratives (WEI 2014), and the vast majority of *danmei* novels are published online (FENG 2011). A pioneering and leading female-oriented literature website hosting *danmei* fiction in China is called JINJIANG LITERATURE CITY (晋江文学城), which is celebrated for its prodigious readership (LINDER 2005, YIN 2005, FENG 2009, 2011, XU and YANG 2013, CHANG and TIAN 2020). By April 2022, Jinjiang Literature City (henceforward Jinjiang) had accommodated over 4.83 million narratives and 53.66 million registered users, among whom 91% are female (JINJIANG LITERATURE CITY 2022).

Notwithstanding the popularity and increasing visibility of *danmei* literature in commercial and marketing aspects, *danmei* is misconstrued as Internet literature that is void of artistic merit, so it fails to attain sufficient scholarly attention. As pointed out by SHAO 2015, Internet literature, parallel to its printed counterpart, is of equal literary value and creative, thought-provoking content. Consequently, Internet literature should be included as part of the analytical framework pertaining to contemporary literature, and should be evaluated by a set of bespoke criteria and discourses (SHAO 2018). Therefore, in this research, I discuss online *danmei* literature, scrutinising a novel entitled *Tianguan ci fu* (天官赐福. Lit. 'Heaven official's blessing') in terms of its defiance against cliché-ridden *danmei* narration and embodiment of religious amalgamation.

Tianguan ci fu (henceforward *Tianguan*) is a 1.14-million-character, 252-chapter novel published on Jinjiang, and after its release in 2017, it used to rank the highest on readers' voting list. *Tianguan* is the chef-d'oeuvre of a contracted Jinjiang writer pseudonymised Moxiangtongxiu 墨香铜臭 (Lit. 'fragrance of ink and odour of money',² henceforward Moxiang), who was nominated as the '2017 Most Popular Jinjiang Writer' and ranked fourteenth among the '2017 Top fifty female Internet writers in China' (SHEN 2017). After its impressive success on Jinjiang, the influence of *Tianguan* has spread to traditional and social media. On Weibo, China's largest social media platform, fans have established a 'super topic' dedicated page for *Tianguan*-related content and discussions; by May 2022, the '*Tianguan* super topic' had attracted more than five billion visits. The author Moxiang has also attracted

² Unless specified otherwise, all extracts, examples and titles are translated by myself.

an enormous fanbase on Weibo – she had over three million Weibo followers by May 2022. Apart from an impressive home readership, *Tianguan* also has legions of non-Chinese-speaking fans abroad. For instance, there is a range of hashtags on Twitter, such as #Tianguancifu and #HeavenOfficialsBlessing, names of the protagonists and popular characters, as well as #Hualian, which is short for Hua Cheng × Xie Lian (the two protagonists) and those ‘shipping’ other couples. Following its commercial success online, *Tianguan* has been published in print versions and sold on home and international markets, and the fiction has been adapted into anime, manga and radio plays. Additionally, *Tianguan* has worked in collaboration with KFC and launched *Tianguan*-themed restaurants in major Chinese cities.

Following (or due to) the rocketing popularity of *Tianguan* and its author, the artistic value of *Tianguan* has been castigated on social media platforms, and the novel anathematised as an overhyped commercial product. Critics’ key arguments include: 1) Moxiang is passionately worshiped by her overzealous fans and eulogised as ‘the light of *danmei*’; 2) Moxiang’s fanbase has been participating in quarrels, conflicts and trolling with those of other *danmei* writers, which might fall into the category of toxic fan practices; and 3) Moxiang’s new novel was ranked topic five on Jinjiang’s voting list, even though she has not published a single word yet, which indicates the irrationality of her fan readers.

2. *Tianguan ci fu*

Tianguan has its setting in ancient China, with one of the protagonists Xie Lian 谢怜 being a benevolent and insightful crown prince admired by his subjects. Lian’s aspiration is to salvage the living via strict cultivation and self-regulation and his well-known quote is ‘body in an abyss; soul in paradise’ (身无间, 心在桃源). During a preponderant ceremonial parade, he ceases the worship performance in order to catch a vagrant child falling from a city wall, which is construed as portending a bad augury for his kingdom. Although afterwards Lian ascends to the heavens as a talented young martial god, he fails to save his motherland from plague and wars, and hence is abominated by his previous believers and deemed ominous. Tortured by repentance of causing a pubescent soldier and a spirit to perish for him, Lian volunteers to be banished from the heavens twice and wears permanent imprecated shackles to be deprived of all his magic and luck. To keep body and soul together and support his fugitive parents, the impoverished former prince is reduced to a labourer, busker and scrap collector. Eight hundred years later, Lian ascends for the third time, but since he has been a laughing stock of all three realms as

a scrap-collecting deity, he is immediately sent down to the mortal realm for arduous chores. Lian meets a charismatic, intelligent ghost called Hua Cheng 花城, who turns out to be the most depredated and powerful lord of demons. Hua has loved Lian since their mortal lives and become invincible so as to protect him as his only believer, yet it takes Hua eight hundred years to find Lian. During a series of escapades and fighting side-by-side with Hua, Lian gradually falls in love with Hua and finds out that Hua is the child he saves as well as the soldier and spirit who died for him twice in previous incarnations. In the ultimate battle with the Heavenly Emperor who is disguised by one of the Four Great Calamities, Hua dies for Lian for the third time, so Lian has been waiting for him until his final rebirth.

‘Romance till death’ (*langman zhisibuyu* 浪漫至死不渝) is the title of Moxiang’s column on Jinjiang, which can serve as the motto of *Tianguan*. In this sense, *Tianguan* might be regarded as bearing a resemblance to the illustrious ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School’ (*yuanyang hudie pai* 鸳鸯蝴蝶派). As a genre renowned for its sentimental stories pertaining to unfulfilled romantic desires including sorrowful, bitter, miserable, wronged and chaste love, the ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School’ can be traced back to the late Qing (1644–1912) era and had sustained its popularity for decades in multimedia forms (LINK 1977, 1981, TAN 2016). Although ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School’ came under censure as a pejorative label while the May Fourth Movement gained momentum (HSIA 1982, CHOW 1986, 1991: 36–38), it contributed to Chinese popular literature and the development of early publishing industry (LI 2012). The discourse of love in 20th-century Chinese fiction served as a hybrid signifier that played a preponderant role in the topography of emotions (LEE 2007: 9).

In addition to romance, *Tianguan* also illustrates faith and belief. The short introduction of *Tianguan* is *wei ni, suoxiangpimi* 为你, 所向披靡, in which *suoxiangpimi* is a fixed idiom literally indicating ‘invincible’ (XINHUA IDIOM DICTIONARY 2002: 669). As for *wei*, it can constitute prepositions ‘because of’ (*yinwei* 因为) or ‘for’ (*weile* 为了), rendering the meaning of *wei ni* polysemous, i.e. ‘because of you’ or ‘for you’. I suggest that in this context *wei* should express both meanings, as indicated in Hua’s confession (1). This expression embodies Hua’s creed, because his self-loathing for not being powerful enough to shield Lian from psychological and physical trauma drives him to an unbeatable condition.

- (1) 我的心上人, 是个勇敢的金枝玉叶的贵人。他救过我的命, 我从很小的时候就仰望着他。但我更想追上他, 为他成为更好

更强的人。虽然，他可能都不太记得我，我们甚至没有说过几句话。我想保护他。

My beloved is a brave, distinguished person. He saved my life, so I've been admiring him since I was a child. But what I want more is to keep pace with him and become a better and stronger man because of and for him. He probably doesn't even remember me, because we haven't spoken to each other much, but I want to protect him.

(*Tianguan*. Chapter 241. Trans. mine)

It is worth mentioning that apart from becoming 'more powerful', Hua becomes a 'better' person because of and for Lian. Hua's weapon is a sentient scimitar forged with his own eye – when he is incarcerated with a group of mortals, he chooses to dig out his own eye to forge a weapon instead of sacrificing another's life, even if he can easily do so, because he is impinged upon by Lian's benevolence (Chapter 237).

Additionally, Hua also takes an oath to Lian upon the latter becomes an immortal, namely, 'I'm always your most devoted believer' (我永远是你最忠诚的信徒), in both romantic and religious senses. This oath occurs in an array of scenes throughout the plot line, and acts as Hua's last line before he perishes for the third time (Chapter 244). A similar expression is 'to die for you is my supreme honour' (为你战死是我至高无上的荣耀) (Chapter 181), which is employed by Hua to reduce Lian's sense of guilt for causing him to become a vulnerable wandering spirit. It is noteworthy that these expressions might have been inspired by vampire narratives and Western fantasies.³ In this sense, there is an affinity between *Tianguan* and a subcategory of *danmei* fiction on Jinjiang, which is dubbed 'Western' (*xifang* 西方). Moreover, in *danmei* fiction under a subgenre called 'quick transmigration' (*kuaichuan* 快穿), storylines regarding Western knighthood and religion are prevalently deployed (see WANG 2021a for more detailed discussions of the subgenre). Having said that, this hypothesis does not invalidate the argument that *Tianguan* is consistent with the 'Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School' and *wuxia* discourse (see below for detailed discussions).

Another significant aspect of the relationship between Lian and Hua is unreserved mutual trust. There is a sentimental custom in the Ghost Realm that a ghost could present their beloved one with their ashes, which are their fatal weakness. As soon as Hua finds Lian after eight hundred years, he disguises his ashes as an ordinary gift and gives it to Lian without hesitation or explanation. As for Lian, even after languishing in glumness and loneliness for hundreds

³ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing it out.

of years, he unconditionally believes Hua's promises. For instance, since Hua vanishes into the air in the ultimate battle, other divinities all assume his decease, yet Lian insists to wait for him, as Hua has promised to return (Chapter 241–243).

3. Defiance against cliché-ridden *danmei* narration

There is no denying the fact that some *danmei* novels exhibit clichés and limitations. Female readers of contemporary online literature, including *danmei*, are impinged upon by Confucian ethics, rituals and precepts prevailing in pre-modern Chinese society. Although anathematising the persecution and oppression imposed on women by Confucianism, web readers might quote Confucian canons to rationalise the predicaments and travails of female characters and advocate traditional familial hierarchy as a blatant sell out to the patriarchal ethos (FENG 2013). Moreover, since a heteronormative order is affirmed in reality and fantasy, some Chinese 'rotten girls' tend to consume *danmei* through a heteronormative frame. As a consequence, this cohort of 'rotten' readers prefer *danmei* fiction entailing: 1) societal and familial approval, e.g. marriage/wedding and male pregnancy/childbirth; 2) everlasting romantic relationships; 3) traditional masculine-feminine binarism and gender stereotypes in appearance, demeanour, personality and social roles; and 4) absence of 'reversible' penetrant-penetrated sexual roles (ZHAO and MADILL 2018). In terms of the fourth point, to be more specific, *danmei* narratives are prone to a conspicuous bipartite dichotomy between 'seme' *gong* 攻 (top; insertive) and 'uke' *shou* 受 (bottom; receptive) roles, which defines a dominant penetrator and the uke as a passive receiver featured by physical and emotional androgyny (YANG and XU 2017b).

Nevertheless, Moxiang does not ingratiate themselves with *danmei* consumers by producing clichéd plots pertaining to quasi-heterosexual relationships. Before discussing three characteristics of Moxiang's writing, it is worth mentioning that there are other well-established *danmei* writers whose works do not abound with formulaic depictions or plots, exemplified by Priest, Huaishang 淮上, Xizixu 西子绪, Qijingnanqu 骑鲸南去, etc. In particular, I have analysed the exemplary novels composed by a male *danmei* writer, pseudonymised as Feitianyexiang 非天夜翔, whose works are celebrated for their innovative themes, magnificent imagination, literary and historical allusions, as well as elaborate portrayals (see WANG 2021b for detailed discussions).

First, as specified by a tag on Jinjiang, Hua in *Tianguan* assumes the seme role and Lian the uke role, whereas there is void of masculine-feminine binarism, in that neither of the protagonists is effeminate. In pre-modern China, male-male same-sex intimacy and eroticism were comprehensively tolerated and even embraced during the vast majority of historical periods (RUAN and TSAI 1987, HINSCH 1990, LOUIE 2002, 2012, LI 2009). Classical Chinese literature is replete with depictions of feminised boys and men assuming the penetrated role, such as masterpieces ‘The Plum in a Golden Vase’ (*Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅) (CHENG and LEI 2014, ZHANG 2014) and ‘The Story of the Stone’ (*Hong lou meng* 红楼梦) (ZHU 1986, EDWARDS 1990, 2001, ZHOU 1993, 1998). In a contemporary context, the entire Chinese fandom, including *danmei* fangirls, currently exhibit an overwhelming fascination with effeminate-looking, delicate-featured and makeup-clad young male idols who are collectively labelled as ‘little fresh meat’ (*xiao xian rou* 小鲜肉). These idols reflect a new type of male aesthetics, viz. ‘soft masculinity’ that signifies the increasing (purchase) power of women and a shift from consuming female sexuality to the ‘consumption of sexualised men’ (JUNG 2009, 2011: 39, LOUIE 2012, HU 2017, LUO 2017, WANG 2017, ZHOU 2017, LI 2020). In contemporary China, heterosexual women, who are surmised to constitute the vast majority of the ‘rotten’ fandom (LOUIE 2012, YI 2013, XU and YANG 2014, SHAO 2016, ZHOU and LI 2016, ZENG 2017), typically demonstrate preference for men with feminised faces, in stark contrast to homosexual men’s preference (LIU and WU 2016, ZHENG 2019). As a consequence, there is a multitude of *danmei* writers who ingratiate themselves with fan readers by means of creating feminised uke and even seme characters, as epitomised by narratives with tags of ‘sissy uke’ (*niangpao shou* 娘炮受), ‘maiden seme’ (*shaonü gong* 少女攻), ‘soft cute seme’ (*ruanmeng gong* 软萌攻), etc (see WANG 2021c for detailed discussions).

Nonetheless, in *Tianguan*, Moxiang does not characterise either protagonist with effeminacy, malleability or vulnerability. Although Lian assumes the uke role that is stereotypically presumed to be more enfeebled, he demonstrates robust personality, adamant will and positive mentality, thereby being competent to morally support (Chapter 31) and physically protect (Chapter 136) the seme. Under most circumstances, Lian and Hua are equally formidable and well matched in perseverance and unremittingness. In this sense, *Tianguan* can be regarded as a work under a subcategory dubbed ‘strong-strong’ (*qiang-qiang* 强强) that depicts both seme and uke characters as being mature, independent and resilient, as opposed to the prevalent strong seme × weak uke bipartite dichotomy (see WANG 2021b, 2021d for detailed discussions). There is no denying the fact that instead of ‘versatile’ (*hugong* 互攻. Lit. ‘mutual

seme'), *Tianguan* accords with the conventional seme-uke dyad that is adopted by the vast majority of *danmei* narratives on Jinjiang.⁴ In stark contrast to the Western slash, which is characterised by versatility (XIAO 2018), *danmei* fiction is prone to manifest a conspicuous, non-reversible bipartite dichotomy between seme and uke characters, which tends to stereotype the latter as being physically and emotionally feminine and weak. This stigma is partially impinged upon by conventions of Japanese BL works (YANG and XU 2017b), and it is censured for complying with a patriarchal gender hierarchy and a heteronormative framework (PAGLIASSOTTI 2010, ZHANG 2016, ZHAO and MADILL 2018). Notwithstanding its conventional seme-uke dyad, *Tianguan*, as a work manifesting salient 'strong-strong' elements, is commendable in terms of characterisation.

Additionally, although enjoying beautiful male characters in BL has become formulaic and clichéd (OMOTO 2015), the two protagonists created by Moxiang are not featured by their flawless beauty. In *Tianguan*, Hua's right eye is covered by a black blindfold (Chapter 36), and Lian is always in austere garments and an old grass hat (Chapter 244). There is no denying the fact that being a fully-fledged literary genre, *danmei* indeed encompasses relatively newly-emerged subcategories that do not entail protagonists with impeccable demeanour.⁵ For instance, a profusion of Jinjiang *danmei* narratives are tagged as having 'disabled seme/uke' (*canji gong/shou* 残疾攻/受) or 'wheelchair seme/uke' (*lunyi gong/shou* 轮椅攻/受). The fact that the two protagonists in *Tianguan* do not possess perfect or androgynous appearance is in line with fiction composed by the male writer Feitianyexiang. Some characters in Feitianyexiang's fiction do not accord with stereotypical *danmei* representation, in that they are predominantly depicted as being stallion-like and having bulging muscles and a dark complexion (see WANG 2021b for detailed discussions). In some of Feitianyexiang's novels, the protagonists do not even have decent clothing or personal hygiene, not to mention 'beauty'. For instance, in his 2015 novel entitled 'Training announcement of level-one state registered exorcists' (*Guojia yiji zhuce qumoshi shanggang peixun tongzhi* 国家一级注册驱魔师上岗培训通知), the seme protagonist is described as an impoverished young man with greasy hair and accumulated grime behind his ears (Chapter 1). Such realistic depictions of imperfect protagonists can also be attested from 'Six accounts of life' (*Fusheng liuji* 浮生六记) by Nankangbaiqi 南康白起, which is arguably the author's semi-autobiography.

⁴ Although versatile narratives only occupy a small proportion of *danmei* fiction on Jinjiang, there are writers who are famed for this subgenre and have legions of devoted fan readers, exemplified by a writer pseudonymised as Wuzhe 巫哲.

⁵ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing it out.

Second, there is no male pregnancy or childbearing portrayal in *Tianguan* to represent the completeness of a patriarchal family with male heirs, or similar acts such as child adoption, pet raising and surrogacy that frequently appear in *danmei* works. In contemporary China, a *danmei* subgenre called ‘childbearing writing’ (*shengzi wen* 生子文) that features male pregnancy and childbirth is increasingly visible, as illustrated by the expanding amount of such works on Jinjiang and related online discussions (TIAN 2015). In narratives under the category of ‘childbearing writing’, feminised uke characters are depicted as being able to deliver offspring, predominantly male heirs, though the biological feasibility is mostly left unexplained. I postulate that analogous to the strong seme × weak uke pattern, childbearing storylines also encapsulate heteronormative norms (PAGLIASSOTTI 2010, ZHANG 2016, ZHAO and MADILL 2018), and they are even more typical than the seme-uke dyad. Furthermore, although ‘rotten’ producers and consumers are construed and/or self-claimed to be defiant, their production and consumption of narratives concerning male offspring are consistent with a Confucian precept of filial piety and China’s immemorial, infamous and irresistible son preference that is inextricably intertwined with filial piety, ancestral worship and agricultural civilisation (HWANG 1999, GUSTAFSSON and LI 2000, CHAN and TAN 2004, GE and ZENG 2011, GUO and YAN 2015). Moreover, in *Tianguan*, Lian and Hua never have a wedding ceremony that signifies social acceptance in some *danmei* fiction, which further indicates *Tianguan*’s defiance against conventional *danmei* discourse, rather than compliance with it.

Third, *Tianguan* does not contain explicit sexual depictions. BL’s homoerotic representation of beautiful men allows women to express emerging sexual identities without subjugating themselves to oppressive hegemonic paradigms of sex and gender (HARTLEY 2015). As consumers of sexual fantasy, female readers demonstrate sexual desires via self-expression and performance, which means homoerotic content is essentially ‘pleasure-oriented’ for female consumers and pornographic scenes enable their autonomous pleasure-seeking impulse (KANEDA 2007, GALBRAITH 2015, NAGAIKE and AOYAMA 2015, OTOMO 2015). Nonetheless, since 2014, Jinjiang has been under surveillance and proscribed to expurgate explicit depictions of sexual encounters. Therefore, a ‘stricter-than-government’ self-censorship standard has been issued by Jinjiang, which proscribes ‘any depiction of body parts below the neck’ (YANG and XU 2017a: 174, WANG 2019, ZHENG 2019). To accommodate readers while simultaneously circumventing state and Jinjiang censorship, a number of *danmei* writers opt to publish the main text with Jinjiang, yet take refuge at Archive of Our Own – on this non-profit, open-source online repository for transformative works, Jinjiang writers post erotic scenes for their

readership without charge. Additionally, there is a variety of circumvention strategies, such as metaphor, code-switching and satire, which are adopted by *danmei* writers to circumnavigate Jinjiang's stringent self-censorship (see WANG 2020a for detailed discussions). *Tianguan*, however, does not contain graphic descriptions regarding homosexual intercourse, which might fail to accommodate a certain cohort of 'rotten' readers.

In terms of everlasting romantic relationships, although the two protagonists indeed reflect this formulaic plot, the author deploys other characters' stories to convey that 'forever is never possible' (永远是永远都不可能的) (Chapter 242) and 'all feasts come to an end' (天下无不散之宴席) (Chapter 241). For instance, a strong-willed female general is obsessed with a libertine, so she betrays her own country to ingratiate herself with him and breaks her own legs as moral coercion. The libertine takes her in but refuses to marry her, so she commits suicide to make him guilty and becomes a demon slaughtering happy brides out of jealousy (Chapter 11). After hundreds of years of entanglements, she finally reconciles with herself and disappears for reincarnation without a word (Chapter 242). Another paradigm concerns an aristocrat who is reduced to prostitution after her country's destruction. She falls in love with a frequenter and is impregnated with his son, but in order not to encumber him, she conceals the truth and leaves him. After the frequenter becomes a deity and finds her, she leaves again with her son, so as to maintain her final dignity and a decent recollection (Chapter 242).

Tianguan is also featured by an encyclopedic portrayal of the trials and tribulations of various characters. The protagonists in *Tianguan* are by no means single-faceted, flawless role models, as in so-called 'feel-good writing' (*shuangwen* 爽文). Some Internet-based 'feel-good' fantasies harness the fan economy (SHAO 2018) and enhance reading enjoyment via unrealistic plots and depictions. They are anathematised for explicit exploration of mental lascivious fulfilment, viz. 'lust of the mind' (*yiyin* 意淫) (CHAO 2012: 225, HOCKX 2015: 112). Some male-oriented and male-authored works are dubbed 'stud fiction' (*zhongma wen* 种马文), in that the male protagonists are admired by the female characters for their stud-like virile prowess (FENG 2011, 2013). In patriarchal time-travel 'stud fiction', protagonists are also facilitated by a 'golden finger' (*jin shou zhi* 金手指) that enables them to reverse history and conquer the past and legions of women (FENG 2013, SHAO et al. 2016, SHAO 2019, SHAO 2020). Additionally, web-based literature also abounds with 'Mary Sue' (*Mali Su* 玛丽苏) heroines and 'Gary Stu' (*Jieke Su* 杰克苏) heroes. For instance, in a phenomenal 2015 television serial 'Nirvana in Fire' (*Langya bang* 琅琊榜), the hero is characterised by charisma, intelligence,

righteousness and in particular, attractiveness (SHAO 2016); the original novel was initially published online under the category of *danmei*, and the hero was designed as a ‘Gary Stu’ assuming the uke role (GUAN 2016, WANG 2017).

In *Tianguan*, however, driven by impoverishment, grief and desperation, the protagonist Lian nearly resorts to robbery (Chapter 184) and vengeance (Chapter 191), but he manages to refrain himself due to self-determination and a stranger’s unintentional philanthropic deed. As a noble crown prince, Lian is well-versed in art and music, so he overcomes the shame and deploys a talent for street performances; he used to be waited upon by a myriad of servants, so after he becomes impoverished, the food he has to cook by himself is devastating and only Hua can eat it without being poisoned. These contrasts are supposed to exacerbate Hua’s tragic fate, whereas the author’s depictions render the protagonist multifaceted in a humorous manner. The other protagonist Hua also demonstrates multifacetedness: he treats Lian with utmost care and veneration but is self-abased in front of him; he is passionate about Lian but shows a nonchalant and sometimes indifferent attitude towards others. The author also gives Hua a shortcoming to make this character more real: Hua is adept at virtually everything from fighting to farming and carpentry, whereas his poor handwriting is virtually indecipherable, so although he has tattooed Lian’s name on his arm, the latter does not recognise it.

Apart from the two main characters, there is a wide range of fully fledged characters who embody the complexity of human nature. Significantly, they do not serve as ‘a barrier to the male characters’ developing a relationship’ (BLAIR 2010: 113), tools to accelerate the development of the romantic bond, or ‘cannon fodder’ who are obsessed with protagonists but never get accepted. By contrast, even minor characters in the fiction are imagery-evoking and thought-provoking. A salient property of characters in *Tianguan* is that none of them is mono-faceted: they are enriched by contradictory acts and perplexed emotions, so none of them can be simply summarised in just a few words. Typical examples include a couple who stab Lian in a hope to render their child immune to plague (Chapter 190), a courageous and straightforward martial god who is known for his dread of women and misogyny yet who has an illegitimate son with a prostitute (Chapter 48/242), as well as a short-tempered farmer who shouts obscenities at the downhearted Lian for tripping him over yet later gives Lian a bamboo hat to shelter from the rain as an apologetic gesture, which restores Lian’s faith in human kindness (Chapter 196).

Tianguan is also characterised by humorous depictions that mitigate sorrowful plots and enhance reading pleasure. For instance, the description of a telepathic communication system for heavenly officials bears resemblance to

the ‘group chat’ function of WeChat, a leading social media platform in China. As a deity who is antediluvian in heavenly trends owing to his long banishment in the mortal realm, Lian always shares outdated content such as beautifully composed lyrics and secret know-how to release waist and leg pain (Chapter 13), which reminds readers of their elderly families who struggle to keep up with the topics of younger generations. However, even after hundreds of years’ agony, Lian is still young at heart, in that the password of his private telepathic communication system is ‘just recite *The book of the way* for a thousand times’, which tricks other deities but in reality is just the phrase itself (Chapter 139).

4. Religious ideology: Amalgamation of religions

Tianguan abounds in religious implications and falls into the category of ‘immortality cultivation’ (*xiuxian* 修仙 or *xiuzhen* 修真). As an indigenous Chinese literary genre highlighting magical arts and imaginary worlds, *xiuxian/xiuzhen* is grounded in Chinese culture and religion, especially Daoist (aka Taoist) alchemy. *Xiuxian/xiuzhen* literature in postsocialist China is postsecular, in that it captures the influence of the religious revival since the 1980s on popular culture and challenges the state’s secularisation projects in the 20th century. The postsecularity of ‘superstitious’ fantasies alters the utopian dreams of socialism and deviates from the anti-religious and anti-superstitious ideology in this modern secular country (ZHANG 2020a, 2020b). Correlated with traditional novels and influenced by mass-market Western novels, ‘immortality cultivation’ fantasies do not simply generate reality-escaping and wish-fulfilling reverie. More significantly, they serve as a platform for Chinese readers to orient themselves in a postsocialist, neoliberal capitalist context, by means of enabling them to reconsider the contemporary, Western, triad of religion, science and superstition (NI 2020a). *Xiuxian/xiuzhen* fantasies are enriched by magical transhumanism beyond boundaries of ‘legitimate’ religion and science, thereby inventing a posthuman subject and a utopian world (NI 2020b); Daoist alchemy, in particular, bears resemblance to transhumanist technology in terms of theories and visions (KOHN 2009, 2014).

Although on Jinjiang, *Tianguan* is tagged as *xiuxian/xiuzhen*, I propound that it bears similitude with another illustrious indigenous Chinese genre, i.e. *wuxia* 武侠, which is inextricably intertwined with ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ literature (ZHENG 1984, WONG 2007). Within this terminology, *wu* denotes militaristic and martial qualities, while *xia* denotes ‘chivalry, gallantry, qualities of knighthood and heroism’ (TEO 2009: 2). *Wuxia*, therefore, has been rendered into a diversity of versions, e.g. ‘Chinese knighthood’ (LIU 1967), ‘novels of martial chivalry’ (HUANZHULOUZHU 1991: 7), ‘martial arts heroes’

(To 2019), etc. Modern Chinese *wuxia* literature can be divided into three subcategories, recounting: 1) historical occurrences and their glorification; 2) martial feats and exotic weapons; and 3) immortality and the supernatural (WANG 1988). Significantly, *wuxia* is deeply rooted in the spiritual and ideological mores of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (LI 2011, FU 2012, REHLING 2012). For instance, in *wuxia* fantasies, chivalry functions as an all-inclusive conception appertaining to Confucian ethics. The *wuxia* spirit is also pertinent to ideals such as loyalty, fidelity, charity, trust and peace (DU 1968: 63, TEO 2009: 73–74, 2012), which, I propound, are analogous to the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism, viz. ‘benevolence’ (*ren* 仁), ‘righteousness’ (*yi* 义), ‘propriety’ (*li* 礼), ‘wisdom’ (*zhi* 智) and ‘faithfulness’ (*xin* 信) (CHENG and CHENG 1989: 105, WILKINSON 1996, HUANG 2013), as well as the advocacy of social harmony (*he* 和) (AMES 1991, 2011, NEVILLE 2011, YU 2013, WONG 2020). As mentioned previously, *Tianguan* bears resemblance to ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ literature. This romance-themed genre also manifests religious characteristics, particularly a Confucian configuration of feelings derived from Confucian ethos, e.g. ‘propriety’ (*li* 礼), ‘righteousness’ (*yi* 义), ‘loyalty; patriotism’ (*zhong* 忠) and ‘filial piety’ (*xiao* 孝) (LINK 1977, CHOU 1986, 1991: 54, LEE 2007: 15, TAN 2016).

It is notable that *Tianguan*, as a *xiuzhen/xiuxian* narrative with *wuxia* and ‘Mandarin Duck and Butterfly’ elements, embodies the coexistence of three institutionalised religious credos and practices, viz. indigenous Confucianism and Daoism, as well as Sincised Buddhism of foreign provenance, which illuminates the three-hold division of Chinese religion. In China, there is harmonious condominium of three teachings, which is referred to as ‘the unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism’ (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一), analogous to syncretism. Institutionalised ethics and religious traditions, i.e. Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, along with sub-religions and folk religion (or popular religion, *minjian zongjiao* 民间宗教), have coexisted with a considerable degree of harmony (COHEN 1992: 17–31, TEISER 1996, GENTZ 2011, NORENZAYAN 2016). The extant ideal of *san jiao he yi* can be attested during the Tang (618–907 CE) dynasty (BROOK 1993, GONG and GONG 2010), based on integration of indigenous Confucianism and Daoism with Buddhism that is of foreign origin (FAN and WHITEHEAD 2011, SHAHAR 2013). Notwithstanding divergent canons and liturgies (HUANG 1998, ADLER 2002), the harmonious contemporaneousness of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism is regarded as syncretism. According to a proverb extracted from a 1605 classic ‘Investiture of the gods’ (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演义) (KAO 2002, LU 2011), ‘[t]he three teachings – the gold and cinnabar of Daoism, the relics of Buddhist figures, as well as the Confucian virtues of humanity and

righteousness – are basically one tradition’ (PLOPPER 1926: 16, TEISER 1996: 3, TILAK 2008). Since it first attained embracement in the late Ming (1368–1644) era (DUARA 2008), syncretism has underpinned a construct in which Confucianism is treated as the mainstay, with Daoism and Sinicised Buddhism functioning as branches (HAN 2011, SHAN 2012, SUN 2012).

In *Tianguan*, the dominant religion is Daoism, which accords with the *xiuxian/xiuzhen* genre. The morality-immortality binary dichotomy in the novel is based on a pivotal Daoist notion of ‘ascension’ (*sheng* 升 or *feisheng* 飞升), viz. attainment of official positions in the heavens. Western ascension is established in Shangqing scriptures and functions as the essential idea of following mystical literature, so this connotation becomes a synonym of Daoist realisation (KOHN 1991: 7, 76). Moreover, in *Tianguan*, there are Four Great Calamities: 1) Black Water Submerging Boats, who exhibits a tendency of gluttony (Chapter 91); 2) Green Light Wandering Nights, who is featured by ferociousness and bloodthirstiness (Chapter 49); 3) White Garment Cursing World, who tempts people into evil (Chapter 86); and 4) Blood Rain Reaching Flowers (i.e. Hua), who is chastised by hypocrites for harbouring ghosts (Chapter 137). Given their one-to-one matched colours, I presume that these four demon lords of the ghost realm are created based on the propitious Daoist ‘Four Symbols’ (*sixiang* 四象), viz. Black Tortoise of the North (Xuanwu 玄武), Azure Dragon of the East (Qinglong 青龙), White Tiger of the West (Baihu 白虎) and Vermilion Bird of the South (Zhuque 朱雀) (BATES 2007: 108). The attributes of the Four Great Calamities, however, are pertinent to figures collectively referred to as ‘Four Perils’ (*sixiong* 四凶), viz. ‘Chaotic’ (Hundun 混沌), ‘Bizarre’ (Qiongqi 穷奇), ‘Mischievous’ (Taowu 罔机) and ‘Avaricious’ (Taotie 饕餮) (ZDIC.NET 2022a). I posit that the contradictory yet harmonious combination of both auspicious and menacing implications in the Four Great Calamities embodies the integration and inseparability of *yin* and *yang* as quintessential Daoist construals (AMES 2001, KIRKLAND 2004: 221, CHAN 2010).

I posit that *Tianguan* does not simply contain fundamental Daoist concepts, in that Daoist culture is implied throughout the novel in the form of religious allusions. For instance, a hint auguring the bond between Lian and Hua is coral bead: it is Lian’s earring worn for the ceremonial performance, and when he catches the young Hua falling from the city wall with his arms, the latter takes the bead and wears it for eight hundred years. According to a Daoist treatise *Taishanglaojun Neiriyong Miaojing* (太上老君内日用妙经) (circa 1046–771 BCE), coral is one of the seven Daoist propitious treasures representing different human organs, and it corresponds to heart specifically (BENN 2019:

185), so the plot can be interpreted in a sense that Hua stole Lian's heart as his predestined partner when he was a child. Another example is an immortal's pseudonym Fuyao 扶摇 that is derived from a Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* 庄子 during the Warring States (475–221 BCE) period. In Chapter 'Wandering beyond' (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遥游), an elephantine primordial birth called Peng 鹏 is able to rock and rise ninety thousand leagues upwards (抟扶摇而上者九万里) (COUTINHO 2016: 69). The expression *fuyao* in *Zhuangzi* originally denotes strong upwards wind and is later employed to metaphorically describe expeditious promotion in official careers (ZDIC.NET 2022b). This connotation accords with the situation of the relevant god in *Tianguan*, as he used to be a low-ranking servant of Lian, but soon after his treachery of his master, he successfully becomes a martial god overseeing the southwest of China with more than seven thousand temples dedicated to him. Furthermore, *Tianguan* abounds in expressions indicating its Daoist setting, exemplified by 'genuine lord' (*zhenjun* 真君) as a title for Daoist divinities, 'Daoist friend' (*daoyou* 道友) as a way to address peer religious practitioners, as well as 'Daoist robe' (*daopao* 道袍), 'Daoist master' (*daozhang* 道长), 'Daoist temple' (*daoguan* 道观), etc.

In *Tianguan*, Buddhism, as a Sinicised religion, coexists with the indigenous Daoism. Two representative precepts of Buddhist theology are reincarnation and karmic retribution. Reincarnation, namely rebirth or transmigration, denotes a construct of 'taking on the flesh again' and cyclical existence, viz. a process that a living being starts a new life in a disparate physical body or species after each biological decease (REASONER 2010, BURLEY 2013, NAGARAJ et al. 2013). According to Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist credence, it takes forty-nine days for unresolved karmas to locate a new home, during which the remains of a person take a ghostly form and re-enter the realm of samsara (CHAPPLE 2017). In order to enable or accelerate the process of reincarnation, a ceremonial performance needs to be conducted to facilitate souls, especially those of premature death, to find peace (COHEN 1992). Reincarnation is implied in *Tianguan*, as in Example (2) involving the conceptions of rebirth and afterlife.

- (2) 半月国人极重丧葬礼仪, 他们相信, 死者逝去时, 尸体是什么样子, 他们来世就会是什么样子。

The Banyue people took funeral rituals extremely seriously, because they believed that the appearance of the corpse would be that of the deceased when he or she was reborn.'

(*Tianguan*. Chapter 26. Trans. mine)

In terms of retribution, or reciprocity, it can be divided into two subcategories, namely, ethical retribution that falls within the purview of human beings, and divine retribution dominated by divinities with supernatural power (CAMPANY 1996: 367–394, ZHANG 2013). The Chinese concept of *baoying* 报应 ‘retribution’ is karmic, triggered by the law of causation in Buddhist philosophy. Punishment and reward in causal relationships are realised either in the current life or in the subsequent life or lives, and they can be conducted via agency as an instrument, e.g. the ten Buddhist hells (CHEN 1973: 110–111, KAO 1989, HELLER 2017). In *Tianguan*, there is a karmic construal that sinfulness and abhorrent wrongdoings will be anathematised and imprecated in a form of contrition. The narrative is also enriched by an intuition of immanent justice that abhorrent deeds ineluctably beget odious aftermaths in the fullness of time, and they may rebound on sinners’ kith and kin. The tenet of retribution is typically epitomised by two brothers Master Water and Master Wind. To rescue his cursed brother from doom, Master Water exchanges his lugubrious fate with an innocent mortal, leading to the perishing of the latter’s entire family. His brother, however, ascends as Master Wind. After the victim becomes Black Water Submerging Boats and forces punitive justice, Master Water pleads for mercy for his brother and volunteers to be decapitated as repentance. As an innocent young man of a compassionate and cheerful personality, Master Wind did not know his brother’s ignominious misconduct, whereas after Black Water’s vengeance, he voluntarily becomes a disabled mortal beggar and lives in torment, thereby atoning the sin on behalf of Master Water (Chapter 124–125).

Moreover, the harmonious unification of religious teachings is also reflected by the Confucian mores of ‘benevolence’ (*ren* 仁) and ‘filial piety’ (*xiao* 孝) in *Tianguan*. The anthropological source of ethically evaluative sentiments of imperial China is adumbrated in Confucian classics, exemplified by ‘Analects’ (*Lunyu* 论语) (circa 5th–3rd c. BCE) and ‘Mencius’ (*Mengzi* 孟子) (circa 4th c. BCE). Benevolence, or human-heartedness, is regarded as the cardinal virtue that applies without being restricted by social hierarchy. Benevolence is fundamentally the paradigmatic virtue or ethical domain of the ruling class and Confucian ‘gentlemen’ (*junzi* 君子), which is deployed to govern through moral suasion, instead of brute force (VAN NORDEN 2004, WANG 2004, GODIN 2011: 19–21, KIM and CSIKSZENTMIHALYI 2014, HARBSMEIER 2015, CSIKSZENTMIHALYI 2020). As for the virtue of filial piety, it is construed as the core pillar of the Confucian ethical system. Being role-based, filial piety specifies moral norms that encompass material and emotional aspects of not only parent-child and authority-subordination relationships, but also societal structure, ethical requirements and power dynamics (HO 1986, IKELS 2004:

187–191, YEH and BEDFORD 2019, BEDFORD and YEH 2020). Filial piety serves as the source of one’s construction of personality and personal identity, as well as one’s service-mindedness to their superiors whose authority is unconditional and conceptually independent of moral excellence (YAO 1995, HARBSMEIER 2015). Under the palpable Confucian moral codes and precepts, filial impiety was the most abominable form of crime in pre-modern China (RUSKOLA 1994). In *Tianguan*, Lian demonstrates filial piety in a form of veneration and obedience not only to his parents in a familial context, but also to his imperial tutor and the Heavenly Emperor as his superordinates in the social hierarchy. Additionally, the reciprocal concern and responsibility between Master Water and Master Wind epitomise another Confucian creed regarding brotherhood, namely, ‘fraternal reverence/love’ (*ti* 悌), which appertains to filial piety and serves as one of the five fundamental human relationships, viz. the ‘five constant relationships’ (*wu lun* 五伦) (HSÜ 1970, FANG 2012, LEE 2012: 88, TAN 2018).

In addition to orthodoxies and ethics of the three institutionalised teachings, *Tianguan* also embraces mythology pertaining to folk religion. For instance, I posit that the archetype of a jinx monster in Chapter 103 is derived from an anthology of folk religion anecdotes, which is entitled ‘In search of the supernatural: the written record’ (*Sou shen ji* 搜神记) and compiled by a court historian Gan Bao 干宝 circa 350 CE (DEWOSKIN and CRUMP 1996: xxv, XIE 2014). In this ‘strange writing’ (*zhiguai* 志怪) collection, a rat with occult powers is recorded as being able to foresee and announce one’s date of decease, which is analogous to the baleful jinx monster in *Tianguan*. Another paradigm is the Lord of Land (*Tudi shen* 土地神 or *Tudi gong* 土地公), who is among the most ancient divinities within the pantheon of folk religion (STEVENS 2001: 68, HODOUS 2020). In Chapter 246 of *Tianguan*, Lian breaks some trees out of fury, so the Lord of Land immediately emerges from the earth and begs Lian not to vandalise his belongings. The plot regarding the Lord of Land is consistent with his status in folk religion, namely a low-ranking deity who serves as a patron of denizens, flora and fauna (YANG 1967: 97, HALL 2009), agricultural harvest (FEUCHTWANG 2001) and commercial success (DELL’ORTO 2002: 149) in local communities.

I have propounded that the overarching rationale accounting for the contemporaneous of religious theologies is attributed to the practicality and pragmatism of the Chinese nation (WANG 2020b). Such attributes are illuminated in *Tianguan*. As can be seen from Example (3), villagers pray in a temple, without even caring which divinity they are praying to. I postulate that such pragmatism encapsulated in this *danmei* work is in line with the

pragmatic orthodoxy prevailing in contemporary China. For instance, there is an illustrious statement correlated with the reforms and opening up of the late 1970s, namely ‘It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice’ (不管黑猫白猫, 捉到老鼠就是好猫), which was proposed by the Chinese communist leader Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (CHAI 2003, YU 2014, PANTSOV and LEVINE 2015: 222, BUCKLE 2018). Additionally, as can be seen from Example (4), upon finding out that the divinity cannot satisfy their requirements, worshippers annihilate sacred shrines, without apprehension about their profanity. I posit that this example in *Tianguan* embodies the atheist ideology advocated in contemporary China (LEUNG 2005, XIE et al. 2017, LI et al. 2018), as well as quotidian people’s subjectivity.

- (3) 村民们虽然压根都不知道这观里供的是哪路神仙, 但纷纷强烈要求在此上一炷香, 反正不管什么仙, 统统都是仙, 拜一拜总归不会有什么坏处。

The villagers did not even know which god the temple was devoted to, yet they all insisted to burn an incense stick here – anyway, no matter which god he was, a god was still a god, and praying to gods would never do any harm.

(*Tianguan*. Chapter 16. Trans. mine)

- (4) 原来, 他们奉为天神的太子, 根本没有他们想象得那么完美强大... 满身伤痛的百姓愤怒地涌入太子殿中, 推倒了神像, 烧毁了神殿。从那以后, 一位守护平安的武神便消失了, 而一位招来灾祸的瘟神诞生了。人们说你是神你就是神, 说你是屎你就是屎, 说你是什么你就得是什么。本来如此。

It turned out that the crown prince they had been worshipping was not as formidable or perfect as they had imagined ... Furious people covered in wounds stampeded into the crown prince’s shrines, tore down his statues and burned his shrines. From then on, a martial god blessing peace faded away, while a demonic god who begot disasters loomed. If people said you were a god, you were a god; if they said you were shit, you were shit. Whatever people said you were, that would be what you become. It had always been like this.

(*Tianguan*. Chapter 1. Trans. mine)

5. Conclusion

To summarise, online *danmei* novels deserve more critical and scholarly attention, as exemplified by *Tianguan*. *Tianguan* not only portrays romance, but also manifests the complexity of human nature via a range of multifaceted

characters. Although *Tianguan* has not been classified into the category of serious literature, it avoids clichéd *danmei* plots pertaining to quasi-heterosexual relationships. To be more specific, *Tianguan* does not deploy three cliché-ridden elements prevailing in *danmei* fiction. First, there is void of androgyny of seme and/or uke roles, which strives to constitute a masculine-feminine bipartite dichotomy. Second, there is void of male pregnancy or childbearing portrayal, which embodies the completeness of a patriarchal family with male heirs. Third, there is void of explicit homoerotic depiction accommodating female readers' sexual desire and pleasure-seeking impulse. Furthermore, *Tianguan* embodies Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist precepts and teachings, as well as the harmonious contemporaneous of the three institutionalised religions and folk religion. Therefore, the popularity of *Tianguan* can indicate the prevailing theistic belief and *san jiao he yi* ideal among writers and readers of Internet *danmei* literature.

There is no denying the fact that the humorous, insightful depictions and religious tropes are not exclusive to *Tianguan*, and there is a multitude of other commendable *danmei* narratives on Jinjiang. Nonetheless, the artistic value, including narrative configuration, character design and theme construction, along with the ideological bent of *Tianguan*, render it more exceptional than its cliché-ridden counterparts. The hermeneutic scrutiny of *Tianguan* also exhibits the significance and value of online *danmei* literature as a prominent category of contemporary Chinese literature.

Abbreviations

- ACG anime, comics and games.
 BL Boys Love, a literature genre.
 Jinjiang JINJIANG LITERATURE CITY.

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