Interakcijski rituali kao queercoding u kineskim serijama

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Abstract

Due to mainland China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT)'s restrictions regarding portrayals of same-gender attraction in media, creators who still wish to portray queer relationships must find ways to do so within the confines of strict yet vague censorship rules by relying on numerous queercoding techniques. This thesis' primary focus is queercoding within live-action series (also commonly referred to as dramas), specifically those that are based on webnovels within the *dānměi* (BL) genre, with the aim to showcase how interaction rituals are used as a form of queercoding. To accomplish this, I have carried out a narrative discourse analysis, using arguably the most popular *dānměi* drama in both mainland China and internationally, 陈情令 (*Chén Qíng Lìng*) *The Untamed* (2019), as a case study (examples from other series are also noted where relevant). The most attention has been paid to interaction rituals played out between the series' protagonists, though those occurring between the creator and audience, such as the use of non-diegetic music and literary references, are briefly touched on as well. The analyzed rituals include the use of different names (名 *míng*, 字 *zì*, and 号 *hào*) and titles; the importance of food and drink; the use of the term 知己 *zhījǐ* ("the one who knows me"); forms of physical intimacy that are permitted within the confines of censorship; and the diegetic use of music, specifically the series' theme song.

Keywords: queercoding, interaction rituals, Chinese dramas, danmei, censorship

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Introduction

Portrayals of same-gender desire, both explicit and implicit, can be found in imperial and modern Chinese art such as "local operas, paintings, poetry, novels, and (Republican) films" (Zhao, 2022), as well as contemporary Chinese art, regardless of the country's shifting attitudes towards queerness[1].

Surviving texts from imperial China largely concern emperors, the nobility, and the gentry, as well as sex workers, and almost exclusively focus on men, and as such the degree to which they can provide an accurate image of wider societal views of queerness is up for debate[2]. In general, however, evidence suggests that romantic and sexual relationships between men were not condemned as long as the parties involved did not wholly forsake the Confucian ideal of getting married and siring children to continue the family line[3]; extramarital relationships also did not appear to be condemned (Hinsch, 1990). Intimacy between women, however, was "often only tolerated as a stimulant of heteromarital harmony and heterosexual male sexual fantasy (Sang, 2003, as cited in Zhao, 2022).

During the Republican Era, modernization and westernization brought on changing attitudes toward same-gender relationships, as "in an era of intense nationalism and rapid

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[1] Terms related to the LGBT community have different connotations in English and Chinese, as well as regional and social differences within each language; e.g. the English word "queer" has a long history of stigmatization, while its Chinese transliteration "酷儿 *kù'ér*" "takes on meanings of freedom, fashion and carnival" (Bao, 2018). For more on the topic, see Bao (2018) *Queer Comrades*.

[2] Not to mention that "imperial China" covers centuries-worth of history with shifting geo- and sociopolitical situations that impacted social norms and laws.

[3] While writings about sexual and romantic relationships between men from this time were not devoid of criticism, the criticism in question rarely had to do with same-gender attraction per se. Many such texts concern the relationships between emperors and their male favorites, which historians and officials of the time criticized due to the amount of power a favorite was granted on account of being the emperor's lover. Favorites both held influential positions in court and had permission to enter the inner palace, which gave them privileges not afforded to other officials nor to the women residing in the inner palace. A favorite's safety also depended entirely on the emperor's affections, as well as the emperor being alive, a fact that certain historians sympathized with in their records. One such example is Mizi Xia, Duke Ling of Wei's lover, who had taken the ruler's carriage without permission—an act punishable by amputation—but Duke Ling of Wei had praised him for it since he had done so in order to visit his ailing mother; however, after losing interest in him, the Duke accused Mizi Xia of a crime, even citing the former incident as a previous offense. Another example is Dong Xian, who had been given the imperial seals and declared emperor by the dying Emperor Ai of Han, but his political enemies forced him to commit suicide instead of letting him ascend the throne. Favoritism became less common with the rise of bureaucracy in later dynasties (Hinsch, 1990).

state-building, educated groups were convinced that the key to restoring the strength of the nation and achieving modernity was proper control of sexual desire" (Kramer, 2014). At this time, various Western texts on sexuality were also translated into Chinese, with Havelock Ellis' medical theory of homosexuality, which "dichotomized sexual normality and deviation", becoming the dominant text on the topic[4]. The Maoist period promoted a "hegemonic model of reproductive sex within monogamous heterosexual marriage" while homosexuality was "more or less seen as a crime because of the medical discourse and the compulsory marriage ideology" (ibid.). During the reform period, policy changes led to sex being viewed as an act of pleasure rather than serving a purely reproductive role; monogamous heterosexual marriage was still considered the ideal but public discussions of sexuality became more prevalent. Visible gay communities slowly emerged in the 1990s, "along with social, legal and economic developments", with most discussions happening within the context of HIV and AIDS prevention. In 1997 homosexuality was no longer considered a crime of hooliganism, and in 2001, it was removed from the list of mental illnesses (ibid.).

Since the 2000s, "China's media censorship system has undergone a series of structural changes, and official policies regarding homosexuality in mass media have been regularly revised. To date, however, explicit portrayals of homosexual topics are generally either censored or carefully regulated in official, legal, educational, and media discourses" (Zhao, 2022). The government claims to adopt a "3-no" policy when it comes to gay culture: "no approval, no disapproval, and no promotion" (Kramer, 2014; Zhao, 2022). In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) issued new requirements for media, forbidding the "express[ion] or display [of] abnormal sexual relations or sexual behavior, such as incest, homosexuality, perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence", as well as the promot[ion of] unhealthy views of marriage and relationships, including extramarital affairs, one-night stands, and sexual freedom" (Zhao, 2022).

The language used in official policies is "deliberately ambiguous, vague, and imprecise, which not only grants the censors more space to exercise their power but also effectively

[4] Kang (2010) argues that modern Western sexology was able to gain a footing in China during the Republican Era because the changing understandings of homosexuality in China resembled those in the West. It is worth questioning, however, how much these changing perceptions might have been influenced by the growing Western presence and influence in China prior to the translation of the texts in question.

encourages self-censorship amongst artists and media producers" (Wang, 2019). However, it also provides a certain amount of room for tacitly queer media to still exist and garner a large audience in spite of restrictive state censorship, thus creating what Wang (ibid.) calls "a battlefield of strategic compliance and resistance".

The most popular and widely available form of gay media in mainland China are works within the *dānměi* genre—the Chinese name for Boys' Love (BL)[5], which centers on romantic relationships between men[6] and which originated in Japan in the 1970s. In the latter half of the decade, it was imported into Taiwan before making its way to Hong Kong and mainland China by the late 1990s; over the next several years, it became a major genre of web literature in mainland China, relying "on the Internet for dissemination and on relatively well-educated young women as its fan base", and has since become a business (Feng, 2009; Zhang, 2016). The popularity of *dānměi* webnovels, as well as the rise in their adaptations in recent years[7], show that "the market economy acknowledges the rising female purchasing power in new era China, yet the producing house must find a way to detour around the tight state control to communicate with their target audience" (Wang, 2019).

Because it is generally considered to be a genre created by and intended for (heterosexual) women, BL is sometimes argued to be separate from queer media, and some fan circles draw a sharp line between the two. However, as Tian (2020) argues, "BL should always be read queerly", a notion I am inclined to agree with as the exclusion of BL from the sphere of queer media poses several issues. Firstly, it supposes a definition of queer media rooted in the creator's identity rather than the content—a thorny notion considering creators of BL content, the overwhelming majority of whom publish pseudonymously, would need to be open about their gender identity and sexual orientation lest their works get mischaracterized. A cre-

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[5] I will be using "BL" when talking about the genre in broad terms, regardless of the country of origin, and "*dānměi*" when talking about Chinese BL, though quotes from other sources may not align with this.

[6] The female equivalent is Girls' Love (GL) or 百合 *bǎihé*. It is not as popular as *dānměi*, despite novels in both genres largely being published on the same literature sites such as Jinjiang Literature City and Changpei, and live-action adaptations are exceedingly rare, while original series are by and large independently produced.

[7] This is not limited only to live-action series, though that will be the focus of this research; audio dramas, audiobooks, animated series, and *mànhuà* (comics) are also common avenues for adaptations, and popular novels will usually be adapted into multiple forms.

ator's identity also does not inherently indicate how "good" or "accurate" the representation in their work will be (nor are these qualifiers objective in the first place, as no one social group is a monolith). Therefore, creating a separation based on the identity of the author serves little purpose beyond creating a potential risk of harm.

Secondly, such a notion completely erases the existence of BL creators and fans who are not heterosexual women. Since its inception, the BL genre has garnered a diverse audience that includes members of the LGBT community of all genders, as well as heterosexual men, both domestically and abroad, though everyone other than heterosexual women tends to be underrepresented in existing BL scholarship (Feng, 2009; Madill, Zhao, 2020). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that BL audiences are more diverse than currently available research indicates. Most BL scholarship also tends to lean into the idea of BL as heterosexual women's fantasy, focusing on the audience's interest in the more erotic aspects of the genre—a worthwhile pursuit, but one that tends to disregard other reasons audiences might find the genre appealing. Due to its only real requirement being the prominent existence of a gay romance, BL overlaps with many other genres and offers a wide array of stories—from coming-of-age contemporary to historical fantasy to far-future science fiction, and everything in between—which can draw readers in both because of the inclusion of gay romance in the types of stories that rarely feature such representation, or regardless of it.

And thirdly, the notion that a genre whose defining feature is gay romance is not considered queer media only aids the fetishization that the genre's critics point out instead of actually addressing it. BL is commonly framed as "a way for young women to feel comfortable in exploring their own sexual desires without feeling transgressive, threatened, or that they have to directly deal with the physicality of sex" (Ni, 2022), as well as "apparently subvert[ing] patriarchal rule by imagining a world in which men take on all the trials and tribulations that currently burden them" (Feng, 2009). This can easily lead to the fetishization and dehumanization of gay men, who are being used as props to play out heterosexual women's fantasies which are often not as subversive as some scholarship paints them to be. As Zhang (2016) points out, "fans seem to appropriate the marginalized BL stories to express their own desires for idealized heterosexual relationships". Some BL stories only reinforce heteronormative relationship structures, simply replicating them with gay couples instead of

challenging them. The most common example of this is the top (攻 *gōng*)-bottom (受 *shòu*) dichotomy, where one half of the pairing is more stereotypically masculine, aggressive, and dominant, while the other is more stereotypically feminine and submissive—traits that are not only indicative of their preferences in the bedroom but also their personalities—which not only fails to subvert the heterosexist norm but also erases gay men's unique experiences with gender and sexuality, instead only replacing them with flimsily repackaged heterosexuality. Another much more subtle and insidious trend is the idea that "a *dānměi* hero […] loves a man not because he is gay; he simply disregards heterosexist norms in his pursuit of true love" (Feng, 2009). What such a notion truly disregards, however, is not heterosexist norms but gay identity and experiences[8]. It is also not uncommon for BL works to feature romanticized versions of predatory relationship dynamics, including relationships between adults and minors, incestuous relationships, and nonconsensual acts, which appear in SAPPRFT's aforementioned blacklist alongside homosexuality, which can only hinder efforts to not group them all together. Even the notion that "BL fandom facilitates a gendered politics of looking that empowers female readers to turn a voyeuristic gaze upon men" (Zhang, 2016) is not as subversive as some present it, as it does not address the inequalities that might lead to such a desire but only makes gay men, who are already marginalized, victims of it.

As Stuart Hall states, popular culture is neither "wholly corrupt [n]or wholly authentic" but instead "deeply contradictory" (1981, as cited in Feng, 2009), and this is certainly true of BL. However, the criticisms the BL genre gets leveled against it are no reason to discount it as queer media[9]. This is especially true of *dānměi* because censorship laws and the lack of sex and gender education in mainland China have led to *dānměi* becoming the main type of media about the gay community that reaches the mainstream[10]. This also makes *dānměi* creators and fans more conscious of potentially harmful representation of gay men compared to creators

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[8] For a more in-depth discussion of this idea and how some *dānměi* authors challenge it, see Tian (2020) *Homosexualizing "Boys Love" in China: Reflexivity, Genre Transformation, and Cultural Interaction*.

[9] Interestingly, publishing in the Anglophone West also includes many gay romances written by openly heterosexual women, but these works receive only a small fraction of the criticism BL receives despite having many of the same issues.

[10] For more information about independent LGBT media and activism in China, see Bao (2018) *Queer Comrades*.

and fans in other countries, because if "BL is the only source of information about romantic and erotic relationships between two men, BL naturally bears certain degrees of educational function about gays and their lives" (Tian, 2020).

Recent years have seen a simultaneous rise of mainland China's vague yet strict media censorship laws, and of adaptations of *dānměi* novels and their popularity on an international scale. The most popular example is 陈情令 (*Chén Qíng Lìng*) *The Untamed* (2019), a live-action adaptation of the equally popular webnovel 魔道祖师 (*Mó Dào Zǔ Shī*) *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by 墨香铜臭 Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù, which has been published in multiple languages[11]. The series' total number of views is difficult to calculate, since it is available to watch on multiple platforms (without taking into account any unofficial ones) but to illustrate, at the time of writing the first episode has 4.4 million views on YouTube (WeTV English, 2019)[12], and by June 2021 it had reached 9.5 billion views on Tencent Video (Wenhui Bao, 2021). Other live-action *dānměi* adaptations, such as 山河令 (*Shānhé Lìng*) *Word of Honor* (2021), and 镇魂 (*Zhèn Hún*) *Guardian* (2018), have also garnered large international fanbases.

Wang's essay about the 2018 series *Guardian* points out that the series "highlights brotherhood to eliminate the visibility of homosexuality" and "disguises its homosexual relationship as homosocial bonding" in order to pass censorship (Wang, 2019)—a method shared by virtually every *dānměi* adaptation. Wang goes on to note that "the difference between homosexuality and homosocial bonding is the existence and absence of carnality" (ibid.). This absence of on-screen carnality, however, is precisely what allows for the portrayal of same-gender romance in a media landscape rife with censorship.

Wang's 2020 paper *Censorship and Circumvention in China: How Danmei Writers '*Drive a Car*' on Jinjiang* analyzes how authors of *dānměi* fiction on the literature website Jin-

[11] *Dānměi* webnovels are a recent addition to English-language publishing, and have so far only been licensed by small independent publishers, and Seven Seas Entertainment which specializes in manga, light novels, and webcomics. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* was one of the first webnovels released in English, alongside the author's other two completed works, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, and *Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*. The first volumes of all three novels were released on December 14, 2021.

[12] Tencent, the company that produced the series, has posted the episodes on multiple channels. These views are from only one upload rather than a sum of all of them.

jiang Literature City (JJWXC) attempt to evade censorship. JJWXC is "one of the earliest and most influential women's literature websites" which "answers, almost exclusively, to contemporary Chinese women's interests and concerns" (Feng, 2009). Since it is not a *dānměi*-exclusive website, "it has been far less frequently subjected to state censorship than exclusively *dānměi* literature sites" (ibid.). On top of that, JJWXC has adopted the tag "纯爱 *chúnài*" (literally "pure love") for *dānměi* works in an attempt to avoid becoming an easy target for crackdowns. This does not, however, mean that JJWXC is unaffected by government policies; it enforces "strict self-censorship standards comprising both automatic detection of transgressive keywords and multiple rounds of manual review" (Wang, 2020). In response to this, JJWXC authors have adopted various circumvention tactics, of which Wang emphasizes metaphors, code-switching, and satire.

JJWXC's automatic detection of transgressive words takes the form of boxes (□) in place of banned words. A major issue with the implementation of this is that *hànzì* are largely polysemous, their meanings highly dependent on context, and there are no spaces separating words within sentences; therefore, "semantic judgment of Chinese discourse heavily depends on contextual information and syntactic analysis, rather than simply lexicon" (ibid.). This often leads to censorship of words whose presence is exclusively lexical rather than contextual. An example given by Wang is the phrase "奶奶头疼 *nǎinai tóuténg* / grandma has a headache", which has been altered to "奶□□疼" by JJWXC's automatic detection software because the middle two *hànzì*, "奶头 *nǎitóu*", form a banned word ("nipple").

The most common tactic used by JJWXC authors to circumvent censorship is the use of metaphors, whose lack of explicitly pornographic language make them particularly well-suited for the portrayal of sexual scenes in a manner that is comprehensible to the website's predominantly well-educated audience (Feng, 2009; Wang, 2020). Some examples found by Wang include comparing sexual intercourse to rainfall[13], farming, mathematics, practicing archery, etc. Another method authors use to avoid automatic detection is Chinese-English code-switching, i.e. replacing blacklisted words with their English counterparts. Satire aimed

[13] This is a rhetorical strategy common in traditional Chinese poetry called "移情于物 *yíqíng yú wù*", in which emotions are transferred onto objects. The term "云雨 *yúnyǔ*" (lit. cloud and rain) is also an archaic term for sex, making rainfall an easily comprehensible metaphor to educated Chinese-speaking readers (Wang, 2020).

at the site's censorship is another common circumvention strategy, such as replacing blacklisted words with "some strange things that Jinjiang won't let me say" or simply "indescribable" (Wang, 2020). In one of his novels, 乱世为王 (*Luànshì Wéi Wáng*) *To Rule in a Turbulent World*, prolific *dānměi* author 非天夜翔 Fēi Tiān Yè Xiáng (writing under a different pseudonym, 顧雪柔 Gùxuěróu), replaced an explicit sexual encounter between the protagonists with the phrase "此处省略若干字 *Cǐ chù shěnglüè ruògān zì* / Some words have been omitted here"[14] (Guxuerou, 2014). Some authors, however, refuse to comply with JJWXC's rules, instead choosing to post their writing on websites such as Archive Of Our Own (before it was banned in China in 2020), or forgoing profit in favor of posting the chapters in the "author's words" section which is not beholden to the same rules as the main body of the text (Wang, 2020).

Print and digital releases of *dānměi* novels published outside of mainland China, however, are not beholden to the same censorship laws, thus making them a valuable resource for uncensored versions of these stories, though a work must first garner enough of an overseas audience for publishers to find it worth licensing.

So far, there has been virtually no research about the methods live-action *dānměi* series utilize in order to circumvent censorship, at least in English, with Wang's aforementioned paper on *Guardian* (2018) being a rare exception[15], and is therefore a space this paper aims to help fill.

Goals and problems

The goal of this thesis is to explore some of the ways creators of mainland Chinese live-action series circumvent state censorship to depict same-gender romantic relationships. A key element that all queercoded works share is a certain level of ambiguity which allows the depicted same-gender relationships to plausibly be interpreted as platonic when looked at through a

[14] The edit appears in the third chapter, which was last edited in December 2016. Whether this particular change was made then or sometime earlier is unknown.

[15] As Wang has already written about *Guardian*, the series will mostly be left out of this particular analysis.

heteronormative lens, while also providing enough evidence to support a romantic reading for viewers who know what to look for.

I theorize that in order to achieve this ambiguity, creators largely rely on various interaction rituals, as well as allusions to classic literature and tropes common in the romance genre, visual symbolism, camera work, and other cinematic language.

When discussing ambiguously queer media, the question of whether it should be considered queercoding or queerbaiting comes up. Queercoding is the act of using subtext to depict one or more characters as queer, and is generally used in cases where overt representation is not possible due to censorship[16]. Queerbaiting, on the other hand, is a marketing tactic in which LGBT representation is hinted at but never explicitly depicted, with the intention of attracting audiences looking for that representation without losing those who might object to it. This is often an important question for potential consumers who do not wish to take part in queerbaiting's exploitative tactics of profiting off of queer audiences' and their allies' purchasing power and free word-of-mouth marketing with no intention of delivering the promised story despite it being possible. When it comes to media made in mainland China, however, this question is a moot point, as the key difference between queercoding and queerbaiting lies in the ability for an overtly queer story to be told in the first place. While it is naive to assume that creators of *dānměi* series are not motivated by the purchasing power and influence of fans, assuming that every piece of ambiguously gay media is queerbaiting is reductive, cynical, and primarily harms those creating original stories rather than adaptations. To avoid derailing the focus of this thesis with debates around this matter, I will be focusing only on live-action adaptations of *dānměi* novels since it is safe to assume that those would have been overtly gay had censorship laws allowed it.

Method

I will be doing a narrative discourse analysis using the costume web series 陈情令 (*Chén Qíng Lìng*) *The Untamed* (2019) as a case study. Narrative discourse analysis is concerned with "how stories are told and how they shape our understanding of the world", "story structure, content, and function", as well as "how stories are told in different social contexts and

[16] Another example of when queercoding might appear is when it is unintentional on the creator's part.

how they are used to construct and maintain social identities and power relations" (Delve, 2023).

To paint a broader picture of certain trends, other series will be referenced occasionally, including 山河令 (*Shānhé Lìng*) *Word of Honor* (2021), 成化十四年 (*Chéng Huà Shísì Nián*) *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* (2020), 愉 此 一生 (*Yú Cǐ Yīshēng*) *Till Death Tear Us Apart* (2017), and its prequel 识汝不识丁 (*Shí Rǔ Bù Shí Dīng*) *Love Is More Than a Word* (2016).

The two key reasons for choosing *The Untamed* as the central focus of this research have already been mentioned previously: its popularity among both mainland Chinese and international viewers, as well as the fact that it is an adaptation of an equally popular novel. Since the novel is explicitly a romance, there is no question about whether the creators of the drama adaptation had intended to depict the relationship between the main characters as romantic. That being said, I will be analyzing just the series itself, not comparing it to its source material; the novel will only be referenced when it can provide important context that the series only vaguely hints at.

The Untamed has multiple different cuts: the original fifty-episode version, the special twenty-episode edition which is told in chronological order and includes several extended scenes between the protagonists, and a Japanese version where the last few scenes of the final episode are rearranged to make the ending less ambiguous. In this analysis, I will be referencing the original fifty-episode cut since it is the most well-known version of the story, though the other cuts will be mentioned where relevant. The analysis will not be touching on any promotional material, behind-the-scenes clips, interviews, live performances, or other additional content.

Interaction rituals can be described as "emotion transformer[s], taking some emotions as ingredients, and turning them into other emotions as outcomes" (Collins, 2005), making them invaluable queercoding tools. Collins also goes on to state that "at the center of an interaction ritual is the process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other's bodily micro-rhythms and emotions" (ibid.). When it comes to the topic of queercoding in media, we can observe two main types of interaction rituals taking place—those that occur within the story itself, between the characters; and those occurring between the creators and the audience (borrowing film studies terminology, we can refer to

these as diegetic and non-diegetic interaction rituals). The act of queercoding is a form of ritual, "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership" (ibid.), happening between the creator and the viewer through the piece of media in question. As the interpretation of a story as queer relies on a mutual understanding of specific storytelling devices, elements such as the framing of shots, editing, the use of visual symbolism and literary references, etc. can all be considered interaction rituals.

For the purposes of this work, however, I will be limiting myself to those interaction rituals that occur only between the characters within the story itself. This is primarily due to these being undeniably culturally relative, while the interpretation of non-diegetic elements can vary depending on the viewer's culture[17]. The latter will only be mentioned if it is directly linked to the former.

The interaction rituals I will be focusing on include the following: the use of different names and titles (how the protagonists refer to each other at different points in the narrative and why, and how this differs from how other characters refer to them); the importance of food and drink for building relationships; the use of the term 知己 *zhījǐ*, or "the one who knows me"; physical intimacy (what is and is not allowed to slip past censorship); and the use of music, primarily diegetic but also non-diegetic (i.e. music that exists within the story itself, and that with an external source).

All quoted lines will include the original Chinese text, the *hànyǔ pīnyīn* transliteration, and the English translation. All translations are taken from Netflix unless stated otherwise (minor edits to fix grammatical errors and flow will not be noted); my own translations of individual lines within a larger quote will be marked as "translation of line is my own" or the specific changes will be noted, while translations of the full quote or dialogue sequence will be marked as simply "translation is my own" at the end of said quote. Important didascalie will also be included in the footnotes.

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[17] For example, Western fans of *The Untamed* have a tendency to interpret a secondary character, Nie Huaisang, as gay because he is more interested in the arts and intellectual pursuits than martial arts, and is typically seen with a folding fan. However, being a scholar was not considered any less "masculine" of a pursuit than martial prowess in imperial China, which the setting of the series is modeled after, and folding fans were a common accessory among scholars, while women sported *tuánshàn*, also known as circular fans. A better and more culturally relative argument for a queer reading of his character would be the brief mention of him owning gay erotica.

Results

Before getting into the results, I will first present the premise of the analyzed series to make the findings more accessible to readers unfamiliar with it. 陈情令 (*Chén Qíng Lìng*) *The Untamed* (2019) is a *xiānxiá*[18] drama about two talented young cultivators from powerful clans, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, whose relationship develops amid growing political turmoil. In order to survive, Wei Wuxian resorts to "demonic" cultivation[19] which ultimately leads to his ostracization and eventual death. Sixteen years later, he is brought back to life, and after reuniting with Lan Wangji, the two set out to solve a mystery connected to the past. The story is told non-chronologically, starting with the scene of Wei Wuxian's death, then jumping forward to sixteen years later before going back to the past, to slightly before the two leads meet for the first time, and following the story chronologically up until Wei Wuxian's death, then continuing where the sixteen-years-later timeline left off (the two timelines will be referred to as pre- and post-resurrection going forward).

Names and Titles

Throughout history, Chinese people, especially those of a higher social status, generally had multiple names during their lifetimes, and different names carried different implications about the closeness and amount of respect the speaker had for the addressee. The types of names I will be focusing on here are 名 *míng*, 字 *zì*, and 号 *hào*.

Míng is the name given to a person by their parents and used throughout their childhood; in adulthood, it is considered to be "a very intimate name" (Theobald, 2011) used by one's seniors or by peers one is very close to. According to 礼记 (*Lǐ jì*) *The Book of Rites*, it is

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[18] 仙侠 *xiānxiá* (literally "immortal heroes") is a subgenre of fantasy that takes inspiration from Chinese mythology, Daoism, Chan Buddhism, martial arts, and other elements of traditional Chinese culture. It follows cultivators, people who are attempting to achieve immortality or who have already achieved it. It shares many similarities with 武侠 *wǔxiá*, however, the latter centers martial artists and other dwellers of the *jiānghú* (江湖; the milieu in which *wǔxiá* stories take place; people of the *jiānghú* have their own norms, rather than obeying local government officials and law enforcement).

[19] Regular cultivation relies on 灵气 *língqì*, or spiritual energy, which is stored in the golden core (金丹 *jīn dān*), while demonic cultivation requires the manipulation of 怨气 *yuànqì*, or resentful energy. While Wei Wuxian is referred to as a demonic cultivator throughout the series, he does not actually practice demonic cultivation but ghost cultivation, hence the use of quotation marks.

disrespectful for people of the same generation to refer to an adult by their *míng* ("Liji : Qu Li I", n.d.). *Zì* is a person's courtesy name, given to them in adulthood, and is used by people of the same generation, especially in formal settings and in writing. *Hào*, also known as an art name, is a "freely chosen alternative name" (Theobald, 2011) used by literati and artists. In *wǔxiá* and *xiānxiá* tales, *hào* is often based on one's reputation—a deed they have done, a fighting move they are known for, the school they belong to, or their general bearing—and is used by others as a sign of respect.

In *The Untamed* these three types of names are used to great effect, cueing the audience in on the relationships between characters without the need for exposition. It is important to note here that the English subtitles, particularly those on Netflix, are not precious about accuracy in this regard—titles often get replaced by names (e.g., Wei Wuxian refers to his elder martial sister Jiang Yanli as "师姐 *shījiě*" but the subtitles refer to her as simply "Yanli"[20]); the prefix 阿 *ā*, used before monosyllabic names as a term of endearment, is regularly left out, etc. Such choices might make the story easier to follow for non-Chinese-speaking viewers but it is done at the expense of accuracy and nuance. For this reason, going forward the names and titles used in the English subtitles will be disregarded and replaced with the correct ones.

From the very first episode, which primarily takes place sixteen years after Wei Wuxian's death, just after he has been brought back to life, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji refer to each other by their *míng*—Wei Ying and Lan Zhan respectively—implying a close relationship between them. In the opening scene, the scene of Wei Wuxian's death[21], Lan Wangji is seen grasping Wei Wuxian's wrist to stop him from falling off a cliff as Wei Wuxian asks him to let him fall, using his *míng*: "蓝湛 放手吧。 *Lán Zhàn, fàngshǒu ba.* / Lan Zhan, let go."[22]

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[20] Subtitles have strictly limited character counts, so translating "师姐 *shījiě*" as "elder martial sister" would not always be feasible, however, simplifying it to "sister" would have been more accurate than using only her given name (it is never made clear if Yanli is her *míng* or *zì*).

[21] It is interesting to note that there are several differences between how the moments leading up to Wei Wuxian's death are depicted in the opening scene and in episode 33, such as the opening scene heavily implying that Jiang Cheng, Wei Wuxian's younger martial brother, was the one who dealt the final blow, and leaving out the moment of Lan Wangji calling out Wei Wuxian's *míng* after he falls. This is due to the opening scene being a version of the event being narrated by a storyteller, while the scene in episode 33 shows what truly happened.

[22] The modal particle 吧 *ba* is used when offering a suggestion or to soften one's speech. Sentences ending in 吧 are often translated as declarative sentences, but the quote above could also be translated as "Lan Zhan, let (me) go, okay?".

Throughout the rest of the episode, Wei Wuxian keeps referring to Lan Wangji as "Lan Zhan", with a notable exception that will be touched on later. Lan Wangji does not make an appearance until the end of the episode; after finding traces of the Yīnhǔfú[23], a tally created by Wei Wuxian, on a spiritual weapon, and noticing a figure fleeing the manor, he thinks to himself: "魏婴 难道真的是你吗？ *Wèi Yīng, nándào zhēn de shì nǐ ma?* / Wei Ying, is it really you?".

Once the narrative switches to the past, it does not take long for the protagonists to start calling each other by their *míng*, though it is at first due to mutual annoyance rather than intimacy. Upon first seeing Lan Wangji in episode 3, Wei Wuxian initially refers to him as "Second Young Master Lan" (蓝二公子 *Lán èr gōngzǐ*) while attempting to convince him to let him and his fellow martial siblings enter Cloud Recesses, the residence of the Lan Clan of Gusu, despite losing their invitation, a matter on which Lan Wangji is refusing to budge. That night, Wei Wuxian decides to break in, carrying two bottles of liquor, and thus efficiently breaking several of the Lan Clan's rules. After getting caught by Lan Wangji, he continues to use his title while trying to plead for leniency. During the ensuing fight, Lan Wangji causes Wei Wuxian to break one of the liquor bottles, leading to Wei Wuxian frustratedly calling out, "蓝湛 你赔我天子笑！ *Lán Zhàn nǐ péi wǒ Tiānzǐ xiào!* / Lan Zhan! Pay for my Emperor's Smile!"

He continues using Lan Wangji's *míng* after getting brought to Lan Wangji's older brother and uncle for punishment for his transgressions. The emotions behind the name choice change from annoyance to appreciation, however, after Lan Wangji's brother reveals that Lan Wangji had allowed his martial siblings to enter Cloud Recesses sometime after Wei Wuxian had gone in search of the lost invitation—a fact Lan Wangji had not divulged. Throughout the next several episodes, Wei Wuxian switches between using various names for Lan Wangji, based on what he thinks is most likely to catch his attention. The most obvious example of this occurs in episode 5 when Lan Wangji is supervising him in the library after he gets punished:

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[23] 阴虎符 *Yīnhǔfú* is translated as the Stygian Tiger Amulet on Netflix but it will be referred to by its Chinese name here. English subtitles of the series have a tendency to equate Western and Chinese religious and philosophical concepts, such as equating the Greek mythological River Styx with Yin, the negative principle of Yin and Yang. 虎符 *hǔfú* is a tiger tally, a tiger-shaped two-piece object used as proof of authority. The *Yīnhǔfú* itself is a tally that allows the wielder to control resentful energy and the undead (referred to as "puppets" in the series).

忘机兄。蓝忘机。蓝湛！你可不要这样看着我啊。是我叫你忘机你不答应 我才叫你名字的。你要是不高兴的话你也可以叫回来。*Wàngjī xiōng. Lán Wàngjī. Lán Zhàn! Nǐ kě bùyào zhèyàng kànzhe wǒ a. Shì wǒ jiào nǐ Wàngjī nǐ bù dāyìng wǒ cái jiào nǐ míngzì de. Nǐ yàoshi bù gāoxìng dehuà nǐ yě kěyǐ jiào huílái.* / Wangji-*xiōng*[24]. Lan Wangji. Lan Zhan![25] Can you stop looking at me like that? I only called you by your *míng* because you ignored me when I called you Wangji.[26] If you're upset, you can call me the same way.[27]

As Lan Wangji continues to ignore him, Wei Wuxian also calls him "Second Young Master Lan" with a teasing edge: "蓝二公子你别说两句又不理人呀。 *Lán èr gōngzǐ nǐ bié shuō liǎng jù yòu bù lǐ rén ya. /* Second Young Master Lan, how can you ignore me again after a few words?" and "蓝二公子赏个脸看看我呗。 *Lán èr gōngzǐ shǎng gè liǎn kàn kàn wǒ bei.* / Second Young Master Lan, may I have the honor of getting a glimpse from you?". The latter instance is particularly flirtatious, which is only further emphasized by it being followed by a double entendre:

Wei Wuxian: 我跟你说对不起了。 *Wǒ gēn nǐ shuō duìbùqǐle.* / I have apologized.

Lan Wangji: 你根本毫无悔过之心。 *Nǐ gēnběn háo wú huǐguò zhī xīn.* / Not in a sincere way.

Wei Wuxian: 我有我有。对不起对不起。你想听多少遍都行要不我跪着说也行啊。 *Wǒ yǒu wǒ yǒu. Duìbùqǐ duìbùqǐ. Nǐ xiǎng tīng duōshǎo biàn dōu xíng yào bù wǒ guìzhe shuō yě xíng a.* / I'm absolutely sincere. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll apologize continuously to your heart's content. I can even kneel down before you.

Wei Wuxian's quick switch from finding Lan Wangji infuriating to considering him a close friend is clear later in the same episode, after Lan Wangji rescues him from a water ghost by grabbing the back of his collar:

Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛！蓝湛 幸好你出手及时。不过你为什么要揪我领子呀。你拉着我不行吗？你这样我好不舒服啊。这样吧我把手伸给你，你拉我吧。 *Lán Zhàn! Lán Zhàn xìnghǎo nǐ chūshǒu jíshí. Bùguò nǐ wèishéme yào jiū wǒ lǐngzi ya. Nǐ lāzhe wǒ bùxíng ma? Nǐ zhèyàng wǒ hǎo bú shūfú a.*

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[24] The honorific 兄 *xiōng*, translated as "older brother", is often used between friends of the same generation.

[25] At this point, Lan Wangji looks up at him, annoyed.

[26] Here, Lan Wangji stops paying attention to him again.

[27] Translation is my own. The subtitles on Netflix botch the differentiation between *míng* and *zì*.

Zhèyàng ba wǒ bǎshǒu shēn gěi nǐ, nǐ lā wǒ ba. / Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan, fortunately, you showed up on time. But why did you grab me by the collar? Can't you just hold me? This makes me uncomfortable. Well, I'll give you my hand. You can just hold it, okay?

Lan Wangji: 我不与旁人触碰。 *Wǒ bù yǔ pángrén chù pèng.* / I don't touch other people.

Wei Wuxian: 我们都这么熟了，还算什么旁人啊。 *Wǒmen dōu zhème shúle, hái suàn shénme pángrén a.* / We're so close. You still consider me to be "other people"?

Lan Wangji: 不熟。 *Bù shú.* / Not close.[28]

Unlike Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji is a character of very few words, and his main modus operandi for dealing with Wei Wuxian at first is to ignore him. The only instances where he refers to Wei Wuxian by his *míng* as a way to reprimand him occur in episode 5, during the previously discussed library scene when Wei Wuxian plants a book of gay erotica on his table, successfully scandalizing him to the point of fury[29], and in the following episode, after Wei Wuxian suggests using the Yin Iron, a type of metal that absorbs resentful energy, for good.

After Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian end up in Cold Pond Cave and are tasked with finding and sealing all the fragments of the Yin Iron (the scene occurs at the end of episode 6 and the beginning of episode 7), the two refer to each other by their *míng* almost exclusively. Episode 7 also marks the first instance of Wei Wuxian using the term "知己 *zhījǐ*" to refer to Lan Wangji, further solidifying the close bond between them (the term will be discussed more in-depth in the section *The One How Knows Me*).

More examples of the two using each other's *míng* later on in the series will appear throughout the analysis but one thing worth noting here is that none of the other characters refer to the protagonists using their *míng* in the context of an intimate connection. In Wei Wuxian's case, others use his *míng* as a sign of disrespect after his "demonic" cultivation and general defiance prove to be a political threat to the other clans. The most blatant example of

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[28] Translation is my own.

[29] How any erotica made it past censors can only be speculated—it is likely due to a mix of it being traditional art and showing up on the screen for a mere second—but it brings up interesting questions about how society in the world of the series—or at least cultivator society—views same-gender attraction. Considering Wei Wuxian's response to Lan Wangji's outburst is to ask why he is ashamed and to claim that he surely must have read such books previously, along with the fact that Wei Wuxian had borrowed the erotica from his friend Nie Huaisang, who nonchalantly mentions owning a sizable collection, we can assume that the general attitude of cultivator society towards gayness mirrors that of the nobility and gentry throughout most of Chinese history as outlined in Hinsch's book *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (1990). Lan Wangji's reaction in this scene seems to be more indicative of his own repressed feelings rather than wider societal attitudes.

this occurs in episode 21, when a minor character, Jin Zixun, refers to him as "Wei Ying" while criticizing him in front of others—a major act of disrespect considering the two have no relationship to speak of—but later uses his courtesy name when talking directly to him. Most characters refer to him by his *zì*, as "Young Master Wei" (魏公子 *Wèi gōngzǐ*), or as "Yiling Patriarch" (夷陵老祖 *Yílíng lǎozǔ*) after he defects[30]. His *shījiě* Jiang Yanli refers to him as "Ā-Xian" (阿羡) or "Xianxian" (羡羡), both cutesy variations of his name which indicate their close (martial) sibling bond; Jiang Fengmian, the initial leader of the Jiang Clan of Yunmeng and Wei Wuxian's guardian, also calls him "Ā-Xian"; and Nie Huaisang calls him "Wei-*xiōng*" (魏兄) in both the pre- and post-resurrection timelines.

Lan Wangji is referred to as "Wangji" by his older brother and his uncle, while most others refer to him as "Second Young Master Lan" or by his *hào*, "Hanguang-jun" (含光君 *Hánguāng-jūn*). Nie Huaisang briefly refers to him as "Lan-*xiōng*" (蓝兄) when they are teenagers, either because of his proximity to Wei Wuxian or because Nie Huaisang had briefly joined the pair for a part of their search for the Yin Iron and therefore felt that they were friends.

Lan Wangji's *hào*, Hanguang-jun[31], is generally used by those who greatly respect him, such as the new generation of the Lan Clan's disciples in the post-resurrection timeline. There are several instances where Wei Wuxian uses it as well. One such important moment will be mentioned in a later category, but in the post-resurrection timeline, he primarily uses it when he does not want others to recognize him. Since in those instances, he is pretending to be Mo Xuanyu[32], who is not close to Lan Wangji and is of a lower station than him, it would be improper to refer to him otherwise, though he does slip up and call him "Lan Zhan" around the Lan Clan disciples who are too young to recognize him, as well as when the two question Nie Huaisang in episode 35. In the latter case, he only uses Lan Wangji's *míng* when talking

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[30] Yiling is the town closest to the Burial Mounds where Wei Wuxian honed his new cultivation path, and where he went into hiding with the survivors of the recently eradicated Wen Clan.

[31] 含光 *hánguāng* means "to contain light", and 君 *jūn* is an honorific typically used to refer to a gentleman.

[32] Mo Xuanyu was the one to resurrect Wei Wuxian after being convinced to do so by Nie Huaisang. In the novel, Wei Wuxian's soul inhabits his body, but the drama includes several hints that Mo Xuanyu's body was sacrificed in order to bring back Wei Wuxian's, the most obvious being that Wei Wuxian wears a mask to not be recognized.

directly to him in a lowered voice, but considering cultivators' heightened senses, even a physically weaker cultivator like Nie Huaisang would have heard him[33].

Other instances where Wei Wuxian uses Lan Wangji's *hào* are when he is teasing or being flirtatious: "没想到含光君这么招这些小动物。 *Méi xiǎngdào Hánguāng-jūn zhème zhāo zhèxiē xiǎo dòngwù.* / I never thought that Hanguang-jun would be so popular among little animals." (episode 43); "其实是因为我现在这具身体灵力低微，所以就算是尚品宝剑我也不能发挥它真正的威力。所以呀还是要请含光君好好保护我这个柔弱的男子了。 *Qíshí shì yīnwèi wǒ xiànzài zhè jù shēntǐ líng lì dīwéi, suǒyǐ jiùsuàn shì shàng pǐn bǎojiàn wǒ yě bùnéng fāhuī tā zhēnzhèng de wēilì. Suǒyǐ ya háishì yào qǐng Hánguāng-jūn hǎohǎo bǎohù wǒ zhège róuruò de nánzǐle.* / It's because this body of mine lacks spiritual power. So even the best sword can't show its true power in my hand. Therefore, Hanguang-jun, please protect this fragile and feeble man." (episode 44). Wei Wuxian does not have an actual *hào*, however, his notorious title "Yiling Patriarch" functions like one. It is not a title Lan Wangji ever uses.

The two hardly ever use each other's *zì* so the rare instances when it happens are intentionally jarring. The best such example occurs in episode 20, after Lan Wangji and Jiang Cheng find Wei Wuxian after his disappearance during which he had begun practicing "demonic" cultivation:

> Lan Wangji: 魏婴。 *Wèi Yīng.* / Wei Ying.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 蓝二公子。不对，应该是含光君。 *Lán èr gōngzǐ. Bùduì, yīnggāi shì Hánguāng-jūn.* / Second Young Master Lan. No. I should call you Hanguang-jun.
>
> […]
>
> Lan Wangji: 你为何弃了剑道改修他途？回答。 *Nǐ wèihé qìle jiàndào gǎixiū tā tú? Huídá.* / Why did you give up the sword for something else? Answer me.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 我要是不回答会怎么样？蓝湛咱们刚刚久别重逢，你就这样兴师问罪不太好。自从岐山玄武一别数月之久。你就算不惦记同袍之谊，也不应该这么绝情吧。 *Wǒ yàoshi bù huídá huì zěnme yàng? Lán Zhàn zánmen gānggāng jiǔbié chóngféng, nǐ jiù zhèyàng xīngshī wènzuì bù tài hǎo. Zìcóng Qíshān Xuánwǔ yī bié shù yuè zhī jiǔ. Nǐ jiùsuàn bù diànjì tóng páo zhī yì, yě bù yìng gāi*

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[33] Nie Huaisang already knows Wei Wuxian's identity, being the one who had orchestrated his resurrection in the first place, and Wei Wuxian, despite being unaware of this fact at this point, hints at his identity when commenting on Nie Huaisang's folding fan, so Wei Wuxian had likely wanted Nie Huaisang to know who he is, whether out of nostalgia for their friendship or to test how much he knows about the situation or a mix of both.

zhème juéqíng ba. / What if I refuse to answer? Lan Zhan. We have just reunited after such a long time. Confronting me with so many questions is not proper. It has been months since we split up in the Xuanwu's cave[34]. Even if you don't cherish our relationship as classmates, you shouldn't be so ruthless.

Lan Wangji: 回答。 *Huídá.* / Answer me.

Wei Wuxian: 我说了你们又不信。具体的一时半会儿也说不清楚。 *Wǒ shuōle nǐmen yòu bùxìn. Jùtǐ de yīshí bàn huì er yě shuō bu qīngchǔ.* / I already did but you don't believe it. I can't explain it in just a few words.

Lan Wangji: 那就跟我回姑苏慢慢说明白。 *Nà jiù gēn wǒ huí Gūsū màn man shuō míngbái.* / Then return to Gusu with me and explain it clearly.

Wei Wuxian: 姑苏？你是说那个戒规三千多条的地方？我才不要去。我更喜欢云梦。 *Gūsū? Nǐ shì shuō nàgè jiè guī sānqiān duō tiáo dì dìfāng? Wǒ cái bùyào qù. Wǒ gèng xǐhuān Yúnmèng.* / Gusu? The place with more than 3,000 rules? I refuse to go. I prefer Yunmeng.

Lan Wangji: 魏婴你不要故作玩笑。 *Wèi Yīng nǐ bùyào gù zuò wánxiào.* / Wei Ying, don't joke around.

Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛哪你究竟想干什么？ *Lán Zhàn nǎ nǐ jiùjìng xiǎng gànshénme?* / Lan Zhan, what do you really want?

Lan Wangji: 魏婴修习邪道终归会付出代价。古往今来无一例外。此道损身更损心性。 *Wèi Yīng xiū xí xiédào zhōngguī huì fùchū dàijià. Gǔwǎngjīnlái wú yī lìwài. Cǐ dào sǔn shēn gèng sǔn xīnxìng.* / Wei Ying[35], there will be a price for learning the wicked path[36]. There's no exception throughout history. This path harms your body and your temperament more.

Wei Wuxian: 邪道？蓝二公子。我非摄取他人灵识。又怎么算是邪道呢？我用的是符咒，习的是音律。这也算邪道吗？就算这也是邪道损不损身损多少我最清楚。至于心性我心我主，我自有数。 *Xiédào? Lán èr gōngzǐ. Wǒ fēi shèqǔ tārén líng shí. Yòu zěnme suànshì xiédào ne? Wǒ yòng de shì fúzhòu, xí de shì yīnlǜ. Zhè yě suàn xiédào ma? Jiùsuàn zhè yěshì xiédào sǔn bù sǔn shēn sǔn duōshǎo wǒ zuì qīngchǔ. Zhìyú xīnxìng wǒ xīn wǒ zhǔ, wǒ zì yǒu shù.* / The wicked path? Second Young Master Lan, I didn't snatch anyone's spirit. How can it be taken as the wicked path? What I use are talismans. What I practice is music. Can those be taken as the wicked path? Even if it is the wicked path, I know myself, and I know whether it will hurt me or not. As for my temperament, I'm in charge of my own mind. I fully understand what I'm doing.

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[34] The Xuanwu in *The Untamed* resembles the Xuanwu from Daoist mythology but is not the same creature. Its full name is the Xuanwu of Slaughter (屠戮玄武 *Túlù Xuánwǔ*) but in this particular instance, it is shortened in the original Chinese, so the English translation has been edited to reflect that.

[35] There is a slight pause between his name and the rest of the sentence; a notable choice considering Wei Wuxian's question.

[36] Netflix's English subtitles translate 邪道 *xiédào* as "wicked tricks" but 道 *dào* refers to the Way in a Daoist sense, and the full phrase indicates heresy. Netflix's translation does not get the extent of Wei Wuxian's transgression across; I have replaced it with "the wicked path".

Lan Wangji: 有些事情根本不是你能控制住的。 *Yǒuxiē shìqíng gēnběn bùshì nǐ néng kòngzhì zhù de.* / There are some things you can't decide on your own.

Wei Wuxian: 说到底我心性如何旁人怎么会知道又关旁人什么事？ *Shuō dàodǐ wǒ xīnxìng rúhé pángrén zěnme huì zhīdào yòu guān pángrén shénme shì?* / After all, how do others know my temperament, and why should it be their concern?

Lan Wangji: 魏无羡。 *Wèi Wúxiàn.* / Wei Wuxian.

Wei Wuxian: 蓝忘机。你一定要在这个时候跟我过去是吗？你以为你是谁？你以为你们姑苏蓝氏是谁？ *Lán Wàngjī. Nǐ yīdìng yào zài zhège shíhòu gēn wǒ guòqù shì ma? Nǐ yǐwéi nǐ shì shéi? Nǐ yǐwéi nǐmen Gūsū Lán shì shì shéi?* / Lan Wangji. Why do you choose to be at odds with me now? Who do you think you are? What do you Lan Clan think you are?

Wei Wuxian's intention here is to drive Lan Wangji away, and he makes it immediately clear by responding to Lan Wangji's "Wei Ying" by using his title and his *hào*, accompanied with a bow of his head so cold it can be considered mocking. His tone also makes his use of Lan Wangji's *míng* throughout the rest of the conversation more of a mockery of their close relationship than a genuine expression of it, though it is possible he is also giving Lan Wangji the opportunity to change his tune, as he only uses his *míng* when reminding him of how long they have been separated and when asking him what he truly wants from him. Considering this is the only instance they use each other's *zì* after their relationship develops past the point of mere acquaintances, their use in this scene cuts particularly deeply, emphasizing the ideological wedge between them (though as becomes increasingly clear throughout the series, Lan Wangji is significantly more concerned about Wei Wuxian's wellbeing than the morality of demonic cultivation).

While the distinction between *míng*, *zì*, and *hào* is not utilized to the same extent in every single *dānměi* adaptation, the names characters use for one another is an easy and convenient method of relaying what their relationship is to the audience. In *Word of Honor* (2021), Zhou Zishu introduces himself as Zhou Xu in order to not expose his identity, and despite Wen Kexing figuring out who he is rather quickly, he continues calling him Ā-Xu (as was mentioned earlier, 阿 *ā* is used as a term of endearment), while Zhou Zishu most often refers to Wen Kexing as "Old Wen" (老温 *Lǎo Wēn*), 老 *lǎo* being another term of endearment. *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* (2020) switches around the common use of *míng* and *zì*, making *zì* the more intimate choice, and Tang Fan regularly refers to Sui Zhou by his *zì*,

Guangchuan. Dramas set in more modern times when the differentiation between *míng* and *zì* is no longer relevant typically emphasize the closeness between characters by having them drop the family name or by adding various prefixes or suffixes that indicate closeness, such as the aforementioned 阿 *ā*.

The particular way the speaker chooses to refer to someone is an excellent indicator of how close they are but it cannot automatically define the relationship as romantic in nature, which makes it a particularly useful tool for queercoding.

Food and Drink

According to Ma (2015), "Food has many symbolic meanings; it not only expresses but also establishes the relationship between people and their environment as well as between people and what they believe. […] Food consumed by one person alone is not a social food. However, when it is consumed by a group of people together or eaten in a religious ceremony, the sociality of food is identified. In human society, food is a means for people to establish and express relationships between one another."

Dānměi dramas tend to take full advantage of the social importance of food to express affection between the characters. *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* (2020) in particular centers food in its romance between food-loving sixth-rank judge Tang Fan and Sui Zhou, an Embroidered Uniform Guard with a knack for cooking, so much so that the series can be considered almost as much of a cooking show as a mystery series; *Word of Honor* (2021) features many scenes of Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing pairing tender moments with liquor or a meal; in *Till Death Tear Us Apart* (2017), Zhou Yaohua insists on preparing a meal for his former classmate Liu Yusheng despite being well-off enough to employ a cook, to list a few examples.

In *The Untamed*, one of the recurring food-related motifs is Emperor's Smile (天子笑 *Tiānzǐ xiào*), a liquor—most likely a type of *báijiǔ*—local to the fictional city of Gusu, near which the Lan Clan resides. As was mentioned in the previous section, Wei Wuxian breaks the Lan Clan's rules by bringing Emperor's Smile into Cloud Recesses and gets into a fight with Lan Wangji over it. Wei Wuxian breaks this particular rule repeatedly; in episode 5, he brings

a bottle of liquor to a night hunt[37], only for Lan Wangji to empty it onto the ground, citing a rule about drinking during the night hunt being prohibited. Despite this, at the end of the episode, Lan Wangji takes two bottles of Emperor's Smile from a vendor before the group returns to Cloud Recesses. The following episode starts with Wei Wuxian, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang getting caught drinking by Lan Wangji, whom Wei Wuxian ropes into joining by using one of his talismans on him. It is never explicitly stated whether the liquor they are drinking in this scene is the same as the one Lan Wangji had taken at the end of the previous episode; while it is easy to assume so based on the scene progression, considering how repressed Lan Wangji is at this point in the story, along with none of the other three mentioning that the liquor was gifted, it is much more likely that those particular bottles do not make another appearance until episode 43, when Lan Wangji arrives at the Jingshi (静室 *jìngshì*), his private residence, with two bottles of Emperor's Smile, and serves the liquor to Wei Wuxian.

The Jingshi itself is a significant location; it was the place Lan Wangji and Lan Xichen's father locked up their mother after marrying her despite the rest of the Clan's disapproval, before secluding himself in another residence. The first lines Lan Xichen says about their parents function as a parallel to Lan Wangji and Wei Wuxian's relationship:

> 不顾族人的反对，一声不响地和她拜了天地。而且他还跟族中的人说这是他一生一世爱的妻子，谁要是动她得先过他这一关。 *Bùgù zúrén de fǎnduì, yīshēng bù xiǎng de hé tā bàile tiāndì. Érqiě tā hái gēn zú zhōng de rén shuō zhè shì tā yīshēng yīshì ài de qīzi, shéi yàoshi dòng tā dé xiānguò tā zhè yī guān.* / Regardless of the disapproval of the Clan, he still married her. He also told the Clan that she was the woman he would love for a lifetime. Whoever wants to drive her out must go through him first. (Episode 43)

However, that is where the similarities end. The series places a lot of emphasis on Lan Wangji respecting Wei Wuxian's agency, even when he wishes to help, as is clear from the following exchange in episode 25:

> Lan Wangji: 我 我想带一人回云深不知处。 *Wǒ… Wǒ xiǎng dài yīrén huí Yún Shēn Bùzhī Chù.* / I…I want to bring someone back to Cloud Recesses.

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[37] Night hunts (夜猎 *yè liè*) refer to the practice of cultivators exorcising evil beings in different locations.

Lan Xichen: 带一人回云深不知处？ *Dài yīrén huí Yún Shēn Bùzhī Chù?* / Bring someone back to Cloud Recesses?

Lan Wangji: 带回去藏起来。 *Dài huíqù cáng qǐlái.* / Bring him back and hide him there.

Lan Xichen: 藏起来？只怕他不愿吧？ *Cáng qǐlái? Zhǐ pà tā bù yuàn ba?* / Hide him? You're afraid he may be unwilling to go, right?[38]

Despite stating his own wish plainly, he does not act on it, since Wei Wuxian makes his stance about going to Cloud Recesses to receive help for his cultivation clear on more than one occasion. When Wei Wuxian finally returns to Cloud Recesses after his resurrection, he stays with Lan Wangji in the Jingshi, and the unconditional trust between them transforms the residence from a place of tragedy to one of safety and healing.

The scene of Lan Wangji serving Emperor's Smile to Wei Wuxian is also particularly poignant considering this comment Wei Wuxian makes earlier, in episode 29, after defecting:

温情。我跟蓝湛第一次见面的时候就是因为我带着天子笑进到云深不知处。你是没有看见蓝湛那个表情，那个脸板的。不过姑苏的天子笑是真好喝。不知道还有没有机会继续喝得到。 *Wēn Qíng. Wǒ gēn Lán Zhàn dì yī cì jiànmiàn de shíhòu jiùshì yīnwèi wǒ dàizhe Tiānzǐ xiào jìn dào Yún Shēn Bùzhī Chù. Nǐ shì méiyǒu kànjiàn Lán Zhàn nàgè biǎoqíng, nàgè liǎn bǎn de. Bùguò Gūsū de Tiānzǐ xiào shì zhēn hǎo hē. Bù zhīdào huán yǒu méiyǒu jīhuì jìxù hē dédào.* / Wen Qing. The first time I met Lan Zhan was when I brought Emperor's Smile into Cloud Recesses. What a pity you didn't see his face, his stony face. But the Emperor's Smile of Gusu is really delicious. I wonder if there'll be a chance to drink it again.

Considering that alcohol is prohibited in the Lan Clan, it becomes a particularly clear symbol for Lan Wangji's shift from prioritizing his Clan's rules to prioritizing Wei Wuxian. This starts to become evident early on in the pre-resurrection timeline (e.g. the aforementioned instance of bringing back Emperor's Smile to Cloud Recesses) but in the post-resurrection timeline, he openly breaks the rules by bringing liquor for Wei Wuxian in episode 43, and by getting drunk himself in episode 36. While the latter scene is mostly comedic, including a moment where a drunk Lan Wangji attempts to steal two roosters as a gift for Wei Wuxian—a nod towards the Chinese wedding tradition where the groom gifts the bride a rooster and a hen (Ngai, 2021)—it also allows an opportunity for emotional intimacy. Once back at the inn,

[38] Translation is my own.

as he is taking care of Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian asks him different questions, including if he has ever broken any of his Clan's rules (Lan Wangji replies that he has), if he likes rabbits (he does)[39], and most importantly, why he is helping him:

> Wei Wuxian: 你为什么帮我？ *Nǐ wèishéme bāng wǒ?* / Why are you helping me?
>
> Lan Wangji: 我有悔。 *Wǒ yǒu huǐ.* / I have regrets.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 什么悔？ *Shénme huǐ?* / What regrets?
>
> Lan Wangji: 不夜天，没有和你站在一起。 *Bú yè tiān, méiyǒu hé nǐ zhàn zài yīqǐ.* / At Nightless City, I wasn't by your side.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 所以这些年你一直在找我？蓝湛你记住了。这件事情跟你一点关系都没有。我叛出，我修诡道术法，都是我自己的选择。你明白吗？ *Suǒyǐ zhèxiē nián nǐ yīzhí zài zhǎo wǒ? Lán Zhàn nǐ jì zhùle. Zhè jiàn shìqíng gēn nǐ yīdiǎn guānxì dōu méiyǒu. Wǒ pàn chū, wǒ xiū guǐ dào shù fǎ, dōu shì wǒ zìjǐ de xuǎnzé. Nǐ míngbái ma?* / So these years, you've been looking for me?[40] Lan Zhan. Remember this. The whole thing has nothing to do with you. Defecting and studying crafty techniques are my own choices. Do you understand?

Lan Wangji's words about not standing by Wei Wuxian's side are not exactly true—aside from Jiang Yanli, he had been the only one willing to defend him when everyone had turned against him; in actuality, his regret is his inability to prevent the tragedy that occurred.

Another important recurring motif is the lotus, which as its name suggests, is abundant in Lotus Pier where Wei Wuxian grew up. It first appears as a symbol of the bond between the Yunmeng siblings—Wei Wuxian, Jiang Yanli, and Jiang Cheng. In a flashback in episode 18, Jiang Yanli prepares lotus root and rib soup for her brothers after they get into a fight. She also makes the soup for Wei Wuxian in episode 21 after he had not eaten anything at a banquet due to being upset over his argument with Lan Wangji in the episode prior (see *Names and Titles*); and in episode 30, after Wei Wuxian has defected, Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng visit Wei Wuxian in secret before Jiang Yanli's wedding, and eat lotus root and rib soup together. Afterwards, Wei Wuxian has no appetite for other food, and fixates on growing lotus

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[39] Rabbits are quite a prevalent motif in *The Untamed*; Lan Wangji receives a handful of them from Lan Yi in Cold Pond Cave, and they appear in every scene taking place in the back hill of Cloud Recesses, including a shot of two rabbits touching noses in episode 33. Art of rabbits appears repeatedly throughout the series as well. They are likely a nod to the Rabbit God, Tù'ér Shén (兔儿神), a deity who manages love and sex between men.

[40] Lan Wangji looks away; Wei Wuxian smiles and takes hold of his hand.

in the Burial Mounds despite Wen Qing pointing out that the soil is not suitable for it (she buys the seeds regardless). As Ma (2015) points out, lotus root is not considered an auspicious gift, as it symbolizes that a "section of arrowroot is separated, but the clinging fiber remains"—a rather fitting motif for the siblings' tragic ending.

Interestingly, however, the lotus seedpod is used as a romantic motif between the main couple. In episode 6, Wei Wuxian tells Lan Wangji, "如果你去莲花坞的话我 我给你摘 我给你摘莲蓬还有菱角好不好。 *Rúguǒ nǐ qù Liánhuāwù dehuà wǒ wǒ gěi nǐ zhāi wǒ gěi nǐ zhāi liánpeng hái yǒu língjiǎo hǎobù hǎo.* / If you ever visit Lotus Pier, I'll pick lotus for you. The seedpod, and water chestnuts, too. How about it?"[41] The same conversation also includes one of several instances where Lan Wangji shows a complete lack of interest in women when Wei Wuxian comments about Yunmeng having many beautiful women. A full forty episodes later, in a boat in Lotus Pier, Wei Wuxian picks lotus pods for himself, Lan Wangji, and his right-hand man Wen Ning. Lan Wangji does not eat the pods right away, instead asking if the lake they are on belongs to anyone, which Wei Wuxian initially denies but ultimately admits that it does, then dejectedly announces that they should leave. Before Wen Ning can begin rowing, however, Lan Wangji picks another lotus pod from the lake, and offers it to Wei Wuxian, saying, "下不为例。*Xiàbùwéilì.* / Only for today."[42] which leaves Wei Wuxian equally shocked and happy. The next shot reveals the floor of the boat covered in lotus pods.

Another recurring food motif in the series is the loquat, which Wei Wuxian tosses to Lan Wangji on two separate occasions—at the end of episode 5 upon noticing that Lan Wangji looks worried, and moments before Lan Wangji takes the bottles of Emperor's Smile; and in episode 8, to announce his presence after Lan Wangji decides to set off in search of the Yin Iron on his own—making it known to Lan Wangji that he is not alone.

The One Who Knows Me

The word 知己 *zhījǐ* has become a great boon to *dānměi* drama adaptations as it allows for the expression of the characters' close bond while still leaving enough room for plausible denia-

[41] Translation is my own.

[42] Translation is my own.

bility about its romantic nature. The term, most accurately translated as "the one who knows me", has become "a fixed epithet for a patron and a friend" (Shields, 2015). As Shields points out, "knowing someone, in this context, means being able to see into another's heart and understand his feelings". During the mid- and late Tang dynasty, it was mostly used in an instrumental, political context to refer to someone who knows one's talents and potential, and can help them find employment, especially within the government[43], but in later eras, it came to signify a close friendship, which is also its most common contemporary usage. It is also, crucially, an ambiguous term as it does not rule out the potential for romance, making it a useful asset for queercoding. The core of *zhījǐ* is the act of knowing, of understanding, of seeing someone, as well as the personal and political loyalty that comes with such an act. Despite most famous examples of *zhījǐ* throughout history being, presumably, platonic[44], the term takes on a distinctly romantic flavor in *dānměi* dramas, while its more common usage leaves just enough room for plausible deniability.

Another aspect that makes the *zhījǐ* relationship especially suitable for censored adaptations of *dānměi* works is the implication that there is no need for two people who know each other's hearts so intimately to voice their feelings out loud. In his 与崔群书 *(Yǔ Cuī Qún shū*) *Letter to Cui Qun* Tang scholar Han Yu writes, "与足下情义，宁须言而后自明耶？ *Yǔ zúxià qíngyì, níng xū yán érhòu zìmíng yé?* / Given the true feeling between us, do I even need to say this before you will understand it?" (ibid.).

Several other terms have the same meaning as *zhījǐ*: 知我者 *zhīwǒzhě* which is translated the same way, 知音 *zhīyīn* ("one who understands the tune"), 知心 *zhīxīn* ("one how knows my heart"), and 同心 *tóngxīn* ("one who shares my heart"). These, however, have appeared much less frequently or have not appeared at all in *dānměi* series so far. The term 知音 *zhīyīn* is used several times in *Word of Honor* (2021), mostly in reference to the Four Sages of Anji, musicians from different backgrounds who left the *jiānghú* to live a quiet life amid a bamboo forest, and who are held up as Zhou Zishu's ideal. They are also an homage to the

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[43] This means that knowing (知 *zhī*) someone came with both personal and political implications. For more on the topic, see Shields (2015) *One Who Knows Me*.

[44] Some interpret the close bond between Tang poets Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen—who had exchanged around nine hundred poems over the course of thirty years, though at least a third of Yuan Zhen's corpus has since been lost (Shields, 2015)—as romantic (Norton, 1998). Speculating about the relationships of real historical figures is outside of the scope of this research; I merely bring this up to demonstrate the ambiguity of the term *zhījǐ* on a romantic-platonic scale.

famous story of the zither player Bo Ya and his companion Zhong Ziqi, whose "intimate understanding of music […] becomes a sign of harmony of their two heart-minds"; after Zhong Ziqi's death, Bo Ya broke his zither and refused to play again (ibid.). The term also appears in the drama's opening theme, 天问 (*Tiānwèn*) *Asking Heaven*[45]: "问路 问程 山水迢迢 知音何处 人寂寥 *Wèn lù wèn chéng shānshuǐ tiáotiáo zhīyīn hé chù rén jìliáo* / Ask the road and the journey ahead, where is my soulmate?"[46] The protagonists, however, use *zhījǐ* to refer to each other, and often.

As was stated earlier, 知己 *zhījǐ* can be translated as "the one who knows me", however, when it comes to subtitles, which are constrained by strict character limits, the most accurate option is not always the one translators can opt for. There are many other possible translations of the word—soulmate, confidant, kindred spirit, intimate friend, bosom friend—but like with any translation, there is no one-size-fits-all option, and the most fitting one should be chosen on a case-by-case basis based on context. Translators generally stick to one option throughout an entire series, as it makes the motif more noticeable for non-Chinese-speaking viewers; *Word of Honor* went with "soulmate", while *The Untamed* opted for "confidant"[47].

The first instance of the term *zhījǐ* appearing in *The Untamed* occurs in episode 7; while discussing the emergence of the Yin Iron with Lan Wangji's older bother and uncle, Wei Wuxian bumps his shoulder against Lan Wangji's and calls him his *zhījǐ*: "知己啊。 *Zhījǐ a.*"

The second mention appears in episode 25, when Lan Wangji approaches Wei Wuxian during a night hunt, and offers to share with him a music score he has been working on to help with his cultivation—a futile attempt since Wei Wuxian no longer has a golden core with which to cultivate, but Lan Wangji is unaware of this fact. Wei Wuxian's demeanor immediately turns colder, and wistful:

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[45] In order to not confuse it with *Questions to Heaven*, the long poem by Chu Yuan, I have chosen to translate the song's title as "Asking Heaven" but the Chinese titles of both are the same.

[46] Translation from Youku's official YouTube channel, where the episodes are uploaded. The English translation is shortened, likely to match the flow of the song. The full lyrics would be "Ask the road and the journey ahead, the remote mountains and rivers; where is my soulmate? It is lonely here."

[47] By my own recollection, Netflix changed the subtitles from "bosom friend" to "confidant" sometime between 2020 and mid-2021.

Wei Wuxian: 蓝忘机啊蓝忘机 我是你什么人啊？我的事情你能不能不要管啊。 *Lán Wàngjī a Lán Wàngjī wǒ shì nǐ shénme rén a? Wǒ de shìqíng nǐ néng bùnéng bùyào guǎn a.* / Lan Wangji, Lan Wangji, who do you take me for? Can't you leave me alone?

Lan Wangji: 你把我当成什么人？ *Nǐ bǎ wǒ dàngchéng shénme rén?* / Who do you take me for?

Wei Wuxian: 我曾经把你当做我毕生知己。 *Wǒ céngjīng bǎ nǐ dàngzuò wǒ bìshēng zhījǐ.* / I once regarded you as my lifelong confidant.

Lan Wangji: 现在仍是。 *Xiànzài réng shì.* / I still am.

By switching from Lan Wangji's *míng*, which he had been using earlier in the scene, to his *zì*, as well as using the past tense when confessing to considering him his *zhījǐ*, Wei Wuxian is once again attempting to distance himself, but Lan Wangji's confident reassurance that he is still the one who knows him leads to the moment in the series where Wei Wuxian is arguably closest to telling him everything, as is implied by a shot of him looking at his *dízi* flute between shots of looking at Lan Wangji. The flute's name, Chenqing (陈情 *chénqíng*), taken from 楚辞 *Chǔ Cí*, a poetry collection attributed to Warring States Period poet Qu Yuan, means "to give a full account". The full line reads: "愿陈情以白行兮，得罪过之不意。 *Yuàn chén qíng yǐ bái xíng xī, dézuìguo zhī bùyì.* / I wished to set forth my thoughts and explain my actions: I little dreamed that this would be held a crime." ("九章", n.d.; Hawkes, 2012). The phrase is also present in the drama's Chinese title, 陈情令 (*Chén Qíng Lìng*).

Prior to his death, Wei Wuxian is deeply concerned with whether Lan Wangji believes him, and is unwilling to have Lan Wangji, whose reputation is unblemished, bear the burden of being associated with him, since being his *zhījǐ* would carry political implications as well as social and personal. In episode 22, once the two make up after their argument (see *Names and Titles*), Wei Wuxian explains how his new cultivation path works (though not the reason for choosing it, which likely would have solved many future misunderstandings), and ends it by saying, "蓝湛 我明白你的担心，但是我魏婴向你保证我绝对不会有堕入魔道的一天。你信不信？ *Lán Zhàn wǒ míngbái nǐ de dānxīn, dànshì wǒ Wèi Yīng xiàng nǐ bǎozhèng wǒ juéduì bù huì yǒu duò rù módào de yītiān. Nǐ xìn bùxìn?* / Lan Zhan, I understand your concern. But I, Wei Ying, promise you that I will never degenerate into demonic cultivation. Do you believe me or not?"[48]. Lan Wangji nods, and Wei Wuxian smiles at him, relieved. Lan

[48] 信 *xìn*, meaning trust and fidelity, was considered to be the virtue fundamental to the role of friend. For an in-depth explanation, see Shields (2015) *One Who Knows Me*, p. 40-42.

Wangji then asks Wei Wuxian to let him help him, to which Wei Wuxian agrees despite knowing that not much can be done since he lacks a golden core. Still, most of the time when Lan Wangji approaches him with offers to teach him melodies that he thinks might help, Wei Wuxian shoots him down, like in the scene from episode 25 quoted above. A rejection of a similar offer in episode 23 is followed by the this exchange:

> Lan Wangji: 你答应过让我帮你。 *Nǐ dāyìngguò ràng wǒ bāng nǐ.* / You promised that you would let me help you.
> Wei Wuxian: 可是你如果不信我又怎么帮呢？ *Kěshì nǐ rúguǒ bùxìn wǒ yòu zěnme bāng ne?* / But if you don't believe me, how can you help me?

Despite Wei Wuxian's concerns that Lan Wangji does not truly believe him, he trusts Lan Wangji completely, and considers him the only one worthy of judging his actions justly, and by extension, deciding if he deserves to live or die. To Wei Wuxian, the act of knowing him comes with the right to serve as his judge, jury, and executioner. This is stated explicitly in episode 27, when Lan Wangji tries to stop Wei Wuxian from fleeing with the survivors of the Wen Clan:

> 蓝湛　如果我和他们之间必有一战那我宁愿和你决一生死。要死也至少死在你含光君的手上。不冤了。 *Lán Zhàn rúguǒ wǒ hé tāmen zhī jiān bì yǒuyī zhàn nà wǒ nìngyuàn hé nǐ jué yī shēngsǐ. Yàosǐ yě zhìshǎo sǐ zài nǐ Hánguāng jūn de shǒu shàng. Bù yuānle.* / Lan Zhan, if I must fight with them, I'd prefer to fight with you. If I am doomed to death, at least, I could be killed by Hanguang-jun's hand. Then I would not have been wronged.[49]

The name usage in these lines is telling; Wei Wuxian uses Lan Wangji's *míng* to show his sincerity but switches to his *hào* when talking about Lan Wangji killing him, putting them on opposite sides politically by pointing out Lan Wangji's esteem. In the end, however, it is not Lan Wangji who sends Wei Wuxian to his death, nor Jiang Cheng as the opening scene of the series implies, but Wei Wuxian himself, who pulls his hand out of Lan Wangji's grip in order to not drag him down with him, both literally and figuratively.

There are many other key moments where Wei Wuxian's unconditional belief in Lan Wangji is evident, but the ones I will point out here draw a parallel to an exchange between

[49] Translation is my own.

Wei Wuxian and Jiang Yanli that could be considered one of the most overt confirmations of the protagonists' relationship being romantic rather than platonic[50]:

> Wei Wuxian: 一个人为什么会喜欢上另外一个人啊？ 我说的是那种喜欢。 *Yīgè rén wéi shén me huì xǐhuān shàng lìngwài yīgè rén a? Wǒ shuō de shì nà zhǒng xǐhuān.* / Why would a person like another person? I mean that kind of like.
>
> Jiang Yanli: 你怎么突然问我这个呀？你有喜欢的人了吗？ *Nǐ zěnme túrán wèn wǒ zhège ya? Nǐ yǒu xǐhuān de rénle ma?* / Why are you suddenly asking me this? Do you have someone you like?
>
> Wei Wuxian: 不是不是 师姐 我可不是有喜欢的人了。至少不要那么喜欢吧。这不就是自己给自己脖子上套犁拴缰吗？ *Bùshì bùshì shījiě wǒ kě bùshì yǒu xǐhuān de rénle. Zhì shào bùyào nàme xǐhuān ba. Zhè bù jiùshì zìjǐ jǐ zìjǐ bózi shàng tào lí shuān jiāng ma?* / No, no, *shījiě*. I haven't got anyone. At least, there's no need to like a person that much. Isn't that like haltering your own neck? (Episode 24)

The imagery Wei Wuxian evokes here—putting a plow and reins around one's own neck ("套犁拴缰 *tào lí shuān jiāng*")—is less serious, but similar imagery reappears in episode 47, when Jin Guangyao, the main antagonist in the post-resurrection timeline, wraps a wire around Wei Wuxian's neck and uses him as a shield to prevent Lan Wangji from attacking him, which results in Lan Wangji nearly stabbing Wei Wuxian's throat, stopping in the nick of time. This echoes a moment at the end of episode 21: after Wei Wuxian realizes that Lan Wangji has not revealed anything that might cause his *shījiě* to worry, he chases after him to apologize. Lan Wangji attacks him, but stops right before the tip of his sword touches Wei Wuxian's throat. Wei Wuxian does not attempt to defend himself, instead only closing his eyes and waiting for the strike to come.

Once the two meet again after Wei Wuxian's resurrection, Lan Wangji is clear about believing him unconditionally, such as in the following exchange which occurs when Wei Wuxian wakes up in Cloud Recesses to find the mask he was using to hide his identity gone, and Lan Wangji playing the guqin:

> Wei Wuxian: 十六年了。 像一场梦一样。 *Shíliù niánle. Xiàng yī chǎng mèng yīyàng.* / It's been sixteen years. It feels like a dream.
>
> Lan Wangji: 你醒了。 *Nǐ xǐngle.* / You're awake.

[50] It is worth noting that both the original Chinese dialogue and its English translation avoid any gendered language.

Wei Wuxian: 没想到还能活着。 *Méi xiǎngdào hái néng huózhe.* / I never thought I could still be alive.

Lan Wangji: 那日见你坠落山谷江澄坚持要到悬崖底下看却只见森森白骨。 *Nà rì jiàn nǐ zhuì qiáo shāngǔ Jiāng Chéng jiānchí yào dào xuányá dǐxia kàn què zhǐ jiàn sēnsēn báigǔ.* / The day you fell from the cliff, Jiang Cheng insisted on looking for you at the bottom, but he could only see countless bones of the dead.[51]

Wei Wuxian: 那你呢？你有去找过我吗？ *Nà nǐ ne? Nǐ yǒu qù zhǎoguò wǒ ma?* / What about you? Have you ever looked for me?

Lan Wangji: 三年后我去过。却是连白骨都没有了。 *Sān nián hòu wǒ qùguò. Què shì lián báigǔ dōu méiyǒule.* / Three years later, I went there. But even the bones were gone.[52]

Wei Wuxian: 为何是三年后？ *Wèihé shì sān nián hòu?* / Why three years later?

Lan Wangji: 这十六年来... *Zhè shíliù niánlái…* / These sixteen years…

Wei Wuxian: 这十六年来如果我说我也不知道我身在何处，你信吗？ *Zhè shíliù niánlái rúguǒ wǒ shuō wǒ yě bù zhīdào wǒ shēn zài hé chù, nǐ xìn ma?* / If I say I also don't know where I was these sixteen years, will you believe me?

Lan Wangji: 我信你。 *Wǒ xìn nǐ.* / Yes, I believe you.

Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 不过那个时候你真的信我吗？ *Lán Zhàn bùguò nàgè shíhòu nǐ zhēn de xìn wǒ ma?* / But Lan Zhan, did you really believe me back then?
(Episode 33)

The question remains unanswered until nearly ten episodes later.

Another instance where the term *zhījǐ* is used occurs in episode 43. While telling Wei Wuxian about how Lan Wangji fought against everyone in the Burial Mounds, not allowing them to destroy it[53], and being punished with three hundred lashes and a three-year seclusion inside Cold Pond Cave as a result, Lan Xichen mentions, "忘机禁闭时我曾去找他也曾劝他，但他却跟我说他既引你为知己就应该相信你的为人。 *Wàngjī jìnbì shí wǒ céng qù zhǎo tā yě céng quàn tā, dàn tā què gēn wǒ shuō tā jì yǐn nǐ wéi zhījǐ jiù yīnggāi xiāngxìn nǐ de wéirén.* / When Wangji was imprisoned, I went to him and tried to persuade him. But he

[51] Translation of this line is my own.

[52] Translation of this line is my own.

[53] The flashback scene of this moment causes some confusion regarding whether it happened shortly before or after Wei Wuxian's death. Lan Wangji definitely visited the Burial Mounds before the battle which led to Wei Wuxian's death, which is when he found Wen Yuan alive—information he had tried to tell Wei Wuxian during the battle but never got the chance to. However, it is also possible that he went back after Wei Wuxian's death, since Jin Guangyao mentions that Lan Wangji's uncle is on his way to punish him.

told me he considered you his confidant and should have trusted you."[54] A flashback that plays during their conversation reveals that Lan Wangji had argued while getting beaten by quoting a line Wei Wuxian had said a few times prior: "敢问叔父孰正孰邪孰黑孰白？ *Gǎn wèn shúfù shú zhèng shú xié shú hēi shú bái?* / I dare ask you, uncle. Who is right, and who is wrong? What is black, and what is white?"[55].

Wei Wuxian asks Lan Wangji the same question twice: in episode 23, "蓝湛 你说眼下这些人，又孰正孰邪孰黑孰白？ *Lán Zhàn nǐ shuō yǎnxià zhèxiē rén, yòu shú zhèng shú xié shú hēi shú bái?* / Lan Zhan, what would you say about these people now? Who is good and who is evil, what is black and what is white?"[56]; and in episode 27: "许我一生锄奸扶弱而如今你告诉我孰强孰弱又孰黑孰白。 *Xǔ wǒ yīshēng chújiān fú ruò ér rújīn nǐ gàosù wǒ shú qiáng shú ruò yòu shú hēi shú bái.* / I promised to spend my life eliminating evil and helping the weak. And now, tell me, who's strong and who's weak, what's black and what's white?"[57].

Zhījǐ gets brought up again in episode 43. It bears mentioning here that back in episode 14, the two use a telepathy spell to communicate while fighting the Xuanwu of Slaughter, and it is used for mostly practical reasons at the time. The details of the spell are never explained, and Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are the only ones seen using it throughout the series. It makes another appearance in the following scene which takes place inside the Jingshi:

> Wei Wuxian: 想想那时候还真是孤独。唯一几个相信我的人都死了。温宁。师姐。幸亏… *Xiǎng xiǎng nà shíhòu hái zhēnshi gūdú. Wéiyī jǐ gè xiāngxìn wǒ de rén dōu sǐle. Wēn níng. Shījiě. Xìngkuī…* / Thinking about it, I was so lonely back then. The few who believed me are dead. Wen Ning. *Shījiě*. Luckily…
>
> Lan Wangji: 这世上还有人信你。 *Zhè shìshàng hái yǒurén xìn nǐ.* / There is still somebody in this world who believes you.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 敬你。人生得一知己足矣。 *Lán Zhàn jìng nǐ. Rénshēng dé yī zhījǐ zú yǐ.* / Lan Zhan, I toast to you. It is enough to have a true confidant in life.

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[54] Translation is my own.

[55] Translation is my own.

[56] Translation is my own.

[57] Translation is my own. The phrase 锄奸 *chújiān* means "to weed out traitors" but "to eliminate evil" flows better in English while expressing the same sentiment.

Lan Wangji: 无他问心无愧而已。 *Wú tā wènxīnwúkuì éryǐ.* / Nothing else but asking my heart and finding no regret.

Wei Wuxian: 管他诽我谤我问心无愧而已。 *Guǎn tā fěi wǒ bàng wǒ wènxīnwúkuì éryǐ.* / No matter how they slander me, I'm asking my heart and finding no regret.[58]

The phrase "问心无愧 (*Wènxīnwúkuì*)"—asking one's heart and finding no regrets, or having a clear conscience—is tied to the promise the two made during the lantern ceremony in Cloud Recesses. Wei Wuxian's wish—"愿我魏无羡能够一生锄奸扶弱 无愧于心。 *Yuàn wǒ Wèi Wúxiàn nénggòu yīshēng chújiān fú ruò wúkuì yú xīn.* / I, Wei Wuxian, wish to eliminate evil and help the weak for as long as I live, holding no regrets in my heart."[59]—is said during the scene itself in episode 7, while Lan Wangji's wish is not revealed until near the end of the final episode—"愿我蓝忘机能够锄奸扶弱 无愧于心。*Yuàn wǒ Lán Wàngjī nénggòu chújiān fú ruò wúkuì yú xīn.* / I, Lan Wangji, wish to wish to eliminate evil and help the weak, holding no regrets in my heart."[60] The only difference between their lines is the addition of "一生 *yīshēng*", meaning "all one's life", in Wei Wuxian's wish.

One other repeated motif that is very important to Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's relationship is that of the single-log bridge. In episode 29, Lan Wangji visits Wei Wuxian in the Burial Mounds after the latter has defected; upon their parting, Lan Wangji overhears Wei Wuxian say the following line to Wen Yuan, a child from the Wen Clan whom Lan Wangji rescues later on: "管他熙熙攘攘阳关道，我偏要一条独木桥走到黑。 *Guǎn tā xīxīrǎngrǎng yángguāndào, wǒ piān yào yītiáo dúmùqiáo zǒu dào hēi.* / Who cares about the bustling, wide open road? I'll stick to my single-log bridge until it's dark."[61] The motif makes a return in episode 42; after Wei Wuxian's identity gets exposed, and the two are cornered while fleeing, Wei Wuxian pushes Lan Wangji away, not wanting to drag him down with him, but Lan Wangji is resolute in his decision to stay by his side:

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[58] Translation is my own.

[59] Translation is my own.

[60] Translation is my own.

[61] Translation is my own. "独木桥 *dúmùqiáo*" literally means single-log bridge, but figuratively, it refers to a difficult path.

Jing Guangyao: 夷陵老祖不愧是夷陵老祖。十六年后重归于世就把我们玩得团团转。不仅仅是金凌就连含光君也着了你的道。 *Yílíng lǎozǔ bùkuì shì Yílíng lǎozǔ. Shíliù nián hòu chóng guīyú shì jiù bǎ wǒmen wán dé tuántuánzhuàn. Bùjǐn jīn shì Jīn Líng jiù lián Hánguāng jūn yězhele nǐ de dào.* / Yiling Patriarch, you are truly worthy of your title. Returning to the world after sixteen years, you still toy with us like we're fools. Not only Jin Ling[62], but Hanguang-jun was also tricked by you.

Wei Wuxian: 不错。*Bùcuò.* / You're right.

Lan Wangji: 非也。我早知道他是魏婴。 *Fēi yě. Wǒ zǎo zhīdào tā shì Wèi Yīng.* / Wrong. I have already known he was Wei Ying.

Wei Wuxian[63]: 蓝湛。蓝湛 你不用如此。这种情况我早就已经习惯了。先跑再说。你就说是受了夷陵老祖的蒙骗，旁人不敢说你什么。 *Lán Zhàn. Lán Zhàn nǐ bùyòng rúcǐ. Zhè zhǒng qíngkuàng wǒ zǎo jiù yǐjīng xíguànle. Xiān pǎo zàishuō. Nǐ jiù shuō shì shòule Yílíng lǎozǔ de mēngpiàn, pángrén bù gǎn shuō nǐ shénme.* / Lan Zhan.[64] Lan Zhan, you don't have to do this. I've been used to this for a long time. Let's go first. Just say you were deceived by the Yiling Patriarch. Others wouldn't dare say anything about you.

Lan Wangji: 魏婴 你记不记得在云深不知处你问我什么？一条独木桥走到黑的感觉确实不差。 *Wèi Yīng nǐ jì bù jìdé zài Yún Shēn Bùzhī Chù nǐ wèn wǒ shénme? Yītiáo dúmùqiáo zǒu dào hēi de gǎnjué quèshí bù chā.* / Wei Ying, do you remember what you asked me in Cloud Recesses?[65] The feeling of sticking to a single-log bridge until it's dark is indeed not bad.

Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛啊蓝湛。蓝湛 再给你最后一次机会。你可得想好了，要是真和我出了这个门你的名声就都毁了。还打不打？ *Lán Zhàn a Lán Zhàn. Lán Zhàn zài gěi nǐ zuìhòu yīcì jīhuì. Nǐ kě dé xiǎng hǎole, yàoshi zhēn hé wǒ chūle zhège mén nǐ de míngshēng jiù dōu huǐle. Hái dǎ bù dǎ?* / Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan, I'll give you one last chance. Think carefully; after you walk out this door with me, your reputation will be ruined.[66] Are we fighting or not?

Lan Wangji: 话多。 *Huà duō.* / Too much talking.

Wei Wuxian: 打！ *Dǎ!* / Let's fight![67]

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[62] Jin Ling is Wei Wuxian's nephew, Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan's son.

[63] The rest of the conversation up until the last line is spoken in lowered voices.

[64] At this point, they look at each other before Lan Wangji draws his sword, making several people back away.

[65] He is referring to this line from episode 33, quoted earlier: "But Lan Zhan, did you really believe me back then?"

[66] They both shift into fighting positions so they're standing back to back as Wei Wuxian is still speaking, showing that Wei Wuxian already knows the answer.

[67] Translation is my own.

Physical Intimacy

The aspect of *dānměi* dramas where the interference of state censorship becomes the most apparent is physical intimacy; while other elements analyzed in this work can be interpreted as either romantic or platonic, many forms of physical contact do not have the same luxury. Adaptations must leave out any instances of the protagonists kissing, as well as any sexual acts, and more innocuous physical contact is generally only shown on screen in brief glimpses. Extended shots of physical contact between the protagonists are typically reserved for "special edition" releases. As an example, the only difference between the regular and special editions of the seventeenth episode of *Word of Honor* is that the special edition includes an additional wide shot of Zhou Zishu placing his hand over Wen Kexing's.

This lack of on-screen physical intimacy between the protagonists, as well as the lack of overt love confessions, is the reason why some viewers consider censored *dānměi* adaptations to be queerbaiting or "not really BL", echoing Wang's sentiment about carnality being what separates homosexuality from homosocial bonding (see *Introduction*). However, to disregard the queerness of works created under censorship purely because of their lack of on-screen carnality would be rather reductive.

As Wang (2019) points out in regard to the series *Guardian* (2018), and as is true for other *dānměi* dramas, "the two male actors' subtle performances maximize the homosexual undercurrents under the guise of bromance. Restrained from physical intimate contact, they mobilize eye contacts, facial expressions, and body gestures to hint [at] the romantic and sexual attractions between the characters". When it does occur, physical contact is most frequently limited to the protagonists protecting each other from harm, especially in *wǔxiá* and *xiānxiá* series where physical conflicts are part of the norm. For example, both *The Untamed* and *Word of Honor* contain numerous moments of the protagonists stepping in to parry an attack meant for the other, supporting one another when wounded, taking care of each other's injuries, and other such instances. Emphasizing that the protagonists are *zhījǐ* and/or martial siblings (师兄弟 *shīxiōngdì*)[68] can provide an excuse for the inclusion of more physical intimacy,

[68] Martial siblings are members of the same generation of a sect, and their dynamic is different from that of blood-related or adopted siblings (though it is possible for martial siblings to also be blood-related or adopted siblings, as is the case with the Yunmeng siblings in *The Untamed*). Whether martial siblings behave more like regular siblings or classmates depends on how the author of a given work chooses to write the dynamics within the sects.

as long as it can still be excused as platonic. From a heteronormative lens, these dynamics seem to eliminate the potential for a romance if the parties involved are of the same gender, even though there are plenty of heterosexual romances between martial siblings in media. *Word of Honor* had been able to include many moments that likely would have been considered too romantic otherwise—such as the gifting of a hairpin—by adding a reveal that the two protagonists are long-lost *shīxiōngdì*.

The Untamed features noticeably less physical contact between the protagonists in the pre-resurrection timeline, which has a lot more to do with the main characters' personalities and the plot rather than censorship. As a teenager, Lan Wangji is visibly uncomfortable with any kind of physical touch, even stating it outright (see *Names and Titles*), while Wei Wuxian avoids touch after losing his golden core so that Lan Wangji cannot tell that something is amiss. That said, Wei Wuxian is still the most willing to let himself be vulnerable around Lan Wangji, though only when he has a believable excuse for the lack of spiritual energy, such as acute injuries. They are both noticeably more comfortable with physical contact in the post-resurrection timeline, which mirrors their developed unconditional trust (see *The One Who Knows Me*). One such example is the parallel between the following two scenes: in the pre-resurrection timeline, Wei Wuxian offers to carry Lan Wangji on his back so he does not have to put weight on his recently broken leg, and Lan Wangji rejects the offer (though he does ultimately lean on Wei Wuxian for support); similarly, when Lan Wangji offers the same thing after Wei Wuxian is injured in the post-resurrection timeline, Wei Wuxian's initial response is to reject his offer. Lan Wangji reminds him of the earlier event, which Wei Wuxian claims not to recall[69], but once Lan Wangji hoists him onto his back, he does not mind it in the slightest despite his earlier protests.

Similarly, in episode 6, Lan Wangji gets dressed while still inside the water as soon as he hears Wei Wuxian approaching, while in episode 33, he makes no effort to do the same, despite being unwilling to talk about the scars he has gotten in the sixteen years Wei Wuxian had been gone. One of the scars matches the one Wei Wuxian had gotten while protecting Luo Qingyang, a female disciple of the Jin Clan. The drama adaptation does not bring up how Lan Wangji got the mark, however, in the novel, he inflicts it upon himself while drunk and griev-

[69] He likely genuinely does not remember; Wei Wuxian's poor memory is a bit of a running joke in the series.

ing. The only hint the drama gives towards this is the following exchange in episode 13, though it is rather opaque for anyone not familiar with the source material:

> Wei Wuxian: 你说绵绵一个姑娘家长得还挺漂亮的啊。要是被那个烙铁在脸上留下什么痕迹这可一辈子留在脸上多不好啊？ *Nǐ shuō Miánmián yīgè gūniáng jiāzhǎng dé hái tǐng piàoliang de a. Yàoshi bèi nàgè làotiě zài liǎn shàng liú xià shénme hénjī zhè kè yībèizi liú zài liǎn shàng duō bù hǎo a?* / That girl Mianmian[70] is quite pretty. What if she got some permanent marks on her face from that hot iron?
>
> Lan Wangji: 你身上这个东西一辈子都去不掉了。 *Nǐ shēnshang zhège dōngxī yībèizi dōu qù bù diàole.* / You can't get rid of that mark on your body for the rest of your life.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 那不一样。反正又不是在脸上。而且我是男人，哪个男人一辈子不受几次伤留几个疤。再说了就算这个东西一辈子去不掉但它也代表我曾经保护过一个姑娘而且这个姑娘一辈子都忘不了我。这样想一想，其实还挺美好的，对不对？ *Nà bù yīyàng. Fǎnzhèng yòu bùshì zài liǎn shàng. Érqiě wǒ shì nánrén, nǎge nánrén yībèizi bù shòu jǐ cì shāng liú jǐ gè bā. Zàishuōle jiùsuàn zhège dōngxī yībèizi qù bù diào dàn tā yě dàibiǎo wǒ céngjīng bǎohùguò yīgè gūniáng érqiě zhège gūniáng yībèizi dōu wàng bùliǎo wǒ. Zhèyàng xiǎng yī xiǎng, qíshí hái tǐng měihǎo de, duì bùduì?* / That's different. It's not on my face anyway. And I'm a man. A man should get wounded sometimes and get some scars. What's more, even if the mark will be with me forever, it represents that I once protected a girl who will never forget me her entire life. Just think about it. It's quite beautiful, right?
>
> Lan Wangji: 你也知道她一辈子忘不了你了？ *Nǐ yě zhīdào tā yībèizi wàng bùliǎo nǐle?* / So you know that she'll remember you forever?

An element specific to *The Untamed* is Lan Wangji's headband, which is worn by everyone in the Lan Clan, and the significance of which is pointed out early on, after Wei Wuxian keeps trying to fix it while Lan Wangji is drunk:

> Lan Wangji: 扶额乃重要之物。非父母妻儿岂能触碰。 *Fú é nǎi zhòngyào zhī wù. Fēi fùmǔ qī'ér qǐ néng chù pèng.* / The headband is important. Except for one's parents, wife, and child, how could anyone else touch it?
>
> Wei Wuxian: 妻子？ *Qīzi?* / Wife?

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[70] Mianmian (绵绵) is Luo Qingyang's nickname. It is a reference to the poem *Watering Horses* (饮马长城窟行 (*Yǐn Mǎ Chángchéng Kū Xíng*), specifically the line "绵绵思远道 *Miánmián sī yuǎndào*" which can be translated as "How endless is my longing for the distant road" (Cai, 1996) or more literally "Mianmian thinks of Yuandao". In episode 3, after learning her nickname, Wei Wuxian introduces himself as Yuandao in a (successful) attempt to charm her. Jiang Cheng brings this reference up later in the same episode when he remarks, "他指不定现在跟什么绵绵什么远道一起了。 *Tā zhǐ bùdìng xiànzài gēn shénme Miánmián shénme Yuǎndào yīqǐle.* / It's hard to say he's not having fun with some Mianmian or some Yuandao now." This is just one example of Wei Wuxian being coded as bisexual.

Lan Wangji: 你笑什么？ *Nǐ xiào shénme?* / What are you laughing at?

Wei Wuxian: 我笑你们蓝氏啊，规矩又多又矫情。哪个女子敢嫁你为妻，打一辈子光棍吧你。 *Wǒ xiào nǐmen Lán shì a, guījǔ yòu duō yòu jiǎoqíng. Nǎge nǚzǐ gǎn jià nǐ wèi qī, dǎ yī bèi zǐ guānggùn ba nǐ.* / I am laughing at you Lan Clan, with your excessive and pretentious rules. What woman would ever dare become your wife? You're going to be on your own your whole life.

Lan Wangji: 也好。 *Yěhǎo.* / That's fine.[71]

(Episode 6)

It is interesting to note that in this exchange, Netflix's English subtitles translate "妻儿 *qī'ér*" ("wife and child") and "妻子 *qīzi*" ("wife") with the gender-neutral term "significant other", but Wei Wuxian's reaction has just as much to do with the custom itself as it does with the idea of Lan Wangji ever marrying a woman.

This exchange occurs minutes after Wei Wuxian tugs on Lan Wangji's sleeve while trying to convince him to have a celebratory drink with him, Jiang Cheng, and Nie Huaisang instead of getting them in trouble for breaking the rules—a moment notable for the particular way in which he does it, resembling a cutting motion. This is a reference to the term "断袖之癖 *duànxiùzhīpǐ*", or cut-sleeve, a euphemism for homosexuality stemming from a romantic anecdote about Emperor Ai of Han and his lover, Dong Xian: "Emperor Ai was sleeping in the daytime with Dong Xian stretched out across his sleeve. When the emperor wanted to get up, Dong Xian was still asleep. Because he did not want to disturb him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve and got up. His love and thoughtfulness went this far!" (Wuxia Ameng, ed., as cited in Hinsch, 1990). At the time, the tale had been popular enough to inspire "an array of opulent courtiers fastidiously dressed in colorful silk tunics, each missing a single sleeve" (ibid.), and it remains one of, if not the most popular, images associated with gay love in China to this day. *Word of Honor* also includes more than one reference to the passions of the cut-sleeve, with Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu both literally cutting off a part of the other's sleeve at different points in the story, with the convenient excuses of Zhou Zishu's sleeve being stained with blood, and Wen Kexing's catching fire.

Despite initially not allowing Wei Wuxian to touch the headband, by the end of the aforementioned episode, Lan Wangji wraps one end of it around Wei Wuxian's wrist, while tying the other end around his own, in order to protect him from attacks inside Cold Pond

[71] Translation is my own.

Cave since he is not a part of the Lan Clan. In episode 8, Wei Wuxian uses a self-made talisman to tie his and Lan Wangji's wrists together after Lan Wangji keeps walking ahead of him on their journey. It is heavily implied that Lan Wangji's headband was a direct inspiration for the talisman, since it is blue in color, matching the headband and contrasting Wei Wuxian's other red talismans. This idea is further implied two episodes later when he remarks that he will have to find another name for it after using it to capture the villainous demonic cultivator Xue Yang. The name he ultimately settles on is never stated in the series but his conversation with Lan Wangji about naming it is quite interesting:

> Wei Wuxian: 要我给它取个什么名字好呢？是同袍还是无衣好啊？我看都不好。要不然叫它…
> *Yào wǒ gěi tā qǔ gè shénme míngzì hǎo ne? Shì tóng páo háishì wú yī hǎo a? Wǒ kàn dōu bù hǎo. Yào bùrán jiào tā…* / What should I name it? Should it be 'Binding' or 'Bonding'? Maybe neither. How about calling it…
> Lan Wangji: 无聊。 *Wúliáo.* / Boring.
> (Episode 8)

The English subtitles offer one of the most blatant double entendres in the drama, and the Chinese names Wei Wuxian suggests—"同袍 *tóng páo*" and "无衣 *wú yī*"—can also be interpreted as such, as their literal translations are "sharing robes" and "no clothes" respectively. More importantly for the series' themes, however, this is also a reference to a poem from 诗经 (*Shījīng*) *The Classic of Poetry*, specifically the line "岂曰无衣、与子同袍。 *Qǐ yuē wú yī, yǔ zǐ tóng páo.* / How shall it be said that you have no clothes? I will share my long robes with you." ("Wu Yi", n.d.). The poem talks about the camaraderie formed between soldiers defending their country, and therefore also harkens back to the promise the two made together.

The headband is brought up several more times throughout the series. While the two are in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave (episodes 13-14), Wei Wuxian takes the headband to secure a tourniquet for Lan Wangji's injured leg, scolding him for caring about the custom more than his own injuries. Still, in the following episode, Lan Wangji wakes up to find the headband back in its rightful place, which Wei Wuxian reveals to be his own doing since he knew Lan Wangji would have been nervous otherwise. Episode 13 also features an allusion to the aforementioned poem: after Lan Wangji opens up about the Wen Clan destroying Cloud

Recesses, Wei Wuxian offers him his outer robe to cover himself if he is cold. Finding him already asleep, he covers him with the robe and settles beside him to sleep.

In episode 25, he teasingly asks to borrow Lan Wangji's headband to use as a blindfold during an archery competition—a request that Lan Wangji promptly ignores. In episode 40, after Wei Wuxian transfers his consciousness into a man-shaped paper talisman to search for clues in the Jin Clan's residence unnoticed, the first thing he does is climb onto Lan Wangji's head and tug on his headband, which Lan Wangji chides him for but does not appear to truly mind.

Another aspect worth noting is that Lan Wangji is typically depicted as pristine, in either white or light blue robes, thus matching his *zì*, 忘机 *Wàngjī*, meaning "to forget about worldly matters and be at peace with the world". The only exceptions to this are connected to Wei Wuxian—there are bloodstains on his robes while the two are in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave, which is also when he allows himself to be more vulnerable around Wei Wuxian; he gets a cut on his arm while protecting Wei Wuxian moments before his death, and there is blood tricking from the wound and down his hand as he grips Wei Wuxian's wrist at the cliff's edge; there are bloodstains visible on his back while he is being beaten as punishment for refusing to renounce Wei Wuxian; and he gets soaked in the rain twice, once after letting Wei Wuxian escape with the Wen prisoners, and once while helping a wounded Wei Wuxian escape from the Jin Clan.

Music

Music is a crucial part of cinematic language. This includes both diegetic and non-diegetic music, or music that exists within the world of the story, performed and heard by the characters, and that which exists only for the audience (such as the soundtrack). While the presence of music in the narrative varies greatly depending on the plot of the series and the budget the production receives, it is not uncommon for *dānměi* series to have opening and/or ending theme songs that are either overtly romantic or can be easily interpreted as such. *Love Is More Than a Word*'s opening theme, 花開年少 (*Huā Kāi Niánshào*) *The Blossoming of Our Youth* is unambiguously a love song, including not only overt declarations of love but also mentions of traditional wedding imagery; the ending theme of *Word of Honor*, 天涯客 (*Tiānyá kè*) *Far-*

away Wanderers, is a tender duet which serves as a kind of response to the aforementioned opening theme, a comfort found within the turmoils of the *jiānghú*, with lines such as: "任山高水远 你在我也在 *Rèn shāngāo shuǐ yuǎn nǐ zài wǒ yě zài* / Mountains grow tall, rivers run far, you are here and so am I"[72].

The Untamed, in particular, places a lot of importance on music, since both protagonists use instruments as spiritual tools—Wei Wuxian uses a *dízi* flute, and Lan Wangji a seven-string guqin—and Lan Wangji plays music to help with Wei Wuxian's cultivation on multiple occasions[73]. However, in this thesis, I will be focusing on only one song that is featured prominently in various iterations both diegetically and non-diegetically—无羁 *Wújī* ("Unrestrained" or "Untamed")—and I will primarily be looking at its diegetic usage, though as will soon become apparent, it often goes hand-in-hand with its non-diegetic appearances. While the lyrics themselves are more ambiguous compared to the aforementioned songs, what makes *Wuji* romantic is its appearance within the context of the story.

While the song is present from the very first episode, if we arrange the story chronologically, its first diegetic appearance occurs in episode 14: After slaying the Xuanwu of Slaughter, Wei Wuxian collapses into the water, and Lan Wangji drags him out and uses his spiritual energy to heal his injuries, during which the following exchange happens:

> Wei Wuxian: 我这不是在做梦吧？ *Wǒ zhè bùshì zài zuòmèng ba?* / Am I dreaming?
>
> Lan Wangji: 不是。 *Bùshì.* / No.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 没想到我有生之年还能看到蓝二公子如此景象。蓝湛 我刚才还以为我活不了了。 *[…]* 太安静了。蓝湛 唱首歌来听好不好啊？我就知道你不会理我。 *Méi xiǎngdào wǒ yǒushēngzhīnián hái néng kàn dào Lán èr gōngzǐ rúcǐ jǐngxiàng. Lán Zhàn wǒ gāngcái hái yǐwéi wǒ huó bùliǎole. […] Tài ānjìngle. Lán Zhàn chàng shǒu gē lái tīng hǎobù hǎo a? Wǒ jiù zhīdào nǐ bù huì lǐ wǒ.* / Little did I think before that one day, I would get to see Second Young Master Lan acting so concerned like this. Lan Zhan. I didn't think I would survive this. […] It's so quiet. Lan Zhan, can you sing a song for me? I know you won't ignore me.

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[72] Translation is my own.

[73] Interestingly, the term 知音 *zhīyīn* is never used in the drama, despite the two, quite literally, knowing each other's tune being a plot point.

At his request, Lan Wangji begins humming *Wuji*, which transitions into a non-diegetic duet version of the song[74], accompanied by a montage of moments the two have shared so far. Wei Wuxian says, "好听，好听。蓝湛 这首曲子叫什么名字啊？ *Hǎotīng, hǎotīng. Lán Zhàn zhè shǒu qǔzi jiào shénme míngzì a?* / It sounds so pleasant. Lan Zhan. What's the name of this song?" But he loses consciousness before he can hear Lan Wangji's response.

The name of the song is never uttered out loud in the series, likely due to it being homophonous with one of the possible portmanteaus of the protagonists' names. The more popular portmanteau for the couple is Wangxian (忘羡) but their names can also be combined to create Wuji (无机). The song title simply replaces 机 *jī* with the homophone 羁 *jī*, a difference that would not be noticed without subtitles, and therefore, is likely too much of a risk to say out loud.

A transition from a diegetic version of the song that Lan Wangji plays on his guqin to the non-diegetic duet version also occurs during this scene from episode 43, already quoted previously but which will be included again for ease of reading, further emphasizing the emotional weight of the exchange:

> Wei Wuxian: 想想那时候还真是孤独。唯一几个相信我的人都死了。温宁。师姐。幸亏…… *Xiǎng xiǎng nà shíhòu hái zhēnshi gūdú. Wéiyī jǐ gè xiāngxìn wǒ de rén dōu sǐle. Wēn níng. Shījiě. Xìngkuī……* / Thinking about it, I was so lonely back then. The few who believed me are dead. Wen Ning. *Shījiě*. Luckily…
>
> Lan Wangji: 这世上还有人信你。 *Zhè shìshàng hái yǒurén xìn nǐ.* / There is still somebody in this world who believes you.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 敬你。人生得一知己足矣。 *Lán Zhàn jìng nǐ. Rénshēng dé yī zhījǐ zú yǐ.* / Lan Zhan, I toast to you. It is enough to have a true confidant in life.
>
> Lan Wangji: 无他问心无愧而已。 *Wú tā wènxīnwúkuì éryǐ.* / Nothing else but asking my heart and finding no regret.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 管他诽我谤我问心无愧而已。 *Guǎn tā fěi wǒ bàng wǒ wènxīnwúkuì éryǐ.* / No matter how they slander me, I'm asking my heart and finding no regret.[75]

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[74] The duet version is performed by the lead actors Xiao Zhan (Wei Wuxian) and Wang Yibo (Lan Wangji).

[75] Translation is my own.

As was mentioned, the song actually first appears in episode 1, when Wei Wuxian plays it on a piece of grass while remembering Lan Wangji after being brought back to life. Overhearing the melody, Lan Sizhui[76] remarks that he has heard it before and that it sounds like a melody from Gusu, implying that Lan Wangji has played it in his presence—a heartfelt twist on the tale of Bo Ya who broke his zither after Zhong Ziqi's death; instead of making a similar decision, Lan Wangji continues playing the song to remember Wei Wuxian. In the following episode, Lan Wangji recognizes Wei Wuxian despite his disguise after hearing him play the song on a makeshift flute. The melody being a way for Lan Wangji to recognize Wei Wuxian despite the latter still being presumed dead emphasizes just how much emotional weight it carries for the two of them.

Wei Wuxian, however, not recalling the song's origin but only the melody, does not piece together how Lan Wangji recognized him for a while. In episode 35, while being carried on Lan Wangji's back, he asks him about it:

> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 在大梵山你就认出我了，你怎么知道的？ *Lán Zhàn zài Dàfàn Shān nǐ jiù rèn chū wǒle, nǐ zěnme zhīdào de?* / Lan Zhan, you recognized me on Dafan Mountain. How did you know it was me?
>
> Lan Wangji: 想知道？你自己告诉我的。 *Xiǎng zhīdào? Nǐ zìjǐ gàosù wǒ de.* / Do you want to know?[77] You told me yourself.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 我告诉你的？是因为金凌还是因为温宁啊？都不对吧…… *Wǒ gàosù nǐ de? Shì yīnwèi Jīn Líng háishì yīnwèi Wēn Níng a? Dōu bùduì ba……* / I told you? Was it because of Jin Ling? Or Wen Ning? I guess neither…
>
> Lan Wangji: 自己想。 *Zìjǐ xiǎng.* / Think about it.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 你就告诉我吧。 *Nǐ jiù gàosù wǒ ba.* / Can't you just tell me?[78]

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[76] Lan Sizhui is Wen Yuan, the last remaining survivor of the Wen Clan whom Lan Wangji found and rescued right before Wei Wuxian's death. His upbringing in both the Burial Mounds and Cloud Recesses was communal but he is shown spending a lot of time around Wei Wuxian as a small child, and his brief remark about *Wuji* implies that he likely spent a good amount of time around Lan Wangji as well; to borrow contemporary terminology, he can, for all intents and purposes, be considered the pair's adopted child. The inclusion of a younger character that the main couple looks after is also present in a handful of other *dānměi* dramas, such as Zhang Chengling in *Word of Honor*, whom Zhou Zishu agrees to escort to safety after the rest of his sect is massacred, and who ends up becoming Zhou Zishu's disciple (Wen Kexing is his martial uncle); and Dong'er in *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty*, a young maidservant who follows Tang Fan after he moves into Sui Zhou's residence.

[77] Wei Wuxian nods.

[78] Translation is my own.

This conversation is continued in episode 40, with both exchanges being accompanied by a non-diegetic instrumental version of *Wuji*:

> Wei Wuxian: 所以我真的很好奇啊，你到底是怎么认出我的？ *Suǒyǐ wǒ zhēn de hěn hàoqí a, nǐ dàodǐ shì zěnme rèn chū wǒ de?* / So, I'm really curious. How did you recognize me?
>
> Lan Wangji: 我也很好奇，你记性为何那么差？ *Wǒ yě hěn hàoqí, nǐ jìxìng wèihé nàme chà?* / I am also curious. Why is your memory so poor?
>
> Wei Wuxian: 我也希望我记性很差。 *Wǒ yě xīwàng wǒ jìxìng hěn chà.* / I also hope I have a poor memory.[79]

Wei Wuxian finally figures it out in episode 43, after playing the song on his flute while they are on the road and noticing Lan Wangji's reaction:

> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 我问你 当年在暮溪山玄武洞底你唱给我听的那首歌到底叫什么名字呀？ *Lán Zhàn wǒ wèn nǐ dāngnián zài mù xī shān Xuánwǔdòng dǐ nǐ chàng gěi wǒ tīng dì nà shǒu gē dàodǐ jiào shénme míngzì ya?* / Lan Zhan, let me ask you. Back then, in the Xuanwu's cave, what's the name of the song you sang to me?
>
> Lan Wangji: 为何突然问起这个？*Wèihé túrán wèn qǐ zhège?* / Why are you suddenly asking this?
>
> Wei Wuxian: 你就说嘛，叫什么名字啊？我好像已经猜到你是怎么认出我的了。说呀 什么曲子？谁作的？ *Nǐ jiù shuō ma, jiào shénme míngzì a? Wǒ hǎoxiàng yǐjīng cāi dào nǐ shì zěnme rèn chū wǒ dele. Shuō ya shénme qǔzi? Shéi zuò de?* / Just tell me, what's it called? I think I've already guessed how you recognized me. Tell me, what song was it? Who composed it?
>
> Lan Wangji: 我。 *Wǒ.* / Me.
>
> Wei Wuxian: 你作的。那它叫什么名字呀？ *Nǐ zuò de. Nà tā jiào shénme míngzì ya?* / You composed it. So, what's its name, then?
>
> Lan Wangji: 你觉得呢？ *Nǐ juédé ne?* / What do you think?
>
> Wei Wuxian: 你是在问我意见呀？那我看不如叫…… *Nǐ shì zài wèn wǒ yìjiàn ya? Nà wǒ kàn bùrú jiào……* / You're asking for my opinion? I think we better call it…
>
> Lan Wangji: 渴了 讨点水喝。 *Kěle tǎo diǎn shuǐ hē.* / I'm thirsty, let's look for some water.[80]

Wuji plays during many other key moments of the series—Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji's duel after Wei Wuxian sneaks into Cloud Recesses in episode 3, their parting in

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[79] Translation is my own.

[80] Translation is my own.

episode 26, their subsequent encounter in Yiling in episode 28, and in the following episode while Lan Wangji is kneeling in the snow as punishment for visiting Wei Wuxian, just to name a few—but it is most frequently used in the final ten or so minutes of the series. It can first be heard as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are shown by a waterfall in Cloud Recesses—for the first half of the scene, they are playing their instruments, so it can be assumed that the song is being played diegetically as well, even if the audience can only hear the non-diegetic duet version—and it continues to play during the following exchange:

> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 你不愧是含光君。 *Lán Zhàn nǐ bùkuì shì Hánguāng jūn.* / Lan Zhan, you are truly worthy of being Hanguang-jun.
>
> Lan Wangji: 你也不愧是魏婴。 *Nǐ yě bùkuì shì Wèi Yīng.* / And you are truly worthy of being Wei Ying.[81]

This exchange is preceded by Lan Wangji explaining that he chose to take on the responsibility of the Chief Cultivator because of the promise the two made in their youth, so Wei Wuxian is expressing that Lan Wangji lives up to his excellent reputation, while his use of Lan Wangji's *míng* at the start of the sentence indicates the closeness between them. Lan Wangji's response is more intimate, declaring that Wei Wuxian is living up to the promise he'd made in their youth, and that his notoriety does not matter. This exchange can easily be considered a love confession, especially considering censorship restrictions do not allow for a traditional love confession to exist.

Following this scene, the two part ways because Wei Wuxian wishes to travel the world, and he asks Lan Wangji to tell him the name of the song the next time they see each other:

> Wei Wuxian: 蓝湛 下次见面你要想好这首歌的名字啊。 *Lán Zhàn xià cì jiànmiàn nǐ yào xiǎng hǎo zhè shǒu gē de míngzì a.* / Lan Zhan, next time we meet, you should come up with a good name for this song.
>
> Lan Wangji: 我早就想好了。 *Wǒ zǎo jiù xiǎng hǎole.* / I already have.[82]

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[81] Translation is my own.

[82] Translation is my own.

The next shot, which takes place after an unspecified amount of time has passed, shows Wei Wuxian playing *Wuji* on his flute while standing on a mountaintop, accompanied by a non-diegetic duet version. The duet fades out, leaving only the final notes of Wei Wuxian's flute. Lan Wangji's voice can be heard off-screen as he says "Wei Ying". Wei Wuxian turns around and smiles as a non-diegetic instrumental version of *Wuji* begins playing again, right before the credits roll in.

In the drama's Japanese cut, these final scenes are rearranged, with the scene in Cloud Recesses being the final one, making the couple's happy ending more overt (Zhi Jian Qing Tiao Juan Yun, 2020). Traditional happily-ever-after endings, one of the most crucial elements of the romance genre, are difficult to pull off in censored *dānměi* dramas, though most creators manage to find a way around the restrictions[83]. *Word of Honor*'s ending implies that Wen Kexing had sacrificed himself to save Zhou Zishu, who is doomed to a near-immortal life of solitude, but a separately released bonus scene reveals that they both survived and are living together on a snowy mountaintop. The final scene of *Love Is More Than a Word* is a wedding between the protagonists[84], Tao Mao and Gu She, though because the series was canceled by the National Radio and Television Administration of China halfway through its run, right before a confrontation with the series' villain who showed no intention of sparing anyone, it is unclear if this scene is a flash-forward or if the couple's happiness might be temporary.

The drama's spiritual successor[85], *Till Death Tear Us Apart*, has one of the unambiguously happier and romantic endings, with Liu Yusheng deciding in the last second to jump onto the train Zhou Yaohua has boarded and travel to America with him. Considering the series focuses on the conflict between the Communist Party and the Kuomintang during the Republican Era, and depicts the Communist Party in a highly positive light, it is rather easy to assume why it might have been given more leeway than its predecessor. *The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty* is another series with an overtly happy ending, featuring Tang Fan and Sui Zhou sit-

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[83] A happy ending is one of the requirements for the romance genre, so while a sad ending does not negate the existence of a romantic relationship in a story, it cannot be considered part of the romance genre.

[84] Though it is never explicitly stated as such, the scene includes many motifs associated with traditional Chinese weddings.

[85] *Love Is More Than a Word* and *Till Death Tear Us Apart* are both made by the same director and feature the same actors, so *Till Death Tear Us Apart* can be considered a reincarnation story following the same characters in their new lives, though both series also stand on their own.

ting down for a meal with Dong'er and a few of their friends when they get informed of a new murder case that requires their attention, which they all eagerly rush out to solve, though not without Tang Fan complaining that they should at least eat first—a running joke in the series.

The original cut of *The Untamed* is more ambiguous than the Japanese cut, but the final seconds, especially when paired with the music, imply a happy ending for the couple rather obviously.

Discussion

The goal of this thesis had been to explore some of the ways in which creators of live-action *dānměi* adaptations evade state censorship of queer content to depict romantic relationships between characters of the same gender, especially through the use of interaction rituals. By analyzing the deliberate use of different types of names and titles, food and drink, the term 知己 *zhījǐ*, permitted forms of physical intimacy, and music—some of the most prominent interaction rituals in costume dramas—I hope to have successfully proven that these are a useful queercoding tool with which mainland Chinese strict yet vague and ever-changing censorship can be circumvented.

It bears repeating that queercoding relies heavily on ambiguity—after all, if a work could be undeniably interpreted as explicitly romantic, then it would no longer be merely coded, and would not be permitted to air—so there is always potential for any of the previously mentioned examples to be interpreted as platonic. This, however, does not invalidate a queer reading, especially considering *The Untamed* (2019) and all other series mentioned are adaptations of overtly queer novels.

A major issue with censored works depicting same-gender romantic relationships (aside from the rather obvious limitations of free speech) is the lack of carnality which leads to an abstraction of desire. This can further aid in the fetishization and dehumanization of LGBT individuals—in this case gay men—which are already all too common in the BL genre. However, without this abstraction, stories of gay love would not be able to exist and thrive under the thumb of state censorship at all. On top of that, it is clear from the examples given earlier that adapting BL works within the confines of censorship requires plenty of skill from the writers, directors, actors, editors, and everyone else involved in the process, and to dis-

count the quality and merit of these works because of a lack of carnality and clear-cut confessions of love would be unjust.

When it comes to international audiences, these works often suffer from a lack of quality subtitles. Even taking strict character limitations into account, English-language subtitles frequently fail to relay important cultural nuances necessary for understanding the importance, and sometimes even basic meaning, of these interaction rituals, especially when it comes to the use of names and titles. I hope to have offered clearer translations where needed.

Further research should be done into methods of queercoding not directly tied to interaction rituals (such as various aspects of cinematic language); what methods contemporary-set series utilize since some of the analyzed interaction rituals are specific to historical or historical-inspired settings; whether *bǎihé* (Girls' Love) series utilize different queercoding techniques; and how mainland China's market economy impacts censorship laws and by extension the creation of queer content.

Conclusion

In 2016, mainland China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) had issued a set of requirements forbidding the portrayal of, amongst other things, homosexuality, but in spite of these restrictions, queer content, especially within the BL genre, has continued to not only exist but also thrive and garner fans both in mainland China and overseas. The specifics of SAPPRFT's regulations are vague and ever-changing, making it possible for state censors to exercise their power against anything they deem inappropriate, as well as inspiring self-censorship amongst creators; however, this also leaves room for covertly queer media to continue to exist.

Mainland Chinese live-action *dānměi* series utilize numerous queercoding techniques to bypass censorship and depict romantic relationships between male characters, from cinematic language such as camera angles and editing, to famous literary and historical references, to interaction rituals between the characters. Using *The Untamed* (2019) as a case study, this thesis focused primarily on several types of interaction rituals: the different types of names and titles the characters use (or do not use) when talking to and about each other; the use of food and drink as a social bond; the use of the term 知己 *zhījǐ* ("the one who knows

me") which carried sociopolitical as well as personal importance throughout imperial Chinese history and which has gained a notably romantic interpretation within the context of *dānměi* series; the different forms of physical intimacy that are permitted to pass censorship; and the use of music as a stand-in for the expression of the characters' emotions. While queercoding has the downside of abstracting queer desire, it allows for these works to exist within the restrictive confines of censorship.

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