

Chinese Boys' Love (Danmei) as Cultural Resistance: Examining Queer Failure in Danmei Novel *Heaven Official's Blessing*

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Abstract

This research paper employs textual analysis to investigate queer failure in a popular Chinese Boys' Love (danmei) text: *Heaven Official's Blessing* (*tian guan ci fu*) by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. This paper adopts a post-structuralist lens and is informed by queer theory, particularly the concept of queer failure as detailed by Halberstam (2011) in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Through a character-focused analytical approach, I illuminate experiences of queer failure, queer affection, violence, religious blasphemy, and a rejection of success and closure as a challenge to heteronormative, capitalist success within a fictional context. This study frames danmei as a form of cultural resistance, provides a queer reimagining of alternative ways of existence, and contributes to broader academic discourse surrounding danmei, Boys' Love media, and LGBTQ+ studies.

Keywords: danmei, boys' love, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, queer theory, queer failure

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Introduction

Background Information and Current Academic Discourse

Danmei refers to a popular Chinese Boys' Love genre that depicts male-male relationships characterised by a focus on romance and homoeroticism (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Existing danmei scholarship can be largely organised into the following categories: Aggressive censorship in Mainland China, the role of Mainland Chinese women as cultural producers and consumers, and narrative conventions in danmei. Firstly, danmei is under belligerent censorship in Mainland China due to its associations with pornographic and homosexual content (Yang & Xu, 2016b). In addition, scholars frequently explore the intrinsic motivations behind Mainland Chinese women's production and consumption of danmei, looking particularly at how their gender and sexuality might intersect with their motivations. Furthermore, danmei has been closely examined for its narrative conventions, and how these conventions reflect ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. Danmei narratives that explore controversial and taboo-filled subgenres receive academic attention (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2013), yet danmei is still looked down upon as a form of "low" web literature and for its association with homoerotic pornography (Yang & Xu, 2016b).

Rationale and Significance of This Study

Considering current academic discourse surrounding danmei, majority of danmei scholarship examines aggressive state censorship, women's fandom, homoeroticism and romance. However, I point out that these studies, regardless of their focus, are trapped in normative binaries surrounding gender, sex and sexuality. Queerness and the subversive potential of being queer are severely underexplored in danmei studies, due to the inherent limitations imposed by the normative binaries that frame majority of danmei studies, such as morally permissible/morally impermissible, top/bottom, gay/straight, and so on. Adopting a post-structuralist lens and using queer theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to fill this literature gap by positioning danmei characters as queer subjects, and investigating the value of queer, non-normative narratives. Through textual analysis informed by the concept of queer failure (Halberstam, 2011), this paper will examine *Heaven Official's Blessing*, a popular danmei novel, to examine how and why queer subjects fail, and how these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success.

Literature Review

Definition, Origins and History of Danmei

Danmei refers to a popular Chinese Boys' Love genre that depicts male-male relationships characterised by a focus on romance and homoeroticism (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Danmei production and consumption are dominated by women and sexual minorities through digital technologies (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Following the popularity of Japanese Boys' Love, danmei constitutes a cultural import introduced to China in the 1990s, and has since blossomed into a popular, fan-centric subculture (Feng, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2016a). "Danmei" is a translingual term from the Japanese kanji "tanbi", which directly translates to "indulgence in beauty" (Feng, 2009; Wong, 2020). Hence, danmei narratives focus on beautiful and romanticised aesthetics of queer romance between good-looking male characters (Feng, 2009; Wong, 2020). While danmei is traditionally understood to be a form of original web literature, contemporary danmei encompasses a variety of media

forms such as manhua (comics) and dangai (TV dramas adapted from danmei) that are accessible across the Internet (Ge, 2020; Wong, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2016a).

Censorship of Danmei in China

Danmei is under constant, aggressive censorship in Mainland China due to its close association with pornographic and homosexual content (Yang & Xu, 2016b). Perceived to be transgressive, Chinese censorship laws have resulted in the mass erasure of danmei works on popular websites like Jinjiang Literature City, through editors' deleting the works or self-censorship by danmei writers afraid of negative repercussions (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2016b). Belligerent Chinese state censorship of danmei has also resulted in the alleged arrest of danmei writers (Ni, 2023). The Chinese government's aggressive stance regarding censorship of homosexuality peaked in the banning of Archive of Our Own (AO3), a public archive for original and fan-written texts (Yu, 2021). This ban occurred in 2020, when the emergence of a homoerotic fan-made text of two male celebrities who co-starred in a dangai drama gained negative attention (Yu, 2021). The Chinese government subsequently banned the entire AO3 website, signalling an unrelenting stance against danmei and homosexual content in China (Yu, 2021).

Danmei Fandom: Chinese Women as Cultural Producers and Consumers

Existing danmei scholarship also delves into the intrinsic motivations behind Mainland Chinese women's production and consumption of danmei. Many scholars argue that danmei is an unconventional avenue for Chinese women to explore deviant dreams surrounding gender, sex and sexuality (Feng, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Xi (2024) posits that danmei narratives featuring men being intimate and vulnerable with each other, constitutes Chinese women's resistance against mainstream media portrayal of traditional, inflexible gender binaries. However, the motivations behind Chinese women's exploration remain multifaceted and highly contentious. From one perspective, these Chinese women are perceived to be largely heterosexual (Feng, 2009), and that they exercise a voyeuristic female gaze to look upon gorgeous men, thus fulfilling their longing for an ideal heterosexual relationship (Ye, 2022; Zhang, 2016). However, other scholars argue that danmei, specifically danmei production, serves as an imaginary, experimental playground for Chinese women to play with different masculinities (Ni, 2023) and to look upon male-male homoerotic romance with an inherently queer gaze (Chao, 2016).

Narrative Conventions in Danmei

Furthermore, danmei has been closely scrutinised for its narrative conventions, and how these conventions reflect ideas of gender and sexuality. The most common narrative convention discussed among scholars is the gong/shou emotional-sexual dichotomy in danmei, where gong (lit. "attack") refers to the strong, dominant, "top" penetrator, and shou (lit. "receive") refers to the weak, subservient and "bottom" penetrated partner (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Wang, 2021b; Ye, 2022). While this rigid dichotomy appears to echo heteropatriarchal ideals, many scholars point out the emergence of new narrative conventions that challenge this conventional gong-shou dyad and explore new possibilities (Wang, 2021b; Xu & Yang, 2013). In terms of narrative arcs, Xi (2024) argues that happy danmei narratives (tian wen) are more popular than tragic ones (nue wen), suggesting that majority of danmei fans prefer successful, happy stories of romance over heart wrenching, tragic ones. However, the popular archetype of the "beautiful, strong, pitiable" (mei qiang can) man (Wang, 2021a; Ye, 2022)

suggests that some degree of suffering, rejection and failure is needed in danmei narratives to appeal to readers. In addition, some danmei narratives also explore controversial, taboo-filled subgenres and topics involving male pregnancy, incest, sexual violence and Omegaverse (A/B/O) settings (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2013). Therefore, other than being looked down upon as a form of “low” web literature and for its inherent association with homoerotic pornography (Yang & Xu, 2016b), women who consume danmei are often criticised to be depraved, debauched and lascivious (Feng, 2009).

Queer Subjects in Danmei: The Subversive Nature of Queer Failure

The majority of danmei scholarship focuses on romance, homoeroticism, fandom and belligerent state censorship. However, these studies are fundamentally ensnared in normative binaries surrounding gender, sex and sexuality, and they overlook the subversive potential of queerness in danmei, and the critique these non-normative narratives present. Adopting a post-structuralist lens, I turn to David Halperin’s (1995) definition of “queer”: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62). Building upon Butler (2006)’s theory of performative gender, I position danmei subjects as queer for their homoerotic acts of *doing*, and by extension, *being*, that challenge rigid frameworks of heteronormativity and patriarchal values. I then extend my study of danmei narratives to Halberstam’s (2011) concept of queer failure. Halberstam (2011) uses the term “queer” to resist conventional narratives of success associated with conforming and thriving in a heteronormative, capitalist world. He argues that “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3), illuminating how queer failure is inherently disruptive in a world that prizes heteronormative, capitalist success. Proposing a queer reimagining of and resistance to conventional interpretations of success, Halberstam (2011) advocates for queer failure to function as a rejection of normative values and an oppositional narrative that reframes the concept of defeat. In his examination of queer failure, Halberstam analyses a plethora of Western media such as children’s animated movies. Expanding on Halberstam (2011)’s concept of queer failure and method, I turn to danmei narratives filled with queer subjects’ failures to offer a different cultural interpretation of queer failure. Moving beyond danmei scholarship underscored by normative binaries and mimicries of heteropatriarchal success, I interrogate how and why queer failure in danmei perpetuates Halberstam’s concept of queer failure as resistance and examine how danmei resists mainstream ideas of heteronormative, capitalist victories.

Research Questions

In this paper, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How and why do queer subjects fail in *Heaven Official’s Blessing*?

This research question interrogates the ways in which narrative arcs in *Heaven Official’s Blessing* present us with queer failure. In examining the relationship between these fictional narrative arcs and queer failure, I seek to illuminate how and why these acts of queer failure present us with non-normative narratives of success.

2. How do these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success?

This research question seeks to understand how the narrative arcs depicting queer failure can challenge or subvert ideas of heteronormative, capitalist success. Therefore, I seek to illuminate a queer reimagining of alternative ways of being.

Methods

Qualitative Research Method: Textual Analysis

This paper utilises the qualitative research method of textual analysis to investigate queer failure in a popular danmei text: *Heaven Official's Blessing (tian guan ci fu)* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. Textual analysis has been chosen to actively describe, interpret and illuminate the content and themes within a chosen text (Tracy, 2020).

Data Sources

This paper focuses on a textual analysis of the danmei novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, and this novel is chosen for its popularity and literary excellence. Originally published in 2017 by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu on web literature website Jinjiang Literature City, *Heaven Official's Blessing* is a popular web novel that boasts a 9.8/10 rating on the website, in addition to having won two awards: the 2017 Annual Outstanding Work award and the VIP Strong Recommendation Medal on Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang Literature City, 2024). In addition, the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel has been chosen for its immense novel length, literary depth, and exploration of queer subjects' failure. In her examination of a lack of clichéd plotlines in *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Wang (2022) emphasises that *Heaven Official's Blessing* is outstanding in its “encyclopedic portrayal of the trials and tribulations of various characters” (Wang, 2022, p. 291), a stark deviation from the “feel-good” type of writing that tends to plague popular danmei literature. Thus, the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel is an excellent source material to analyse queer failure within the context of danmei.

In my textual analysis of queer failure in the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel, I have chosen eight data sources:

- *Heaven Official's Blessing: Tian Guan Ci Fu (Novel) Vol. 1 to Vol. 8* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, published by Seven Seas Entertainment

I chose the published, official English translation of *Heaven Official's Blessing* over the original Chinese web novel for two primary reasons. Firstly, the published English translated novel of *Heaven Official's Blessing* facilitates clarity in my analysis and writing for this Anglophone study. Secondly, the published translation will ensure that all Chinese idioms, linguistic nuances, and language specific to Chinese culture have been translated and interpreted in a consistent manner by a professional translator.

Data Collection

In terms of data collection, this paper employs a character-focused analytical approach to examine queer failure by the two main characters in *Heaven Official's Blessing*: Xie Lian and Hua Cheng. Acknowledging that the novel has a large cast of characters and multiple intersecting plot lines, this paper will only focus on Xie Lian and Hua Cheng for two reasons. Firstly, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng are the two main queer subjects who embody failure in the

text. Secondly, their narrative arcs intersect throughout the entire novel to form a larger romantic narrative arc that is underscored by queer failure and resistance.

Data Analysis

I performed a close reading of the entire *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel to analyse the two main characters' character arcs and their larger relationship arc. I paid close attention to how these characters experience or embody queer failure in relation to queer theory and Halberstam (2011)'s concept of queer failure. I then interrogated how these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert mainstream notions of heteronormative, capitalist success within a fictional context.

Results

Protagonist Xie Lian's Character Arc

The story of *Heaven Official's Blessing* takes place in an immortality cultivation setting, where three realms exist: the Mortal Realm, the Heavenly Realm, and the Ghost Realm. The protagonist of *Heaven Official's Blessing* is Xie Lian, a heavenly official who is the former crown prince of the fallen kingdom of Xianle. Having been banished to the mortal realm twice, he collects scraps for a living and is known as the Scrap Immortal, to the ridicule of other heavenly officials. 800 years ago, Xie Lian was the renowned crown prince of a prosperous kingdom named Xianle. While performing during a ceremonial procession, Xie Lian saves a child from falling to his death. Shortly after, Xie Lian achieves spiritual ascension and becomes a heavenly official, worshipped by his entire kingdom. Three years later, Xie Lian defies heavenly orders and descends to the mortal realm to save his people from droughts, civil wars and a plague. Xie Lian exhibits indecisiveness and foolish ideals, and he struggles fruitlessly, revealing his inherent fallibility despite his godly status. Here, his repeated failures despite his godhood effectively disrupt the myth of exceptionalism and the capitalist mappings between hard work, talent, and success. As his kingdom accelerates towards ruin and Xie Lian fails to save his people repeatedly, the common people become disillusioned and enraged. After a conversation with his state preceptor, Xie Lian reflects upon his failures as a god:

That's strange. I saved people and protected people because they were innocent and didn't deserve death. Everything I've done was only done after serious consideration, and every choice was made after much struggle. Yet why does it all sound so laughable coming from another's mouth? Why does it sound like I've achieved nothing, that everything I've done is such a... failure? (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 183)

As Xie Lian loses his kingdom to the rebels, he is banished from the heavens and becomes the subject of ridicule and violent hatred. Xie Lian is subsequently brutally stabbed and mutilated by the common people, but he is unable to die due to being an immortal. As a queer subject that defies societal expectations, Xie Lian endures extreme violence as a natural consequence of being a deviant failure. Disillusioned, Xie Lian plots revenge on the common people he once loved, and teams up with a ghost named Wuming. However, Xie Lian eventually snaps back to his senses and attempts to save the common people again. Wuming sacrifices himself to save the common people, and Xie Lian ascends to the Heavenly Realm again. Ridden with guilt, Xie Lian asks to be banished for the second time, and gives up all

his spiritual powers and luck. Xie Lian wanders the mortal realm for 800 years, until he ascends again as the Scrap Immortal. In his attempts to cope with his deep trauma, Xie Lian advocates the art of forgetting rather than remembering:

Besides, some things are best forgotten. Rather than remembering how I was butchered and trampled hundreds of years ago, I'd prefer to remember that I ate a delicious meat bun yesterday, no? (Moxiangtongxiu, 2021, p. 323)

Deuteragonist Hua Cheng's Character Arc

Hua Cheng is the deuteragonist in *Heaven Official's Blessing*, and he is Xie Lian's love interest. Hua Cheng is a Supreme ranked ghost, and he is notorious for being a powerful menace across all three realms. During his mortal life, Hua Cheng was known as Hong'er. Born with one red pupil, Hong'er was the subject of violent abuse by everyone around him. Sick and tired of suffering, Hong'er contemplates suicide during a ceremonial procession, and almost falls to his death. He is caught by Xie Lian and becomes instantly enamoured, and Xie Lian shows up time and again to save his life. Hong'er falls in love with Xie Lian, forming a queer romantic-religious obsession that coalesces homosexual affection and religious worship. Following Xie Lian's ascension to godhood and the outbreak of chaos in Xianle, Hong'er becomes a soldier in the Xianle army and dies in battle for Xie Lian. Hong'er becomes a ghost fire, refusing to rest in peace due to his wish to protect Xie Lian. "If you force your soul to remain, you won't be able to rest in peace," Xie Lian said. The nameless ghost didn't seem to care. "I'm willing to never rest in peace" (Moxiangtongxiu, 2023, p. 134). Subsequently, Hong'er becomes a wrath ghost when he witnesses Xie Lian get mutilated by a hundred swords in his former temple. 800 years later, Hua Cheng alludes to the pain he felt when he failed to protect Xie Lian: "Watching your beloved be trampled and ridiculed with your own eyes and being unable to do a thing about it. You understand that you are nothing, that you can do nothing. That's the worst suffering in the world" (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 39). As Xie Lian plots revenge, he teams up with a nameless wrath ghost named Wuming. The dead Hong'er is in fact now the wrath ghost Wuming, and Wuming sacrifices himself to save Xie Lian after the latter regains his senses. Wuming eventually goes to Mount Tonglu to partake in a violent battle royale. He emerges as a Supreme ghost king and calls himself Hua Cheng. Having become unparalleled in strength across all three realms, Hua Cheng fervently searches for Xie Lian for 800 years.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian (Hualian)'s Combined Narrative Arc

800 years later, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng reunite in the mortal realm. Through a series of escapades, the two fall in love with each other and form a homoerotic and romantic relationship. Regardless of their gender and belonging to different realms, the two love each other unapologetically and unconditionally against heteronormative expectations. The two, despite their happy ending, do not have any children and instead live together as immortals forever. Their inter-realm homosexual relationship is also perceived to be a taboo, and the two frequently engage in blasphemous acts. This ties in with Hua Cheng's extremely obsessive love for Xie Lian, both as his romantic interest and as his most devoted believer for centuries. The blurring of the lines between fervent religious worship and romantic affection peaks in a scene where the god and ghost embrace each other on top of an altar:

This altar was originally a place to worship the divine, but presented there this evening instead was a ghost and a god entangled in a fervent, inseparable embrace,

their tongues entwined. It was absurd and strange, and yet a sight of breathtaking loveliness. (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 278)

Furthermore, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng's romantic relationship is also characterised by unconditional love in the face of failure. When Hua Cheng expresses his failures in the past, Xie Lian reassures him that he is never measured by his external achievements, but he deserves to be loved for who he is. When Xie Lian expresses his own failures, Hua Cheng repeats the same saying back to him:

'To me, the one basking in infinite glory is you; the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is you, not the state of you' Hua Cheng recited languidly as he gazed at Xie Lian. He blinked meaningfully, cocking an eyebrow. 'I feel the same way.' (Moxiangtongxiu, 2023, p. 92)

Discussion

Queer Subjects' Failure and Natural Endurance of Violence

Xie Lian's repeated instances of failure followed by an endurance of violent humiliation reflects the violence that queer subjects endure when they "fail" by normative standards set by society. When Xie Lian is disgraced and banished, the common people violently mutilate his body with a hundred swords. Due to his immortal status, Xie Lian is unable to die and instead turns into an unrecognisable mush of human flesh and blood writhing in endless, extreme and unbearable pain. As a queer subject who has taken a non-normative path and failed terribly, Xie Lian's extreme pain and humiliation are not depicted as a punishment, but as a perverse, natural consequence of his failure. His inability to die is deeply symbolic of the unending nature of abuse queer subjects endure in the face of their public failure. Xie Lian's endurance of violence as someone who failed his kingdom criticises and highlights the hypocrisy of a normative society that celebrates the winners and throws the losers under a bus.

Rejection of Heteronormative, Capitalist "Success"

However, one might ask, where does failure and public humiliation lead to? The correct answer is nowhere in particular. The obsession with achieving success measured by capitalist yardsticks is humorously criticised by Halberstam (2011) throughout *The Queer Art of Failure*. Rejecting a linear path to capitalist success and an obsession with productivity and positivity, Halberstam advocates for a queer, oppositional narrative that reframes the concept of defeat. In a discussion on American exceptionalism, Ehrenreich (2009) highlights that the heralded path to capitalist success is one that places immense emphasis on "positive thinking" and having the right attitude. Xie Lian's exceptionalism in all areas coupled with his epic failures to save his beloved kingdom presents a precise queering of this success narrative. It shatters the myth of exceptionalism and exposes society's hypocrisy in how it jeers at those who do not conform. Furthermore, as a non-conforming queer subject, Xie Lian's character arc presents us with a queer alternative to exist between "success" and "failure". His endurance of failure and public humiliation, interestingly, does not make him a better or worse person at the end of it all. This disrupts the didactic narrative shamelessly promoted in a capitalist society, where static, normative binaries of success/failure, good/bad, lesson learnt/lesson missed are weaponised to impose moral instruction and capitalist ideals on queer subjects who do not conform. After enduring immense pain and violence, Xie

Lian's fundamental character and outlook on life remain unchanged, to the disbelief of others. His past narrative arc, concluded in a grey area between "success" and "failure", constitutes a rejection of normative success in a capitalist world obsessed with making subjects conform to upward trajectories of victory.

Queer Subjects and the Art of Forgetting

Furthermore, Xie Lian's act of deliberately forgetting parts of his past is a form of queer power in his attempt to actively erase memories of pain and trauma. To quote Halberstam (2011): Forgetting can be a "cocooning of the self in order to allow the self to grow separate from the knowledge that might destroy it" (p. 92). Deliberate forgetfulness, as practised by Xie Lian in his desperate attempts to forget the violence he endured, provides an alternative way for queer subjects to reclaim their power in a world that seeks to permanently imprint labels and traumatic experiences on queer subjects. In a society that insists on remembering the winners who conform and succeed by narrow standards, Xie Lian reminds us that queer subjects can feel empowered in a safe space created by deliberate forgetfulness.

Queer and Ambiguous Romantic-Religious Affection

Hua Cheng's queer affection for Xie Lian is one that is ambiguous, selfless, and immensely painful. In the face of Xie Lian's unconditional kindness, Hong'er/Hua Cheng forms a queer affection for Xie Lian that is riddled with contradictions as it blurs the boundary between romantic affection and religious worship. Hua Cheng calls Xie Lian his "beloved", highlighting his romantic and homoerotic intentions, yet he religiously worships Xie Lian as his most devoted believer for more than 800 years. The queerness of Hong'er/Hua Cheng's devotion lies not only in its refusal to be neatly categorised into a heteronormative matrix, but also in its blatant subversion of religious figures as unreachable, holy beings. Hua Cheng's pursuit of his queer affection for Xie Lian is also riddled with failure and suffering as he witnesses Xie Lian being humiliated, betrayed and trampled by the common people whom he loved. Indeed, Hua Cheng's queer affection in his relentless pursuit of Xie Lian is an explicit rejection of upward trajectories of victory and self-benefit. Despite experiencing failure repeatedly, Hua Cheng's queer affection for Xie Lian pushes him to worship a disgraced and fallen god, and to suffer endlessly in his pursuit to protect him. Hua Cheng's queer devotion reminds us that "failing" by societal standards can be liberating and fulfilling for the queer subject himself, despite its accompanying host of negative affective states. Hua Cheng's queer affection moves beyond its romantic-religious ambiguity and fluidity to trouble dominant narratives that promote a monolithic definition of love and hard work for self-benefit.

Rejection of Closure and Resolution

If Xie Lian's journey is a rejection of "success", Hua Cheng's journey is one that is undoubtedly the rejection of closure. Closure can be thought of as a form of resolution, whether it be "successful" or not. When Hua Cheng dies again and again, he refuses to rest in peace. Here, the immortal cultivation setting provides a fantastical space where Hong'er/Wuming/Hua Cheng undergoes death repeatedly for Xie Lian, and his refusal to a physical and emotional closure stems from the fact that he longs to protect Xie Lian, a direct consequence of his queer affection and desires. Hua Cheng's repeated deaths are queer in and of itself, because it does not seek any resolutions or conclusions in a world that celebrates not just an ending, but a successful and happy ending. Furthermore, Hua Cheng is willing to die

for Xie Lian repeatedly, and his failure to live leads to a sense of fulfilment in terms of his queer affections and desires to protect Xie Lian. Therefore, his deaths symbolise his failure to protect his beloved, and yet it is the very act of repeatedly dying without resting in peace that underscores Hua Cheng's resistance against mainstream narratives of happy resolutions and fulfilment from obtaining closure.

Non-reproductive, Undying Queer Romance as a Challenge to Productive Heteronormativity

Hualian's romance is one that is undoubtedly queer: Xie Lian and Hua Cheng are both men in love with each other, they belong to different realms, and their relationship is underscored by mutual obsession and Hua Cheng's religious reverence and devotion to Xie Lian. Hualian's undying queer romance that persists for all eternity presents the reader with an unorthodox alternative to a heteronormative matrix that equates heteronormativity with social success and capitalist wealth. In reality, Hualian's childless queer romance would be frowned upon for being a deviant and non-reproductive lifestyle. However, *Heaven Official's Blessing* leverages upon a fantasy immortal cultivation setting to provide a queer reimagining of what it means to live happily ever after. Hualian's happy ending hence provides an oppositional narrative that reframes queer failure as non-normative success. Throughout the novel, Hualian fail time and again to conform to normative binaries and heteropatriarchal success, choosing to walk their own paths of failure to find each other. Through their failure to conform as queer subjects in a normative world, they are rewarded with unconditional love unbounded by their identities, and that which cannot be measured by conventional interpretations of success.

Queer Religious Blasphemy and Subversion of Socio-Religious Expectations

In addition, Hualian's queer failure is evident in their acts of religious blasphemy. Returning to my previous point on Hua Cheng's romantic-religious affection for Xie Lian as a form of queer affection, Hualian frequently engage in acts of religious blasphemy as a form of romance. For instance, Hua Cheng kisses Xie Lian fervently and passionately embraces him on top of his own altar in his own temple, religiously desecrating his god and romantically worshipping him at the same time. The idea of religious desecration is further compounded by the fact that Hua Cheng, a Supreme ghost embracing Xie Lian, is basically the embodiment of the devil himself. The electrifying co-existence of religious blasphemy with romantic desire constitutes queer failure for it directly challenges the idea of a distant devotee-god religious relationship and heteronormative romance, and it subverts the idea of religious figures as asexual and aromantic beings. The queer failure evident in the coalescence of religious blasphemy with romantic desires in Hualian's relationship illuminates the beauty of alternative expressions of love and desire, that are otherwise deemed as socially deviant and degenerate in a heteronormative society.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges the limitation of examining only the main characters and plot lines in *Heaven Official's Blessing*. For future research, I would like to conduct textual analysis on a danmei novel with a thematic analysis approach to examine the entire storyline. Furthermore, I am keen to conduct in-depth interviews with queer danmei readers to examine how queer failure in danmei might resonate with their social realities.

In conclusion, this paper investigates queer failure in danmei novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* from a post-structuralist perspective and examines how these queer acts of failure challenge traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success. Through a character-focused analytical approach, I articulate the protagonist Xie Lian's experiences of queer failure, his natural endurance of violence, his rejection of heteronormative, capitalist "success", and the art of forgetting. In examining the deuteragonist Hua Cheng's journey, I illuminate a queer and ambiguous romantic-religious affection, and a rejection of closure. Finally, I examine the larger, combined romantic arc to illustrate how non-reproductive, undying queer romance challenges productive heteronormativity, and how queer religious blasphemy can subvert socio-religious expectations. In conclusion, I position my study as a form of cultural resistance and queer reimagining of alternative paths to success within broader academic discourse surrounding danmei, Boys' Love and LGBTQ+ studies.

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