

## Queering Across Media: Danmei Adaptation and Fandom in *Heaven Official's Blessing*

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's *Heaven Official's Blessing* (*Tiān Guān Cì Fú*) as a pivotal danmei (Boys' Love) text for examining queer media dynamics. This study investigates how queer narratives evolve across media forms while navigating censorship by examining the shift from novel to donghua adaptations. Drawing on queer theories to analyse how queer narratives are strategically reshaped in donghua through subtextual aesthetics, such as visual metaphors, gaze, and sound design. These techniques maintain their emotional impact without explicit declaration. Netnography and Fiske's fan productivity frameworks are used to view global fandom as a form of collective labour in which fans engage with subtext, expand queer possibilities, and extend beyond official boundaries globally. By analysing the novel, its adaptation, and fandom practices that support queer worldmaking despite restrictions, this paper contributes to the growing areas of danmei, queer media, and fandom studies.

**Keywords:** danmei, queer theory, adaptation, fandom, censorship

### Introduction

*Danmei* (耽美), which literally means "indulge in beauty," is a genre of Chinese fiction that focuses on romantic relationships between male characters, often written by and for women (Feng, "Addicted to Beauty" 5). Danmei's story begins with Japanese yaoi, or Boys' Love (BL), which swept into China in the 1990s through unofficial translations and fan circulation. Early Chinese danmei stories were greatly affected by the defined roles in Japanese BL, particularly the *seme* (named *gong* in Chinese, meaning "attacker," comparable to the "top" in gay relationships) and the *uke* (*shou* in Chinese, literally the "receiver" or "bottom") (Yang and Xu 9). Inspired by American slash fiction, Japanese manga, and anime, danmei has grown into a vibrant and distinctive literary and fan community. Its rising popularity in the West shows a growing global interest in stories that challenge mainstream ideas about gender and sexuality. With the rise of internet connectivity in the early 2000s, danmei thrived on digital platforms such as *Jinjiang Literature City* (*JJWXC*), where aspiring writers could publish serialised stories and build loyal audiences (Feng, *Romancing* 53; Yang and Xu 9). Over time, danmei has evolved into a distinct Chinese literary tradition that incorporates local cultural values, aesthetics, and mythology, and consistently explores non-heteronormative relationships. This genre has become an important area for creating multiple

identities, especially in a world where LGBTQIA+ stories are frequently marginalised or restricted. Combining romance, fantasy, and emotional depth, danmei has become a significant cultural phenomenon, supported by a passionate, often international, fan community and a network of digital content creation and consumption.

The novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* (天官赐福; *Tiān Guān Cì Fú*; hereafter *TGCF*), written by the pseudonymous Chinese author Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX), serves as the central case study in examining the development of danmei as a literary genre. *TGCF* was first serialised as a web novel on *Jinjiang Literature City* (*JJWXC*) in 2017 and quickly gained popularity for its rich world-building, lyrical style, and emotionally powerful queer story. The novel was later officially translated into English by Seven Seas Entertainment and released in eight volumes from 2021 to 2023. The story is set in a fantasy realm with gods, ghosts, and humans, and draws inspiration from *xianxia* (仙侠), a genre that emphasises Taoist cultivation, martial arts, and spiritual transcendence. The plot revolves around Xie Lian, the Crown Prince of Xianle, who went against the divine laws to protect the common people. His first ascension as the "God Pleasing Warrior" ends in disaster as his kingdom falls, and he becomes the "God of Misfortune" (Mo 1:23). His exile after a brief second ascension made him a laughing stock among the heavens and a scrap collector. Eight hundred years later, Xie Lian's third ascension leads him to encounter Hua Cheng, the supreme ghost king, also known as "Crimson Rain Sought Flower" and one of "The Four Calamities," whose devotion changes both their destiny (Mo 1:139). Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (MXTX) extends the themes of danmei literature beyond romantic clichés into philosophical and metaphysical contexts by using *TGCF* to examine queer desire, devotion, and ethical ambiguity. MXTX's works, such as *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System* (2014) and *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (2015-2016), also add emotional depth and global impact to the danmei genre. Furthermore, *TGCF*'s role in transnational queer storytelling has been solidified by its adaptation into excellent donghua (Chinese animation), audio drama, manhua (comic), and the upcoming live-action series (*Eternal Faith*). This has continued to inspire an active global fandom whose creative efforts continue to preserve and expand the narrative's emotional depth.

The first season of *Heaven Official's Blessing* donghua was co-produced by Haoliners Animation League and *Bilibili*. The donghua debuted in 2020 and was released simultaneously on *Bilibili* and *Funimation* (later merged into *Crunchyroll*), with English subtitles and dubbed versions. The series became available on popular streaming platforms like *Netflix* and anime-specific services like *Crunchyroll*, offering several language options. *Netflix*, for instance, offered subtitles in seven languages and broadcast the series to 36 countries, resulting in 100 million views in just over three weeks (Yang). The second season was produced by Red Dog Culture House in late 2023 and continued to focus on visual storytelling, with better animation and greater emotional depth. *TGCF* has become central to transmedia storytelling through its various adaptations, including an audio drama, a manhua (comic), and the forthcoming live-action series *Eternal Faith*. In addition to the main donghua seasons, *Bilibili* has released three official short films for *Heaven Official's Blessing* since October 2024. These short vignettes, each five to ten minutes long, adapt significant fan-favourite scenes from the novel and are made available on *Bilibili*'s official *YouTube* channel with English captions, further broadening the narrative's transmedia presence and international accessibility (Nerine). However, because of strict Chinese censorship laws, all official adaptations only show non-sexual intimacy between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng using layered subtext, sustained gazes, and emotional nuance.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that includes close textual analysis, discourse analysis, and netnography to explore queer world-building in *Heaven Official's Blessing (TGCF)*, through its novel, donghua, and fandom. Close textual analysis discusses how the novel presents queer themes, character relationships, and narrative motifs such as longing, devotion, and chosen kinship. Discourse analysis examines the primary sources and audience discussions to show how queerness is presented, silenced, or reinterpreted despite China's stringent censorship. Netnography studies how fans interact with *TGCF* in online spaces by reinterpreting queer subtext, navigating censorship, and expanding through fanfiction, reviews, edits, and discussions. With these approaches, this study will demonstrate how the queer narrative of *TGCF* circulates, adapts, and undergoes different media landscapes.

The study is based on theoretical frameworks from queer theory, adaptation studies, and fandom studies. Queer theory offers tools for analysing performativity, temporality, and futurity, drawing on thinkers such as Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and José Esteban Muñoz. Adaptation studies help analyse how stories and emotional elements change across different media, focusing on visual and sound styles that hide queer themes under censorship. Fandom studies, especially the work of John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, guide the online study of fan culture and fan creativity. *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, *Tumblr*, *Instagram*, *X* (formerly *Twitter*), and *YouTube* are selected platforms for their interpretive and creative activities. Existing scholarly works on danmei, BL media, and Chinese censorship provide further context for *TGCF* within broader cultural and political discourses, underlining the intersections between its circulation and platform regulation. With this methodological framework, the study examines how *TGCF* functions as a shared queer storytelling that is continually reshaped from the novel to adaptation through aesthetic strategies and fan practices.

### Queer Worldmaking in *TGCF*: Performativity, Temporality, and Devotion

The novel *Heaven Official's Blessing (TGCF)* creates a queer world by showing identity as performative, time as nonlinear, and desire as devotion. Butler's idea of performativity explains how gender identity is formed by acting out queerness through changing roles and repeated actions (*Gender Trouble* 23). Hua Cheng, for example, shifts between guises, the charming San Lang, the fearsome Ghost King, and sometimes the hidden figure of Wu Ming. As Butler reminds us, identity is "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" ("Performative Acts" 519). Hua Cheng challenges the idea of a fixed self, favouring the creation of a self through actions rather than a core nature. Each appearance is not a mask hiding a "true" self but a way of showing who he is with Xie Lian and the world, questioning any idea that identity is singular or unchanging. This way of acting goes beyond physical changes to include acts of loyalty. Most notably, his creation of thousands of statues and murals of Xie Lian in the "Cave of Ten Thousand Gods" (万神窟, Wàn Shén Kū) (Mo 6:49). These sculptures are not merely likenesses but echoing gestures of love, each a stylised repetition of affect that sustains both Hua Cheng's identity and his bond with Xie Lian across centuries. In sculpting these images, Hua Cheng performs queerness as an ongoing effort and form of creativity, turning devotion into a continuous act of self-shaping. The Cave becomes a queer collection of recurring feelings and desires, where identity, love, and time continually change through the active practice of worship.

Xie Lian's trajectory similarly unsettles stable identity. Once celebrated as the Crown Prince of Xianle, the "God Pleasing Warrior," he falls into disgrace and is dubbed as the "God of Misfortune," eventually inhabiting the humble role of a scrap collector: "And so, this was the story of the man who was known as the laughing stock of the three realms" (Mo 1:23). This dramatic change shows Butler's idea that identity is not a fixed fact but is created through repeated actions that must happen over time to take effect (*Bodies That Matter* 107). For Xie Lian, even being divine is like a performance, often interrupted and rebuilt after failure, shame, and changing social recognition. His story also reflects Freeman's idea of "chrononormativity" (30), the social expectation that individuals will live according to a schedule of schooling, marriage, work, and reproduction. *TGCF* consistently challenges this scheme, the disciplining of life into normative temporal arcs such as ascension, achievement, and continuity. Xie Lian's downfall and repeated reincarnations go against the idea of a linear timeline, instead showing what Freeman calls "temporal drag" (62), in which the past continues to affect and shape the present. For example, the trauma of Xianle's fall never dispersed but continues to affect Xie Lian's present life, keeping him stuck in cycles of shame and resilience. Consequently, the novel's structure reflects this idea, creating a repeating pattern in which the past's impact cannot be left behind. In Butler's and Freeman's terms, Xie Lian exemplifies both the fragility of performative identity and the rejection of chrononormative time, embodying a queer existence that persists through failure yet endures through reconstitution.

In volume 1 of *TGCF*, the third chapter, "The Ghost Takes a Bride; The Crown Prince Mounts the Bridal Sedan" (Mo 1:67), the narrative immediately subverts the imposition of socially sanctioned, heteronormative timelines oriented towards marriage and reproduction (Freeman 3). Xie Lian's decision to pose as the bridal sacrifice for the ghost bridegroom challenges the usual storyline (Mo 1:73). A male crown prince takes on the traditionally female role of the bride, not out of obligation to a marriage fate, but as a deliberate act of heroism. This subversion further intensified when the expected groom turned out to be Hua Cheng. Such manoeuvring not only queers a social ritual but also reconfigures the *xianxia* genre's conventions, transforming a potential heteronormative plot into a foundational narrative of non-reproductive and queer longing. Furthermore, the entire framework of the traditional marital trope is parodied and reconfigured into a foundational encounter between a disgraced god and a supreme ghost. This union represents the linear temporality of heteronormative kinship and inheritance.

*TGCF*'s narrative also embodies Halberstam's concept of queer temporality, which resists heteronormative chronologies of birth, reproduction, and linear success. The novel presents queer temporalities characterised by endurance, disruption, and nonconformity. Halberstam observes that queer time "implies a mode of temporality that lies outside of normative logics of development" (*In a Queer Time* 2). *TGCF*'s narrative of repeated ascensions and downfalls also reflects Halberstam's understanding of queer failure as a refusal to conform to capitalist and heteronormative success narratives (*Queer Art* 89). This is clear in the journey of the fallen crown prince Xie Lian, who repeatedly fails yet perseveres through devotion and resilience. Moreover, the romance between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng spans 800 years, defying heteronormative timelines of courtship and fulfilment. Hua Cheng's devotion to Xie Lian embodies queer alternatives to normative life narratives, notably avoiding clichés such as quasi-heterosexual gender binaries, patriarchal reproductive family structures and explicit homoeroticism (Wang, "Cliché-ridden Online Danmei Fiction?" 287). The love/romance narrative is not centred on marriage or family but focuses on absolute

devotion, loyalty, and resilience, embodying queer choices within normative life trajectories. Hua Cheng's centuries-long devotion to following Xie Lian extends an open horizon to what Muñoz refers to as queer futurity, where "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). This utopian vision is rooted in a love that transcends all states of being and social standing. Initially stated by Xie Lian in volume 4 and later reiterated in volume 6 through Hua Cheng's pivotal confession: "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" (Mo 4:182; 6:92), which ultimately frames the vision. This statement distinctly separates love from all performative identities and temporary accomplishments. Hua Cheng's devotion is not to a crown prince, a god, or a scrap-collector, but to the essential you-ness of Xie Lian, a love that exists outside the hierarchies of heaven and mundane world.

Hua Cheng's love is not merely a longing for their first encounter but a projection into infinite possibilities, a utopian vision that continually exceeds the limits of the present. Their bond does not culminate in reproductive family structures but in enduring intimacy, built on chosen kinship, loyalty, and devotion. Hua Cheng embodies the utopian performative: each act of devotion, each return across centuries, points to a horizon where queer love sustains itself against erasure (Muñoz 26). In volume 8, his vows, "My beloved is a brave, noble, gracious special someone. He saved my life, and I've looked up to him ever since I was young. But I wanted to catch up to him and become even stronger for his sake. Although he might not remember me well—we never really talked—I want to protect him" (Mo 8:116). This shows that devotion is a dynamic, forward-thinking force that shapes his whole life. Their relationship develops towards a utopian performative that offers a profound vision of queer resistance and belonging in a world where queer love, based on chosen kinship and unconditional devotion, endures as its own form of grace. The enduring intimacy between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng gestures toward futures that remain unattainable within China's restrictive cultural present yet appear as affective glimpses within the text. Their relationship thus signifies a possibility rather than fulfilment, a utopian vision grounded in enduring intimacy. Through this emotional horizon, *TGCF* imagines futures beyond heteronormative family structures, suggesting that longing itself can be a queer act of worldmaking and resistance.

### **Adapting Desire: Queer Aesthetics under Censorship in *TGCF***

The adaptation of *Heaven Official's Blessing (TGCF)* into a donghua demonstrates that queer narratives endure and evolve under the constraints of censorship, transforming textual intimacy into a visual and affective form. This reflects Hutcheon's argument that adaptation involves a process of creative reinterpretation across media, engaging audiences in active meaning-making (8). The *TGCF* donghua co-produced by Haoliners Animation League and *Bilibili* adheres to China's strict media regulations by recoding the novel's homoerotic desire into the subtle aesthetics of gesture, symbolism, and sound. This supports Yiyuan Zhang's observation that danmei adaptations often hide queer masculinity by using repressed sexuality and visual hints to avoid censorship, while still keeping emotional depth (25). Instead of erasing queerness, the donghua redistributes it through adaptation, enabling queer affect to persist in transformed visual and emotional forms that invite viewers' active interpretation.

Censorship serves as an undeniable influence on creative production, compelling artists and writers to adapt their expression. This adaptive process reflects Wang's insights

into danmei culture regarding the preservation of queer meaning under regulation where writers and producers often employ “metaphor, code-switching and satire strategies” (“Censorship and Circumvention” 137; “Cliché-ridden Online Danmei Fiction?” 291). *TGCF* was originally published on *Jinjiang Literature City*, an online publishing platform known for its danmei content (Feng “Addicted” 5). Here, the author has relative narrative freedom to explore homoerotic desire, albeit within China’s ambiguous censorship boundaries (Wang, “Censorship and Circumvention” 142). As a publicly broadcast visual medium, the donghua was subject to more stringent regulations than the novel, which had considerable narrative flexibility within China’s ambiguous digital boundaries. The donghua operates within media frameworks governed by censorship that prohibits explicit same-sex intimacy, whereas the novel conveys intimacy through lyrical narration. This restriction compels adapters to utilise implication, visual metaphor, and affective gestures, thereby reconfiguring the novel’s queer themes to enable queerness to persist despite censorship. This creates a “masquerade” of bromance, as Nim describe as a strategy to reduce the risk of censorship in the adaptation of danmei novels (115). Through these strategies, the donghua not only maintains the novel’s queer worldmaking but also validates it for transnational audiences, fostering resistance against normative erasure.

The *TGCF* donghua’s primary strategy is to build a sustained visual vocabulary for queer intimacy. One of its most potent motifs is the repurposing of the red string of destiny. Traditionally, a heteronormative symbol of predestined marriage in East Asian cultures, the donghua queers this trope. This adaptive strategy becomes a form of resistance against heteronormative timelines (Freeman 3). In the first episode of season one, the scene unfolds around the bridal sedan, where Xie Lian poses as a bride waiting for the ghost bridegroom. Hua Cheng then emerges from the shadows, as the camera zooms tightly on his hand, the red string pulsing with ethereal light amid the sedan’s crimson drapery and his knowing, smiling gaze (“The Bride Prince” 29:36-29:46). This deliberate close-up, presenting the string as he extends his hand to Xie Lian, instantly re-codes the symbol from one of heteronormative destiny to a marker of fated, yet decidedly queer attachment. Furthermore, the string’s repeated visual appearance acts like stylised, repeated actions (Butler, “Performative Acts” 519), actively shaping Hua Cheng’s identity as a devoted lover over a non-normative timeline. Each time it reappears and reinforces their bond without directly stating it, showing how adapting under censorship can keep queer storytelling alive through repetition and subtle resistance.

Similarly, the silver butterflies function as a multifaceted visual metaphor for Hua Cheng’s unwavering devotion and haunting presence, transforming surveillance into tender protection. They are a direct extension of his queer gaze, a non-verbal language of protection and constant presence that transforms surveillance into care. Each ethereal appearance visually conveys his watchfulness over Xie Lian, a motif that Evgeniya Nim, in her analysis of danmei adaptations, describes as a key technique of “bromance as a masquerade,” in which “spiritual and emotional connections serve as a stand-in for physical romance” (118). Furthermore, the butterflies embody a visual manifestation of “temporal drag” (Freeman 62). As beautiful, lingering traces of an eight-hundred-year longing, they visually enact a queer non-linearity by repeatedly interrupting the narrative’s flow. This principle of adaptation is an act of “repetition, but without replication” while preserving the novel’s core emotion of devotion (Hutcheon 7). By creating new visual forms such as particle effects and light trails, the donghua elevates the motif into a unique visual achievement in animation media and consistently breaks the linear narrative flow connecting the past and present. A striking

example occurs in season two, episode six, where a swarm of silver butterflies envelops Xie Lian gently and whisks him away from the Heavenly Realm; the animation uses soft, particle-based effects to make them linger on his skin like a gentle touch, their faint chime underscoring unspoken care but some of them pass through him and assails the heavenly officials, Feng Xin and Mu Ching aggressively like a weaponized force (“Heavenly Palace Raid” 15:27-16:05). This visual layering, combining fluid motion with faint luminescent effects that draw attention to the butterflies’ silvery gleam, rendering the spectral butterflies soft and gentle, almost endearing, in their envelopment of Xie Lian, invites viewers to interpret the scene as queer intimacy between Hua Cheng and Xie Lian. In contrast, the other heavenly officials confront the same butterflies as a weaponised force, overlaying the source-text emotions onto new visual forms (Hutcheon 9).

Soundscapes equally play a vital role by translating the novel’s queer narratives into visual and auditory cues that bypass visual and verbal censorship. During intimate moments, the orchestral music employs soft strings to convey queer longing without using words. The story’s main queer connection is highlighted by the emotional atmosphere this music creates. It demonstrates that even when the story remains obscured, the music clearly communicates the characters’ emotions. The voice actors also add to this feeling with their accents, pauses, and emotional tones. For instance, Hua Cheng shows his respect and dedication by addressing Xie Lian as “Gege” (brother) or “Dianxia” (Your Highness). Hua Cheng’s unwavering gaze, prolonged silences with Xie Lian, and his longing devotion all become these very intimate actions within the donghua. With their queer impact, these little gestures serve as temporal disruptions, changing the conventional narrative (Freeman 65). These components present the donghua as a collaborative adaptation in which queer desire is continuously expressed through visual repetition rather than explicitly declared. This process aligns with the concept of identity as a set of repeated acts (*Gender Trouble* 43), here translated into an auditory language that constructs a credible queer relationship. Similarly, adaptation is a “creative reinterpretation” that actively involves viewers in the process of meaning-making (Hutcheon 8). So listeners must decipher these auditory cues to rebuild the novel’s queer intimacy. According to Welker, this approach can be called “transfiguration” (15), which sustains a homoerotic tension across cultural boundaries. This ensures that the donghua’s queerness circulates across cultures, bridging linguistic barriers through universal emotional resonance.

This adaptive negotiation is particularly evident in *TGCF*’s short film chapter 3, “Two in Red Reunite in Water,” which premiered on March 1, 2026, and is now available on Bilibili’s official *YouTube* channel. According to *DanmeiNews.com*, a news and editorial website focused on Chinese danmei literature, this short film adapts a scene from volume 3 of the English edition published by Seven Seas Entertainment, in which Xie Lian falls into a lake while chasing an evil spirit and inadvertently locks lips with Hua Cheng underwater (Nerine). While the novel describes this moment of physical intimacy, the animated short operates under stricter visual censorship. The scene builds tension as their faces draw closer underwater, but a surge of water bubbles strategically conceals the anticipated lip contact. The intimacy continues as Xie Lian is whisked to Hua Cheng’s Ghost City mansion, where Hua Cheng tenderly treats his injuries, and Xie Lian changes into Hua Cheng’s signature red robe. In a particularly layered moment, the camera focuses on their backs walking together and flashes back to the same composition previously seen in the series, where Xie Lian was dressed as a bride and Hua Cheng as the ghost bridegroom (“*TGCF* New short film” 7:23-7:32). This moment can be taken as a symbolic wedding, turning the red robe from mere

borrowed attire into an embodiment of queer union. The bubbles indicate what Wang describes as a "metaphor" strategy for defending queer meaning through coded substitution ("Censorship and Circumvention" 137). While the bridal scene flashback presents their relationship as destined and unchanging.

*TGCF*'s adaptations thereby convey a subtle type of queer resistance, transforming the novel's explicit intimacy into symbolic visual and audio language. The series constructs a rich and engaging world employing aesthetic creativity to maintain a visual and emotional connection. Rather than enduring censorship, the donghua employs subtext, ensuring its queer message resonates more powerfully through implication than explicit declaration.

### Queer Expansion through Danmei Fandom and Fan Productivity in *TGCF*

Fandom culture has long been recognised as an active, participatory sphere rather than a passive one, where fans become new authors who reshape and expand existing works. To be a fan is to become an engaged reader, viewer, or listener who not only consumes but also reimagines and recreates the text. Fan labour includes various creative activities like social media posts, fanfiction, fan art, video-making, cosplay, crafts, and food art. Fans produce countless artefacts of fan culture that demonstrate their engagement with the source text, their emotional connection, and their creative potential (Ciesielska et al. 11). Through social interaction, this interactive approach transforms cultural texts into dynamic "events" rather than being static resources, allowing fans to develop meaning and identity. Jenkins refers to this process as "textual poaching," whereby fans actively "poach" pre-existing media elements to express personal and group desires (*Textual Poachers* 23). In this interactive framework, fandom serves as both an emotional and cultural space that thrives on shared interest, creativity, and connection.

The Chinese danmei fandom, however, worked within a more unstable cultural and political context. Platforms such as *Jinjiang Literature City (JJWXC)*, which was the starting point of various danmei works, including *Heaven Official's Blessing (TGCF)*, are under constant state scrutiny. As Aiqing Wang notes, these online literary spaces face frequent regulatory crackdowns that compel authors and fans alike to adopt strategies of "metaphor, code-switching, and satire" to sustain queer expression under restrictive conditions ("Censorship and Circumvention" 145). This creative labour enacts what Welker frames as a core aspect of BL media's queerness: a deliberate attempt to unsettle or "queer" norms around female sexuality through content depicting male-male romance, allowing fans, regardless of their own identities, to flout social norms and reshape narratives in ways that provide "room to breathe via this media and the amorphous sphere of its fandom" (2). Moreover, as Lowe argues, danmei and fanfiction, primarily female-authored and read by female fans, emerge as pseudonymous texts that centre queer romance and issues of queer sexuality, arising within frequently "non-professional communities of writers" (1) who rely on digital platforms to amplify underrepresented voices, underscoring the significance of *TGCF*'s participatory culture. This limited space impacts how Chinese fans express their creativity and affects the global *TGCF* fandom. Fans shared strategies across platforms and languages to sustain and expand the story's queer world. Their collective engagement forms what Fiske calls a "shadow cultural economy" (30), which emerges alongside and in critique of official media production. Through acts of creation, interpretation, and preservation, this global network embodies the transformative power of participatory culture. It sets the stage for the forms of fan productivity that sustain *TGCF* as a living, evolving queer text.

Fiske identifies three modes of fan productivity, each traceable within the *TGCF* fandom. The first is “semiotic productivity,” where fans generate meanings beyond the official text (Fiske 37). This is evident in the interpretive practices of fans who analyse narrative motifs and character symbolism in essays, posts, and long-form commentaries. For example, a Tumblr user named lemonzestedtea discusses the recurring significance of the number three in *TGCF*, showing how Xie Lian’s third ascension, Hua Cheng’s name “San Lang”, meaning “third son,” and his three deaths all connect with the cultural belief of luck and transformation. “All this information, coupled with the fact that three is regarded as a lucky number in Chinese culture, just makes me feel so many emotions,” the fan writes (lemonzestedtea). This interpretive labour demonstrates Fiske’s concept of fans’ creation of alternative meanings. Such fans engage with *TGCF* simply as consumers but as co-authors in a shared interpretive project, transforming their responses into critical readings that highlight the text’s queer substructures.

The second mode, “enunciative productivity,” manifests in the *TGCF* fandom’s active digital exchanges, where fans collectively create meaning through discussions (Fiske 37). On platforms like *Instagram*, *Tumblr*, *X*, and *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, fans use hashtags such as #tianguancifu, #tgcf, #heavenofficialblessing, #hualian, etc. and share their critical essays, discussions, and symbolic readings of character psychology, narrative structure, and queer themes. These practices exemplify Fiske’s argument that fan communities openly articulate their engagements, turning private reception into collective interpretive effort (33). According to Fiske, “the styling of hair or make-up, the choice of clothes or accessories are ways of constructing a social identity and therefore of asserting one’s membership of a particular fan community” (38). This influence extends strongly from digital discourse into the physical world through cosplay. The circulation of these crafted identities is a vital part of this productivity, as demonstrated by a reposted *TikTok* video of Hualian cosplay by @/anh.dip03(credit), later shared on *Instagram* (@tgcfdiary). The cosplayers carefully style wigs, makeup, and detailed robes to embody the characters and post their costume play across platforms (from *TikTok* to *Instagram*), showing that this identity construction is a shared communal act. The comments under the reposted cosplay video serve as a space where fans express their emotional and interpretive reactions to the visual content. The commenters do not react passively. They influence meaning by showing admiration, expressing strong emotions, and recognising connections to other texts. Some in the comments describe the cosplay as “beautiful” or “stunning,” and even refer to specific aesthetic choices as “canon,” showing fans asserting their influence on character representation. Others wish to read the original text again. Consequently, each individual’s reaction deepens shared queer readings. This continuous discussion in the comment section becomes a space where the fan community actively creates, discusses, and shares meaning rather than passively receiving it.

Lastly, “textual productivity” refers to fans’ transformation of their interpretations into new cultural works. The fandom’s “textual productivity” is most evident in the proliferation of creative works across various media platforms (Fiske 39). Through fanfiction, memes, and fanart, fans go beyond interpretation to creating, explicitly visualising and narrating the queer intimacy that remains subtextual in official adaptations. For example, the *AO3* fanfiction “What to do When Your Husband Turns Into a Weasel – A Guide by Hua Cheng” humorously reimagines Xie Lian as a weasel (death\_waltz). Xie Lian’s character traits are reframed metaphorically, which combines humour with tenderness. While explicit representation is limited by censorship, fan reinterpretations deepen emotional connection and encourage shared queer readings. This also extends to video edits on *YouTube*, where fans create AMVs

(Anime Music Videos), short analyses, and *chibi*-style animations featuring a cute, exaggerated art style with oversized heads and small bodies that re-edit and re-score donghua footage, often set to emotionally resonant music emphasising the romantic subtext between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng. These edits organise material by employing platform capabilities to highlight key events or striking visuals, such as the red thread or butterflies. In doing so, they create an engaging, fan-driven romance narrative that ranges from lighthearted themes to explicit exploration of desire. Fans' essays, subtitled videos, and commentary posts work together to form a global discussion that connects different languages and cultures. Fiske implies that this process, as a "shadow cultural economy" (30) outside commercial limits, is a fundamental act of queer worldmaking, expanding the narrative's boundaries and affirming their relationship in unequivocal terms.

Through this interaction of semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity, *TGCF* fandom shows how fan culture reflects an affective economy built on collective care and emotional investment (*Affect in Fandom* 12). Fans preserve the narrative's queer subtext through translation, platform interaction, and meta-commentary. They also actively expand their queer potential through fanfiction, fan art, and video edits. These creative acts deepen emotional resonance and resist censorship. This collective endeavour demonstrates, as Feng notes, how danmei fandom offers participants the opportunity to "transcend geographical, ideological, gender, and class boundaries," forging a transnational space for queer worldmaking through shared narrative investment ("Addicted to Beauty" 58). *TGCF*'s fandom thus becomes a dynamic force of global queer expression which keeps intimacy and desire across borders.

## Conclusion

*Heaven Official's Blessing* (*TGCF*) exemplifies how danmei functions as a transmedia site of queer adaptation and fandom-driven worldmaking. Through its original novel, donghua adaptation, and global fandom, *TGCF* challenges heteronormative frameworks through a queer theoretical lens. This study proves that media adaptations dynamically expand *TGCF*'s queer significance and develop the novel's queer themes by emphasising performativity and temporality through Hua Cheng's fluid identities and Xie Lian's non-linear journeys. They express queer time through cycles of devotion, chosen kinship, the challenge of heteronormativity, and the embrace of queer failure as a form of resilience. This is most evident when characters choose devotion over duty, loyalty over hierarchy, and love over divine approval. The transition from page to screen opens new opportunities and limitations. Censorship shaped the donghua adaptation, which uses artistic techniques including metaphor, protracted gaze, and sound design to depict queerness both aurally and visually. The novel's narrative portrays the themes of devotion and longing, while the donghua conveys them through musical cues, voice acting, and the visual movement of bodies toward one another. In this cross-media dynamic, fans contribute significantly by sharing translations, interpretations, and creative works through modes of fan productivity. Fandom itself emerges as a mode of queer worldmaking, in which intimacy and desire are continually reimagined and collectively shared. Ultimately, this study positions *Heaven Official's Blessing* within a collaborative framework in which novel, adaptation, and fandom co-create resilient spaces for queer worldmaking amid censorship.

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