

WATCHING THE BROMANCE: GENDER AND SUBCULTURE'S MASQUERADE IN
CONTEMPORARY CHINA

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Chinese bromance drama, a new genre of Chinese TV drama that insinuates the homoerotic relationship between male protagonists. This thesis regards the Chinese bromance drama as a masquerade, a middle region, a special cultural field where both the old and the new, as well as the traditional and avant-garde play on the stage, colliding, competing, and communicating with each other. The study uses the example of *Word of Honor* (2021) to provide a novel and illuminating angle to discuss the true theme of Chinese bromance. By analyzing the male protagonist of *Word of Honor*, this thesis argues that the new genre embodies the features of androgyny and romance. Though Chinese bromance drama disturbs the conventional alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality, it has failed to transgress the still-dominant patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. With the gender-role dichotomy and male gaze both questioned and consolidated in Chinese bromance drama, this thesis uncovers the intricate interactions in contemporary China between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, as well as between dominant culture and subcultures. Starting from the changes of the gender discourse in China, this study tries to explore the “hidden voices” in China and present the panorama of contemporary Chinese society.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In recent years, people around the world have witnessed a surge of bromance¹-related movies or TV dramas. In America, films like *Superbad* (2007), *The Hangover* (2009), and *I Love You, Man* (2009) have gained increasing attention from scholars.² In Britain, no matter the TV series *Sherlock* (2010–2017) or the movie version *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), the emphasis on the bond and partnership between Holmes and Watson has stimulated audiences' passion on social media platforms. In China, bromance-related TV dramas have also become prevalent. In 2015, *Nirvana in Fire* (*Langya Bang* 琅琊榜, 2015) portrayed the friendship and loyalty between several male protagonists, proving to be both a critical and financial success. In the following years, *Guardian* (*Zhenhun* 镇魂, 2018), *The Untamed* (*Chenqing Ling* 陈情令, 2019), and *Word of Honor* (*Shanhe Ling* 山河令, 2021) all acquired great commercial success. *Guardian* had accumulated a total of 3.2 billion views on the Chinese video platform Youku before it was taken down in August 2018. As for *The Untamed*, it was one of the highest-earning dramas in 2019, and its influence extends well beyond China's national borders. The drama has been translated into 13 different languages and broadcast in several countries, including Thailand, South Korea, and Japan. In 2021, *Word of Honor* also attracted widespread public attention. Therefore, maybe it is not rash to conclude that bromance-related movies or TV series have gained success globally.

However, with its strong homoerotic subtext, Chinese bromance dramas have distinctive features compared to those produced in the rest of the world. In English, bromance is a

portmanteau of “bro” from “brother” and “romance.” Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary offers the following definition: “a close nonsexual friendship between men.”³ Traditionally, the word in China shared a similar meaning, which combines brother (*xiongdì* 兄弟) and emotion/affection (*qing* 情). The definition in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary applies well to the traditional accounts of the long-existing brotherhood theme in classic Chinese dramas, such as *Water Margin* (*Shuihu Zhuan* 水浒传), which exemplifies nonsexual homosocial bonds between the heroes. Nonetheless, this definition cannot characterize the newly emerging meaning in China—a close friendship or relationship between men that implies or insinuates their homoerotic relationship. In contemporary China, especially after 2018, bromance has come to constitute a new genre with its close affiliation with *danmei* or boy’s love (BL) culture. According to Tong Shen, most recent Chinese bromance TV dramas were adapted from BL novels, a genre of male-male romance created by and for women and sexual minorities, which can be traced back to 1970s Japan.⁴ After this genre landed in China, it quickly became popular within the BL fandom; however, it is still deemed a subculture, confronting stiff resistance from the dominant culture when put onto a screen. The most vivid example is the BL drama *Addicted* (*Shangyin* 上瘾, 2016), which was removed from all Chinese video streaming websites because of the so-called “vulgar, immoral and unhealthy content”⁵ in the same year of its release. In 2017, the Chinese Cyberspace Administration published the *General Principles for Censorship of Online Programs*⁶ and officially banned gay-themed dramas. Same-sex intimate scenes on screens became dangerous. Henceforth, to evade censorship and reach a broader audience, all portrayals of homoerotic relationships between male characters in dramas have been restrained,

reframed, and restructured. From *Guardian* (2018) and *The Untamed* (2019) to *Word of Honor* (2021), though all adapted from BL novels, these dramas have all converted from same-sex romance to platonic friendships, which has been dubbed “socialist bromance.”⁷ Thus, bromance has become a product of compromise between subcultures and mainstream culture, a middle ground between women’s fantasies⁸ and hegemonic masculinity, and a unique genre in Chinese dramas.

With the rapid prosperity of Chinese bromance dramas, some scholars have observed the rise of the new genre, and they have especially studied the BL fandom. Since the popularity of this new genre of drama is very recent, people have had trouble naming it. In previous academic analyses, most researchers regarded the Chinese bromance drama as an extension of BL or *danmei* culture. “*Danmei* online drama” (耽美网剧) is still the most frequently mentioned name in their studies. Scholars like Han and Liu (52-54), Wang (“*Danmei: Marginal Pleasure*” 71-74,109), and Li and Li (170-175) have defined the genre as a branch of BL culture, stressing the genre’s vital contributions to deconstructing the hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality. Han and Liu (52-54) argued for the Utopian potential of bromance dramas to eradicate homophobia and sexism, regarding BL culture as a new form of sexual liberation.⁹ From the feminist perspective, Wang (71-74,109) emphasized the “conversion of the gaze” through BL novel-based dramas where “women are no longer an object of being gazed, a reflection of lust, a silent lamb in patriarchal authorities”; instead, they exchange the position with men and implicitly challenge or threaten the binary construction of gender.¹⁰ Besides the feminist perspective,

subculture also provides a maneuverable angle to delve into the topic. Li and Li (170-175) studied the drama *The Untamed* to discuss how a subculture is “incorporated” into the mass culture, and both scholars agreed that the drama is a successful product that realizes the harmony of subculture and mainstream culture.¹¹ On the other side, Jin (114-115) unfolded the turbulence and undercurrents behind the superficial calmness. Though pessimistic about the future of subculture, influenced by the Birmingham School, Jin insisted on the subculture’s resistance power to the mainstream.¹² From different perspectives, the studies have made significant contributions to the frontier. Nonetheless, the studies above still limited themselves to the scope of “*Danmei* online drama,” which, on the one hand, fails to cover all dramas with implicit homoerotic plots, and on the other hand, implies the new genre is a branch of BL culture rather than a newly emerging cultural phenomenon that has developed its own distinct features. Xue (90-96) acutely noted that the enthusiasm of Chinese spectators for male-male intimate scenes is not limited to dramas based on BL novels. Xue used the popular TV series *Lang Ya Bang* as an example to discuss the dubious “love triangle” where the heterosexual relationship is weakened to cement the homosocial relationship.¹³ Then, Hu and Wang (1-16) first employed the word “bromance” to summarize the newly emerging genre of dramas. Their work introduced the concept of “masquerade”¹⁴ to analyze the representational strategy of Chinese dramas that disguise the ambiguous male-male relationship using brotherhood.¹⁵ Though they did not clearly define the notion of “bromance,” which sometimes caused confusion, their excellent point is still thought-provoking and has inspired this research.

The previous studies provided insight into bromance dramas in the past several years. However, first, as we have discussed above, most of them failed to be aware that the new prevalent drama genre extends the boundary of BL culture; second, most of them sought a macro view of the recent cultural phenomenon but failed to give us a clear answer to the following questions: What is the relationship between the two male protagonists? And what is a woman's position when they are fascinated by the new genre of drama? How does the drama incorporate the "thrilling" homoerotic scenes into their plots and evade censorship by the authorities? Most of the research has either evaded these questions tactfully or given an answer both obscure and ambiguous. Therefore, in this thesis, I will start from one tiny, entertaining, but profound phenomenon in the drama *Word of Honor* to uncover the intricate interactions in contemporary China between hegemonic masculinity and femininity, as well as between dominant culture and subcultures. I do not intend to sketch out all the details of bromance dramas in this thesis, which is impossible; instead of answering the question of why people are fascinated by the bromance¹⁶, I will start from the change to the old word to probe into the changes in the gender narrative in Chinese bromance dramas and catch a glimpse into burgeoning Chinese "queer pop."¹⁷

Word of Honor was a phenomenal drama released in 2021, and it has brought about a new change to the word "wife" (*laopo* 老婆). The word was traditionally exclusively used to refer to a female partner in marriage, and it now applies to men. I argue that the changed use of the word could be regarded as a "masquerade," which represents the new power relations between men and women under the veil of the old word. The changed usage of the word reimagines gender,

sexuality, and subculture, becoming the “trouble-maker” or “noise-maker” in Chinese society under the guise of the reframed word. Thus, to some extent, the word is not only the microcosm of Chinese bromance drama but also contemporary China. Therefore, in the following chapter, I will start with the new use of the word. Though the bromance drama has been declared as brotherhood stories between the male protagonists, I argue that the recent usage of the term “wife” betrays the other side of the drama, which tells the romance stories between the androgynous protagonists. I will examine the protagonist’s slide between masculinity and femininity and try to answer the question, “What is the relationship between two male protagonists in an ‘androgynous romance^{18?}’” Then, I will concentrate on the power relationship between female spectators and male characters. In other words, I will try to figure out the position of women in bromance dramas. Though many scholars have argued for women’s power with the emergence of women scriptwriters and audiences, the theory about the “male gaze” is still an enduring topic in movies or televisions and demands researchers’ reconsideration in the studies of bromance dramas. Chapter 4 will discuss the relationship between subcultures and the dominant culture. I will employ Meyrowitz’s theory about the middle region to explore the intricate interactions between subcultures and the dominant culture. I will demonstrate that the non-normative gender narrative in subcultures does not perish easily when incorporated into the mainstream; instead, it lurks and implicitly challenges the existing social structure. In this thesis, I regard modern Chinese bromance dramas as a special cultural field, a masquerade, a middle region where both the old and the new, as well as the traditional and avant-garde play on the stage. Here, I do not intend to judge which force holds overwhelming superiority; instead, I

explore how different forces mask themselves and how they confront each other. I believe a consideration of this new genre and its reception can be of assistance in understanding the issue of sex, gender, and subcultures in contemporary China.

¹ In English, “bromance,” conflating the words “brother” and “romance,” is thought to originate from *Skateboard* magazine editor David Carnie in the 1990s (DeAngelis, 8). Traditionally speaking, the bromance-related movies or TV dramas depict the non-sexual emotional intimacy between presumably straight male protagonists. However, the definition was challenged recently in China where people used the word to insinuate the homoerotic male bonding on screen. This thesis studies China’s new “bromance” from the gender and subculture perspectives.

² See the articles by Alberti, John. “‘I Love You, Man:’ bromances, the construction of masculinity, and the continuing evolution of the romantic comedy.” *Quarterly review of film and video*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2013, pp. 159–172 and Ciasullo, Ann M., and David Magill. “‘This is what I’ve always wanted’: Bromance and the Evolution of Male Intimacy in the Jump Street Films.” *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015, pp. 303–321

³ “Bromance.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bromance?utm_campaign=sd&utm_medium=serp&utm_source=jsonld (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁴ Shen, Tong. “The reasons for the popularity of Boy’s Love Culture in China.” *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2020.

⁵ “China Bans Depictions of Gay People on Television.” *The Guardian, Guardian News and Media*, 4 Mar. 2016, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/mar/04/china-bans-gay-people-television-clampdown-xi-jinping-censorship.

⁶ “Zhongguo wangluoshiting jiemu fuwu xiehui fabu wangluoshiting jiemu neirong shenhe tongze.” 中国网络视听节目服务协会发布《网络视听节目内容审核通则》 [Chinese Netcasting Services Association published the *General Principles for Censorship of Online Programs*]. (*Cctv.com*), 央视网. June 30, 2017. web.archive.org/web/20170630135640/www.cnsa.cn/2017/06/30/ARTI0Qg4cp7jtd1Z5o0RnfzM170630.shtml (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁷ “Shehuizhuyi xiongdqing” 社会主义兄弟情 [socialist bromance]. *Baidu Encyclopedia 百度百科*, baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A4%BE%E4%BC%9A%E4%B8%BB%E4%B9%89%E5%85%84%E5%BC%9F%E6%83%85/22767554?fr=aladdin (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁸ The BL novel is primarily produced for and by women. Chinese bromance drama is greatly influenced by BL culture and women are the key audiences. See the studies of Wu and Ji. Wu, Xianwei. “Hierarchy within female ACG fandom in China” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 30 (2019). Ji, Shuang 季爽. “Danmei wangluoju de shouzhong fenxi” 耽美网络剧的受众分析 [Audience Analysis for Chinese Slash Network Play]. MS thesis. Liaoning University 辽宁大学, 2016.

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- ⁹ Han, Bing and Chaoyue Liu. 韩冰, and 刘超越. "Danmei yingshi zuopin zhong de yileiwenhua yu shenmeitezheng"耽美影视作品中的异类文化与审美特征 [Alien Culture and Aesthetic Characteristics in danmei Films and Television Works]. *Movie Literature 电影文学* vol. 22, 2015, pp. 52–54.
- ¹⁰ Wang Wei 王伟. "Danmei: bianyuan de yuyue—dui danmei wangluoju de kaohe" 耽美: 边缘的愉悦——对耽美网络剧的考察 [Danmei: Marginal Pleasure—An Investigation of Danmei Web Drama] *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition) 重庆科技学院学报(社会科学版)*, 2020(01):71-74+109.
- ¹¹ Li, Shengli and Zijia Li. 李胜利, 李子佳. "Cong yawenhua dao zhuliuwenhua de chengong gaibian—yi chengqingling weili 从亚文化到主流文化的成功改编——以陈情令为例." [The Successful Adaptation from Subculture to Mainstream Culture—For the Example of The Untamed] *Shandong Social Sciences 山东社会科学* vol. 10, 2020, pp. 170–175.
- ¹² Jin, Keying 金可盈. "Bominghan xuepai lilun xia danmei wangju de shoubian he dikang—yi zhenhun weili" 伯明翰学派理论下耽美网剧的收编和抵抗——以《镇魂》为例 [The Incorporation and Resistance of Danmei Web Dramas under Birmingham School—For the Example of Guardian]. *Shoucang 收藏* vol. 3, 2020, pp. 114-115.
- ¹³ Xue, Yingjie 薛英杰. "Yuwang de quexi yu zaichang: dianshiju langyabang de xingbie jizhi" 欲望的缺席与在场: 电视剧《琅琊榜》的性别机制 [The Suppression and Expression of Desire: Gender Ideology in the TV Series Lang Ya Bang]. *Women Studies 妇女研究论丛* vol. 1, 2016, pp. 90–96.
- ¹⁴ The notion of “masquerade” was first introduced by Joan Riviere in “Womanliness as Masquerade” in 1929, where Riviere regards femininity as a defensive mask for women to hide their wish for masculinity and tactfully avert anxiety and retribution from men. Tingting Hu and Cathy Yue Wang quoted the theory of masquerade to articulate the strategy being employed by the Chinese media.
- ¹⁵ Hu, Tingting, and Cathy Yue Wang. "Who is the Counterpublic? Bromance-as-Masquerade in Chinese Online Drama—SCI Mystery." *Television & New Media*, 2020, 1527476420937262.
- ¹⁶ Scholars have not achieved an agreement regarding the answer to the question. Different scholars have discussed the question from different perspectives. See the articles of O'Brien and Ann, Martin, and Shen. O'Brien, Amy Ann. "Boys' Love and Female Friendships: The Subculture of Yaoi as a Social Bond between Women." 2008. Martin, Fran. "Queer Pop Culture in the Sinophone Mediasphere." *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2016. Shen, Tong. "The Reasons for the Popularity of Boy's Love Culture in China." *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2020.
- ¹⁷ Zhao, Jamie J. "It has never been 'normal:' queer pop in post-2000 China." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2020, pp. 463–478.
- ¹⁸ Jenkins, Henry. *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge, 2012.

CHAPTER 2: BROMANCE AND ANDROGYNOUS ROMANCE

Word of Honor is a famous Chinese TV series set in the martial arts world, which tells a wuxia tale of two soulmates, Zhou Zishu (周子舒) and Wen Kexing (温客行). Zhou Zishu (played by Zhang Zhehan 张哲瀚), the leader of the assassin organization in the government, quits his position and escapes with severe wounds to pursue freedom. He meets Wen Kexing (played by Gong Jun 龚俊), the leader of the Ghost Valley, in the middle of his travels. Entangled in a series of conspiracies, they soon become soulmates. The TV series quickly became popular in China. By May 7th, 2021, the TV series had been viewed over 2 billion times, resulting in many discussions about characters and actors. Following the pattern of *Guardian* and *The Untamed*, the drama concentrates on the relationship between the two male protagonists.

However, there is one particular phenomenon outside of the screen that is at study here—many fans of the drama call the character Zhou Zishu or the actor Zhang Zhehan “wife,” though both of them are male. In Chinese, traditionally, husbands use this word to address their wives; thus, the word used to be confined to women. The new use *de facto* endows the word to a broader target audience and implies a change in the existing gender structure. In the following parts of this chapter, I will start from the expanded usage of the word to clarify the true theme of the bromance drama: “androgynous romance.”

Androgyny

In March 2021, if people searched for the word “wife” on Chinese social media platforms, the most frequently appearing related celebrity would be Zhang Zhehan, who plays the title role Zhou Zishu in *Word of Honor*. On March 7th 2021, the update Zhang posted on Weibo (China’s biggest social platform and the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) received around 86 thousand comments, and over half of the comments called the male celebrity “wife.” The “freaky” phenomenon has aroused much attention and curiosity. On China’s most prominent question-and-answer website Zhihu (Chinese version of Quora), the question “why I call Zhang Zhehan (my) “wife”” has been viewed nearly 100 thousand times. The user, “Jiujiu de Qimiao Maoxian” (韭韭的奇妙冒险) praised Zhang’s role in the drama *Word of Honor*: “he is the carrier of female virtues like softness and forgiveness... he provides a platform for women to appreciate or gaze at the virtues hardly found in men for various reasons.”¹ Another user, “Huandu” (欢度), shared similar opinions: “You will not think that he is (totally) feminized...but he also has many feminine qualities like diligence, kindness, and patience.”² Though many of the comments are not precise nor completely clear, they still divulge one significant characteristic or attribute of male roles in Chinese bromance dramas: androgyny.

Androgyny is not a new term, as the word could be derived from ancient Greek, specifically from Plato’s *Symposium*. Plato implied that androgyny is one of the primitive conditions from which humans have evolved. However, the word was not clearly defined until modern times. In 1974, Bem used the concept of “androgynous person” (155) to describe the third psychological

state and break the rigid sex-role differentiation³, which soon drew attention from scholars. According to Cook, androgyny “represents a combination of personality characteristics traditionally associated with men (masculine) and those associated with women (feminine)” (471). Though what counts as masculine and feminine varies among different scholars, scholars have conceded that the androgynous individuals “are more likely to engage in cross-sexual behaviors than those who maintain traditional sex roles,”⁴ which happens to coincide with fans’ praise of Zhang’s acting in the drama. According to the fans, Zhang’s acting endowed the character with both “traditional male attributes and female characteristics.”⁵

As a male character, Zhang’s character, Zhou Zishu, reveals his masculine characteristics in the first episode. Here, I borrow Cook’s definition that “masculine characteristics are instrumental/agentive in nature, involving goal orientation, assertive activity, self-development, and separation from others” (472). In other words, masculine qualities connect to qualities like strength, efficiency, responsibility, independence, and courage. The drama exhibits Zhou’s masculinity in the first episode with the introduction of the assassination scene. As a leader of the assassin guild, Zhou kills an official of the court under heavy protection without any regret. The first scene represents Zhou as a cold-hearted man skilled in martial arts. It emphasizes Zhou’s masculinity, such as his goal-oriented personality and separation from others, which is reinforced in the following scene as Zhou punishes his uncle to death by himself. Strength and courage are also essential qualities when Zhou decides to leave the assassin organization. To force the prince to approve his resignation, Zhou punishes himself in advance to evoke the

prince's sympathy—a courageous and clever attempt as the story is set in ancient China, a world with a rigid hierarchy. Facing a man who could take his life at any moment, Zhou never gets frightened, even when the sword edge touches his chest. In the words of the princess, the scriptwriter evaluates Zhou, “cruel and decisive,” not only to others but also to himself. Thus, Zhou's image is established as a cold, assertive, courageous man with outstanding competence in martial arts. All these traits are associated with men and masculinity.

However, after Zhou leaves the assassin organization, his hidden femininity begins to surface. Cook gives us a rough description of femininity. “Feminine characteristics,” according to Cook, “are expressive/communal, focusing upon emotionality, selflessness, sensitivity, and interpersonal relationships” (472). More specifically, femininity could be exhibited as openness to needs and feelings and being more tender, expressive, considerate, and compassionate. Many audiences acutely observed the change in the characteristics of Zhou Zishu as the story unfolds, especially after he encounters his soulmate Wen Kexing. “Zhou Zishu is more like a mother,” Zhihu user “Jiujiu de Qimiao Maoxian” says, “he has maternal instincts.”⁶ During their journey, he looks after two orphans tenderly, takes care of his apprentice Zhang Chengling and his soulmate Wen Kexing, and practically plays the role of teacher or mother, exemplifying his gentleness, tenderness, and compassion. He is also frank, encouraging, and open to his feelings. Following his master's teaching, he trusts Wen even though he does not clearly know Wen's story and waits for the trust to be returned frankly and patiently. Gentleness and tenderness are also accentuated when Zhou takes care of the drunken Wen Kexing, who is burdened with grief

and hatred because of a family feud. He lays Wen in bed and tucks him in, kindly and lovingly. The drama implies Zhou's maternal instincts several times, especially in Episode 6, where Wen directly calls Zhou "mom" because of a hallucination. All these details reveal Zhou's feminine features.

Therefore, the role of Zhou Zishu could be viewed as a symbol of androgyny in this bromance drama that possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics. This is different from traditional brotherhood stories like *Water Margin*, which excluded femininity to strengthen homosociality in the communities of males. Here, I do not mean to maintain that the traditionally male characters like Guan Yu or Zhang Fei do not obtain feminine qualities; nonetheless, it still should be acknowledged that femininity never plays an essential part in the plot of brotherhood, which "contributes to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity" (Bird 121). However, in bromance dramas, it is not hard to find femininity in male characters, from Zhao Yunlan in *Guardian* to Wei Wuxian in *The Untamed*. Though they are all male characters played by male actors, under the mask, they are all endowed with feminine features. Their feminine traits are amplified and emphasized. Androgyny becomes one of the most salient features of the protagonists in bromance dramas, which troubles rigid gender stereotypes and facilitates the reimagining of gender roles. When Zhou plays the role of a good wife or a kind mother in his journey of the martial arts world, he *de facto* deconstructs the conformity between gender and sex, in which condition "man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one"⁷(Butler, 10). Therefore, on

the stage of the masquerade, after removing the mask, it is hard to define whether Zhou Zishu is masculine or feminine. Many fans also detected this, and they praised Zhou for being both “softness and strength.”⁸ This is a prevalent view among the fans of Zhou Zishu on the Internet which emphasizes Zhou’s “masculine power” and “feminine softness.”⁹ The feminine features partly demonstrate why fans address Zhou, a male character, as “wife.” Admittedly, the notion of androgyny still establishes the paradigm of the sex-role dichotomy, which is accentuated repeatedly when the fans iterate their praise for Zhou’s masculine and feminine traits. However, a role like Zhou Zishu inspires people to rethink the established gender division and encourages the flexibility of gender identity, which according to June Singer may be “a representation in the human form of the principle of wholeness” (275) With Zhou’s sliding between masculinity and femininity, the role offers an opportunity to transcend the existing formula and explore more possibilities in the gender system.

Romance

As discussed above, the androgynous characters in Chinese bromance dramas interrogate the naturalized dualities of masculinity versus femininity, disturbing the conventional alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality. However, it is still hard to fully illustrate why many fans call Zhou Zishu “wife” instead of “husband” since his character possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. To answer the question, in this part, I will examine the narrative structure of bromance dramas and compare them to the romance genre. I argue that though represented as a new drama genre, the bromance drama is still structured within the traditional romance and constructed as a

replication of heterosexual relations. In other words, the masqueraded brotherhood eroticizes, romanticizes, or even “heteronormalizes” the same-sex relationship. Thus, the same-sex relationship becomes a parody or imitation of romance that centers on a male-female relation, and Zhou Zishu practically turns into the “heroine” in the story.

In the past, the bromance was synonymous with brotherhood, referred to as male homosocial desire depicted through terms such as “male bonding” or “brotherhood.” These terms describe males who share similar interests and emotional closeness and are characterized as defensive responses to the anxiety about homosexuality (211)¹⁰. However, as we have discussed in the introductory part, compared to the traditional brotherhood stories, the meaning of bromance transformed following the eroticization or fantasizing of the relationship between male protagonists in the Chinese context. Thus, the gap between bromance and romance has narrowed. As Hu and Wang suggest, the emergence of the new drama genre has led to the blurred boundaries between bromance and romance¹¹. They regard the bromance as a kind of masquerade of romance. The former widely employs the narratives and strategies of the latter, thus imitating the formulaic structure of heterosexual love. Wang (“Portray the Bromance with the Romantic Narrative” 66-68) shared a similar opinion, and she found that the so-called bromance drama “portray(s) bromance through the romantic narrative” (67) *Word of Honor*, as I will analyze below, shares a similar romantic narrative.

In her exceptional work *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis concluded eight narrative elements of romance: “a definition of society; the meeting between the heroine

and hero; an account of their attraction for each other; the barrier between them; the point of ritual death; the recognition that fells the barrier; the declaration of the heroine and hero that they love each other; and their betrothal.” Though Regis insisted that the romance “tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (22), it is not hard to find the dual-male-protagonist drama *Word of Honor* to follow the same pattern of narrative:

Society Defined

In *Word of Honor*, Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing are set in a martial arts world where the government power expands, and the endless clashes happen.

The Meeting

They first meet at a restaurant where Wen soon finds that Zhou is a beauty though Zhou dresses like an ugly beggar. Zhou finds that Wen is intolerable, despite Wen being interested in him. Thus begins the conflict between Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing, the barrier to their mutual recognition and their eventual “betrothal.”

The Barrier

There are four barriers between Zhou and Wen in the drama: Zhou’s close connection with the assassin guild, Wen’s family feud, Wen’s self-abasement, and Zhou’s ignorance of Wen. The barriers drive the plot and action, and the story does not arrive at a happy ending until the barriers fall. The fall, Regis argues, “is a liberation for the heroine” (33).

The Attraction

Attraction plays an unneglectable role in romance since “it keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier.” In *Word of Honor*, the two male protagonists share a sexual attraction, friendship, brotherhood, and goals. Among the several attractions, it is the sexual attraction that makes the story transcend the limits of brotherhood to become a romance. Instead of representing the sexual attraction explicitly, the drama insinuates the sexual attraction between Wen and Zhou mainly through the two strategies to evade censorship. One is the romanticized lines in the drama. A typical example could be found in Episode 2. When Wen flirts with Zhou and sees him off beside a boat, he says, “Don’t worry about the trip; I’ll eventually welcome you.”¹²This is a line from the poem by Wang Xianzhi, who writes this to comfort his beloved concubine before she gets on the boat. The scriptwriter borrows this line to imply the true relationship under the veil of brotherhood. A similar example appears in Episode 6, where Wen says, “If you are gone, alone in this wilderness, who should I go to?”¹³This line is borrowed from the poem by Yuan Haowen, who wrote poetry to express his admiration for unchangeable love. The lonely wild goose commits suicide after his partner’s loss, foreshadowing the fate of Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing. The other strategy to hint at the sexual attraction is the eroticization of the intimate scenes between the male protagonists. In Episode 4, during the fight between Wen and Zhou, the camera repeatedly focuses on Gu Xiang’s pancakes (*shaobing* 烧饼). The director uses the close-up to allude to “pasting pancakes,” (贴烧饼) a euphemism for homosexual behavior in the Chinese classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Thus, the fight between Wen and Zhou is painted on the color of homoeroticism. In Episode 6, Wen helps Zhou clean his wound after they confront dangers. Many female audience members felt excited when they saw Wen's mouth touching Zhou's shoulder to help him suck the venom out. The YouTube user "Jaymee Mangang" called it a "shoulder kiss," and the comment received over 1000 likes.¹⁴ Consequently, *Word of Honor* practically draws the homosocial into the orbit of homosexual desire, and the attraction between Zhou and Wen drives the plot development.

The Declaration

The declaration means the protagonists declare their love for each other. In *Word of Honor*, Wen and Zhou forge a bond gradually with the plot changes and character development. They declare their deep affection for each other several times, especially in the second half of the story. Zhou first states his trust and patience to Wen in Episode 12. After a series of events, Wen eventually reciprocates the same trust and love, so he gives his hairpin (zan 簪) to Zhou as a present. The hairpin works as a token of love, since it endows the wish of "jiefa" (结发) or marriage in the traditional Chinese context and is the key to treasure in the martial arts world. In other words, Wen declares his love to Zhou in this way.

Point of Ritual Death

As Regis defines, the point of ritual death “marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever” (35) In *Word of Honor*, there are two moments of ritual death. One is when Wen and Zhou jump off the cliff together. Out of indignation and greed, the swordsmen in the martial arts world decide to kill Wen together. To escape being hunted, Wen jumps off the cliff, and Zhou also jumps off in despair. Though the audience soon realizes that both protagonists do not die, the other moment of ritual death follows—Zhou’s wound worsens, and he can live only for another five days. Thus, ritual death puts in place the apparently insurmountable barriers between the characters and the happy ending.

Recognition

Recognition means the emergent new information that overcomes the barriers. In *Word of Honor*, Zhou’s recognition of Wen’s identity and miserable past helps the plot develop and provides new information. Before this new information, Zhou did not truly understand Wen’s behavior. Things change when he recognizes that Wen is his lost brother. The new finding provides him with the new meaning of life and prompts him to remove his prejudice against Wen; thus, one of the internal barriers between them has fallen. After recognition, Zhou clearly shows his patience and love for Wen, thus forwarding the story to the “betrothal” part.

The Betrothal

Betrothal plays an essential part in the traditional romance novel. The betrothal part ensures the happy ending of the story and symbolizes good wishes for the future. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that many romances follow the pattern of “the prince and princess got married and lived happily ever after.” With the variations in the forms of romance, the betrothal becomes a figurative word that signifies the fall of the barrier and the union of the protagonists, like *Pride and Prejudice*, which divides the betrothal part into “a proposal scene and an acceptance scene” (Regis 38). *Word of Honor* does not depart from the old pattern, and the story ends on the snowy mountains in which the soulmates live forever. Controversial as it is, the ending still fulfills Wen and Zhou’s dream to leave the martial arts world and live a tranquil life together.

The eight essential elements in the romance novel, according to Regis, represent the core of the genre (ch. 5).¹⁵As we have analyzed above, since the bromance drama *Word of Honor* inherits these tenets of the romance genre, maybe it is not hasty to conclude that *Word of Honor* belongs to the romance genre, similar to classic works like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. Additionally, the bromance dramas like *Nirvana in Fire*, *Guardian*, and *The Untamed* share the same feature. I do not mean to draw the conclusion that the bromance drama is a subgenre of romance, as it is still a new genre with great uncertainty and ambiguity. Yet, most existing bromance dramas are structured within the traditional romance formula and follow the same narrative pattern as “attraction begets misunderstanding yet gives way to nurturing acceptance” (Jenkins 244). Thus, same-sex romance, to some extent, could be regarded as a parody of a

heterosexual love story. For instance, as Wang Yusu discussed, in *Nirvana in Fire*, Prince Jing replaces the function of a heroine and helps the hero Mei Changsu realize his dream with his company. It is also Prince Jing who builds up frequent emotional communications with the hero, greatly influencing Mei's thoughts¹⁶. Similarly, in *Word of Honor*, the male protagonist Zhou Zishu *de facto* plays the heroine's role. Here, I deem Zhou as the heroine, not only because the drama follows the typical rule of heroine-centered romance, putting Zhou (heroine) at the center of the story, but also because it is Zhou, instead of Wen, who fulfills the internal logic of romance by demonstrating the heroine's self-growth, self-satisfaction, and self-realization.¹⁷

Romance is termed compensatory fiction by Janice Radway, as reading romance novels "fulfill certain basic psychological needs for women that have been induced by the culture and its social structures" (113). Radway highlights the female's quest for motherly nurturance in romance. During a love adventure, the heroine, with masculine traits at the beginning of the story, transforms her attitude from rejecting motherhood to regaining it and fulfilling her female personhood. "What the heroine successfully establishes by the end of the ideal narrative," Radway argues, "is the now-familiar female self, the self-in-relation" (139). In the journey in the martial arts world, Zhou experiences the process of rejecting and regaining femininity. His character first appears on screen as a cold-blooded leader of an assassin guild, and the drama implicitly highlights Zhou's masculine behaviors and rejects womanhood. However, in the rest of the story, he becomes softened or "feminized" following his relationship with Wen Kexing and practically takes the responsibility of a mother and a wife during the journey. His acceptance

of the hairpin could be regarded as an acceptance of his new identity and an accomplishment from finding the female self. The story ends in the ritual union of Wen and Zhou, an ideal ending for the grown “heroine.” As Judith Butler noted, “man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one”¹⁸(Butler 275). Though possessing a male-sexed body, Zhou becomes a “heroine” in the story, completing his journey and identity change. He practically becomes the wife of Wen Kexing, which offers another reason why the role is called “wife” by the audience.

Therefore, just as Radway discussed whether the romance reading is “the ritual retelling of the psychic process by which traditional heterosexuality was constructed for women” (14), bromance retells and reperforms the heterosexual relationship. Therefore, how should we understand the contemporary bromance drama in China? It differs from the old brotherhood stories, which emphasized the homosocial relationship and negated feminization and the homosexual tendency. Compared to heterosexual romance, bromance imitates its structure and narrative while replacing its heroine with a male protagonist. Unmasking the newly emerging genre, *Word of Honor* is like *Romeo and Juliet*, but both protagonists are male. Hence, I borrow Jenkins’ idea about slash novels and define the contemporary bromance drama in China as “androgynous romance.” On the one hand, the new genre of drama deconstructs the gender stereotype within the traditional romance and sneers at the old framework of gender formula with the male-embodied “heroine.” On the other hand, with the simple replication of heterosexual relationships, the bromance drama fails to observe the dystopian dimensions of heterosexuality

and surrenders to the hegemonic construction of reproductive heterosexuality without the mention of the “repressive and hierarchical male sexuality” (Jenkins 225). When the fans call Zhou “wife,” the disturbing queer elements in the same-sex relationship are pacified, disarmed, and shattered. From this perspective, the heterosexual partnership in the new genre is simultaneously questioned and consolidated.

¹ Chinese: 他是承载了女性柔茹包容美德的载体...在男性身上出现（由于种种原因男性更难触及到这种品质）恰好提供了一个平台让女性去平视、欣赏这种美德. Jiujiu de Qimiao Maoxian 韭韭的奇妙冒险. Why I Want to Call Zhang Zhehan ‘Wife’? “为什么我对着张哲瀚会想叫老婆?” *Zhihu 知乎*, Mar 7. 2021, www.zhihu.com/question/448145152/answer/1777867460 (accessed 30 June, 2021).

² Huandu 欢度. “Why I Want to Call Zhang Zhehan ‘Wife’?” “为什么我对着张哲瀚会想叫老婆?” *Zhihu 知乎*, Mar 7. 2021, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/448145152/answer/1774258347> (accessed 30 June, 2021).

³ See Bem, Sandra L. “The measurement of psychological androgyny.” p. 155.

⁴ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Androgyny”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 12 Jul. 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/androgyny> (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁵ Chinese:这个角色既有传统意义上的男性特质，又有女性特质. LiuLy 留 Ly. Why I Want to Call Zhang Zhehan ‘Wife’? “为什么我对着张哲瀚会想叫老婆?” *Zhihu 知乎*, Mar 7. 2021, www.zhihu.com/question/448145152 (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁶ Chinese:周子舒更像一个母亲...闪烁着母性的光辉 Jiayu Tianxia 嘉遇天下. “Why I Want to Call Zhang Zhehan ‘Wife’?” “为什么我对着张哲瀚会想叫老婆?” *Zhihu 知乎*, Mar 7. 2021, www.zhihu.com/question/448145152 (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, p. 10.

⁸ Chinese: 温柔且强大. See “Zhou Zishu of Word of Honor” *Jianshu*. Apr 1st, 2021. <https://www.jianshu.com/p/dfaee4007af9> (accessed 30 June, 2021).

⁹ See the article of *Zhihu*. Zoufu 走斧. “Zhou: the Core Competence of BL novels or Bromance Drama” “周子舒的存在是耽美小说/耽改剧的核心竞争力”. May 20, 2021. *Zhihu 知乎*. <https://zhuankan.zhihu.com/p/359927173> (accessed 30 June, 2021)

¹⁰ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire,” p. 211.

¹¹ Hu, Tingting, and Cathy Yue Wang. “Who is the Counterpublic? Bromance-as-Masquerade in Chinese Online Drama—SCI Mystery.”

¹² Chinese: 但渡无所苦，我自迎接汝。See in “Taoyege sanshou qisan 桃叶歌三首·其三.” *Gushiwen.cn* 古诗文网, so.gushiwen.cn/shiwenv_a91792a10b06.aspx (accessed 30 June, 2021).

¹³ Chinese: 你若不在了, 千山暮雪, 我孤翼只影向谁去啊? Adapted from the poem of Yuan Haowen 元好问. See details in “Moyur yanqiuci 摸鱼儿·雁丘词.” Shicimingju.com 诗词名句网, www.shicimingju.com/chaxun/list/42962.html (accessed 30 June, 2021).

¹⁴ See detail on YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOxqr4AxrIU> (retrieved June 30, 2021).

¹⁵ Regis, Pamela. *A natural history of the romance novel*, chapter 5.

¹⁶ Wang Yusu 王玉王. “Yong yanqinggeng xie xiongdqing—weishenme shuo langyabang shi danmeixiang zuopin” 用“言情梗”写“兄弟情”——为什么说《琅琊榜》是“耽美向”作品[Portray the Bromance with the Romantic Narrative—Why *Nirvana in Fire* is A Danmei-Orientated Work]. *Nanfang Wentan* 南方文坛, vol. 2, 2016, pp. 66–68.

¹⁷ Ibid. Wang Yusu argues that romance should reveals the heroine’s self-growth, self-satisfaction, and self-realization (女主人公自我成长, 自我满足和自我实现). Her opinion coincides with Radway, who emphasizes the heroine’s psychological growth in romance.

¹⁸ Butler, Judith. “Gender trouble, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic discourse.” *Feminism/postmodernism*, vol. 327, 1990, pp. 275.

CHAPTER 3: BROMANCE AND FEMALE GAZE

We have discussed the reason Zhou Zishu's role in *Word of Honor* causes him to be called "wife" in the previous part. In this chapter, I will further probe into the question, "Where are women when they call Zhou Zishu 'wife?'" Strange as the question seems, the word's expanded use places their female users in a dubious position. Does the female audience become "husband" when they deem the male protagonist as a wife? Many of them, if not all, think so. On Weibo, many female fans of Zhou Zishu, or Zhang Zhehan, call themselves "cyber husbands." The female fans discuss Zhang's body in and outside of the screen. Some people argue that this new phenomenon represents women's empowerment since "women have become the ones who gaze at others." They claim that "women gaze at men, transform men according to their aesthetics, even putting themselves into male roles. They occupy an active position in the relationship."¹ Thus, could we conclude that the power shift has happened silently, and men have become the objects of female desire? In other words, does the female audience escape or subvert the "male gaze" in the process? To answer this question, we need to revisit and rethink the theory of the male gaze.

When Laura Mulvey developed her idea about the male gaze in 1975 in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"² she described the film world as a "world ordered by sexual imbalance," where "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive female." Women, according to Mulvey, "are simultaneously looked at and displayed," which "connote to-be-looked-at-ness" for the scopophilia enjoyment of male viewers. In contrast,

males, particularly masculine, heterosexual men, occupy the position of an active, dominant gazer. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure through film characters and the audience. Thus, the female is an erotic object for the characters within the screen and the spectators. As Mulvey states, “Women displayed as sexual objects is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle...She holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.” She concedes with Budd Boetticher that “the woman has not the slightest importance” in herself in the film, and “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents.” (Mulvey 22)

Although Mulvey’s essay is influential and has laid the cornerstone for understanding the “male gaze” and the sexual inequalities in Hollywood films or the mainstream cultures of the 1950s and ’60s; nonetheless, Mulvey’s theory does not allow a complete understanding of the genres outside the restricted Hollywood system. Just as Mulvey acknowledged, the theory fails to account for the “buddy movie” in which the male figures portraying homosexual eroticism do not freeze the flow of the narrative. Additionally, as many researchers have noticed, the theory does not apply to “diverse spectatorial positions and desires” since Mulvey’s initial study only accounted for “heterosexual experiences of the gaze and male spectatorial pleasure”(McGoey 8). Therefore, it is not surprising that many scholars have claimed that the Chinese bromance drama escapes the male gaze and even “subverts the classic pattern of visual pleasure.” (Wang “*Danmei: Marginal Pleasure*” 72-73)³ According to Wang Wei, in bromance dramas, “women are no longer an object of being gazed, a reflection of lust, a silent lamb in patriarchal authorities” (72), since women are the prime creators and prime consumers of these stories. In other words,

bromance dramas are created by and for women. For example, for *Word of Honor*, the original BL novel was written by the female author Priest, and it was adapted into a bromance drama by female scriptwriter Xiaochu Nada for the female audience. Therefore, scholars assume that in bromance dramas, women eroticize and objectify the image of men for their own desire so that men become the ones who “hold the look, plays to and signifies female desire.”

To some extent, it is reasonable that Wang believes in a new power relationship in bromance. According to Xue Yingjie, the bromance drama guarantees the “absolute and irrecoverable”⁴ distance between female spectators and male characters due to the absence of female characters in a same-sex relationship.⁵ The distance changes the old position of women in the old Hollywood gender formula represented in Mulvey’s essay. She is no longer the image limited to the male’s gaze; rather, she becomes the powerholder of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze. It is not hard to observe the eroticized male body under female desire. For example, several scenes exhibit the male protagonists’ bodies in the drama. In Episode 14, Wen tries to pull off Zhou’s clothes to examine his wound. Zhou shouts at him, “There are two men pulling at my clothes in the middle of the night; what kind of a scene is this?” Episode 22 shows the scenes of Wen Kexing bathing. In Episode 32, Zhou cares for his wound with his shirt off. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the male protagonists in the bromance drama become erotic spectacles for female spectators. The male is displayed and discussed as an object of eroticism by the female spectatorship, similar to the place in which women are positioned in mainstream films. This is a kind of reversal. Thus, the female spectators become “men” and *de facto* adopt

the traditional male position, which is best manifested in their self-description as “cyber husbands.” Furthermore, with self-identification from men, the female spectators project themselves onto the screen and imagine themselves in active roles forwarding the story. They soon find the process “joyous” because they could perceive a “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (Mulvey 22). Therefore, just as Mary Anne Doane explains, the woman becomes a transvestite who “adopts the sexuality of the other...in order to attain the necessary distance from the image,” which is imperative to assume the position of fetishist. (Doane 78-81) From this perspective, it seems accurate that the power relationship between males and females in bromance drama shifts, and it is female spectators who hold the power of the gaze.

However, could we conclude that the “male gaze” is dismantled when the female audience watches the bromance drama? Maybe drawing such a conclusion is too hasty. For one thing, as many female audiences have noticed, though the male is objectified in the bromance world where the female attains the dominant power to resist the objectification of women in reality⁶, the reversal itself remains locked within the same logic of binary-structured gender discourse and simply reinforces “the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy” (Doane 77). Hence, instead of weakening the ground of the “male gaze,” the thought about reversal internalizes and consolidates the male gaze’s internal hierarchy.

For another thing, the feasibility of reversal is dubious in many of the bromance dramas, especially in *Word of Honor*. The relationship between spectator and characters is much more

complicated and could hardly be accounted for through the reversal of power like women watching the male striptease or the gigolo. In the first part, the protagonist Zhou Zishu is represented as a heroine in the romance story, though he has a male-sexed body. Zhou is endowed with feminine attributes and reiterates a female's journey. Therefore, though played by the male actor, Zhou differs from the male protagonists in the traditional male-orientated dramas; instead, he represents an exploration of alternative masculinity and an affirmation of feminine characteristics. Admittedly, it is too far to say that it is a kind of gender swap; nevertheless, people could hardly exclude the possibilities of the spectators' proximity to the character and deny the presence of a female in a bromance drama. Zhou's embedded feminine characteristics cancel the legitimacy of the so-called distance between female spectators and the protagonist: "The lack of a distance between seeing and understanding...is conducive to what might be termed as 'over-identification with the image'" (Doane 80). Thus, instead of becoming the powerholders of the male-female relationship, some female spectators find themselves in the role of heroine, locked within the gaze of males, and over-identify with the role of femininity in the drama. This explains the widespread controversy evoked by the ending of the story. Many of the fans were not satisfied with the ending of the drama, not only because the "hero" Wen Kexing was not represented as an ideal man in the last several episodes, but also because the scriptwriter hinted that the protagonists would be locked in the snowy mountains forever. This ignited the anger of the audience, and many of them posted articles on social websites to express their disappointment with the drama and compassion for Zhou; "After Zhou is saved from Prince Jin following serious damage, no one even asks him: are you hurt?"⁷An audience complained on the

website, “It breaks my heart.” Additionally, the Zhihu user “Lalala” shared a similar opinion: “I feel Zhou’s sacrifice was worthless after he jumped off the cliff because I felt empathy for him.”⁸ Under the emotion of empathy, masochistic over-identification and narcissism⁹ lurk behind the “tears and ‘wet wasted afternoons’”(Doane 80). Here, I do not intend to make any value judgments about over-identification; however, this way of watching dramas fails to escape the old gender formula and is obsessed with the self-pity in the position of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Instead of becoming the gazer, the female spectators replace Zhou and are hurt by feelings of lack, inferiority, and obedience.

Thus, how do we understand the question at the beginning of this part? Do female audiences escape the “male gaze” in the process? Here, I do not intend to give an ultimate answer to this question. We could see the appeal for a new gender order and violations to existing gender expectations; meanwhile, the actors and spectators still behave in a manner that conforms to prevalent stereotypes and social norms. The two phenomena coexist and twist together. The competing and contradictory interpretations of the gaze constitute the distinguishing features of the bromance drama.

¹ Chinese: 女性终于也站在凝视者的位置上。女性凝视男性，以自己的审美改造男性，她们甚至代入男性，在这一段男女关系中占据主动的一方。 See detail in “Dang nvfensi han nanmingxing laopo: nisuxianxiang beihou de nvxingsuqiu”当女粉丝喊男明星‘老婆’: ‘泥塑’现象背后的女性诉求[When Female Fans call Male Celebrity ‘wife’: Female Appeal Behind the Feminization]. *Pengpai News 澎湃新闻 The Paper*, m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=11939260&from=wifiKey.

² Mulvey, Laura. "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." *Visual and other pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989, pp. 14–26.

³ Chinese:它颠覆了电影视觉快感的经典模式。See the details in Wang Wei 王伟. *Danmei: Marginal Pleasure—An Investigation of Danmei Web Drama*. “耽美”：边缘的愉悦——对耽美网络剧的考察. 2020, pp. 72-73.

⁴ See Doane, Mary Ann, "Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator." *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 3–4, 1982, pp. 74–88.

⁵ Xue, Yingjie 薛英杰. "The Suppression and Expression of Desire: Gender Ideology in the TV Series Lang Ya Bang" "欲望的缺席与在场：电视剧《琅琊榜》的性别机制."

⁶ Chinese: 耽美女性影响、塑造、挑选男性的世界。这个世界中，男性成为了客体，女性借此将两性关系的支配权力抓在自己手里，挑战父权文化下的权力结构；通过在作品中将男性客体化，反抗女性被客体化的现实。See Xie Zhihui 谢智慧. Facebook. Mar 12, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/358323584279759/posts/3467040726741347/> (accessed 30 June, 2021)

⁷ Chinese:首先周子舒被从晋王那里救回来，一身的伤，没有人问一下:...你疼不疼? ...我都心疼死了 See the details in *Financial Headlines* 财经头条, cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/7506507209/1bf6c35c900100sq5.5 (accessed 30 June, 2021)

⁸ Chinese 因为和周絮共情了，阿絮跳崖之后的一切，我都在替阿絮感到不值 See the details in Aiyou 哎呦. "Why are you disappointed to word of hope?" "你为什么对山河令下头?" June 10, 2021. Zhihu 知乎. <https://www.zhihu.com/question/453171484> (accessed 30 June, 2021)

⁹ See Doane, p. 80.

CHAPTER 4: BROMANCE AND SUBCULTURES

Let us first go back to the original question: Why do people call the male actor or male protagonist “wife?” Just as I have discussed in the Introduction, the term was sociohistorically constructed, and its change in meaning reveals the displacement and transformation of the power relations within the expression. The new use of the word implies that a new gender order is on the way. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that a male protagonist substitutes the female heroine in the romance story, and a female spectator refuses objectification and becomes a “man” in the bromance drama. Just as Shao concluded, bromance becomes a special cultural field where a “soundless revolution” occurs, subcultures compete with mainstream culture, and feminism fights with hegemonic masculinity (Shao 55).¹

Here, I borrow Meyrowitz’s theory about the middle region to analyze the apparent contradictory manifestation of the bromance drama. The theory is based on Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, in which Goffman used the metaphor of theatre to view people as actors and society as a stage. He argued that a person’s identity is not stable or independent; instead, it is constructed, performed, and practiced according to different settings in the society. Thus, he divides social life into two parts: the front region and the backstage. According to Goffman, an individual’s performance in the front region is “an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards”²(Goffman 67), while on the backstage, “the suppressed facts make an appearance” (69) and foster contradictory impressions compared to the performance in the front region. Hence, conflicted as they are, the behaviors in the front

region and the backstage coexist. Further, based on the concepts of the back and front region, Joshua Meyrowitz developed the idea of the “middle region,” where the audience could get a “side-stage” view. Meyrowitz argued that the middle region behavior pattern “contains elements of both the former onstage and offstage behaviors but lacks their extremes” (47).³ Thus, to some extent, it is neutral ground. Suppose we borrow this pattern to describe the cultural field. In that case, mainstream culture is the main character in the front region, and more or less every “actor” onstage there has to play under the mask of the mainstream; however, in the back region, many disharmonious and discordant voices appear, like the queer and feminist elements in the subcultures. Therefore, I regard the bromance drama as a middle region that possesses the features of the other two extreme regions. In other words, by studying the middle region, people could realize how subcultures and mainstream culture interact and intertwine with each other. As Dick Hebdige argued, “the cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation encloses each successive subculture” (100)⁴ In the middle region, resistance and incorporation coexist. As a field of struggle, various forces collide, compete, and communicate with each other in bromance dramas. The previous passage discussed the battle between masculinity and androgyny, romance and homosociality, as well as the male gaze and the new gender order in *Word of Honor*. Therefore, bromance dramas become a mutual product of established social order and new-emerging thoughts.

In the middle region, it is not hard to detect the influential power of the dominant culture to discipline subcultures. More or less, all bromance dramas make a compromise and conform to

the existing gender order. They delete explicit erotic scenes between the male protagonists to evade the audience's homophobia in a male-dominated society. The dominant culture disciplines the subculture from both commodification and ideology perspectives. From the commodification perspective, the bromance drama needs to delete the "threatening scenes" to reach a broader audience; from the ideology perspective, homosexual content is still highly sensitive and prohibited in mainland Chinese mainstream media productions, and the government will never give up on censoring the bromance drama. On April 7th 2021, Chinese state-run media *Guangming Daily* expressed its attitude toward the bromance drama. In the article, the writer argued that the genre is embedded with "unhealthy, paranoid gender concepts, as well as the scarce scientific physiological knowledge; If (the government does) not guard and restrict the contents...it will mislead the audience, especially young people."⁵ Hence, it explains why many readers of BL novels find the bromance drama disappointing, as most of the "sensitive content" disappears in the drama. Therefore, the dominant culture, especially with the method of commodification and censorship, endangers the counterpublic discourse within the subculture, naturalizing and domesticating the non-normative narratives.

However, it is too far to conclude "the defusion of the subculture's subversive power" (Hebdige 95) as insisted by Meyrowitz; "the middle region style seems to have a 'back region bias'" (Meyrowitz "*No sense of place*" 48) Meyrowitz's statement insinuates the nuanced influence of subcultures on the dominant culture. According to Meyrowitz, "it is always easier to see what has newly arrived as opposed to what has recently disappeared" (Meyrowitz "*No sense*

of place” 48). Thus, the new change is easily detected, especially when it steps onto the front stage. The expanded use of “wife” is a great example to illustrate the negotiation between the front region and backstage. When women employ the word, they practically change the notion of the word and challenge the old gender ideologies under the veil of the word. The new change within the word soon attracted much attention. As we can find in social media, the recent use of “wife” shocked many people at first, and many people expressed their confusion and aversion on different platforms. However, with more females using or performing the new notion of the word consistently, the “trouble-maker” or “noise-maker” in the backstage “can be converted into a relatively traditional front region performance” (Meyrowitz 48), and the word “wife” now applies to idols, celebrities, characters from ACGN,⁶ and so on. The expansion of the usage of this term troubles the presumptive distinction between male and female, queer and straight, and mainstream and subculture. Similar to the word “wife,” there will be more non-normative narratives that appear with the growing popularity of bromance dramas under the mask of the old pattern of expression. With more “noise-makers” or “trouble-makers” appearing backstage, the subculture will silently change the front stage scenes and have a noticeable impact on the mainstream.

¹ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君. “Zaijian meifengyi yu funwvwenhua de nixi—yichang jingqiaoqiao fasheng de xingbie geming” 再见“美丰仪”与“腐女文化”的逆袭——一场静悄悄发生的性别革命 [A Return of Male Beauty and Yaoi Culture, A Silent Gender Revolution]. *Nanfang Wentan* 南方文坛 vol. 2, 2016, pp. 55–58.

² Goffman, Erving. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Vol. 21. London: Harmondsworth, 1978.

³ Meyrowitz, Joshua. *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁴ Hebdige, Dick. "Subculture: The Meaning of Style. 1979. Reprint." 1996.

⁵ Chinese:偏执不健康的性别观念, 以及缺乏科学性甚至错误的生理知识。这些内容若不加以约束, 将对观众尤其是年轻群体的价值判断、自我形塑造成严重误导。See Meng's article "Danmei zuopin gaibian shengxing daipian dazhong shenmei" 耽美作品改编盛行带偏大众审美[The Prevail of Adapted *Danmei* Works Divert Aesthetics]. *Guangming Daily 光明日报*. 7, April, 2021.

https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2021-04/07/nbs.D110000gmrb_14.htm

⁶ ACGN is the abbreviation for Animation, Comics, Games, and Novels, representing the related subcultures in Great China and Southeast Asia.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I used the example of *Word of Honor* to probe into the genre of Chinese bromance drama. Starting from the expanded use of the word “wife,” I excavated “the other side” of the drama under the mask of homosociality or brotherhood. By discussing the story of the two male protagonists, I argue that the new drama genre *de facto* retells and reperforms the heterosexual relationship, thus “heteronormalizing” the same-sex relationship. For one thing, the construction of an “androgynous heroine” disturbs the conventional alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality; for another thing, the new genre has failed to criticize the still-dominant patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. Bromance dramas have become another form of “compensatory literature” (Radway 95) for women. Though providing the female audience with “important emotional release”(Radway 95) in the strict social role, whether the genre facilitated women’s slide to “attain paradises of enchantment” (Norton and Kille 55).¹ is still thought-provoking. In the third chapter, I returned to the theory of the male gaze to discuss the changes in the power relationship between males and females in the bromance drama. Just as I stated in the fourth chapter, bromance dramas could be viewed as a “soundless revolution.” They implicitly challenge existing social norms such as the heteropatriarchy with their embedded disharmonious elements; however, it is still too far to conclude the impact of the “revolution” under the suppression of the dominant culture. In this thesis, I avoid making any presumptive judgments as to whether the recent bromance dramas are truly progressive or conservative; instead, by clarifying the complex confronts, conflicts, and communications of different forces that are

playing out in this special cultural field, I argue that the bromance genre has become the epitome of contemporary Chinese society. The different forces, including LGBTQ+ and homophobia, patriarchy and feminism, as well as dominant and marginal cultures, all perform on the stage with their mask on.

It has been reported that there are more than 80 bromance dramas on the way in 2021.² The enthusiasm of the audience and the capital investments are astonishing. However, the bromance craze suddenly came crashing down when the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration published a notice on September 2nd, 2021, which officially banned “effeminate men” on TV.³ On September 17th, the administration declared a boycott of the dramas adapted from BL novels.⁴ Thus, the battle between the dominant culture and subcultures became aggravated. By analyzing *Word of Honor*, this work discussed the issues surrounding gender and subcultures, but the results of the battle are still unpredictable. Will bromance-related dramas survive in China? Will there be a new variation? We could not answer the question now. Nonetheless, it is clear that China is at a crossroads.

¹ See the chapter “Dependent Love in Women” (written by Simone de Beauvoir) in Norton, David L., and Mary F. Kille. *Philosophies of love*. No. 376. Rowman & Littlefield, 1983.

² See Qiao’ article, “Dangai 101, huangjin wanliang yu fengshengheli” 耽改 101: 黄金万两与风声鹤唳 [Dangai 101: Fortunes and Dangers]. *Wangyi 网易*, 5 Mar, 2021, www.163.com/dy/article/G4B1O27P0517818J.html.

³ “Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju bangongting guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang wenyijiemu jiqi renyuanguanli de tongzhi 国家广播电视总局办公厅关于进一步加强文艺节目及其人员管理的通知”[The Notice of National

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⁴ “Guangdian zongju: jianjue dizhi dangai zhifeng deng fanyulehua xianxiang”广电总局：坚决抵制‘耽改’之风等泛娱乐化现象 [National Radio and Television Administration: Boycott Dramas Adapted from BL cultures and Pan-entertainment phenomena]. *Xinhua News* 新华网, 17 Sept, 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/ent/20210917/7ca3d89b53a546bdaaec4305e8fcc2e6/c.html>.

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