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The functions of intertextuality in LGBTQ+ representation:
exemplified by *Word of Honor*

Master's Thesis

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2024

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16/01/2024

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1. Introduction

Sexuality is a fundamental aspect of human nature, which encompasses not only heterosexuality, but also diverse identities like gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and many more, collectively known as LGBTQ+. Belonging to a minority, LGBTQ+ people have historically received less representation, which, however, changed in the wake of Stonewall riots of the 1969 and subsequent rise of the activist movement. While the Western understanding of LGBTQ+ culture has gained global recognition, China, alongside other countries of the Eastern hemisphere, has its own distinct perspective. From a rich LGBTQ+ history to the conservative social attitude towards non-heterosexual people in modern China, with the increasing popularity of the Funv¹ group, LGBTQ+ culture seems to be reviving in China in multiple forms, including novels, movies and TV dramas. This thesis explores LGBTQ+ representation in China on the example of *Word of Honor*, a contemporary TV series that draws inspiration from a number of historical prototexts.

1.1. Background context

On June 28th, 1969, the police arrested several members of LGBTQ+ community in the Stonewall Inn (Encyclopedia Britannica 2023, sub Stonewall riots), which caused a spontaneous protest and later became a symbol of the community's resistance to social and political discrimination. LGBTQ Pride, also known as Gay Pride, emerged in the aftermath of these events, gradually gaining an international scope. According to Dennis Altman, the strong impact of the Stonewall riots in the United States, alongside similar movements in Europe, led to the dominance of the Western understanding of gender and sexuality at the expense of diverse indigenous views (Altman 2001: 87-88). Altman suggests that the Western paradigm has proven culturally and politically suitable for universal use, helping the community to

¹ Funv is a Chinese expression for Yaoi fans who are interested in the content addressed to the LGBTQ+ community. This expression was previously used to describe girls keen on male homosexual relationships or plots that are concentrated on Boy Love affairs. However, with the growth of the Funv group, this expression now generally refers to people who love to see relationships between couples of the same sex/gender.

transcend the boundaries between countries and continents (Ibid., 87-90). Avant-garde status of the Western perspective is also evident on the legislative level (see Figure 1 and Figure 2): in half a century after the Stonewall riots, the majority of Western European and Latin American countries hold a generally positive stance towards the LGBTQ+ community (Equaledx 2023).



Figure 1. The legal status of same-sex marriages around the world. *Equaldex*.



Figure 2. The legal status of homosexual activity around the world. *Equaldex*.

However, the Western model appears to be less applicable in the Eastern hemisphere, where, for instance, three-fifths of African countries still view homosexuality and outward displays of homosexual conduct as crimes. Most Asian countries hold a middle ground between these two extremes: whereas homosexual conduct is usually not prohibited, the legislation in relation to LGBTQ+ rights remains conservative. While this might appear to present Asian countries as less progressive in the eyes of the Western theorists, it does not mean that the local LGBTQ+ cultures are any less rich or sophisticated. Hongwei Bao (2011), who works at the intersection of queer studies, China/Asia studies, and cultural studies, believes that the paradigm of “global queering” ignores the heterogeneity and diversity of local forms of gender expression and sexuality, as well as overemphasizes the influence of the “West” on the “East”, while disregarding the mutual influence between “Eastern” cultures.

Particularly during my youth, I had limited to no interactions with the LGBTQ+ community in China, where I was born and raised. Until recently, neither the development nor the existence of the LGBTQ+ community in China had ever occurred to me. Nonetheless, as I

matured and broadened my social orbit, I encountered members of this community. As I gained a deeper understanding of their struggles and way of life, I began to focus on queer culture in China. This interest served as the catalyst for the present research and the reason to delve more deeply into the representation of the LGBTQ+ community in the broader Chinese cultural sphere.

Across history, Chinese literature features numerous references to LGBTQ+ related topics exploring both physical interaction and spiritual fulfillment. As documented in *Fantastic Tale by Ji Xiaolan* (Ji 1998), the tradition of loving boys can be traced back to the Yellow Emperor, a significant mytho-historical figure in ancient China associated with Daoism (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2018, sub Huangdi). The Yellow Emperor's reign dates back to approximately 2704 BC, making it challenging to pinpoint the precise emergence of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture without further concrete evidence. Fortunately, as a country that loves recording history, China possesses an ample number of historians, no matter which dynasty or generation, official or nonofficial, who were responsible for documenting historical events from various aspects. Those historians not only recorded the political events that occurred in the imperial court, but also took notes about the life of the emperors' harem. Thanks to them, the traces of ancient Chinese LGBTQ+ culture remain accessible for contemporary society to explore and understand (see Chapter 1.2. for the literature review).

In contemporary China, influenced by Japanese Boy Love (BL) Manga, LGBTQ+ themed arts — like novels, comics, and TV dramas — have rapidly emerged on Chinese web platforms (Liao 2013). This cultural wave has given rise to China's unique LGBTQ+ culture, known as danmei². Initially, Chinese dramas portraying same-sex love were labeled as danmei Dramas. However, due to Chinese broadcasting policies, production companies later shifted towards bromance/gromance-oriented dramas, termed dangai³ dramas. This transition stirred suspicion among audiences, leading to concerns about “queerbaiting”, defined by Ng as a narrative that “attracts viewers interested in LGBT narratives [...] and encourages their interest without ever definitively confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters” (2017: 2). Drama

² Dan means “immerse” and Mei means “beautiful appearance”. Danmei is the abbreviation of Dan Yu Mei Se in Chinese, which translates as “immersed in the beautiful appearance”. Therefore, in Chinese Danmei works, the protagonists are often portrayed as beautiful people, contributing to and reinforcing the stereotype of male homosexuals as feminine men, a phenomenon that will be discussed later.

³ Dangai means adapted from danmei works.

production companies operate within a fiercely competitive and high-stakes industry, motivated by the pursuit of maximizing profit. In such a competitive environment and considering the expansive market scope, it is understandable that, when a company's production on a specific topic gains popularity, others will attempt to follow and replicate the success.

The explosive success of the danmei drama *Go Princess Go* (2015), narrating a story of a man magically waking up in a woman's body and eventually falling in love with another man, was the beginning of a new trend for the market, turning the attention of companies towards LGBTQ+ themes. The fear of censorship and limitations posed by the Chinese broadcasting policies were not enough to halt the growth of this drift. As a result of this profit-driven mentality and pursuit of financial gain, it is comprehensible why audiences developed skepticism towards these productions. They began to doubt the production companies' sincere endeavors to promote inclusivity and representation, as well as their inventive strategies to bypass censorship barriers for the sake of audience satisfaction and the expression of the LGBTQ+ community. The transition from danmei dramas to dangai dramas can indicate a more conservative approach to LGBTQ+ representation in comparison to ancient times. Yet, the popularity of dangai dramas suggests a certain level of acceptance and understanding towards LGBTQ+ culture in China.

The strictness of Chinese censorship has led to a perception that the country adopts a severe stance towards the LGBTQ+ community. However, as seen in Figure 1, modern China's approach regarding the legalization of homosexual practices is not as stringent as in neighboring Asian nations. Notably, mainland China permits "other type of partnership" instead of "same-sex marriage", which means that same-sex couples can seek protection through the voluntary guardianship system under the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China (The Third Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress 2020: 5-8; Wang, You 2020). Moreover, China recognizes same-sex marriages registered by Chinese citizens with foreign partners in jurisdictions permitting such unions (Wang 2022: 197). While modern Chinese laws neither recognize same-sex marriage nor offer protection for such unions, they tend to lean towards maintaining ambiguity on LGBTQ+ matters rather than taking a definitive stance against them, possibly influenced by China's extensive history of being LGBTQ+ friendly.

1.2. Literature review

Academic studies of the traditional Chinese LGBTQ+ culture predominantly focus on historical research and interpretations of classical literature (Zhang 2001; Shi 2008a; Li 2010). According to Zhang's review of Chinese LGBTQ+ history (2013), the earliest texts dealing with the topic of homosexuality can be traced back to the Han Dynasty⁴. These texts, such as the *Book of Han*, documented the homosexual practices within the royal family (Ban 1962). Relatively open acceptance of the male homosexuality during the Wei and Jin dynasties fueled the creation of LGBTQ+ themed poems. The earliest novels and plays depicting homosexuality could be associated with the Tang Dynasty (Shi 2008b:1-5), and became even more common in Ming and Qing Dynasty. The most prominent literary examples of this period include *Bian Er Chai* (Zui Xi Hu Xin Yue Zhu Ren 1985), *Yi Chun Xiang Zhi* (Zui Xi Hu Xin Yue Zhu Ren 1996), *Long Yang Yi Shi* (Jing Jiang Zui Zhu Ju Shi 1996), *Floral Treasures* (Chen 1996), *The Golden Lotus* (Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng 2016), *Dream in The Red Chamber* (Cao 2012).

Due to the influence of patriarchal societal norms, the majority of LGBTQ+ historical accounts in China have centered around the experiences of male homosexuality, resulting in comparatively less records of other parts from the LGBTQ+ spectrum (Zhang 2013; Shi 2008b). However, it is important to note that this does not preclude the existence of other LGBTQ+ community within China. For example, the "Grinding Mirrors⁵" Party existed in the late Qing Dynasty (Zeng 2011), and also traditional Chinese Operas like *Lian Xiang Ban* from *Li Wen Shi Zhong Qu*, written in Qing Dynasty by Li Yu, is an opera that praises the love between females (Zhang 2013).

In contemporary China, LGBTQ+ representation finds expression primarily through the danmei and dangai genres. Research on danmei predominantly focuses on the analysis of novels (Zhang 2012: 171-179; Liao 2013: 91-94; Liu 2013: 147-158), whereas studies on dangai explore the social impact of dramas (Zuo 2021: 98-99), economic aspects (Cheng 2020: 26-27; Song, Liu 2015: 100-103), and distribution under censorship (Wee 2021). As a newly emerged cultural phenomenon in China, the overall number of dangai dramas remains rather

⁴ For the timeline of Chinese dynasties please see Appendix 1.

⁵ Please see the explanation in Motif 5.

limited, averaging at least one popular dangai drama per year over the past decade. When searching CNKI's Chinese studies database (which supposedly covers all the Chinese research) using the term "dangai dramas", surprisingly, only one page of results with 17 articles was found, mostly focusing on marketing strategy (Cheng 2020: 26-27; Liu 2021: 47-52). To narrow down the topic, this dissertation will focus on the cultural aspects of LGBTQ+ representation, including the transformation of meaning through different translation strategies.

1.3. Materials

The list of the dangai dramas released since 2015⁶ includes at least 21 texts suitable for the analysis. To limit the scope of the study, we will choose the material according to three parameters: explicitness of LGBTQ+ representation, popularity of the text, and length.

Firstly, due to legal constraints, drama production companies may introduce heterosexual storylines, as in *Killer and Healer* (2021), or intentionally modify characters' genders to make their relationship heterosexual, for example, *Immortality* (in production) and *The Revive of Super Star* (2016). All this makes it unclear whether these dramas can still be considered as representing LGBTQ+. To prevent this ambiguity, the dissertation will select dangai dramas that preserve the original romantic relationships between the main characters.

Secondly, the popularity of the text also plays a significant role. Following the rise of dangai dramas, productions like *The Untamed* (2019) and *Word of Honor* (2021) have drawn enormous attention, both from Chinese and international audiences (Chen 2019; Sohu 2021). The former reached more than 12 million views, while the latter gained over 17 million views only for its initial episode on Youtube, not to mention its success on other platforms.

Lastly, the length of dangai dramas should also be taken into consideration. While *The Untamed* might suit the current analysis, *Word of Honor* offers a more concise narrative, with fewer episodes and a smaller list of characters. At the same time, it includes a lot of intertextual references to historical Chinese texts, which makes it the most suitable choice for in-depth study.

The novel *A Tale of the Wanderers* (Priest 2010), from which the drama *Word of Honor*

⁶ Please see Appendix 2.

was adapted, was initially published in Chinese on Jin Jiang Wen Xue Cheng (JJWXC), a fee-based online platform for writers. *Word of Honor* is available on various streaming platforms, including Youku, Youtube and Netflix. Whereas the audience of the drama includes both Chinese and international audiences, it is important to ensure the effective translation and localisation of the content, such as preserving references to historical and literary sources. Even though the representation of LGBTQ+ topics in the drama cannot be as explicit as in the novel, we believe that creative use of poetic imagery and intertextual references can help to preserve Chinese LGBTQ+ heritage.

1.4. Research aim and questions

The Internet and social media provide new and diversified means for cultural communication, enabling various subcultures like danmei and dangai to gain more influence than in the pre-digital era. In contrast to novels, animation, comics, and video games, dramas, especially broadcasted on live-streaming platforms, have the advantage of the wider reach and more vivid live-action audiovisual experience. In what ways does the medium of drama affect the communication of LGBTQ+ codes and symbols in Chinese culture is worthy of research.

The analysis of historical roots of danmei and dangai helps to establish the continuity between contemporary LGBTQ+ texts and their prototexts, as well as to observe the change in representation through time. The dissertation aims to analyze the representation of LGBTQ+ in the series *Word of Honor* by defining intertextual references to historical and literary sources. While focusing on seven particular motifs, we aim to demonstrate the connection between *Word of Honor* and traditional Chinese LGBTQ+ culture.

Therefore, based on the previous elaboration, this dissertation proposes three research questions:

1. What intertextual references are used in *Word of Honor* to represent LGBTQ+ topics?
2. What are the functions of these intertextual references?
3. Under which conditions can we talk about an actual representation of the LGBTQ+ community in dangai dramas instead of a queerbaiting?

The first part of the analysis follows the transformation of motifs from historical allusions and literature works to the danmei novel and dangai drama. The second part looks closer at the

functions of intertextuality and the different types of communication of the text. The third part applies the results of the analysis to outline the distinction between queerbaiting and queer coding, offering a deeper understanding of cultural codes that influence representation of the Chinese LGBTQ+ community. To sum up, the dissertation aims to contribute to the academic research on Chinese dangai dramas, acknowledging the distinctive trajectory of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture and exploring the ways for its communication worldwide, while simultaneously enriching the universal LGBTQ+ research.

1.5. Methodology and theoretical framework

This dissertation combines the perspectives of semiotics of culture, translation studies, and queer studies to analyze Chinese LGBTQ+ representations in the dangai drama *Word of Honor*. The first perspective is grounded in the notions of self-description and cultural autocommunication (Lotman et al. 1973; Torop 2017), and five types of textual communication (Lotman 1988). The aspects of translation are explored through the prism of three types of translation (Jakobson 1959), translational operations (Delabastita 1993), prototexts and metatexts (Popovič 1976), and intertextuality (Kristeva 1986). The perspective of queer studies is represented by the ideas of queerbaiting (Ng 2017), queer coding (Russo 1981), and queer archive (Halberstam 2005).

1.5.1. Semiotics of culture

From the perspective of semiotics, “[c]ulture is based on human communication, and language is the main means of communication” (Torop 2017). According to “Theses on the semiotic study of culture”, two main tendencies in the cultural development include:

- (a) The tendency toward diversity – toward an increase in differently organized semiotic languages, the “polyglotism” of culture.
- (b) The tendency toward uniformity – the attempt to interpret itself or other cultures as uniform, rigidly organized languages. (Lotman et al. 1973:76)

The repetition and interpretation of the cultural languages increase the activeness and diversity in culture, and correspondingly determine the richness of culture. The languages here are understood in a semiotic sense, including “various languages of culture and types of media”,

such as “the languages of literature, film, theater and art” (Torop 2017). Languages are used for the creation of various cultural texts, the totality of which constitute the culture itself. In the words of Torop, culture can be described as “the process of creating new texts from previous texts” (2014: 177). Cultural diversity results from constant “interpretation, mediation, deformation, elimination” of texts” (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 65).

In order to preserve important meanings and keep evolving, culture depends on the processes of autocommunication and self-description, which also serve as the basis for its dialogue with other cultures (Torop 2017). Cultural autocommunication can be defined as culture’s communication with itself. In the digital era, a set of cultural languages used in self-description and cultural autocommunication is complemented with new forms, such as memes, web series, and even TikTok videos. The self-description of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture is vital for its development and preservation, especially in unfavorable political circumstances.

According to Lotman’s article *The Semiotics of Culture and the Concept of a Text*, “a multilayered and semiotically heterogeneous text may be capable of entering into complex relations both with the surrounding cultural context and with its readers”, as “it not only conveys the information put into it from without but also transforms messages and develops new ones” (1988: 55). Lotman’s five functions of communication will be used to analyze the relationship between 1) the authors of *A Tale of the Wanderers* and *Word of Honor* and the audience, 2) audience and cultural tradition, 3) audience and itself, 4) audience and the text, 5) the text and the cultural context (Ibid.). By the “author” of *Word of Honor* we understand the entire team of the TV drama production, including directors, scriptwriters, cast, and other staff members. As a global TV series, the audience of *Word of Honor* includes not only Chinese viewers familiar with China’s LGBTQ+ culture, but also people from around the world who lack such a background.

Finally, the perspective of cultural semiotics allows us to study the correlation of older languages (such as historical prototexts) and newer languages (such as danmei novel and dangai drama) in Chinese LGBTQ+ representation. In line with the “Theses” (Lotman et al. 1973: 76), we will explore the tendencies towards uniformity and diversity: the continuity of Chinese LGBTQ+ representation through the ages (persistence of specific motifs and artistic conventions) and the creative transformation of the traditional plots by means of the new languages.

1.5.2. Translation studies and intertextuality

Throughout the analysis, we will use the notion of motif defined by Boris Gasparov (1994: 30) as “any semantic ‘spot’ [...] – an event, a character trait, an element of a landscape, any object, a spoken word, paint, sound, etc”, which is reproduced in the text. Similar to musical motifs, literary motifs form a dynamic structure rather than a concrete one.

The transformation of LGBTQ+ motifs from the ancient texts to the danmei drama can be considered as translation. To analyze the processes of translation, we will combine the ideas of Jakobson (1959) and Delabastita (1993). Roman Jakobson identified three types of translation: intralingual, which is “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language”; interlingual – “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language”, and intersemiotic translation or transmutation – “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (1959: 261). In the course of transmutation, some aspects of original meaning are inevitably lost in translation, which is compensated by the introduction of new meanings.

Dirk Delabastita also distinguished three levels of translation as a recoding process – linguistic, cultural and textual (1993: 2-27). Natural language relies on linguistic codes to convey messages, and these codes can be substituted to change the message’s meaning. On the level of linguistic recoding, the translation process always occurs within or between the languages, which can be associated with Jakobson’s types of intra- and interlingual translation (Ibid., 2-13). The difference between cultural recoding and linguistic recoding can be compared to the distinction between an encyclopedia and a dictionary (Ibid., 14). On the level of cultural recoding, “the linguistic sign is drained by the cultural code in that it is reduced in its entirety to the semiotic status of a mere signifier, which is then matched with a conventional signified in order to make up the cultural sign” (Ibid.). Finally, the textual recoding translates “the overall semantics of a text and its bearing” for the prospective text receiver who “is not also well equipped to handle the code that governs the usage of language” (Ibid., 20). In order to better understand the development of the LGBTQ+ intertextual references throughout Chinese history, this thesis will refer to the three levels of recoding by Delabstita.

Translation processes in cultural autcommunication can be subdivided into metacommunication and intercommunication (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 65). Metacommunication

refers to the creation of new texts based on the system of primary texts, whereas intercommunication implies implicit relations between texts: “On the intercommunicative level, culture is a mental whole in which boundaries between texts are not always specified beyond doubt” (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 65). Even though it is not always possible to define specific sources for LGBTQ+ motifs in *Word of Honor*, all of them exist in cultural memory on the intercommunicative level. To analyze these two types of relations, we will refer to the works of Anton Popovič (1976) and Julia Kristeva (1986) respectively.

The historical roots of the contemporary dangai dramas and danmei novels will be analyzed from the perspective of metatexts and prototexts defined by Anton Popovič (1976: 226):

Prototext is a text which serves as an object of inter-textual continuity. Every text can potentially be an object of such continuity. The realization of this possibility is a matter of the dynamics of the literary process.

Metatext is a model of the prototext; the way in which two texts are linked. The rules of this modelling are realized in the text-forming activity of the creator of the metatext.

As seen in Figure 3, the processing of the original text is done by other authors, readers, critics, scholars, translators, and manifested in the form of metatexts – new texts about the original text (Popovič 1976). Thus, *A Tale of the Wanderers* serves as a prototext for *Word of Honor*, and both can be regarded as metatexts of the earlier texts (literary sources and historical records). In this work we will mainly refer to the former as prototexts, unless otherwise specified.

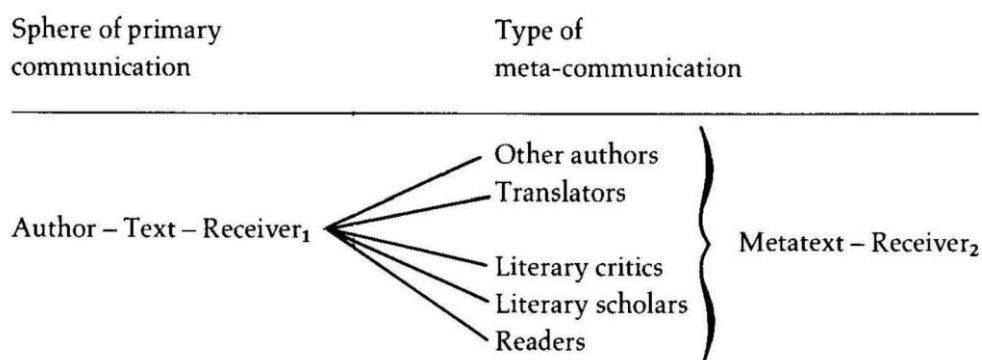


Figure 3. Model of literary communication (Popovič 1976: 226).

To explore the relationship of *Word of Honor* with surrounding texts on the intercommunicative level (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 65), we will refer to Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality. According to the latter, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1986: 37). Cheng (1996: 92-97) argues that intertextual approach implies the interconnectedness of all human discourse, as well as the lack of the certain subject (speaker, author, or reader). From the perspective of intertextuality, quotations are always modified, distorted, condensed, or altered in some way to match the speaker's value system (O'Donnell, Davis 1989: 260). Since *Word of Honor* was released 11 years after the publication of the original novel, some adjustments were made to adapt the story to the new audience.

Throughout the translation process, the prototexts can undergo different transformations, such as repetition, deletion, addition, substitution and permutation (Delabastita 1993). For example, due to the television restrictions described earlier, erotic scenes in the drama had to be limited, while the original novel could depict them more explicitly. However, this lack is compensated in *Word of Honor* by subtle references to earlier texts implying the homosexual relationship between the two characters, and the references like this are scattered in the whole text of *Word of Honor*.

The motifs found in the *Word of Honor* are considered as indices of various prototexts. By repeating significant motifs, adding quotes from ancient Chinese poems, deleting some more explicit scenes, substituting titles, and permutating the meaning of some episodes, *Word of Honor* transforms the 2D Wen Kexing⁷ and Zhou Zishu⁸ of the written novel to the multidimensional 3D characters of the TV series.

1.5.3. Queer theory

As per Ng's definition mentioned earlier (2017: 2), queerbaiting represents a marketing strategy employed in entertainment aiming to attract an audience by hinting at a presumed (yet not definitive) non-heterosexual relationship of characters. The phenomenon of queerbaiting

⁷ Wen Kexing is one of the male leading characters who holds actual authority in the Ghost Valley.

Additionally, Wen has an unruly character and enjoys pretending to be well-educated, often teasing and flirting with Zhou.

⁸ Zhou Zishu is the other male protagonist in the drama, who used to be the leader of an assassin association. In comparison to Wen, the personality of Zhou tends to be more serious but sincere.

pervades popular culture and literature, spanning across various mediums such as films, TV dramas, novels, and music. Queerbaiting is not limited to advertisements or media; it is also utilized by celebrities who intentionally maintain ambiguous identities through their creative works and expressions. For instance, Thai star Mew Suppasit acknowledges employing “queerbaiting” solely for fan service rather than for disclosing his personal sexual identity (Saint 2023).

Whereas the term “queerbaiting” emerged in the early 2010s, it can be traced to media discourse of the 1970s, when it was focused on the subtle marketing of LGBTQ+ persons in commercials and novels (Nordin 2015: 76). A different term “queer coding” (Russo 1981) once served as a means of resistance, providing the LGBTQ+ community with a sense of identity during the Hays Code era (1930). Queer coding involves portraying queer characters in media whose sexual identities might not be explicitly confirmed but remain recognizable. For example, in *Word of Honor*, while Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu’s sexual identities are not explicitly articulated, the audience can speculate that their identities likely fall within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, as characters can be interpreted as queer based on the source material.

Both queerbaiting and queer coding refer to LGBTQ+ themes, yet with ambiguity. The purpose of queer coding is to hide the real LGBTQ+ identities from the conservative social audience while revealing these true identities to an understanding audience. The aim of queerbaiting is to hint at someone’s LGBTQ+ identity (regardless of whether it is true) without portraying anything definitive, often for financial gain.

Another crucial concept is queer archive, “a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity” (Halberstam 2005: 170). The queer archive “requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making” (Ibid.). Additionally, queer archive is significant for the development of queer culture as it enabled the LGBTQ+ community to “look at the silences, the gaps, and the ruptures in the spaces of performance” (*ibid.*, 187) and use it as a narration for the LGBTQ+ community. In subsection 2.3., *Word of Honor* will be analyzed as an example of queer archive.

In the next chapter, we will apply the discussed theory and methods to the analysis of *Word of Honor*. In the Subchapter 2.1., we will analyze seven LGBTQ+ motifs present in the TV

series from the perspective of proto- and metatexts, and Delabastita's translational operations. In the Subchapter 2.2., we will apply 5 functions of communication of Lotman, while the Subchapter 2.3. will discuss the case from the perspective of queer studies.

2. Analysis

Chinese written culture has gradually grown for at least 3,000 years, tracing back to the Shang Dynasty, which marks the earliest written records in China. With the advancement of Chinese literature, the records of LGBTQ+ culture have progressed from historical facts to creative literature works, and then extended to diverse media phenomena such as movies and TV dramas. The enduring and rich LGBTQ+ history paves the way for the continuation and further expansion of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture, despite the conservative stance towards homosexuality in modern China compared to ancient times. The analysis explores the intertextual relation of *Word of Honor*'s motifs to historical and literary texts by utilizing translation theory. Afterwards, the series is discussed from the perspective of five functions of communication by Lotman, and, lastly, through the prism of queer coding and queerbaiting.

2.1. Motifs

Motif	Historical prototext	Novel <i>A Tale of the Wanderers</i>	TV Drama <i>Word of Honor</i>
Motif 1	<p>Poems:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Dan Du Wu Suo Ku, Wo Zi Ying Jie Ru” [Do not worry about traveling alone, I will welcome you by personally picking you up] 2. “Piao Piao Xi Ru Liu Feng Zhi Hui Xue, Fang Fu Xi Ru Qing Yun Zhi Bi Yue” [Steps were like the snow in the wind and the moon hidden behind the clouds] 3. “Qian Shan Mu Xue, Gu Yi Zhi Ying Xiang Shei Qu?” [There are thousands of snowed mountains, with a single wing and a lonely shadow, to whom shall fly to?] 	/	<p>Lyrics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dan Du Wu Suo Ku, Wo Zi Ying Jie Ru 2. Piao Piao Xi Ru Liu Feng Zhi Hui Xue, Fang Fu Xi Ru Qing Yun Zhi Bi Yue 3. Qian Shan Mu Xue, Wo Gu Yi Zhi Ying Xiang Shei Qu
Translation Process: Addition			
Motif 2	“San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” [An old spirit sitting on the rock]	/	<p>Lyric:</p> <p>Mo Bu Shi San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun?</p>

Translation Process: Addition			
Motif 3	<p>“Tie Shao Bing” [putting the pancakes together]:</p> <p>a description of the intimate sexual behaviors between men</p>	/	<p>Scene:</p> <p>A Xiang is warming pancakes, while Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu are fighting. At the same time, A Xiang puts two pancakes together and turns them upside down by seeing their behaviors.</p>
Translation Process: Addition			
Motif 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Gu Jian Qing Shen” [miss the old sword with tender feelings] 2. “Xiao Shi Nong Yu”: a fairy tale from the spring and autumn period featuring a gentleman named Xiao Shi, who taught his beautiful wife Nong Yu how to play the Xiao. 3. “Jiao Jie Hou, Ying Qing Wei Zu, You Cong Xia Ti Ta Pin Xiao” [After being intimate, Jin Lian’s desire was not fulfilled, so Jin Lian tried to satisfy him orally] 	<p>Weapons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Zhou Zishu has a soft sword called “Bai Yi”. 2. Wen Kexing fights with bare hands and does not have any weapons. He can use anything as a weapon. 3. Jing Beiyuan, or known as Qi Ye, has a Xiao tied to his waist. 	<p>Weapons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Zhou Zishu has a soft sword called “Bai Yi”. 2. Wen Kexing has Xiao as a sonic weapon and a white fan.

Translation Process: Repetition/Addition			
Motif 5	<p>“Duan Xiu” [cutting off the sleeves]:</p> <p>a love story in Chinese history that Emperor Ai of Han cut off his own sleeves in order not to wake up his male lover Dong Xian.</p>	<p>Chapter 21:</p> <p>Wen Kexing tears down Zhou’s sleeves purposely.</p> <p>Chapter 29:</p> <p>Wen Kexing cuts off Ye Baiyi’s sleeves purposely in avenge for Zhou.</p>	<p>Episode 5:</p> <p>Wen Kexing cuts off Zhou Zishu’s sleeves stained by blood.</p> <p>Episode 6:</p> <p>Zhou Zishu cuts off a blood-stained corner of his cloth.</p> <p>Episode 18:</p> <p>Zhou Zishu cuts down Wen Kexing’s burning sleeves.</p>
Translation Process: Permutation			
Motif 6	<p>“Tonight the moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”:</p> <p>a love confession means “I love you”</p>	<p>Title of Chapter 8:</p> <p>Moonlight</p>	<p>Wen Kexing invites Zhou Zishu to drink outside and enjoy the moonlight. After being rejected, Wen Kexing says “the moonlight is very beautiful tonight” to persuade Zhou Zishu.</p>
Translation Process: Permutation/Addition			

Motif 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “Mei Ren Zai Gu Bu Zai Pi” [The true beauty lies in the bones rather than the skin] 2. “Mei Nan Po Lao” [a beautiful male secretary can slander the serious ministers] 	Wen Kexing calls Zhou Zishu as “Mei Ren	/
Translation Process: Deletion/Substitution			

	<p>1. “Shi Wei Zhi Ji Zhe Si, Nv Wei Yue Ji Zhe Rong [man dies for the person who understand him; woman puts make up for the person who pleases her]”</p> <p>2. “Mountain and River”: an allusion of Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi, used as a metaphor of soulmate in the Chinese cultural context</p>	<p>Title of Extra Chapter: Zhi Ai Zhi Zhi [beloved soulmate]</p>	<p>Episode 8: Wen Kexing replies to Zhou Zishu when he is about to risk his life for saving Zhang Chengling (the apprentice of Zhou): “A true gentleman is willing to die for his confidant. So, what if I take this risk for you?”</p> <p>Episode 9: Wen Kexing: Mountain and River, soulmate is difficult to meet. Zhou Zishu: The world is not important, what’s important is finding a soulmate.</p>
<p>Translation Process: Repetition/Addition</p>			
	<p>Xiang Gong: a) a respectful way to address the prime minister and was widely used for officers during the Tang Dynasty</p>	<p>Wen Kexing: That’s because... (I) have a family now, Xiang Gong Zhou.</p>	<p>“A Xu, Zhou Xiang Gong, Ke Lian Ze Ge” [Ah Xu, Xiang Gong Zhou, please pity me]</p>

	<p>b) respectfully call an educated man</p> <p>c) a respectful way for wives to address their husbands, given that males were encouraged to study in ancient China</p> <p>d) male prostitutes</p>		
Translation Process: Repetition			

Table 1. Prototext of the motives in *Word of Honor* and translation processes.

2.1.1. Motif 1: Chinese ancient poetry

The original novel *A Tale of the Wanderers* (Priest 2010) is written in a colloquial style in modern Chinese and leans towards expressing emotions in a more straightforward manner. The novel was initially published on the online fee-based platform JJWXC, one of the biggest Chinese web-novel platforms, and was categorized as Original story – Pure love – Aerial history – love. The book is currently not available for reading on this platform due to the sale of its copyright. The dangai drama *Word of Honor* was created under censorship, which imposed limitations on portraying flirtatious expressions or affection explicitly. To overcome these restrictions, the drama creators chose to create the numerous dialogues in the style of ancient Chinese, while using numerous allusions, textual counterpoints, and rhyme (JUQK 2022).

While discussing the process of addition, Delabastita makes a distinction between two types of translators (1993: 36). The first aims to translate the text as fully as possible to make it understandable, clarified and coherent – “disentangle complicated passages, provide missing links, lay bare unspoken assumptions” (Ibid.). The other one opts for such methods as “adding rhyme” (Ibid.), “using a more strongly metaphorical language” (Ibid.), “adding to the exotic flavour of the text, and so forth” (Ibid.) to “enhance the aesthetic qualities of his/her translation”

(Ibid.). Due to the numerous additions made in the process of translation, *Word of Honor* leans toward the second case. In particular, the introduction of Chinese classical poetry can be seen as a core means of queer coding in this dangai drama. Through adding poetry lines, the drama creators bring forward the grace of the language, for example, in “Dan Du Wu Suo Ku, Wo Zi Ying Jie Ru⁹” [Do not worry about traveling alone, I will welcome you by personally picking you up], or introduce rhyme, as in “Piao Piao Xi Ru Liu Feng Zhi Hui Xue, Fang Fu Xi Ru Qing Yun Zhi Bi Yue¹⁰” [Your steps were like the snow in the wind and the moon hidden behind the clouds]. Some poetry lines, like “Qian Shan Mu Xue, Gu Yi Zhi Ying Xiang Shei Qu?¹¹” [There are thousands of snowed mountains, with a single wing and a lonely shadow, to whom I shall fly to?], may seem less understandable, especially for the international audience, who is not familiar with the cultural context.

All these additions can be interpreted as Wen’s secret love confessions directed towards Zhou. The first quote originates from a love poem written by Wang Xianzhi to his lover, in which the poet encouraged the latter not to be afraid of farewell (Yangzi News 2020). In the second example, the antithetical and neatly structured line includes repeated rhymes with the letters P and F, and an end rhyme with “ue”. This quote also alludes to a love poem, *Ode To The Nymph of The Luo River* (Cao 2011). The third addition describes a lonely wild goose flying to the cold place and originates from a love poem *Moyuer – Song for Goose Love* that praises the pure and loyal love between wild geese. The figure of wild geese symbolizes love in Chinese culture (Sohu 2020).

The subtle queer coding of *Word of Honor* can only be fully appreciated by the audience who is familiar with classical Chinese poems. The flirtatious narration depicted in the original novel is much more explicit, with lines such as: “Okay, you can go to my room. I will let you taste me for infinite times”. By adding allusions to classic Chinese poetry during the translation process, *Word of Honor* reveals the queer identity of two male protagonists to those viewers who can grasp these references. Throughout the entire drama, Wen never says “I love you” to Zhou; yet, he never stops expressing his love. Viewers with the knowledge of Chinese classical poetry can decipher these queer coded messages while watching the series.

⁹ 但渡无所苦，我自迎接汝。

¹⁰ 飘飘兮如流风之回雪，仿佛兮如轻云之蔽月。

¹¹ 千山暮雪，孤翼只影向谁去？

2.1.2. Motif 2: Three Lives

The phrases used daily by the Chinese people often have profound meanings, which are deeply rooted in historical heritage and passed down by generations. It has been over two thousand years since Buddhism came to China, which resulted in the development of a distinct Buddhism culture in China. The concept of three lives in Buddhism – referring to one’s previous life, the current life, and next life – has profoundly influenced Chinese culture, including LGBTQ+ related texts.

The phrase “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” referenced in *Word of Honor* originates from an ancient Buddhist tale about a high-ranking Monk Yuan Ze and the governor of Luoyang, Li Yuan. The story was written down by a famous poet of Song Dynasty, Su Shi, in his work *Biography of Monk Yuan Ze*, which is a part of *Dongpo Complete Works* (Su 1987). During a journey to Mount E’Mei, Li Yuan and Yuan Ze met a pregnant woman carrying jars for water. Suddenly Yuan Ze stopped and said that this woman had been pregnant for three years, awaiting his reincarnation as her son. Then he reached nirvana after promising to meet Li at Tianzhu Temple in Hangzhou at the Mid-Autumn Festival (August 15th) thirteen years later. On the agreed date, Li went to the Tianzhu Temple, as promised, and met a herd-boy singing:

“I am an old spirit sitting atop the Three Lives rock,
but I am not here to admire the Moon or chant poems;
I am shy about my old friend visiting me from far away,
I am still the same old me, except my body has changed.”

“San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” is the first sentence taken out from the song “I am an old spirit sitting atop the Three Lives rock”, which signifies a destiny beyond three lives. Throughout the following dynasties and even in contemporary society, the phrase “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” has been employed in various literary works as a reference for destined love. For instance, *Bian Er Chai* (Zui Xi Hu Xin Yue Zhu Ren 1985), a famous homoerotic novel from the Ming Dynasty, tells a love story of Zhao Wangsun and Feng Xiang from their first meeting to falling in love. “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” was mentioned when Zhao started to miss Feng. One of the most classical Chinese novels of the Qing Dynasty,

Dream in The Red Chamber (Cao 2012), used the same phrase to describe the love relationship between a male character Jia Baoyu and a female character Lin Daiyu. Therefore, “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” can allude to destined love between two individuals, regardless of their gender.

In contrast to the first motif, the addition of “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” aligns better with the first condition of Delabastita’s addition, aiming to “provide missing links” (1993: 36). The creators of *Word of Honor* try to convey the unspoken expressions of love between two male protagonists (explicitly present in the original novel) to the audience familiar with Chinese culture. In its turn, the international audience may consider this quote as “alien”, or, in the words of Popovič, to “perceive a certain textual element of the metatext as a quotation, identifiable in this context, or as a concealed, ‘indirect’ allusion” (1976: 230).

Therefore, “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” has two levels of meaning in *Word of Honor*: 1) an old spirit sitting atop the Three Lives rock; 2) a predestined love beyond three lives. A literal word-by-word translation conveys only the first meaning, which may not make much sense for the international audience without the background in Chinese culture. At the same time, the phrase can be still identifiable as an alien element and, potentially, encourage the viewers to seek clarity by digging for the queer-coded double meaning of “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” – “predestined love beyond three lives”.

2.1.3. Motif 3: Pancakes

Since Chinese TV programs lack a rating system and are accessible to the viewers of all ages, they tend to use a more conservative approach when portraying sexual content. Intimate scenes in TV shows are often presented in a subtle and indirect manner, and the subject is even more sensitive in case of dangai dramas. However, *Word of Honor* manages to navigate this restriction by incorporating Chinese LGBTQ+ symbols, such as Tie Shao Bing.

“Tie” means touch and “Shao Bing” means pancake, so Tie Shao Bing translates literally as “putting the pancakes together”. However, the expression has also gained a homoerotic connotation through a classical Chinese novel *Dream in The Red Chamber* (Cao 2012), where the intimate behavior between two male classmates was likened to two pancakes sticking together. As a result, Tie Shao Bing has come to be used to describe intimate behavior between

men, hinting at a homosexual orientation. It is worth noting that only one male student among them is explicitly depicted as solely interested in men, while others occasionally engage in relationships with females, hinting at their bisexuality. Therefore, Tie Shao Bing could represent not only the gay group, but also give voice for the bisexual group.

In *Word of Honor*, there is a scene where A Xiang, more like Wen's sister than just his maid, cooking pancakes on fire while Wen and Zhou battling each other. According to the definition of Shao Bing given by the Volume Six of *Notes Before Jingkang Event*, "those burned by fire are called Shao Bing¹²" (Huang 1986). Therefore, pancakes cooked on fire in *Word of Honor* can be considered as an intertextual reference to this particular phenomenon. The scenes alternate, depicting the quarrel among the protagonists and A Xiang, who puts two pancakes together and keeps turning them up and down. At first glance, this sequence can be interpreted as a metaphor for the fierce fight between Wen and Zhou. However, juxtaposed with *Dream in The Red Chamber* (Cao 2012), A Xiang's action attains a sexual connotation, suggesting an intimate relationship between the two male protagonists.

In contrast to explicit sexual depictions in the original novel, this scene in *Word of Honor* conveys a hidden sexual code. As mentioned before, one function of addition in Delabastita's typology is to supply the absent meanings and expose the hidden agenda. The addition of Tie Shao Bing works as a euphemism for the sexual relationship between Wen and Zhou depicting a heated atmosphere and an ambiguous chemistry around this male couple. The audience familiar with Chinese LGBTQ+ background can grasp the implicit sexual meaning of the scene. Simultaneously, the creative introduction of Tie Shao Bing in *Word of Honor* contributes to the self-description and the development of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture.

2.1.4. Motif 4: Weapons

With Zhou and Wen being knights, weapons play a significant role in *Word of Honor*, while also serving as queer-coded symbols. Some of the most peculiar weapons include a sword used by Zhou and a flute preferred by Wen.

Grosse described a dance from a primitive tribe where male dancers used wooden sticks to

¹² 故火烧而食者，呼为烧饼。

penetrate a concave surface, which also expressed their sexual desire (Grosse 1899). Similarly, Freud mentioned that male genitalia could be represented by similarly shaped objects in dreams, such as long sticks or swords (Freud 2016). This correlation between swords and sexuality is common to many cultures, including China. Depending on the context, sexual intercourse in Chinese culture is sometimes metaphorically described as a battle, wherein a sword can represent male genitalia (Ma, Liu 2014).

In Episode 2, when Zhou was exhausted and ready to faint after a fierce fight with the enemies, Wen swiftly rescued him from a potential fall by catching him from behind. Reacting instinctively, Zhou swiftly drew his sword to fight the person behind him. Wen intercepted the sword using his fingers, quickly moved his body around Zhou, bent the blade into a semicircle around them, and then commented “Nice sword!”. These flirtatious gestures, including Wen touching Zhou’s back, holding the sword’s tip, smirking and commenting, mirror the novel precisely. In Delabastita’s typology (1993), this case of translation could be characterized as repetition.

For the audience familiar with the classic Chinese culture, this episode can bear additional romantic connotations. An idiom *Gu Jian Qing Shen* [miss the old sword with tender feelings] originates from a love story of the Emperor Xuan of Han Dynasty, Liu Xun, and his Empress, Xu Pingjun. The Emperor referred to his wife as *Gu Jian* [the old sword], when he wanted to elevate her status to Empress over other women (Ban 1962). Since then, “the old sword” became a reference to one’s wife. In the novel, Zhou also has an old sword, and this detail is repeated in the drama. Therefore, Wen’s comment “Nice sword!” could be alternatively interpreted as “Nice wife!”, hinting at a potential partnership of Wen and Zhou. In Delabastita’s terms (1993: 14), the linguistic code, an old sword, is overridden by the cultural code, *Gu Jian Qing Shen*, so that the audience is required not only to have a command of the Chinese language, but also be familiar with the Chinese idioms and allusions. The repetition of Zhou’s weapon in *Word of Honor* ensures a full interpretation aligned with the original novel. Simultaneously, within the constraints of censorship, the drama conveys the hidden codes of love and sexual desire, which are accessible to the viewers with an equivalent level of Chinese cultural knowledge.

Whereas Zhou’s weapon can be characterized as an example of repetition, another weapon, Xiao, could be considered as an addition made by the creators of *Word of Honor*. While ending

up as Wen's weapon, Xiao initially belonged to another important male couple in the novel, whose story is also portrayed in the book *Lord of Seventh*. Originally a traditional Chinese musical instrument resembling a vertical flute, Xiao turned into a form of sonic weapon in wuxia¹³ novels. The sound of Xiao is soft and gentle, symbolizing literature, whereas the sword is commonly perceived as hard and rigid, representing martial power. In Chinese literary works, such as Gong Zizhen's poems, Xiao has been frequently mentioned alongside Jian, a double-edged sword (Zhao 2016: 38). Thus, a sword and a flute are often seen as a duo in Chinese culture, possibly hinting at a romantic relationship between Wen and Zhou. Here, the addition of Xiao could be seen as "provid[ing] missing links", using Delabastita's terminology (1993: 36).

Another possible prototext is a fairy tale from the spring and autumn period featuring a gentleman named Xiao Shi, who taught his beautiful wife Nong Yu how to play the Xiao. The beautiful melody attracted a magical phoenix who eventually helped them to become immortals (Liu 2021). Consequently, playing Xiao started to symbolize a happy and fulfilled marriage (which could still be true for Wen and Zhou, given that *Word of Honor* concludes with an open ending in Episode 36). Throughout the whole series, Wen and Zhou play Xiao several times, which, according to Delabastita, could be interpreted as "lay[ing] bare unspoken assumptions" (1993: 36) of their potential happy future together.

Apart from the fact that Xiao could be seen as a phallic object, the flute holds an additional sexual connotation specific to Chinese culture (Handian, 2023a). In *The Golden Lotus*, the first Chinese realistic vernacular/colloquial novel (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014, sub *Jinpingmei*), a passage reads: "Jiao Jie Hou, Ying Qing Wei Zu, You Cong Xia Ti Ta Pin Xiao¹⁴" [After being intimate, Jin Lian's desire was not fulfilled, so Jin Lian tried to satisfy him orally] (Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng 2016). This suggests that, at least since the Ming Dynasty, the act of playing Xiao started to symbolize not merely a happy marriage but a more direct sexual intercourse. In Episode 4, Zhou took Wen's Xiao to fight an assassin who used a Chinese flute to perform a sonic attack. After the end of the battle, Zhou cleaned the Xiao and returned it

¹³ Wuxia, which literally translates as "martial heroes", is a genre of Chinese fiction that revolves around the adventures of martial artists. The main characters of wuxia novels are mostly knights, renowned for their extraordinary martial arts abilities, thereby showcasing and encouraging the knightly attitude.

¹⁴ 交接后，淫情未足，又从下替他品箫。

back to Wen, saying:

— I am sorry to get your flute (Xiao) dirty. I will find a new one for you some other time.

— Never mind. But Ah xu, you are good at martial arts, but you are tone-deaf. I will teach you sometime.

— No need. (Youku 2021: Episode 4)

For those unfamiliar with the aforementioned prototexts, the conversation between Zhou and Wen may seem perfectly natural without any hidden meanings. However, considering the stricter censorship of sexual content in the drama compared to the novel, this creative addition, implying a dirty talk between the two male protagonists, “generally give[s] the text a fuller wording” (Delabastita 1993: 36), that is, includes an additional layer of meaning. By adding Wen’s weapon – Xiao, *Word of Honor* successfully codes the relationship of Wen and Zhou as a queer one, faithfully conveying the sexual undertones present in the original novel and leaving the audience to speculate on a potential positive outcome for the character’s relationship.

2.1.5. Motif 5: Cutting off the sleeves

Chinese culture includes many remarkable tokens of sexuality hinting at various identities, for example, grinding mirrors¹⁵ represents lesbian desire, while separating the peach¹⁶ is associated with male homosexuality. The *Anthology of Petty Matters in Qing* (Xu 1984) describes a female homosexual gathering called “Grinding Mirrors”, the name of which alludes at the mirror-like sexual behaviors of lesbians, drawing parallels to their similar body structures. The metaphor of separating the peach originates from the tale of the Duke Ling of Wey and his male favorite Mi Zixia from the Warring States Period. In this story, documented in Volume 4 of *Han Feizi* (Han 1998), Duke praised Mi’s love for him, when the latter tasted a sweet peach and left a remaining half for the Duke. Since then, separating the peach has become a symbol of homosexual affection. The Duke interpreted the peach as a symbol of affection from Mi, when he was in love with him; however, as the Duke’s feelings towards Mi changed, he sentenced Mi for giving the monarch the leftovers.

¹⁵ 磨镜

¹⁶ 分桃

Compared to the sad love story about separating the peach, the allusion of cutting off the sleeves appears more encouraging.

— Do not disturb him. Go cut off my sleeves.

— Yes, Your Majesty.

The story about cutting the sleeves was chronicled in the Volume 93 of the *Book of Han* (Ban 1962), the first annual-biography history book, which depicted deep love between the Emperor Ai of Han Dynasty and Dong Xian. The Emperor was overwhelmed by Dong's beautiful appearance after their first encounter and promptly appointed him as a trusted official, leading to an intimate romantic relationship. Once, while having a nap with Xian, the Emperor Ai woke up to find Xian sleeping on his sleeves. To not disturb his lover's sweet dream, the Emperor had his sleeves cut off. This historical anecdote gave rise to the term "Duan Xiu" (cutting off sleeves) in Chinese culture, symbolizing male homosexuality from that moment onward.

As an audiovisual production, *Word of Honor* can not only make verbal allusions to historical prototexts, but also represent them in the language of film. One of the most recognizable intertextual references from Chinese history is the act of cutting off the sleeves, cleverly and naturally integrated into *Word of Honor*. In the fighting scenes of Episodes 1 and 2, Zhou used his sword to block the splashing blood coming towards him, as he had been repulsed by blood since his previous traumatizing experience with bloody battles and massive killings. This repulsion reflected his emotional drain and trauma that led him to flee the assassin organization he once founded. Later, in Episode 5, when Zhou and Wen were tracing a suspicious shadow man, blood dripped from a dead body hanging on the tree, staining one of Zhou's sleeves. Aware of Zhou's mysophobia, Wen promptly waved his fan to cut off Zhou's blood-stained sleeve. Therefore, the level of the audience's understanding of this scene relies on their acquaintance with the cultural context of Duan Xiu.

The trope of cutting off the sleeves is subsequently repeated throughout the series. In Episode 6, after experiencing a death threat together with Wen in the Yi Zhuang (a family house for storing unburied dead bodies, similar to a morgue in present society), Zhou cut off a blood-stained corner of his cloth. Furthermore, in Episode 18, upon witnessing Wen's sleeve on fire, Zhou cut off the sleeve without any hesitation. These different instances of sleeve-

cutting may represent the evolution of Zhou's character: from having his sleeves forcefully cut down by Wen to willingly doing it himself for Wen, which can signify a shift from Wen's unrequited love to a mutual affection between them. Mediated through the symbol of Duan Xiu, the progression of the emotional connection between the male characters feels natural and genuine.

In the original novel, the act of cutting off the sleeves occurs twice, and on both occasions, it is Wen who performs the action. For the first time, Wen tore Zhou's sleeves by force to inspect his wounds in Chapter 21; the second time, in Chapter 29, Wen deliberately cut off the sleeves of Ye Baiyi (who is in love with his best male friend but cannot get response since his friend has married another woman) in avenging for Zhou. In the novel, Wen's re-enactment of Duan Xiu makes Zhou to believe that Wen has developed a strong inclination towards tearing other people's sleeves.

At the first glance, *Word of Honor* might appear to simply repeat the image of "Duan Xiu" from the novel. According to Delabastita's definition, repetition "is not substituted but rather merely repeated or transferred" (1993: 34). Technically speaking, Wen tears down Zhou's sleeve in the novel, which is not a strictly cutting-off behavior, while in the drama, the act of cutting off sleeves is visually evident. In the original novel, "Duan Xiu" clearly refers to male homosexuality, whereas the drama is created under the circumstances of censorship and cannot portray LGBTQ+ identities explicitly. Instead the symbol of "Duan Xiu" is repeated to signify the development of the emotional connection between Wen and Zhou. From the perspective of Delabastita's translational operations, the use of "Duan Xiu" in the drama could be categorized as permutation:

Such a type of translational relationship is usually meant when translation critics use the term 'compensation'.

Within the category of permutation, one type of translation operation deserves a special mention: the translator introduces a distinction between two levels of discourse, i.e. a *textual* and a *metatextual* level, and relegates his/her rendering of a S.T. item or feature to the latter. The metatextual status of this second level of discourse is signalled by conventional means like the use of footnotes, parentheses, or italics. [...] The capacity of metatextual compensation to combine with other transformation categories also shows in its frequent alliance with the category of addition; much of the information usually specified in footnotes, ect. Bears an additional character as compared to the S.T. (Delabastita 1993: 36-37).

In line with Delabastita's definition of permutation, the occurrence of "Duan Xiu" image

three times in the drama can be compared to a footnote, providing additional information for the audience. It signifies Zhou's progression from acknowledging Wen's feelings to actively reciprocating Wen with an emotional response. The repeated act of cutting off sleeves gradually intensifies the emotional dynamics between the protagonists, providing the drama's audience with a clearer insight into the characters' emotional states.

2.1.6. Motif 6: Moonlight

The moon, including its multiple representations, has always played a significant role in Chinese culture, which includes numerous texts about the full moon, the waxing and waning phases, the bright moon, moonlight and other lunar images. For instance, it appears in the story of the God of marriage and love, Yue Lao [an old man under the moon] (Li 1982: 179-181); the myth of the Goddess Chang'e who farewelled to her husband and ascended to the moon (Liu, Chen 2016); the renowned poem *Moon Thoughts* by Chang Jo-hsü (Fletcher 1966: 169) which evokes a sense of lovesickness under the vast cosmos; and the widely popular song *The Moon Represents My Heart* (Teresa Teng's, 1977), which one of the most recognized Chinese songs worldwide. These examples demonstrate that the strong link between the image of the moon and romantic love has existed in China throughout the ages.

In the original novel, a chapter titled "Moonlight" portrays Zhou and Wen enjoying the moonlight after a hard battle; the words "moon" and "moonlight" are referenced seven times throughout the chapter. The author uses the term "Ai Mei" (usually denoting an ambiguous chemistry and a romantic atmosphere between two individuals) to describe the moonlight. Thus, the translation task of *Word of Honor* implied effectively conveying the romantic ambiance and significance of moonlight to the audience.

On the level of the linguistic code (Delabastita 1993: 4), the importance of moonlight in the novel is emphasized by using the title "Moonlight" and repeatedly mentioning the moon and moonlight in association with romantic love. In the *Word of Honor*, the motif is represented through repeated scenes of drinking under the moonlight, which is also an important romantic trope in Chinese culture. For instance, it could be associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival (Min, Fu 2006: 345), one of the most significant celebrations in China, during which people honor their unions, while young couples seek Yue Lao's blessing for marriage. As Delabastita states, "texts contain a load of cultural meanings on top of (next to, within) their linguistic

meanings” (Delabastita 1993: 14). Drinking and enjoying moonlight during the Mid-Autumn Festival have long been a crucial aspect of Chinese traditions, suggesting that drinking under the moonlight can be considered a cultural code of romantic love.

According to Delabastita, permutation can be compared to compensation (1993: 37): a translator uses the metatextual discourse to make up for the lack in the textual discourse by means of “footnotes, parentheses, or italics” (Ibid., 10). This practice is common in translation from one language to another, especially in dramas, which require translating from verbal to audio-visual format. In the novel, the romantic connotations of moonlight can be conveyed through the linguistic code; however, in the drama, moonlight as a background setting does not necessarily carry such meanings and can be easily ignored by the audience. At the same time, drinking under the moonlight is already a cultural code that serves as a sort of parenthesis to the portrayal of moonlight in the drama, effectively compensating for the lack of information in the translation process.

In Episode 9 Wen invites Zhou to join him for a drink under the moonlight, but Zhou turns down the invitation. However, Wen persists and tries to persuade Zhou by emphasizing: “The moon tonight is so beautiful”. This phrase can be linked to a wide-spread misconception in China that the Japanese writer Natsume Sōseki romantically translated “I love you” as “Tonight the moon is beautiful, isn’t it?” (Rui 2019). Despite its inaccuracy, this misinterpretation has become a sort of love confession in Chinese culture. According to Delabastita, “the capacity of metatextual compensation to combine with other transformation categories also shows in its frequent alliance with the category of addition” (1993: 37). Also, addition is considered as a method which “us[es] a more strongly metaphorical language” (Ibid., 36) and can “enhance the aesthetic qualities of his/her translation” (Ibid., 36). The usage of metaphorical language by Wen in *Word of Honor* not only implies a secret love confession between two protagonists, but also enhances the romantic and ambiguous atmosphere of the scene.

Therefore, by drawing on the lasting Chinese tradition of moon appreciation, the custom of drinking under the moonlight, and the connotations of the phrase “The moon tonight is so beautiful”, *Word of Honor* efficiently translates the romantic codes implied by the prototext.

2.1.7. Motif 7: Titles

In the novel, Wen keeps changing titles to refer to Zhou as their relationship develops, such as Mei Ren, Zhi Ji¹⁷ and Xiang Gong¹⁸. In the drama *Word of Honor* also uses titles to show the progression of the relationship between Wen and Zhou.

Mei Ren¹⁹

Where creeping plants grew on the wild
And heavy dews declined,
There was a fair one all alone,
Bright-eyed, good-looking, kind.
Chance brought us to each other's side,
And all my wish was gratified.
Where creeping plants grew on the wild.
And thick the dew-drops stood,
There was the fair one all alone,
Kind, as the looks were good.
Chance let us meet each other there.
Our mutual happiness to share²⁰ (Jennings 1891: 110).

This poem titled *Fortuitous Concourse* originates from the *Book of Songs*, one of the earliest poetry collections in Chinese history, spanning from the Zhou Dynasty to the Autumn Period. The pursuit of Mei (beauty/attractiveness) has been a recurring theme in China since ancient times, shaping the unique beauty standards in Chinese culture. There is a well-known Chinese saying “Mei Ren Zai Gu Bu Zai Pi²¹ [The true beauty lies in the bones rather than the skin]”, which comes from the first story of *Stories to Awaken the World* (Feng 1956). The author of this renowned collection of tales, Feng Menglong, has also been widely recognized for his homoerotic writing in the Ming Dynasty. Bones not only support the human body, but also

¹⁷ 知己

¹⁸ 相公

¹⁹ 美人

²⁰ 野有蔓草，零露漙兮。有美一人，清扬婉兮。邂逅相遇，适我愿兮。野有蔓草，零露瀼瀼。有美一人，婉如清扬。邂逅相遇，与子偕臧。——《诗经·国风·郑风·野有蔓草》(The given translation is taken from the English version of *Book of Songs*, translated by Jennings).

²¹ 美人在骨不在皮

symbolize an individual's upright character in Chinese culture (Handian 2023). Compared to “Pixiang Mei²² [the beauty of skin]” that ages easily, “Guxiang Mei²³ [the beauty of bone structure]” was held in higher esteem in ancient China (Shen 2012).

In the very beginning of the novel, there is a whole paragraph commenting on Zhou's appearance, who has long and thick eyelashes, bright eyes, straight nose, and thin lips, exuding a sense of gentleness but also indifference and coldness. This lengthy introduction sets the stage for Wen to refer to Zhou as “Mei Ren [Beautiful person]”. One of the possible prototexts of this scene could be a famous line “Wei Cao Mu Zhi Ling Luo Xi, Kong Mei Ren Zhi Chi Mu²⁴ [And I thought how the trees and flowers were fading and falling, And feared that my Fairest's beauty would fade too]” (Hawkes 1965: 51) by the ancient Chinese poet Qu Yuan. Here, the title “Mei Ren” is attributed to King Huai of Chu, who, according to some accounts, was admired by Qu Yuan (Wen 1944; Cheng 2014). In the Warring States period, “Mei Ren” was considered as a gender-neutral term, applied both to men and women, regardless of their sexuality. Notably, a proverb “Mei Nan Po Lao²⁵ [a beautiful male secretary can slander the serious ministers]” originating from the *Lost Book Of Zhou* (Zhou 2015) in the Zhou Dynasty, was utilized to persuade emperors to stay away from men with beautiful appearance, whereby it is culturally acceptable for calling men as “Mei Ren” in ancient China.

However, in modern China, Mei Ren is more commonly used to describe beautiful women (Handian 2023b), gradually losing its gender-neutral connotation. Therefore, referring to a man as “Mei Ren” in modern Chinese context may hint to concentrate on the beautiful and feminine appearance. Also, the title “Mei Ren” can have a subtle negative connotation through its association with “Pixiang Mei”, which can signify not only “the beauty of skin”, but also “sissy”. This particular slur – “sissy” – was notably applied to the homosexual men, who have been historically treated as “feminine” or “mama's boys” (Russo 1981: 9). In light of this context, there is an ethical concern about the appropriateness of using the term “Mei Ren” in dangai drama. In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, *Word of Honor* omits the title “Mei Ren” presented in the original novel. According to Delabastita, this can be considered as an example of deletion, which is “for a large variety of reasons very frequent in the actual

²² 皮相美

²³ 骨相美

²⁴ 惟草木之零落兮，恐美人之迟暮。

²⁵ 美男破老

reality of translation” (1993: 35-36). The deletion of “Mei Ren” under these circumstances seems reasonable and understandable.

Even after the deletion, the meaning of “Mei Ren” in the source text could “be recaptured elsewhere through some compensation device” (Ibid., 36). Thus, *Word of Honor* brings forward the aspect of “Guxiang Mei [the beauty of bone structure]” to preserve the authentic characteristics of the novel. When Zhou disguises himself as a rugged man (more like a beggar), with a deliberately unshaved beard and messy hair, Wen still identifies him as Mei because of the well-structured shoulder blades. This characteristic directly echoes the original novel. Apart from the delicate shoulder blades, *Word of Honor* also brings forward Zin’s slim waist and long legs, stressing his exceptional bone structure. Instead of stressing the “Pixiang Mei [the beauty of skin/sissy]”, the TV series focuses on the “Guxiang Mei [the beauty of bone structure]”, which can be categorized as Delabastita’s substitution which is similar to replacing one item by another equivalent item (Ibid., 33). In contrast to the negative presentation of LGBTQ+ characters in the early Hollywood movies (Russo 1981), *Word of Honor* manages to portray the delicate beauty of the male character by paying tribute to ancient cultural codes.

Zhi Ji

There is an extra chapter in *A Tale of The Wanderers* called “Zhi Ai Zhi Ji [beloved confidant]”, depicting Wen’s emotional journey from being curious and wary of Zhou to gradually developing a profound affection and fully opening his heart to him through a first-person narrative. The introspective transformation results in Wen finally getting redemption through love and finding his own path in life. In this chapter, Wen gives Zhou the title “Zhi Ji”, and thinks: “From now on, if he lives for one day, I will live for one day. If he dies, I will burn myself with wood and oil. At least, I will die with him”. “Zhi Ji” is a common concept in Chinese literature, particularly in poetry, which generally means “a confidant”: for example, in a phrase “Hai Nei Cun Zhi Ji, Tian Ya Ruo Bi Ling²⁶” [If you have a friend afar who knows your heart, distance cannot keep you two apart] from a farewell poem written by Wang Bo (He, Xiong 2019).

²⁶ 海内存知己，天涯若比邻。

By Episode 6 of the series, the initial hostility and suspicion of protagonists towards each other transforms into a relationship of respect and admiration. The title “Zhi Ji” is firstly introduced in Episode 8 of *Word of Honor*. When Zhou disapproves of Wen’s plan to risk his life to save Zhang Chengling (the apprentice of Zhou), Wen replies: “A true gentleman is willing to die for his confidant. So, what if I take this risk for you?”.

The Strategies of the Warring States, an ancient collection of stories from the Warring States period, includes a famous line “Shi Wei Zhi Ji Zhe Si, Nv Wei Yue Ji Zhe Rong²⁷ [man dies for the person who understand him; woman puts make up for the person who pleases her]” (Liu 2015). This phrase can be considered as a prototext of *Word of Honor*, bringing forward Wen’s willingness to die together with Zhou, and, simultaneously, stressing the basic meaning of “Zhi Ji” – a person who shares the same values and appreciates the other. In this sense, *Word of Honor* remains faithful to the fundamental essence of “Zhi Ji” as depicted in the original novel, which aligns with the homological principle of repetition suggested by Delabastita (1993: 34). According to Delabastita’s definition, repetition implies conservatively reproducing elements of the source text, faithfully preserving its original meaning.

Worth mentioning, the title of the chapter in the novel is actually “Zhi Ai Zhi Ji”, which means beloved confidant or love and a confidant. In *Word of Honor*, however, these two meanings are merged into the concept of “Zhi Ji” to navigate the censorship restrictions. Later in the series, Zhou shows Wen the joyful and peaceful life of The Four Sages of Anji (the title for three men and one woman who live together as cherished ones). This stands in stark contrast to the protagonists’ current life, illustrating the ideal future that Zhou desires. After that, comes the most renowned dialogue of *Word of Honor*, an implicit yet profoundly meaningful confession:

Wen: Mountain and River, soulmate is difficult to meet.

Zhou: The world is not important, what’s important is finding a soulmate.

(Youku 2021: Episode 8)

“Mountain and River” is a historical allusion to the story chronicled in *Liezi* about the two men, Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi (Lie 2023). Yu had a unique talent at playing the Chinese zither,

²⁷ 士为知己者死，女为悦己者容。

while Zhong was a music enthusiast and admirer of Yu's skills. While Yu intended to show mountains and rivers in his music, Zhong could visualize the same landscapes by listening to Yu's melody, which showed their strong spiritual connection. After Zhong's death, Yu, devastated as he was, broke his zither and never played again. According to this famous story, the "Mountain and River" serve as a metaphor of soulmate in the Chinese cultural context (Handian 2023c).

The addition of the metaphor "Mountain and River" enhances the meaning of "Zhi Ji" in *Word of Honor* from a confidant to a soulmate. Additionally, the image of a mountain and a river can also refer to the land of a country, which is why Zhou replied to Wen that the world is not as important as a soulmate. The addition in *Word of Honor* does not only "provide missing links" (Delabastita 1993: 36) – the omitted "love" from the chapter's title – but also elevates the relationship from a common love to more profound soul resonance between the lovers.

Xiang Gong

The term "Xiang Gong" has four main levels of meaning. Initially, it denoted a) a respectful way to address the prime minister and was widely used for officers during the Tang Dynasty (Handian 2023d). However, this usage is not common any more in modern Chinese. Starting from the Ming Dynasty, the meaning of "Xiang Gong" shifted to b) respectfully call an educated man, while the most common usage is c) a respectful way for wives to address their husbands, given that males were encouraged to study in ancient China (Ibid.). Lastly, "Xiang Gong" can also refer to d) male prostitutes (Ibid.). The etymology of the last meaning traces back to the Ming Dynasty, when government officers were prohibited from hiring female prostitutes' services by law, and, instead, some individuals turned to male prostitutes (Wu 2005). Since then, the term "Xiang Gong" has acquired sexual connotations.

In the original novel, the title "Xiong Gong" comes up in Wen and Zhou's conversation as they were visiting a brothel to find their enemies.

— That's because... (I) have a family now, Xiang Gong Zhou.

— Niang Zi Wen, you are so nasty.

Similarly, “Niang Zi” has two layers of meaning: a) a form of address for one’s wife b) a general title for women (Handian 2023e). In this example, the linguistic code of “Xiang Gong” refers to a term of endearment for a husband and potentially carries a sexual connotation.

In *Word of Honor*, the term “Xiang Gong” appears to have a more ambiguous meaning, verging between a noble title and a term of endearment which is hard to identify. The title is introduced after the escape of the main characters from the deep cave in Episode 18, which is considered a climax in the storyline. While joking about their bad luck, Zhou playfully punches Wen, who pretends to be weak and begs for mercy, saying “A Xu, Zhou Xiang Gong, Ke Lian Ze Ge²⁸” [Ah Xu, Xiang Gong Zhou, please pity me]. The second part of the phrase refers to the famous line “Niang Zi Ke Lian Xiao Ren Ze Ge Ba²⁹ [Lady, please pity me]” from the 16th-century novel *The Golden Lotus* (Lan Ling Xiao Xiao Sheng 2016), when the male protagonist asked the woman of his interest to have sex for the first time. This intertextual reference added by the creators of the TV series seems to “disentangle complicated passages” (Delabastita 1993: 36), showing the lascivious characteristic of Wen through the use of the prototext of the famous Chinese erotic novel. Simultaneously, it “provides missing links” (Ibid.), specifying the meaning of “Xiang Gong” in *Word of Honor*, which is assuredly not purely a noble title but rather a term of endearment carrying sexual connotations. Interestingly, the English version of *Word of Honor* provided on YouTube for the international audience translates the phrase as “My dear, please, pity me” (Youku 2021: Episode 18).

By drawing on historical prototexts, *Word of Honor* implicitly conveys the intimate and tender relationship between the two protagonists. The creators of the TV series chose to repeat the term “Xiang Gong” from the original novel rather than using any modern expression. This aligns with the function of translation analogues, which tend to be “conservative rather than innovative insofar as they imply a more or less [...] an active endorsement of the indigenous codes” (Delabastita 1993: 35). Thus, *Word of Honor* not only acknowledges and pays respect to the original novel but alludes to historical Chinese texts.

²⁸ 阿絮，周相公，可怜则个。

²⁹ 娘子可怜则个吧！

2.2. Functions of communication

As stated by Lotman in his *The Semiotics of Culture and the Concept of a Text*, semiotics predominantly “concentrates its attention on the semiotic functioning of a real text” (Lotman 1988: 52). To analyze a complex relationship between “a multilayered and semiotically heterogeneous text” and “the surrounding cultural context and its readers” (Ibid., 55), he introduced the five sociocommunicative functions of text, which include communication between addresser and addressee, communication between the audience and the cultural tradition, communication of the reader with her/himself, communication of the reader with the text, and communication between a text and the cultural context. In the next subchapters, these five types of communication will be investigated on the material of *Word of Honor*.

2.2.1. Communication between addresser and addressee

In the communication between addresser and addressee, “a text fulfills the function of a message from the bearer of information to the audience” (Lotman 1988: 55). To begin with, it is important to make a distinction between the addresser of the original novel and the addresser of the dangai drama.

The novel *A Tale of the Wanderers* was first published on the web-platform JJWXC under the category of “Pure Love” designated for LGBTQ+ stories (Priest 2010). As introduced by the author named Priest in the preface, the original story aims to chronicle the narrative of a distinguished espionage commander breaking away from the confines of the royal court to explore the wider and freer outside world. The underlying theme expresses a carefree notion that the world is vast; wherever human exists, the world is there. The world depicted in the original novel encompasses a wide range of identities, featuring two distinct couples: the Wen-and-Zhou couple, representing a non-heterosexual relationship, and the couple of Cao Weining³⁰ and A Xiang³¹, representing a heterosexual relationship.

The original novel depicts numerous instances of love expressions between the two male protagonists, described with explicit audacity. The examples include endearments like “Mei

³⁰ Cao Weining is a young male apprentice of the Qingfeng Sect who fell in love with A Xiang at first sight, but, unfortunately, got killed on his wedding day by his master who disapproved of their union.

³¹ A Xiang is Wen’s maid, akin to a young sister, who died at her wedding with Cao for avenging Cao’s master.

Ren” and “Xiang Gong” that were analyzed previously; intimate interactions like Wen resting his head on Zhou’s thighs (Chapter 31); and even explicit depictions of kissing, caressing, and sharing a bed. Although *A Tale of the Wanderers* may not feature as many sexual scenes as some danmei novels, such as *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (2015), the source material for *The Untamed* (the dangai drama mentioned earlier), it includes enough intimate moments to categorize it as a danmei novel. Indeed, as a danmei novel, *A Tale of the Wanderers* is rooted in LGBTQ+ culture and respectfully portrays romantic relationships between non-heterosexual characters without any attempts to conceal or downplay them.

As previously mentioned, the entire team of *Word of Honor* (including directors, scriptwriters, cast, and other staff members) can be considered as an addresser of the TV series. Compared to the original novel, *Word of Honor* noticeably omits many intimate scenes. However, the drama compensates for this absence of LGBTQ+ content by including allusions as various prototexts, including Chinese ancient literature works, historical records, and proverbs. Additionally, *Word of Honor* strongly implies a romantic relationship between Xisang Ghost³² and Yan Ghost³³, evident in the final scene, where Yan Ghost’s gaze was directed towards Xisang Ghost rather than Yu Qiufeng³⁴. All these efforts made by *Word of Honor* demonstrate the authors’ respect for LGBTQ+ community as well as the original novel does.

Moreover, *Word of Honor* notably places more emphasis on the spiritual fulfillment of love rather than physical aspects of sex, as evident in emotional climax scenes. For instance, Wen and Zhou expressed their shared values and titled themselves as soulmates, or Zhi Ji, in Episode 8, marking the first emotional climax. Throughout the narrative, Wen and Zhou share the moments of joy and intimacy, basking in sunshine or moonlight together; there is even a scene where Wen desires to catch the light shined on Zhou’s body after a life-and-death battle. The final emotional climax occurs in Episode 36, as Wen expresses his willingness to sacrifice

³² Xisang Ghost is a female character in *Word of Honor*, who seeks to punish all male heartbreakers worldwide after being deserted by a heartless man. Subsequently, she chooses to live together with Yan Ghost following the dismissal of the Ghost Valley. Unfortunately, Xisang Ghost was killed during the battle at Cao and A Xiang’s Wedding.

³³ Yan Ghost is a female character in *Word of Honor* who was good at disguising and got deserted by her male lover Yu Qiufeng as well. Yan Ghost was also killed in the same battle with Xisang Ghost after stabbing Yu.

³⁴ Yu Qiufeng is a male character in *Word of Honor* who lured Yan Ghost and deserted her. Even though he regretted his behavior in the end, Yan Ghost had totally forgotten him after taking medicine, and stabbed him ruthlessly.

his life to save Zhou.

By closely following the original novel and integrating historical prototexts, *Word of Honor* conveys a message to the addressee that the pursuit of love by non-heterosexuals is no different to that of heterosexual people, as everybody craves genuine love. To a certain extent, this narrative contributes to shaping positive images of the LGBTQ+ community, garnering respect from society and potentially reducing discrimination.

2.2.2. Communication between the audience and the cultural tradition

The second function of text refers to communication between the audience and the cultural tradition: “A text fulfills the function of a collective cultural memory. In this capacity it discloses a capacity for continual replenishment and for retrieving some aspects of the information stored in it and temporarily or totally forgetting others” (Lotman 1988: 55). In comparison to web novels, TV dramas face stricter censorship requirements, implying that direct love expressions – sexual behaviors and verbal love confessions – have to be omitted. When adapting a danmei novel into a drama, the challenge lies in preserving the LGBTQ+ connotations, which may be lost during the process of transformation. As stated by Lotman et al.,

As a generator of meaning, as a thinking mechanism capable of working, the text needs an interlocutor. This requirement reveals the profoundly dialogic nature of consciousness. To function, a consciousness requires another consciousness—the text within the text, the culture within the culture. (Lotman et al. 1994: 378)

As applied to the given case, “a consciousness requires another consciousness” could mean that the consciousness of LGBTQ+ in *Word of Honor* requires other texts with LGBTQ+ connotation and culture. Rather than simply following the original novel, *Word of Honor* relies on external sources to establish LGBTQ+ consciousness under the circumstances of censorship. For example, by integrating Duan Xiu (cutting off sleeves) into the narrative, *Word of Honor* introduces a historical prototext in the metatext and fulfills the function of collective cultural memory. Furthermore, the images of the main characters undergo a gradual queer coding, allowing the addressee to consistently perceive the LGBTQ+ consciousness throughout the whole drama. In this way, *Word of Honor* effectively conveys LGBTQ+ connotations from the original novel, using intertextual references to continuously generate

new queer-coded messages in the dangai drama. This highlights the drama's ability to consistently present and update LGBTQ+ culture for the audience. At the same time, viewers can connect with cultural traditions and intertextual references that allude to historical representations of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture, reinforcing their awareness of the subject.

However, being broadcasted on global platforms, *Word of Honor* presents a challenge for most international viewers who are not familiar with Chinese LGBTQ+ culture and history. Non-Chinese audiences may find it more challenging to comprehend the queer-coded elements of the series, and the intertextual references may lose their function in effectively conveying messages. For instance, the instances of cutting off the sleeves in *Word of Honor* may appear natural and logical, making it easy for the international audience to miss the LGBTQ+ connotations. As a result, crucial aspects of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture are unlikely to be retained in the minds of these viewers.

Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this situation. For example, the phrase “San Sheng Shi Shang Jiu Jing Hun” is an evidently alien text in *Word of Honor* (see the Motif 2: Three Lives), which would likely hold some significance or associations with other meanings, regardless of the cultural background of the audience. Even without the necessary background knowledge, the viewers may develop an interest in these alien texts and start exploring Chinese culture. As they start searching for the explanations on platforms like Weibo, Youtube, Twitter (or known as X), Tik Tok or other websites³⁵, they can find answers from other audience members who are more knowledgeable in these cultural spheres and dedicated to promoting them. As they delve deeper into their research and become more immersed, more texts of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture will gradually integrate into their consciousness. Eventually, these viewers may decode not only apparent alien texts but also the subtly overlooked intertextual references, such as Duan Xiu. The new meaning of cutting off the sleeves may capture their attention, causing them to temporarily or completely forget its original meaning stored in their knowledge. In this sense, *Word of Honor* generates the LGBTQ+ consciousness among the international audience, while broadcasting Chinese LGBTQ+ culture to a universal realm.

³⁵ For instance, the explanations of Chinese LGBTQ+ representations can be seen from the videos AvenueX 2021a; Avenue X 2021b; Avenue X 2021c; top10blchannel 2021; Chinese Lit 2021.

2.2.3. Communication of the reader with himself

The third function of text refers to communication of the reader with her/himself and is explained as follows:

A text – this is especially important for traditional, ancient texts distinguished by their high degree of canonicity – retrieves certain aspects of the personality of the addressee himself. During this type of communication of the recipient of information with himself, a text plays the role of mediator, helping to reorganize the personality of the reader and change its structural self-orientation and the extent of its links with metacultural constructions. (Lotman 1988: 55)

The positive portrayal of queer-coded characters in *Word of Honor* stands in stark contrast to stereotypical images of non-heterosexual individuals in Western culture, which were often subjected to ridicule and laughter (Russo 1981). As highlighted in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, "America was a dream that had no room for the existence of homosexuals. Laws were made against depicting such things onscreen. And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets" (cited in Russo 1981: 6). The observation refers to the early images of the LGBTQ+ community in Hollywood films from approximately a century ago. Similarly, in recent Chinese history, there has been an increasing tendency to depict homosexual individuals as being "sissy", which contributed to discrimination and internalized homophobia (see, for instance, the character Xiaodouzi in the movie *Farewell My Concubine*, 1993).

The significant attention gained by the emergence of danmei and dangai works, such as *Word of Honor*, appears to have the potential to challenge these unjust impressions in the minds of the audience. *Word of Honor* carefully addressed the offensive nature of the concept of "sissy" and shifted away from emphasizing the title "Mei Ren", as was done in the novel (see Motif 7). At the same time, *Word of Honor* retained the scene of the original novel, where the protagonist disguises himself as a rugged man, thereby avoiding the shallow emphasis on superficial attractiveness which easily gets associated with the "sissy" stereotype. Rather, the audience is encouraged to appreciate a more refined concept of beauty related to the finesse of the bone structure. As a wuxia TV series, *Word of Honor* vividly portrays diverse martial arts scenes, challenging the stereotypical association of homosexuality with weakness and frailness. Hence, the viewers come to recognize that the two male protagonists, while being evidently queer, can embody both aesthetically pleasing characteristics and a strong sense of masculinity,

therefore defying the “sissy stereotype”. In this way, *Word of Honor* plays the role of “mediator”, “helping to reorganize the personality of the reader” (Lotman 1988: 55).

Additionally, both characters possess higher social status, which aligns with some historical prototypes, such as Dong Xian in the Han Dynasty and Han Zigao³⁶ in the Chen period, who were both generals. Zhou was the leader of “Heaven Window” (one of the two biggest assassin associations), the commander of the famous “Four Season Mansion” sect, and a confidant of the emperor, while Wen wielded actual authority in the Ghost Valley. In this way, *Word of Honor* challenges another stereotype that historically associated non-heterosexuality with a lower social status, and promotes positive self-esteem among its audience.

While Zhou and Wen may not conform to the traditional hero archetype, characterized by sinlessness and the ability to save everyone in the world, they are still heroes in their own way, bearing a striking difference to other characters. Thus, Zhou saved Zhang Chengling, the only surviving member of the Zhang Family after a massacre, and prevented the Scorpion King³⁷ from getting the illegal treasure. In his turn, Wen tried his best to expose Zhao Jing³⁸'s intrigues to the public and eventually sought vengeance for his parents. Both of the protagonists demonstrated moral discernment and empathy, upholding the principle of equality without consideration for social status. Despite being trapped in darkness and witnessing the depths of human depravity, Zhou and Wen remain resilient, ceaselessly seeking the light and never giving up.

Word of Honor, as a dangai drama, has effectively communicated a positive image of the LGBTQ+ community to the whole world. Notably, reaction videos made by popular Youtubers (for instance, Gaywatch 2021, Jeanet Henning 2021, IPOND TV 2021 and many more), demonstrate how the viewers empathize with the characters and see themselves represented. This transformative impact changes “the extent of its links with metacultural constructions” (Lotman 1988:55).

³⁶ A general from the Chen period who, in later dynasties, was suspected to have a romantic relationship with the emperor.

³⁷ A male character who is the leader of another assassin association.

³⁸ A male character, who is the god father of the Scorpion King, has a secret plan to get the treasure.

2.2.4. Communication of the reader with the text

The fourth function of text refers to the communication of the reader with the text and explained by Lotman as following:

Manifesting intellectual properties, a highly organized text ceases to be merely a mediator in the act of communication. It becomes an interlocutor on an equal footing, possessing a high degree of autonomy. For the both the author (addressant) and the reader (addressee), it may work as an independent intellectual structure, playing an active and independent role in dialogue. In this respect, the ancient metaphor of “conversing with a book” turns out to be fraught with profound meaning. (1988: 55-56)

As added later, “[t]he introduction of an external text into the immanent world of another text has far-reaching consequences. The external text is transformed in the structural field of the other text’s meaning, and a new message is created” (Lotman, 1994:378). The incorporation of external texts into *Word of Honor*, such Chinese ancient poetry and anecdotes, has given rise to new messages, which allows considering the series as “interlocutor” rather than a mere “mediator”. As a result, *Word of Honor* has become “an independent intellectual structure, playing an active and independent role in dialogue” (Lotman 1988: 56). The audience's interpretation of the series may differ, especially since the identity of characters of *Word of Honor* is not portrayed explicitly but subtly coded due to the censorship. In this context, LGBTQ+ characters in dangai dramas, like Wen and Zhou, could be compared to Dorothy Gale of *The Oz*, who was regarded as a queer icon and inspired the emergence of the euphemism “a friend of Dorothy”, associated with the LGBTQ+ community (Leap, Boellstorff 2003: 98). Similarly, *Word of Honor* queer-codes characters by making intertextual references to Chinese LGBTQ+ culture and meticulously asking readers: “Are you one of us? Are you interested in our culture?”

Based on readers’ individual interpretations shaped by their previous knowledge, “there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people’s eyes” (Zhu 1981: 50). For those lacking background in Chinese LGBTQ+ culture or knowledge of the original novel, the drama may be seen as a thrilling wuxia story full of fighting scenes and intrigues. Viewers familiar with the original novel but lacking cultural knowledge might find the adaptation disappointing, as it does not communicate the LGBTQ+ identities as explicitly as the original. For a more knowledgeable audience, the interpretation of the series will depend on their familiarity with Chinese LGBTQ+ prototexts.

While some intertextual references could be decoded more easily, others are integrated more subtly. For instance, the series never explicitly reveals the historical timeframe of the narrative, but the viewers can deduce the period as ancient China primarily through the characters' costumes. The audience well-versed in Chinese LGBTQ+ history may discern the time more precisely by using multiple clues. For instance, the addition of characters like The Four Sages of Anji originating from *The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove* allows connecting *Word of Honor* with the era of Wei and Jin dynasties, which was renowned for its openness and relative gender equality (Xiang 2014).

The careful use of queer-coded references enables *Word of Honor* to navigate censorship and reach its target audience. At the same time, international viewers are likely to overlook these subtle hints and miss out on the enjoyment of decoding hidden messages.

2.2.5. Communication between a text and the cultural context

The fifth function of text, according to Lotman, refers to the communication between a text and the cultural context, wherein “the text is not an agent of a communicative act, but a full-fledged participant in it, as a source or a receiver of information” (Lotman 1988: 56). As stated further, a text may relate to its context in a metaphorical manner, “as when the text is perceived as a substitute for the overall context to which it is, in a certain respect, equivalent, or as metonymic, as when a text represents the context as a part of the whole” (Ibid.). The same text may establish different relations with different structural levels of the cultural context; also, they tend to pass from one context to another, especially in the case of long-live works of art: “when they move into another cultural context, they function as an informant that has moved to a new communicative situation and bring out hitherto latent aspects of their own coding system” (Ibid.). According to Lotman, this “self-recoding” is what makes similar the symbolic behavior of a person similar to that of a text:

Hence, a text, in likening itself to the cultural macrocosm, on the one hand becomes more significant than itself alone and acquires the features of a cultural model, while, on the other hand, it has a tendency to effect an independent behavior insofar as it likens itself to the autonomous individual (Ibid).

Some of the oldest prototexts of *Word of Honor*, such as the metaphors of cutting off the sleeves or sticking the pancakes together, have already undergone the process of “self-

recoding”. For example, the act of cutting off the sleeves has gained a distinctive place in the LGBTQ+ cultural sphere and now serves as a point of reference for later creative works, playing the role of “a descriptive mechanism” (Lotman 1988: 56). All those intertextual references come into dialogue to construct a new text – a vibrant world of *Word of Honor*, where people of various identities can be free. The integration of historical prototexts contributes to *Word of Honor*’s transformation into “a full-fledged participant” (*Ibid.*) of the cultural process.

In 2019, Priest was selected as one of the five most classical Chinese web-novel writers by *Chinawriter*³⁹. This initiative is aimed at identifying representative works of various literary genres and establishing them as models for the future development of Chinese literature (Shao 2019). Two prioritized selection criteria include the relevance of the genre and the work’s level of representation, including creativity, maturity, and influence. Pure Love (LGBTQ+ themed stories) has become an important genre with a proven influence potential in China.

Moreover, the drama *Word of Honor* has itself become one of the most iconic and frequently cited examples in discussions about dangai dramas in the “Pure Love” genre (Chongmu 2021; Liu 2021; Luo 2021). Also, it has become a reference point in the exploration of LGBTQ+ topics within the context of Chinese cinema (Jiemian News 2021). For instance, gamers duplicated the Four Seasons Mansion of *Word of Honor* in a construction and management simulation (CMS) game, in which they welcome virtual avatars belonging to the LGBTQ+ community (Amengshuo 2021). Thus, the drama functions “[a]s an informant that has moved to a new communicative situation” (Lotman 1988: 56). *Word of Honor* serves as both a participant and a reference point in the cultural dialogue of LGBTQ+, which exists in the drama on the level of connotation. In this ongoing “self-recoding”, *Word of Honor* raises its significance as “a cultural model” (*Ibid.*), gradually solidifying its position within the LGBTQ+ cultural sphere while simultaneously influencing other cultural entities.

The process of autocommunication helps to enrich the LGBTQ+ culture, not only within China, but also on a global scale. As stated by Lotman, “[t]he powerful external textual eruptions in a culture conceived of as a huge text not only lead the culture to [...] introduce

³⁹ Even though the work selected by *Chinawriter* was *The Light in The Night* (2016) rather than *A Tale of the Wanderers* (2010), both works fall under the genre of Pure Love and cater to a similar audience.

them into its memory but also stimulate the culture's self-development, with unpredictable results" (Lotman 1994: 379). Even though dangai dramas cannot explicitly portray LGBTQ+ identities, their growing popularity can make valuable contributions to the development of the LGBTQ+ culture and bring surprises to the global LGBTQ+ culture.

2.3. Discussion

As stated in Spinks' article *Gay Erase*, based on his observation of British history, "LGBTQ lives have either been relegated, omitted or expunged" (Spinks 2019: 17):

Any civilisation is characterised by its past. It is in looking back with a good dose of navel-gazing that we find our collective identity. Nations rise and fall and people come and go, as do attitudes and societal norm. Yet as an LGBTQ community, the history of our people is often lost to us. We don't inherit a societal rulebook from our families, nor are we taught the great deeds of our gay ancestors. So as we start out our lifelong personal journeys, how do we discover our community identity if we don't know much about those who have gone before us? (Ibid., 16)

As demonstrated previously in this thesis, *Word of Honor* have traversed many Chinese LGBTQ+ representations in history and culture, carefully selecting and coding them into its own narrative. Simultaneously, it has evolved into a new message-carrier metatext, which needs to be interpreted by the audience themselves. In this sense, *Word of Honor* functions as a "mediator" and "interlocutor" at the same time. As a "mediator", *Word of Honor* selects iconic Chinese LGBTQ+ representations, preserving the historical records of the community, reminding the audience of the LGBTQ+ heritage, and serving as a "queer archive" (Halberstam 2005: 170). The process of finding the intertextual references in *Word of Honor* is also a procedure of rediscovering the Chinese LGBTQ+ history and fostering resonance with Chinese LGBTQ+ culture for the audience. As the "interlocutor", *Word of Honor* creates its own metatext of new queer-coded messages and contributes to creating an additional layer of LGBTQ+ memory. By playing both roles, *Word of Honor* helps to uncover the Chinese LGBTQ+ legacy while simultaneously creating a new legacy for future generations. However, upon reviewing the intertextual references in the drama, it might raise a question among the audience: Why do so many historical sources primarily focus on male love without taking another LGBTQ+ identities into account? Does *Word of Honor* exploit the LGBTQ+ topic merely for profits or other purposes? To address these questions, this thesis may delve into

Chinese LGBTQ+ history for answers.

It is evident that the records of women significantly and rapidly decreased after the time period of the Five Dynasties. Simultaneously, the portrayal of women in historical texts was primarily produced under the male gaze, which deteriorated and exhibited extreme tendencies after the Five Dynasties. Since then, there has been a trend to confine nature and humanity of women, encouraging them to guard their purity for men and restricting their freedom of expression (Xiang 2022). Over time, the inequality between men and women intensified under the patriarchal social structure, resulting into a broader representation of male homosexuality over other identities.

A closer look into the historical records about Chinese LGBTQ+ individuals can reveal a strong connection between beautiful feminine looks and homosexuality. For instance, Han Zigao from the Chen period was famous for his beautiful appearance and described by historians “as beautiful as a woman” (Yao 1972). The beauty of Han has sparked rumors about a romantic relationship between him and Emperor Wen of Chen (which, however, cannot be supported by conclusive evidence), leading people from subsequent dynasties to fabricate a narrative of their love affair. In the Chen period, Han Zigao was a general, however, due to his appearance, his sexual preference became a subject of skepticism in later periods. In the Ming Dynasty, drawing on previous works of homosexual literature by various writers and anecdotes, Wang Jide created an opera called *Male Empress* using the female-resembling image of Han (Dong 1959). In this context, the image of homosexual figures in traditional Chinese LGBTQ+ texts has been historically and culturally linked to effeminacy to a certain degree.

Additionally, one of the prominent entertainment industries in ancient China was operas. A distinctive feature of Chinese opera performances is the practice of gender-crossing casting, where male actors also portray female characters. The societal concept of male dominance over females gradually marginalized female participation in public opera performances, leading to their replacement by male performers (Li 2006). In other words, the roles of opera performers in ancient China were predominantly occupied by males (which is ironic, as some of these female-playing actors eventually became oppressed by the higher class of men). Furthermore, the prohibition of female prostitution among officials during the Ming and Qing dynasties contributed to the prevalence of male prostitution and male lovers during that era

(Yangcheng News 2013). According to Lun Xun, the male erotic industry, primarily dominated by male opera artists, experienced significant growth and prosperity during the Ming and Qing dynasties, lasting for over five centuries in ancient China (Lu 1981: 256). This phenomenon is also reflected in many artistic works, including *Dream in The Red Chamber* (a male opera performer called Jiang Yuhan forced to be the lover of a prince), *M. Butterfly* (1993), and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). However, both professions, opera performers and sex workers, belonged to “Xia Jiu Liu”, the lowest social status in ancient China. This situation marked a change compared to previous dynasties, such as the Han Dynasty: for instance, Dong Xian, the protagonist of the Duan Xiu story who lived during the Han Dynasty, held the rank of a general (Ban 1962). In this context, discrimination towards homosexual people and the whole LGBTQ+ community in later China appears to be rooted in historical prejudices.



Figure 4. The image of Shi Peipu, a male opera performer, enacted by Zun Long (*M. Butterfly* 1993)



Figure 5. The photograph of a male prostitute in Qing Dynasty (Zhao 2022)

Worth noting, the presence of the LGBTQ+ community during the Ming and Qing era appears to be more complicated, and rife with contradictions. In reality, some of bi- and homosexual men became playthings of wealthy-class men. Many artistic works depict romantic relationships between LGBTQ+ characters, some of which fought for true love despite being oppressed by higher-class men (e.g., the novel *Bian Er Chai*, 1985, and Jiang Yuhan was forced to be the lover of a prince in *Dream in The Red Chamber*, 2012). In comparison, other characters indulge themselves in being oppressed and even assist others in oppressing fellow LGBTQ people (e.g. the novel *Yi Xiang Chun Zhi*, 1996). This phenomenon inspired the authors of that era to use the LGBTQ+ identities as a form of resistance against the oppression of the patriarchal society. Therefore, the discrimination towards the non-heterosexual people (and, generally, to all people who are not cis-heteronormative men) in later China find its origin in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Thus, a limited representation of LGBTQ+ community in *Word of Honor* can be considered not as a drawback of the drama itself, but as a characteristic of overall representation of LGBTQ+ in Chinese culture.

From the late Qing Dynasty, there was a tendency to learn Western culture, which resulted in a thought wave of Total Westernization in the 20th century, where all Western culture was perceived as good, and all Chinese culture as bad (Alexlvx 2013). With the rise of Christianity under the pressure of Opium War in the nineteenth century (Sun 2017), the idea that homosexuality is a sin (Koenig, Dykman 2012: 42-43) gained prominence in contemporary China, causing the conservative social attitudes towards the LGBTQ+. This ideology has gradually shaped societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community from supporting or at least empathizing to being critical and desiring to suppress their existence. However, with the rapid development of technology, the LGBTQ+ community is increasingly exposed, especially on the Internet, which serves as an open space for various voices; as a result, the LGBTQ+ community cannot be concealed anymore. Initially confined to web-novels, the development of Chinese danmei culture gained attention and influence, gradually extending its reach to various platforms. Dangai dramas emerged as a response to the continuing conservative stance and the censorship of danmei dramas in modern China.

One of the most distinguishing features of dangai dramas is the omission of erotic scenes

compared to danmei works. It is evident that *Word of Honor*, like other dangai dramas, has altered the sexual content from the original novel. However, it shows respect for the LGBTQ+ community, which distinguishes it from some dangai dramas that rush for profit-making and casually change content to meet censorship requirements. To compensate for the omission of explicit LGBTQ+ scenes, *Word of Honor* integrates numerous historical prototexts, for instance, adds Chinese love poems to the lyrics of Wen, enhancing his flirtatious personality and conveying the “queer” characteristic in a natural and logical way. Additionally, *Word of Honor* places greater emphasis on the spiritual connection and emotional bonding of the characters compared to physical interactions, which might be censored. For example, *Word of Honor* arranges several emotional climaxes for the protagonists, such as addressing each other as “Zhi Ji”, drinking under the moonlight, and even sacrificing their lives for each other. Step by step, the intimacy and trust gradually build between the characters. In this sense, *Word of Honor* leverages censorship regulations, guiding the audience to focus more on the spiritual world of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, the “self-recoding” of *Word of Honor* creates a new text for the LGBTQ+ cultural context, positioning itself as a reference to others. The more attention it gains, the more powerful it gets. The series has thus established its unique position in the realm of dangai dramas, evident from related searches on Google: *Word of Honor* is closely followed by the keyword “dangai dramas”, and there are more than 130k results for dangai drama and *Word of Honor* written together. Further, as “a cultural model” (Lotman 1988: 56), *Word of Honor* serves as a model for subsequent dangai dramas on how to effectively adapt danmei works by incorporating prototexts from Chinese LGBTQ+ history.

To sum up, *Word of Honor* not only communicates essential elements of Chinese LGBTQ+ culture to the audience but also ensures its further development. Despite facing limitations in representing the whole spectrum of the LGBTQ+ (a constraint rooted in historical contexts), the series strives to be inclusive. Even under the censorship, *Word of Honor* manages to use the legacy of Chinese LGBTQ+ history to emphasize spiritual connections between characters rather than sensual desires, demonstrating respect for the emotions and lives of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, the drama enhances the queer archive and supports the global development of LGBTQ+ culture. Based on these considerations, it can be concluded that *Word of Honor* is not a product of queer-baiting but a thoughtful dangai drama that uses the strategy of queer-coding to navigate conservative censorship while increasing the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community.

3. Conclusion

This thesis explores the representation of the Chinese LGBTQ+ community in dangai dramas under censorship. Motivated by the author's observations and the controversies surrounding queerbaiting in dangai dramas, the research aims to identify intertextual references employed by *Word of Honor* and discern their functions. Given the massive production of dangai dramas and the increasing instances of queerbaiting, the study also explores the evolution of LGBTQ+ culture in China. Finally, this paper aims to discuss under which conditions *Word of Honor* can be regarded as an example of queer coding.

The methodological framework of the thesis is based on Boris Gasparov's motif notion (1994) and Lotman's five types of communication (1988). Additionally, the research combines the perspectives of semiotics of culture, translation studies and queer studies: for the first purpose, the methods of Delabastita's five types of translation, Popovič's prototext and metatext and Kristeva's intertextuality are applied; the methods of Lotman's five types of communication are employed for the second objective; the third goal involves the application of queer theory, especially the notions of queerbaiting, queer coding and queer archive.

The first part of analysis examines seven intertextual motifs, namely, Chinese ancient poetry, three lives, pancakes, weapons, cutting off the sleeves, moonlight and titles. The prototexts of those motifs lie in Chinese culture and history, and in the original danmei novel, *A Tale of the Wanderers* (2010). These prototexts undergo alternation and coding in the metatext, *Word of Honor*, through the use of addition, repetition, deletion, permutation and substitution. Throughout this transformation, *Word of Honor* compensates for the exclusion of explicit scenes and direct love expressions, emphasizing spiritual and emotional bonding between characters. This careful and inclusive approach in the queer-coding process of translation reflects a profound respect for the LGBTQ+ community.

The second phase of analysis focuses on the functions of intertextuality and the different types of text communication. The analysis has shown that the intertextual references enable *Word of Honor*: a) to convey the positive image of the LGBTQ+ community to the audience; b) reconnect the audience to LGBTQ+ culture traditions; c) resonate with the queer-coded characters; d) navigate the censorship and express solidarity; e) enrich the LGBTQ+ culture. However, for the international audience without any guidance, these intertextual references

may lose their intended functions.

The discussion based on queer theory provides a comprehensive perspective on the importance of representation, reveals the origins of discrimination, and highlights shifts of public opinion towards the LGBTQ+ community, whose identity often faces suppression due to contemporary conservatism. Acting both as a mediator and an interlocutor, *Word of Honor* conveys queer-coded messages to the audience and generates new queer messages based on the historical prototexts. Simultaneously, the continuous “self-recoding” of *Word of Honor* turns it into a reference source and a classic icon, establishing a distinctive role as a cultural model for the future dangai dramas.

Despite the censorship and other historical limitations, *Word of Honor*'s respect for the community, careful translation with queer coding, subsequent popularity, and contributions to LGBTQ+ culture exemplify successful strategies for inclusivity and genuine representation. The findings of the thesis could be valuable for further exploration of the subject and contribute to the global development of LGBTQ+ culture and acceptance of the community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: China dynasty timeline

China Dynasty Timeline				
Dynasty		Years	Capital	Current Location
Xia dynasty		2070–1600 BC	(1) Anyi, (2) Yangcheng	(1) Xia County, Shanxi, (2) Dengfeng, Henan
Shang dynasty		1600–1046 BC	(1) Hao, (2) Yin	(1) Shangqiu, Henan, (2) Anyang, Henan
Zhou dynasty	Western Zhou dynasty	1046–771 BC	Haojing	Xi'an, Shanxi
	Eastern Zhou dynasty	770–256 BC	Luoyi	Luoyang, Henan
	Spring and Autumn period	771–476 BC	Luoyi	Luoyang, Henan
	Warring States period	476–221 BC	Luoyi	Luoyang, Henan
Qin dynasty		221–206 BC	Xianyang	Xianyang, Shanxi
Han dynasty	Western Han dynasty	206 BC– 23 AD	Chang'an	Xi'an, Shanxi
	Eastern Han dynasty	25–220 AD	Luoyang	Luoyang, Henan
Three Kingdoms	Wei	220–265 AD	Luoyang	Luoyang, Henan
	Shu	221–263 AD	Cheng Du	Chengdu, Sichuan
	Wu	222–280 AD	Jiangye	Nanjing, Jiangsu
Western Jin dynasty		265–316 AD	Luoyang	Luoyang, Henan
Eastern Jin dynasty and Sixteen Kingdoms	Eastern Jin dynasty	317–420 AD	Jiankang	Nanjing, Jiangsu
	Sixteen Kingdoms	304–439 AD	-	-

Southern and Northern Dynasties	Song	420-479 AD	Jiankang	Nanjing, Jiangsu
	Qi	479-502 AD	Jiankang	Nanjing, Jiangsu
	Liang	502-557 AD	Jiankang	Nanjing, Jiangsu
	Chen	557-589 AD	Jiankang	Nanjing, Jiangsu
	Bei Wei	386-534 AD	(1) Pingcheng, (2) Luoyang	(1) Datong, Shanxi, (2) Luoyang, Henan
	Dong Wei	534-550 AD	Ye	Linzhang, Hebei
	Bei Qi	550-577 AD	Ye	Linzhang, Hebei
	Xi Wei	535-556 AD	Chang'an	Xi'an, Shanxi
	Bei Zhou	557-581 AD	Chang'an	Xi'an, Shanxi
Sui dynasty		581-618 AD	Daxing	Xi'an, Shanxi
Tang dynasty		618-907 AD	Chang'an	Xi'an, Shanxi
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms	Liang	907-923 AD	Bian	Kaifeng, Henan
	Tang	923-936 AD	Luoyang	Luoyang, Henan
	Jin	936-946 AD	Bian	Kaifeng, Henan
	Han	947-950 AD	Bian	Kaifeng, Henan
	Zhou	951-960 AD	Bian	Kaifeng, Henan
	Ten Kingdoms	902-979 AD	-	-
Northern Song dynasty		960-1127 AD	Kaifeng	Kaifeng, Henan
Southern Song dynasty		1127-1279 AD	Linan	Hangzhou, Zhejiang
Liao dynasty		916-1125 AD	Huangdu	Bairin Right Banner
Western Xia		1038-1227 AD	Xing Qing Fu	Yinchuan, Ningxia
Jin dynasty		1115-1234 AD	(1) Huining, (2) Zhongdu, (3) Kaifeng	(1) A'cheng, Heilongjiang, (2) Beijing, (3) Kaifeng, Henan
Yuan dynasty		1271-1368 AD	Dadu	Beijing
Ming dynasty		1368-1644 AD	Beijing	Beijing
Qing dynasty		1644-1912 AD	Beijing	Beijing

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Appendix 2: The list of released dangai dramas

首播年份	原作者	原著	影视剧	双男主	播出平台
2015	柴鸡蛋	逆袭	逆袭之爱上情敌		腾讯视频
2016	柴鸡蛋	你丫上瘾了	上瘾		中国OTT下架 ^[4]
	青罗扇子	重生之名流巨星	重生之名流巨星		腾讯视频
	剑走偏锋	烟袋斜街10号	烟袋斜街10号		
	赵铭	逆光源	逆光源		
	王泡小泡	错生的瞳孔	错生		
	酥油饼	识汝不识丁	识汝不识丁		优酷视频
2017	南枝	愉此一生	愉此一生		腾讯视频
	水千丞	针锋对决	对决争锋		爱奇艺视频
2018	蝶之灵	最强男神	最强男神		优酷视频
	柴鸡蛋	势不可挡	盛势		腾讯视频
	Priest	镇魂	镇魂		优酷视频
	耳雅	S.C.I.谜案集	S.C.I.谜案集		优酷视频
2019	艾乐直	晨阳	晨阳		爱奇艺视频
	墨香铜臭	魔道祖师	陈情令		腾讯视频
	一只大雁	论如何错误地套路一个魔教教主	少年江湖物语		爱奇艺视频
2020	水如天儿	鬓边不是海棠红	鬓边不是海棠红		爱奇艺视频
	梦溪石	成化十四年	成化十四年		爱奇艺视频
2021	Priest	天涯客	山河令		优酷视频
2023	大风刮过	张公案	君子盟 (原剧名《张公案》 ^[5])		腾讯视频
	Priest	默读	光渊 (原剧名《深渊》 ^[6])		优酷视频
待播	Priest	杀破狼	烽火流金		腾讯视频
	金十四钗	在黑暗中	逆光者		芒果TV
	肉包不吃肉	二哈和他的白猫师尊	皓衣行		腾讯视频
	风弄	蝙蝠	夜燕白		芒果TV
	巫哲	撒野	左肩有你		腾讯视频
	非天夜翔	夺梦	夺梦		爱奇艺视频
	Priest	山河表里	山河表里		优酷视频

(English Name in order)

2016:

Counterattack

Addicted

Revive

Yandaixiejie No.10

Reverse light source

Webisode

Love is More Than A Word

2017:

Till Death Tear Us Apart

Beloved Enemy

2018:

The Strongest Men Of God

Advance Bravely

Guardian

S.C.I. Mystery

2019:

Breaking Down

The Untamed

The Birth of The Drama King

Winter Begonia

The Sleuth of Ming Dynasty

Word of Honor

A League of Nobleman

Justice in the Dark

Source retrieved from Wiki,
<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%80%BD%E6%94%B9%E5%89%A7>, 22.05.2023.

Kokkuvõte

Intertekstuaalsuse funktsioonid LGBTQ+ kujutamises "Word of Honor" näitel

Selle lõputöö eesmärk on analüüsida LGBTQ+ esinduste arengut Hiinas, võttes aluseks danmei romaani põhjal kohandatud telesarja "Word of Honor" näite. Kuigi praegune ühiskondlik suhtumine LGBTQ+ kogunasse on Hiinas pigem negatiivne, on Hiinal siiski rikkalik ajalooline ja kultuuriline LGBTQ+ pärand.

Lõputöö eesmärk on tuvastada draamas kasutatud intertekstuaalsed viited ja eristada nende funktsioone. Arvestades dangai draamade massilist tootmist ja sagenevaid veidrusi, uurib dissertatsioon ka LGBTQ+ kultuuri arengut Hiinas. Lõpuks on selle töö eesmärk arutada, millistel tingimustel võib Word of Honor'i pidada "queer-kodeerimise" näiteks.

Metodoloogiline raamistik põhineb Boris Gasparovi motiivimõistel (1994) ja Lotmani viiel kommunikatsioonitüübil (1988). Lisaks kaasab lõputöö kultuurisemiootika, tõlketeaduse ja kväärteooria vaatenurki: Delabastita viit tõlketüüpi (1993), Popoviči prototeksti ja metateksti (1976), Kristeva intertekstuaalsust (1986), samuti ka *queerbaitingi* (Ng 2017), kväärkodeerimise (Russo 1981) ja kväärarhiivi (Halberstam 2005) mõisteid.

Analüüsi esimene osa käsitleb seitset intertekstuaalset motiivi, nimelt hiina iidset luulet, kolme elu, pannkooke, relvi, varrukate mahalõikamist, kuuvalgust ja pealkirju. Nende motiivide prototekstid peituvad Hiina kultuuris ja ajaloos ning romaanis "A Tale of the Wanderers" (2010). Neid prototekste muudetakse ja kodeeritakse metatekstis "Word of Honor" liitmise, kordamise, kustutamise, permutatsiooni ja asendamise abil. Kogu selle ümberkujundamise abil kompenseerib "Word of Honor" erootiliste stseenide ja otseste armastusavalduste väljajätmist, rõhutades tegelaste vahelist vaimset ja emotsionaalset sidet. See hoolikas ja kaasav lähenemine tõlke protsessile peegeldab sügavat austust LGBTQ+ kogukonna vastu.

Analüüsi teine samm keskendub intertekstuaalsuse funktsioonidele ja erinevatele tekstikommunikatsiooni tüüpidele. Analüüs on näidanud, et intertekstuaalsed viited võimaldavad: a) edastada kuulajateni LGBTQ+ kogukonna positiivset kuvandit; b) siduda publik uuesti LGBTQ+ kultuuritraditsioonidega; c) resoneerima queer-koodiga tähelepanekidega; d) liikuda tsensuuris ja väljendada solidaarsust; e) rikastada LGBTQ+ kultuuri.

Rahvusvahelise publiku jaoks ilma igasuguste juhisteta võivad need intertekstuaalsed viited aga kaotada oma ettenähtud funktsioonid.

Kväärteoorial põhinev arutelu annab tervikliku vaatenurga esindatuse olulisusele, paljastab diskrimineerimise päritolu ja toob esile avaliku arvamuse nihked LGBTQ+ kogukonna suunas, mille identiteet on tänapäevase konservatiivsuse tõttu sageli alla surutud. Olles nii vahendaja kui ka vestluspartnerina, edastab Word of Honor publikule queer-kodeeritud sõnumeid ja genereerib ajalooliste prototekstide põhjal uusi queer-sõnumeid. Samal ajal on see tulevaste dangai draamade kultuuriline mudel.

Vaatamata tsensuurile ja muudele piirangutele töötab Word of Honor välja eduka strateegia kaasavaks ja ehedaks esindamiseks: see näitab austust kogukonna vastu, tõlgib hoolikalt prototeksti queer-kodeerimise abil ja aitab edasi arendada Hiina LGBTQ+ kultuuri. Lõputöö tulemused võivad olla väärtuslikud teema edasisel uurimisel ning aidata kaasa LGBTQ+ kultuuri globaalsele arengule ja kogukonna aktsepteerimisele.