

***YOUR LOVE IS QING: WOMEN IN THE DANGAI DRAMA
WORD OF HONOR***

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Abstract

Since the reinforcement of censorship on homosexual content in China's mainstream media, *dangai* dramas—online series adaptations of male-to-male romance *danmei* fiction—have utilized queer subtext as a compromised representational strategy. This thesis analyzes the 2021 *dangai* drama entitled *Word of Honor* by employing Eve Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial desire and the Chinese literary concept of *qing* (情). The study's contribution is twofold. First, it challenges the Western binaries that Sedgwick identifies in nineteenth-century English literature—homosexual versus homosocial. Second, it develops a new and culturally specific theoretical framework—*queer qing*—for the analysis of subtextual male bonds in censored Chinese *dangai* dramas.

By analyzing three pivotal scenes meticulously selected through a systematic filtering process, this research traces how Gu Xiang facilitates the articulation and circulation of *qing* between the male protagonists, Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu. As the drama's only major female character, Gu resembles a younger sister to Wen and Zhou. Rather than serving as a barrier or romantic rival, Gu Xiang performs a unique narrative and affective role: she mediates, interprets, and enables the development of queer *qing* between the two men all at once. In doing so, she legitimizes queer male bonds within heteronormative narrative constraints and reveals how *Word of Honor* transforms censorship into a site of creative negotiation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Prior to the mid- to late nineteenth century, homosexuality was a pervasive and generally tolerated social phenomenon in China, provided that men engaging in same-sex relations fulfilled their familial obligations by marrying women and producing offspring (Wu, 2003). During the late Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), homoerotic themes were frequently depicted in literature, opera, and visual art (e.g., *Bian Er Chai* 弁而釵), reflecting a cultural milieu that did not treat same-sex desire as inherently taboo (Kang, 2009). However, while imperial Chinese culture accommodated such representations, homosexuality has become ideologically fraught since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949). This paradigm shift is exemplified by the emergence of state-sponsored homophobic discourse (Zhang & Zhuang, 2025) and the increasingly stringent regulation of male homoromantic and homoerotic fiction (Hu et al., 2024).¹

In recent years, *danmei* (耽美) fiction and its transmedia adaptations, known as *dangai* (耽改), have introduced a specific portrayal of male romance, complicating media representations of queer love in contemporary China. Originating from Japanese boys’ love (BL) manga, Chinese *danmei* fiction emerged in the 1970s as a literary genre centred on male-male romantic and erotic relationships. Notwithstanding the prevalence of homosexual themes in *danmei* content, its producers and consumers are predominantly women and sexual minorities (Yang & Xu, 2017). Notably, the increasing popularity of *danmei* novels has contributed to their huge commercial success, resulting in various transmedia adaptations referred to as *dangai*² (耽

¹ These restrictive conditions are in stark contrast to the media landscapes of Hong Kong and Taiwan region, where portrayals of queer identities face significantly fewer constraints (Kong, 2023).

² *Dangai* (Chinese character: 耽改) is an abbreviation for *danmei gaibian* (Chinese character: 耽美改编), “adaptations of *danmei*.” *Dan* (耽) is short for *danmei* (耽美), and *gai* (改) is short for *gaibian* (改编), which means “adapt(ation).”

改). These adaptations include, but are not limited to, audio dramas, web series, and comics (Yang & Xu, 2017, p. 3). The year 2021, in particular, witnessed a surge of *dangai* dramas (*dangai ju*, 耽改剧), notably adapted from popular *danmei* novels. In contrast to BL dramas in other Asian countries, such as Thailand, Japan, and South Korea, which frequently depict male-to-male romance in explicit ways, *dangai* dramas circumvent China's stringent media censorship of homosexual representation by portraying romance as non-sexual *bromance* (*xiongdi qing*, 兄弟情³), which subtly alludes to romantic subtext between male protagonists.

In response to the tightening state censorship policies that prohibit explicit LGBTQ+ narratives, Chinese media producers have adopted the *bromance-as-masquerade*⁴ strategy. This involves meticulously crafting male bonds in a manner that is *homosocial* rather than overtly *homosexual* (DeAngelis, 2014). This approach enables the production team to circumvent regulatory penalties while allowing audiences, particularly dedicated *danmei* fans, to interpret the subtextual queer relationships within the drama (Hu & Wang, 2021; Hu et al., 2023). At the core of this process lies the Chinese literary concept of *qing* (情), a nuanced emotional bond involving profound *affects* and *desires* (Luo, 2023; Wang, 2019; Liang Ge, 2024). Consequently, *qing* emerges as a pivotal narrative instrument, facilitating the portrayal of male intimacy in a manner that is deemed permissible under censorship while preserving queer interpretive potentialities.

A preliminary investigation of the existing academic literature on *danmei* reveals that most studies have focused on its capacity to serve as a medium through which female individuals

³ Similar to the blend word “bromance” consisting of “bro(ther)” and “romance” in English, the Chinese term “*xiongdi qing* (兄弟情) also consists of brother (*xiong*, 兄 the elder brother, *di*, 弟 the younger brother) and *qing* (情, emotional bond).

⁴ This strategy is further explained in Chapter 2.2.

can challenge heteronormative social constructs endorsed by the state, and, by extension, articulate nonheteronormative desires (Liang Ge, 2024). However, recent academic interest has shifted toward understanding the specific strategies *dangai* employed to subtextually represent queer love within restrictive sociopolitical contexts (e.g., Luo, 2023). This thesis builds upon the scholarship on queer subtext in popular *dangai* dramas by investigating the construction of such subtext in the 2021 drama *Word of Honor* (Cheng et al., 2021). The drama's focal point is the triangular relationship among the three central characters: Zhou Zishu, Wen Kexing, and Gu Xiang.

In contrast to the conventional heterosexual romance narrative revolving around rivalry between two men with the woman as the object of competition, this specific triangular relationship positions Gu Xiang between two male protagonists and helps create queer subtext under the guise of *qing*. By combining Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985/2016) concept of *male homosocial desire* with the Chinese literary concept of *qing*, this research proposes *queer qing* as a new framework for analyzing the subtextual representation of male bonds in censored Chinese *dangai* dramas.

In conjunction with this framework, the research raises two research questions:

RQ1: How is the triangular relationship among Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu, and Gu Xiang constructed and evolved as depicted in *Word of Honor*?

RQ2: What roles does Gu Xiang assume in formulating the queer subtext within their triangular relationship?

Through these two questions, this research reexamines the frequently disregarded female characters in the *dangai* (and *danmei* as a whole) narrative. It examines how female characters assume a pivotal role in articulating queer love within the constraints imposed by media

censorship. The objective of this research is to provide a culturally specific theorization of male bonds by analyzing three pivotal scenes selected from a systemic filtering process. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader scholarship on the representation of queer love under censorship in contemporary popular culture.

After delineating the research objectives, it is imperative to contextualize *Word of Honor* within its broader cultural and sociopolitical context. A comprehensive understanding of how *danmei* and *dangai* dramas navigate censorship pressures and heteronormative constraints is essential for a nuanced examination of the triangular dynamic and subtextual queer representation in the genre. Consequently, the subsequent chapter provides a comprehensive survey of *danmei* as a distinct literary genre, examines the historical impact of censorship on its adaptations, and elucidates the rationale behind the significance of *Word of Honor* as a case study for analyzing queer subtext.

Chapter 2: Context

This chapter provides the necessary contextual information to understand how *dangai* dramas (and *danmei* fiction as a whole) have continuously been compromised during negotiations with media authorities. Due to media censorship, *danmei* novels are deprived of sexual descriptions and *dangai* dramas were eventually banned outright, even after the complete purging of the essential narrative of male-to-male romance. As a result, *Word of Honor* becomes the last *dangai* drama to be streamed in China. Ultimately, following the complicated evolution and diminishing trajectory of *dangai* dramas, this chapter explains the significance of *Word of Honor* as a case study in exploring queer subtext.

2.1 *Danmei* as a Distinctive Fiction Genre

2.1.1 *Definition and Origins*

As a fiction genre, *danmei* essentially refers to male homosexual romance and/or erotica. In China, while *danmei* is primarily known in novel format, this genre has seen an increasing variety of transmedia adaptations in recent years. Originating from Japanese BL manga and fan culture, Chinese *danmei* has “merged with a diverse range of local and global media and celebrity cultures and developed into a transnational, all-inclusive, and female-dominated meta-fan culture” (Yang & Xu, 2017, p. 3). In addition, after being introduced to China through the worldwide spread of Japanese ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture, *danmei* has developed into a variety of formats, such as “fiction, manga, anime, games, audio drama, MV songs, and cosplay” (Yang & Xu, 2017, p. 3). Particularly, *danmei* fiction, in the format of online novels, is regarded as “one of the most rapidly growing businesses in the internet industry and has become a primary source for films and TV series” (Hu et al., 2023, p. 836). Among the various types of

dangai, *dangai* dramas have achieved significant commercial success and gained widespread popularity worldwide (Hu et al., 2023, p. 837; Wrochna, 2023).

2.1.2 Transnational Influences and Chinese Adaptations

While *danmei* has similar counterparts in different countries, it is embedded within distinct sociopolitical characteristics. These characteristics are thus beneficial for this research to explore a non-Western media representation of queer love. Compared to Japanese BL and Euro-American slash fiction,⁵ the term *danmei* is a widely adopted genre label in China. While BL also remains an umbrella term referring to fiction with male homosexual romance (including slash fiction), the usage of *danmei* has prevailed in China in recent years (Hao, 2023). In most cases, *danmei* is used as the generic name for Chinese-language male homoromantic and/or homoerotic fiction (Yang & Xu, 2017; Hao, 2023; Liang Ge, 2024). Therefore, this proposal uses *danmei* to emphasize its distinctive features and the complex Chinese context in which *danmei* is created, consumed, and adapted.

While similar in theme, *danmei* distinguishes itself from other fiction genres depicting male-to-male romance and/or erotica for several reasons. First, as part of the global queer love narratives, *danmei* has absorbed elements from Japanese BL and Anglophone slash fiction, resulting in a diverse readership. Yang and Xu's (2017) study identifies three main groups within the Chinese *danmei* community: the original Chinese-language fiction community, the Japanese community that consumes and adapts Japanese BL, and the Euro-American community centred around Western media and slash culture. Although each circle follows its path of growth and

⁵ Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction featuring romantic or sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex. The label "slash" refers to the tagging of the main protagonists with a slash (e.g., most popular Star Trek slash pairing: "Kirk/Spock" (Döring, 2021)).

engages with distinct media products, the boundaries between them are flexible and permeable, allowing for frequent cultural exchange. As a result, by benefiting from both Japanese BL and Western slash, *danmei* culture has largely become globalized, rather than being limited to the local Chinese-language fan community. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that, not unlike the BL and slash community, the *danmei* fan community is still dominated by heterosexual female creators and readers (Wong, 2023).

Second, another characteristic of *danmei* lies in its intertwining with other literary genres. While a majority of *danmei* authors situate their narratives in pre- or after modern Chinese society in an attempt to appeal to a more domestic viewership (Hao, 2023, p. 69), there are also authors trying to “hybridize” *danmei* with other popular genres, such as “steampunk and zombie apocalypse,” out of “the dual pressure of the monetary extraction of media capital and the state’s moral censorship” (Ni, 2020, p. 182). Additionally, Ni (2020) notes that the combination of non-realist genres, such as science fiction, with narratives of patriotism lends legitimacy to *danmei* writers’ desire to depict homoerotic romance. As such, *danmei* fiction is expected to hybridize with other literary genres to dilute narratives of male homosexuality to enter mainstream media and appeal to a larger readership.

Moreover, *danmei* fiction is predominantly available online, and its commercialization is generally restrained because of extremely rigid publishing laws in China. Most Chinese *danmei* fiction is published online rather than in print manga, unlike in Japan (Williams, 2020). These novels can only be printed if *danmei* writers illegally self-publish or publish through some Taiwanese publishers at the risk of being arrested in China (Wang, 2019). As a result, *danmei* producers commonly choose to share their works—whether in the format of novels, serials, or comics—on online platforms for relatively more creative freedom (Chao, 2016). As Hao (2023,

p. 68) underlines, the relatively light regulation of the internet, compared to print media, and the freedom that anonymity offers allow for significant online engagement between fans, contributing to an increasing readership.

2.2 *Danmei* Novels Under Censorship

Ever since its introduction and adaptation in China, *danmei* has been subject to pornography censorship due to its explicit sexual descriptions in its early years. Consequently, *danmei* is only legal in China if it is purely romantic in nature; including erotica in works could constitute a crime if they become popular and are reported to the police.

Although *danmei* is one of the most popular genres online, its novels have long been vulnerable to censorship under anti-pornography regulations. In fact, prior to the internet, the circulation of obscene and indecent materials was considered a criminal offence. In the criminal laws and directives issued by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT, the government department overseeing the mass media), there are circular definitions of *obscene* (淫秽) and *pornography* (色情), leaving a large and rather ambiguous space for law enforcement (Yan, 2014, p. 389).

In practice, “the portrayal of sex, either gay or straight, in media productions generally has been judged to be within the domain of pornography” (Hu & Wang, 2021, p. 673) and *danmei* novels are under even more severe scrutiny due to their “dual association with homosexuality and pornography” (Yang & Xu, 2017, p. 4). Consequently, as the nature of *danmei* fiction revolves around fantasies on romantic or homoerotic relationships, both platforms and *danmei* writers risk being punished for “producing, publishing, selling, and disseminating obscene articles” (Tian, 2020b, p. 190).

A recent example of the state's harsh punishment is the *Haitang*⁶ incident (海棠事件), which occurred in June 2024 and continues to this year. According to Ge (2025, pp. 1-2), several groups of Chinese *danmei* writers were “arrested and/or released on bail pending inquiries” because of their “publishing male-male homoerotic stories on the Taiwanese BL website *Haitang Literature City*.” Despite provoking considerable public opposition and widespread online protest, the crackdown has continued with no indication of abating. Since February 2025, “at least 30 writers, nearly all of them women in their 20s, have been arrested across the country” and they could face more than 10 years in jail under China's pornography law (Ma, 2025, para. 4). Additionally, it is also noteworthy that although China's anti-pornography regulations ban all explicit sexual descriptions, “heterosexual depictions often have more leeway” (Ma, 2025, para. 8).

Due to the strict regulations surrounding gay erotica, nearly any explicit or implicit depictions of sex could be deemed a transgression.⁷ This explains why online publishing platforms are implementing more stringent rules regarding the ever-increasingly popular *danmei* genre. In contrast with the *Haitang* incident previously mentioned, the largest *danmei* platform, *Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang)*,⁸ based in mainland China, has chosen the opposite practice in an attempt to distance itself completely from any allegations regarding sexual descriptions. By enhancing stricter self-censorship, *Jinjiang* has been renowned for its “clean” and “wholesome” content (Ge, 2025, p. 2), with no tolerance for “any depiction of body parts below the neck” (Wang, 2020, p. 144; Ge, 2025). Notably, during the state's 2014 anti-porn campaign, *Jinjiang*

⁶ *Haitang* is short for *Haitang Literature City* (海棠文学城), a Taiwan-hosted platform known for *danmei* erotica.

⁷ According to Article 367(1) of the Criminal Laws, there are two exceptions of works that are not to be considered as obscene articles: “scientific works on the functioning of human bodies and on medical knowledge; and works of art and literature containing pornographic content (包含有色情内容) but having artistic value (有艺术价值)” (Yan, 2014, p. 388).

⁸ *Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang, 晋江文学城)* is one of China's leading *danmei* websites.

further coined the term *pure love* (纯爱) to replace *danmei* (耽美), as a way to avoid any association with gay erotica (Zheng, 2019; Hu et al., 2024). Consequently, current mainstream *danmei* novels are entirely reduced to male-male romance without erotica.

Adding to the problem, media censorship continues to haunt *danmei* novels and their adaptations, regardless of the significant commercial success that they have achieved in the media industry. As the Chinese-language *danmei* fan community continues to expand (Tian, 2020b, p. 192), prominent *danmei* platforms with online subscription systems have emerged (e.g., Jinjiang), allowing *danmei* fans to read original novels in a serialized form. As such, *danmei* authors can earn economic rewards when their work is purchased (Hao, 2023, p. 69).

Furthermore, when a *danmei* novel gains significant popularity, both the platform and the author can profit by selling adaptation rights to third parties willing to adapt the novel into other formats (Hu et al., 2023). However, this increased visibility can be a double-edged sword. As adaptations bring *danmei* culture into the mainstream, the heightened public attention may trigger regulatory scrutiny, resulting in the original novels being blocked or removed without clear justification. In this regard, although original *danmei* novels survive on online platforms, they are still subject to penalization by media authorities due to the mainstream success of their adaptations. This uneasy relationship between popularity and censorship creates a precarious environment for adaptations, leading directly to the emergence of *dangai* dramas as contested sites where queer subtext is simultaneously concealed and revealed.

2.3 *Dangai* Dramas

As previously mentioned, media producers can reap tremendous economic returns by investing in adaptations of popular *danmei* novels. However, due to the tightening censorship of

mainstream media, media producers must present the “de-homosexualized” *dangai*. In order to enter the mainstream media, they commonly have to tone down *danmei* novels’ “transgressive” elements—namely, homosexual and homoerotic narratives—to lower the risk of being penalized by media authorities. *Danmei* fans, therefore, use the term *dangai dramas* (耽改剧) to highlight the implicit representation of male-male romance in this type of drama, as opposed to “authentic” *danmei dramas* (耽美剧) or *BL dramas* (BL 剧), which are now banned in China (Hu et al., 2023, p. 837).⁹

In the context of China’s escalating legislative control over homosexual narratives in mainstream media, the adaptation of *danmei* novels into *dangai* dramas has undergone substantial changes and compromises (Wang, 2019, p. 46; Nim, 2022). This phenomenon partially elucidates the adoption of the “*bromance-as-masquerade*” strategy by *dangai* dramas, utilizing homosocial bromance as a means to depict male-male romance, with the dual objectives of circumventing censorship and engaging with mainstream media (Hu et al., 2023). In this sense, male characters’ intimacy would be represented as strong emotional bonds while allowing fans to proactively construct the complete romance through their engagement, such as commenting and creating fan fiction (Hu & Wang, 2020). Consequently, the focus of *dangai* dramas is frequently narrowed to portrayals of bromance or “socialist brotherhood” as ridiculed by Chinese *danmei* fans (Ng & Li, 2020).

Whilst there has been significant attention paid to *danmei* as a genre that allows women to explore and negotiate non-heteronormative fantasies with the potential to resist heteronormativity (see, for example, Hu & Wang, 2021; Wang, 2019), there has been

⁹ Before the ban on *dangai* dramas, there was a *danmei* drama adapted from the *danmei* novel in 2016, *Addicted* (上瘾). However, it was removed from all Chinese video streaming websites by order of the SAPPFRFT (Hu & Wang, 2021, p. 672).

comparatively less attention paid to *dangai* dramas per se. Since *dangai* represents the “benign” and mainstream version of *danmei* as well as the public’s perception of queer love in heteronormative China, a critical review of *dangai* would shed light on the current understanding of the Chinese *dangai* genre. For instance, through a discussion of one famous *dangai* drama, *Guardian* (Zhou, 2018), Luo (2023) underlines how *dangai* dramas construct queer subtext under censorship to challenge state-backed heteronormativity and carve out new possibilities for representing queer love in the Chinese heteronormative media environment. In this regard, *dangai* dramas series can offer a disruptive potential in creating non-heteronormative configurations of queer love in restrictive media environments through their strategic representation of male-male romance. Drawing on this possibility, this research on *dangai* dramas aims to explore the representation of queer relationships by focusing on the last *dangai* drama, *Word of Honor*.

2.4 *Word of Honor*

Word of Honor is seminal because it is the final example of *dangai* dramas before their complete prohibition. In contrast to previous works, it incorporates more explicit queer subtext despite censorship constraints. Of particular note is the prominent role of the female character Gu Xiang¹⁰ (顾湘), whose distinctive narrative function in mediating male intimacy serves as a pivotal point of inquiry in this thesis.

Word of Honor is a *dangai* and *wuxia* (武侠, martial arts heroes) drama adapted from the *danmei* novel *A Tale of Wanderers* by Priest (2010). The story is set in an ahistorical time of

¹⁰ In this thesis, the presentation of character names follows the sequence of family name and then first name to correspond with the official English subtitles.

jianghu (江湖, literally rivers and lakes, a trope referring to the martial arts world). It tells the story of Zhou Zishu (周子舒), the former leader of *Four-Season Manor* and a retired commander of the Window of Heaven, a dangerous *assassin organization*, and Kexing Wen (温客行), the chief of *Ghost Valley*. In the course of a series of perilous incidents, the two men become soulmates (知己) and embark on a voyage of self-redemption.

Figure 1

Thumbnail of Word of Honor Episode 1 on YouTube



Note. This video thumbnail features the main characters from *Word of Honor*. The two in the middle are Wen Kexing (left, in white, played by Gong Jun) and Zhou Zishu (right, in black, played by Zhang Zhehan). The woman next to Wen Kexing is Gu Xiang (played by Zhou Ye).

From *Word of Honor* EP01 [Video], by Youku, 2021, *YouTube*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU12X99y6KM&list=PLk3CgXKvqvFp_0e1wE1twwEJc-PL9BmKS). Copyright 2021 by Youku.

The narrative follows the protagonists Zhou and Wen as they undertake an investigative journey concerning a conspiracy involving the *Glazed Armour*, a legendary artifact said to hold the key to an armour housing a plethora of martial arts techniques and secrets.

The fates of Wen and Zhou are intertwined since the very beginning of their childhood. As a child, Wen had a brief encounter with Zhou, who should be considered his junior brother, as they were originally from the same martial arts sect, the *Four Seasons Manor*. After his parents were killed, he was cast out into the *Ghost Valley*. To survive and seek revenge, he became the leader of the Ghost Valley, believing that everyone in the martial arts world was hypocritical, wearing a mask of righteousness and morality while being corrupt and despicable in reality.

Zhou was a teenager when his master passed the responsibility of the Four Seasons Manor to him. Unable to support the entire sect, Zhou led all the disciples to join Prince Jin and founded an assassin organization—the *Window of Heaven*. Later, disheartened by the successive deaths of the disciples of Four Seasons Manor, he sought to regain his freedom. To leave the organization, Zhou agreed to undergo the torture of the implantation of the deadly *Seven Nails of Three Autumns* as a form of retribution and punishment for his past actions. This is a measure that results in gradual death over three years. It left him with only three years of life remaining, during which he would gradually lose his five senses, and his martial arts prowess would diminish greatly (Wikipedia contributors, 2023).

The life of Zhou is subject to a significant shift when he encounters Wen. However, as time elapses and the pair spend more time in each other's company, they realize that they have a great understanding of each other. Ultimately, they demonstrate their capacity for redemption, revealing the inherent goodness that resides within their hearts. In this story, Gu Xiang is the only main female character and is closely tied to the other two male protagonists. Rescued as a

child and raised by Wen, Gu is a bright and lively girl. While she regards Wen as her master, Wen treats her as his younger sister. Beyond her side love story with Cao Weining, she emerges as a pivotal narrative figure whose interactions with the male protagonists appear to play a significant role in shaping their intimacy.

Following the trend of *dangai* dramas popularized by two major pioneers—*Guardian* and *The Untamed* (Zheng & Chen, 2019)—*Word of Honor* further affirmed this genre’s considerable economic profitability and media sensation. Streamed on Youku (one of China’s three major streaming platforms), it soon reached billions of views in the following week, attracting dozens of brand sponsorships (Wang & Wang, 2023) and gaining streaming contracts from international platforms, including Netflix (Liu, 2021). As a result, the worldwide popularity of *Word of Honor* further promotes foreign audiences’ interest in other *dangai* dramas released before (Wrochna, 2023).

However, regardless of *dangai* dramas’ worldwide popularity and considerable economic success, the release of *dangai* dramas ceased by the end of 2021, leaving *Word of Honor* the last *dangai* drama. On 16 September 2021, China’s media authorities held a meeting,¹¹ which specifically mentioned resisting “the trend of *dangai* and other forms of over-entertainment” (Bai, 2021, para. 1). Since then, there has been considerable uncertainty over the fate of unreleased *dangai* dramas. By contrast, *Word of Honor*’s great success was once ironically recognized as a sign that *dangai* dramas had reached a mature stage (Wang & Wang, 2023). The reasons for the “ban on dan(me/gai)” (禁耽令) have been mostly discussed as the government’s increasing concerns regarding *dangai*’s non-heteronormative representation of love relationships

¹¹ The full sentence from the news was: “The meeting also called for stronger guidance in the creation and production of TV dramas, firmly resisting the pursuit of traffic, the chaos of ‘fan circles,’ the trend of *dangai*, and other forms of over-entertainment” (Bai, 2021, para. 1).

and *dangai* fans' proactive engagement against censorship in general (Wang & Wang, 2023; Longlong Ge, 2024).

Nevertheless, *Word of Honor* presents a unique case in which queer subtext is symbolically formulated under the pressure of heteronormative censorship. As Ye (2023, p. 1598) analyzed, *Guardian* and *The Untamed* both employed a heavy bromance masquerade to conceal male-to-male romantic relationships; in contrast, *Word of Honor* represents a more explicit queer subtext than usual *dangai* dramas. One example of this “bold” attempt is the discrepancy between the words spoken and the official dubbing in the drama, which allows fans to interpret the hidden romantic messages between the male protagonists (Zhou, 2024, p. 721). Therefore, this research chooses this *dangai* drama as the object of analysis due to its subtextual yet transformative representation of queer relationships of the *dangai* genre.

This contextual overview—covering *danmei*'s unique cultural positioning, censorship dynamics, and *dangai* adaptations—lays essential groundwork for exploring existing scholarly debates. Specifically, this research seeks to fill critical gaps in understanding how female characters, often peripheral yet narratively crucial, might mediate queer subtext within *dangai* dramas. The subsequent chapter reviews existing literature to clarify these dynamics further and frame the central analytical inquiry into Gu Xiang's specific role in *Word of Honor*.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter presents scholarly debates surrounding *danmei*'s potential to challenge heteronormativity in contemporary China and explores how *dangai* dramas navigate and respond to the constraints of state censorship. As scholars have examined the transformative reconfiguration of gender and sexual ideals in *danmei* novels, they increasingly recognize that *danmei* is not a monolithic and static genre. Instead, it encompasses a wide range of themes and subgenres. However, when *danmei* narratives are adapted into mainstream *dangai* dramas, their essential male-to-male romance often requires a careful modification or strategic disguise to comply with heteronormative censorship. To address these complexities, this chapter traces the evolution of the representational strategy employed in *dangai* dramas under censorship pressure.

3.1 *Danmei* as Challenge to Heteronormativity

In addition to Japanese BL and Euro-American slash fiction, *danmei* is part of the globalized queer fandom culture. Within the context of Japan and the broader Asian region, the BL manga genre is characterized by depictions of “love, sex, and romance between beautiful boys and young men” (Zhang, 2017, p. 122). In Euro-American contexts, queer fandom culture has its roots in the slash tradition, where heterosexual female fans actively seek out homoerotic subtext embedded within the heteronormative framework of mainstream cultural products such as films, television shows, and literature (Wakefield, 2001; Allington, 2007). In this sense, *danmei* has been argued to become a “transnational apparatus of love” due to its involvement in a globalized media representation of queer love and relationships (Zhang, 2017).

As a distinctive genre that showcases women's interest in male-to-male romance, *danmei* has been a subject of extensive scholarly discourse. Specifically, within the context of a female-

dominated fandom, scholars have examined whether *danmei* serves to reinforce or challenge heteronormativity. As Zhang (2016, p. 249) argues, *danmei* grants female readers the agency to engage in a voyeuristic observation of male figures. This unconventional gaze enables fans to engage with traditional gender roles, offering a form of escapism and creating an alternative to the prevalent heterosexual romantic narrative. Moreover, with a focus on the subgenre of father-son incest, Xu and Yang (2013) identify a feminine attempt to reorder the power structure in the family by means of eros. In a similar vein, Liang Ge (2021) examines another notable subgenre of *danmei*, the A/B/O fiction.¹² Ge concludes that female *danmei* writers intentionally assign reciprocal and equal relationships between male protagonists. This reverses various heteropatriarchal norms through a reconfiguration of the dichotomy of alpha (A) as dominant and omega (O) as submissive. Consequently, *danmei* has emerged as a potent instrument for heterosexual women, facilitating the delineation of novel romantic relationships and the transformation of conventional sexual and gender ideals.

Despite existing research on the internalized heteronormativity of *danmei* novels, it is essential to recognize that *danmei* should not be regarded as monolithic and static. For instance, while Zhou et al. (2018) suggest the presence of persistent heteronormative gender stereotypes in narratives of *danmei* novels, Tian (2020a, p. 104) points out the increasing interweaving of *danmei* with reference to homosexuality and sexual minorities in China. As a result, by reflexively adapting fantasy for queer love with inspiration from emergent societal problems faced by queer communities, *danmei* writers have also been involved in the active construction

¹² A/B/O fiction introduces three fictional biological sexes, alpha, beta, and omega, into mankind, alongside the male/female binary sex system. So, in total, there are six sexes in the traditional A/B/O fiction setting. Within this fictional setting, most human beings are betas who are unlikely to get pregnant. By contrast, powerful and intelligent alphas are partnered with vulnerable and fertile omegas. As Ge (2021, p. 242) summarizes, “it is the A/B/O system that plays the dominant role in determining core physiological features and social status in A/B/O stories.”

of a peer-led educational space on nonnormative sexuality and gender identity. In this regard, *danmei* creators have played a role in indigenizing *danmei* and consciously writing and reading *danmei* through a queer perspective.

3.2 *Bromance-as-Masquerade*

The adaptation from *danmei* novels to *dangai* dramas introduced a new media sensation to the media industry, where stakeholders, state media authorities, producers, and fans attempted to maximize their interests despite the compromises made. Because *dangai* dramas with no explicit male homosexual narratives are not recognized as the “real” *danmei* dramas, fans expect *dangai* drama producers to cautiously suggest the homoromantic subtext commonly found in the original *danmei* novels (Hu & Wang, 2021; Wang, 2019; Nim, 2022). In response to this dilemma, media producers have devised a “*bromance-as-masquerade*” strategy to appease both regulators and audiences. Drawing on the theory of masquerade by Doane (1982), Hu and Wang (2021, p. 671) argue that *bromance-as-masquerade* is a compromised representational strategy that aims to depict male-male romance under the guise of homosocial bromance. In other words, rather than depicting romantic relationships between male protagonists, media producers deliberately replace them with male homosocial relationships, thereby allowing for different interpretations.

Nevertheless, while the bromance masquerade strategy appears to be a successful expedient when faced with state censorship, it could also be evaluated as problematic in terms of eliciting ambivalence from both producers and fans. As Hu and Wang (2021, p. 682) observe, the *bromance-as-masquerade* strategy, manifesting as “passive resistance”, serves to expand the scope of nonheteronormative representation in China. However, this strategy also entails a

replication of censorship's dismissal of the authentic *danmei* subculture. From the perspective of *danmei* fans, the strategy grants visibility to their love for homosexual romance; it also allows for the monetization of their affection (Hu & Wang, 2021). Such a masquerade strategy, in essence, embodies a contradictory nature, simultaneously exhibiting conformity and resistance to prevailing heterosexually centred forms of censorship. In this regard, *dangai* dramas, akin to *danmei* novels, often portray queer love in an ambivalent manner, simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting state ideology (Zhang, 2023).

Furthermore, while media producers endeavour to employ the concept of bromance to obfuscate the presence of romance, *dangai* dramas are frequently accused of failing to acknowledge homosexuality to the same extent as the original *danmei* novels. For instance, *Guardian*, a prominent *dangai* drama adapted from the *danmei* novel of the same name, received significant criticism due to the removal of homosexual elements. Consequently, adherents of the original novel and subsequent audiences, who self-identified as “Guardian Girls (镇魂女孩)”, endeavoured to subvert the monopoly of official discourse through their comments, artworks, and fictions to complete the missing “affection and carnality” between male protagonists (Wang, 2019, p. 46).

Consequently, while the strategy of *bromance-as-masquerade* could be employed to circumvent state censorship effectively, it is insufficient in maintaining the essential characteristic of the *danmei* genre, namely, male homosexual desires. This is particularly challenging in the context of media authorities implementing drastic oversight measures concerning *dangai* dramas, mandating that media producers augment the degree of “de-embodiment and abstraction of homosexual desire” during the adaptation process (Wang, 2019, p. 49). Drama producers are confronted with a predicament in which they must decide between

provoking their audience's discontent or adhering to the more stringent censorship policies imposed by media authorities concerning the portrayal of homosexuality.

3.3 Formulating Queer Subtext through *Qing*

There has been an emerging body of scholarship focusing on the formulation of queer subtext in *dangai* dramas beyond the *bromance-as-masquerade* strategy. Among research addressing this gap, *qing* (情) has been identified as a core element in formulating queer subtext in both *danmei* and *dangai* genres (Liang Ge, 2024). This concept of “deep emotional bonding” is further elaborated in Luo (2023) as a significant factor in understanding these texts. *Qing* is a highly symbolic concept that is incorporated in traditional Chinese literary works of romance (Wang, 2019, p. 53). This affective tradition often depicts *qing* as the ultimate source of power, with which protagonists in love can overcome any challenges to be together (Lee, 2007).

Furthermore, Zeitlin (2007, p. 7) underlines that *qing* can be defined as “love, sentiment, and desires” and “a passion capable of surmounting the gulf between life and death.” In a similar vein, Liang Ge (2024) posits that *qing* encompasses both affects and desires, emphasizing its role as a highly formulaic element in the narrative structure of *danmei* fiction. In summary, within the context of *dangai* dramas, *qing* is employed to underscore the emotional intensity experienced by male protagonists. As a narrative technique, it emphasizes the affects and desires shared by the male protagonists. This allows audiences to interpret their male bonding in diverse ways, including as potential queer subtext.

Dangai dramas are renowned for their formulation of queer subtext through intensified *qing* invested in the male intimacy disguised as bromance. For *dangai* dramas, *qing* is rather essential in triggering fans' emotional engagement with the two male protagonists' romantic

relationship. As Wang (2019) demonstrates, being dissatisfied with the portrayal of male bonds in the *Guardian*, the *Guardian Girls*, fans of the drama, decided to complete the missing *qing* through their slash writings, including both romantic and erotic narratives. Luo (2023, p. 404) further posits that, within the framework of the bromance masquerade, it is *qing* who serves as the foundational element of the homoromantic relationship depicted in the series. The notion of *qing* is frequently conveyed through the palpable erotic tension evident in the mutual care, trust, and devotion exhibited by the protagonists. In this sense, Luo (2023, p. 404) further asserts that *qing* holds the power to facilitate the representation of queer desire. As such, while the male-to-male relationship may be disguised by bromance, it could be revealed through an investment in *qing*. Therefore, while the utilization of the *bromance-as-masquerade* strategy assists in the evasion of censorship, *qing* plays a pivotal role in the development of queer subtext and the representation of queer love in *dangai* dramas.

3.4 Between Men: Female Characters in Triangular Relationships

It is peculiar that while *qing* has been analyzed as a prominent element in both *danmei* novels and *dangai* dramas, current analysis has merely focused on male protagonists' *qing*, thereby reducing female characters to a narrative device. Particularly, given that the majority of the *dangai* drama audience is heterosexual women, research addressing the representation of female characters in *dangai* dramas could shed light on their role in relation to male-to-male queer love. For instance, Chang and Tian (2021, pp. 611-612) summarize two major types of female characters in *danmei* fiction, namely the *bystander* and the *matchmaker*.

While the bystander usually shares a close relationship with one or both male protagonists (e.g., friends, sisters), she does not intervene in their budding relationship; she is a

witness to it. By contrast, the matchmaker would actively promote the progress of male protagonists' love, providing necessary assistance in certain plots. To a certain extent, the roles of female characters are refined from a participatory perspective, enabling fans to more effectively identify with the narrative and participate in the relatively exclusive romantic relationship between male protagonists. Therefore, in a manner consistent with conventional heterosexual romance narratives, *danmei* fiction also mirrors a triangular structure.

However, in *dangai* dramas, the triangular relationship is further problematized within China's socio-political environment. As previously reviewed, explicit homosexual romance is usually disguised as homosocial bromance to circumvent censorship, and it is through *qing* that queer subtext is formulated to transform bromance into romance. As a result, the woman within this triangular structure is different from that of the traditional love triangle, in which the woman occupies a privileged position. Additionally, instead of serving as the *conduits* through which the bonds between men are expressed (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 4), women in *dangai* dramas demonstrate agency in either turning their gaze upon male-to-male relationships as bystanders or actively promoting those relationships as matchmakers. In this regard, although female characters might be peripheral in the original *danmei* novels, they have more narrative responsibilities in *dangai* dramas. Here, female characters enter a triangular relationship with the male protagonists without becoming the object of romantic competition between the two men.

Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework that relies on both Eve Sedgwick's (1985/2016) theory of *male homosocial desire* and the Chinese literary concept of *qing*. By combining these two ideas, this research proposes a culturally specific *queer qing* framework to interpret *queer subtext* formulated in *dangai* dramas, departing from a binary framing of male bonds as either homosexual or homosocial. Moreover, applying this specific theoretical framework to the female character Gu Xiang also allows this research to precisely interrogate her narrative function in relation to the male protagonists in *Word of Honor*.

4.1 Male Homosocial Desire

To understand female characters in relation to male bonds, I draw on Eve Sedgwick's (1985/2016) seminal theorization of male bonding—men's relations to other men—in patriarchal societies. In her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick introduces the concept of *male homosociality* to describe various forms of often non-sexual yet deeply emotional bonds between men. Sedgwick distinguishes homosociality from homosexuality, arguing that while the two exist on a continuum, societal norms often disrupt the visibility of this continuum, especially in patriarchal societies.

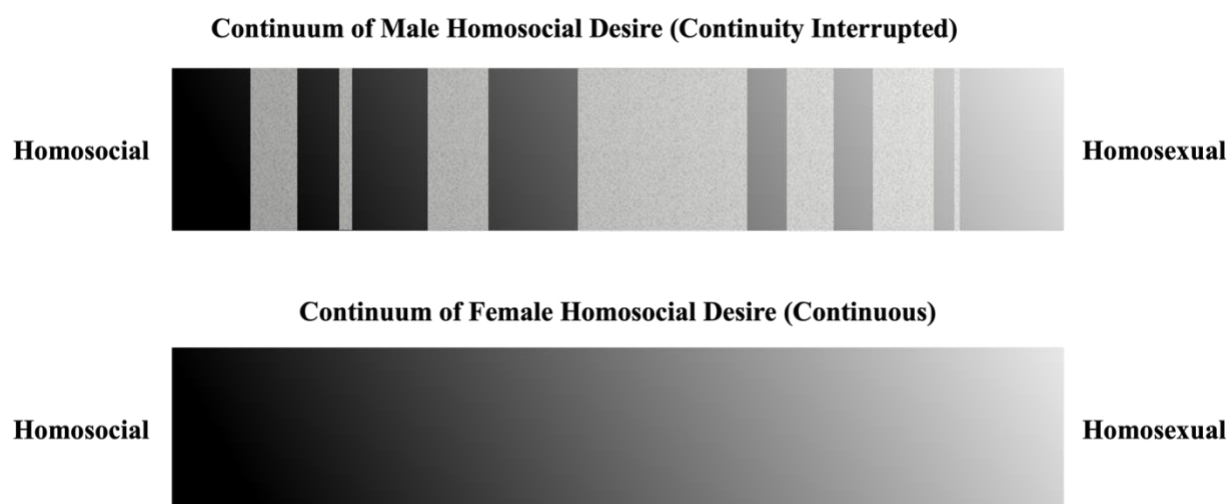
To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted (pp. 1-2).

Moreover, Sedgwick highlights the gendered structure of homosocial desire. By highlighting homosocial desire between men, she pinpoints that “the diacritical opposition

between the ‘homosocial’ and the ‘homosexual’ seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men.” In this regard, the boundary between homosocial and homosexual is less rigid and clearly defined among women (*female homosocial desire*) than among men (Figure 2). Consequently, while male bonds often anxiously police this boundary to avoid being associated with homosexuality, female bonds tend to fluctuate between emotional intimacy and erotic expression. In short, the gendered homosocial desire reveals a societal double standard in how same-sex bonds are perceived and regulated.

Figure 2

Continuums of male and female homosocial desire



Note. Based on *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* by E. K. Sedgwick, 1985/2016. In the diagram, male homosocial desire is depicted with interruptions, signifying occasional disruptions due to societal pressures, cultural expectations, or state-imposed censorship. Conversely, female homosocial desire is shown as fluid and continuous, highlighting Sedgwick’s observation that the boundary between homosocial and homosexual relationships is less rigid and more permeable among women.

Finally, the male homosocial desire continuum is inherently unstable due to the social enforcement of a discontinuity between homosociality and homosexuality, as opposed to a natural continuum. Sedgwick (1985/2016, p. 26) describes that the structure marks both “discriminations and paradoxes,” thereby highlighting the legitimization of homosociality through its opposition to homosexuality. Therefore, it can be concluded that the establishment of male bonding is considered morally acceptable only under the condition that an absolute distance is maintained from any manifestation of homosexuality. However, this enforced separation is never fully secure. Despite the dominance of heterosexual norms and homophobia, literature often reveals latent homoerotic tensions within supposedly platonic male bonds. Thus, the continuum remains riddled with contradictions, exposing the fragility of socially constructed boundaries of different types of male bonds.

The socially enforced discontinuity of male homosocial desire offers a particularly effective means for understanding the construction and negotiation of male bonding in *dangai* dramas. Despite being produced within the constraints of state-sanctioned homophobia, these dramas depict male intimacy in a state of flux, allowing for a range of interpretations. By meticulously encoding intimate affect within “acceptable” homosocial frameworks, *dangai* producers reconstruct the fragmented male homosocial continuum, momentarily bridging the paradoxical ends of the male homosocial desire continuum—homosociality and homosexuality.

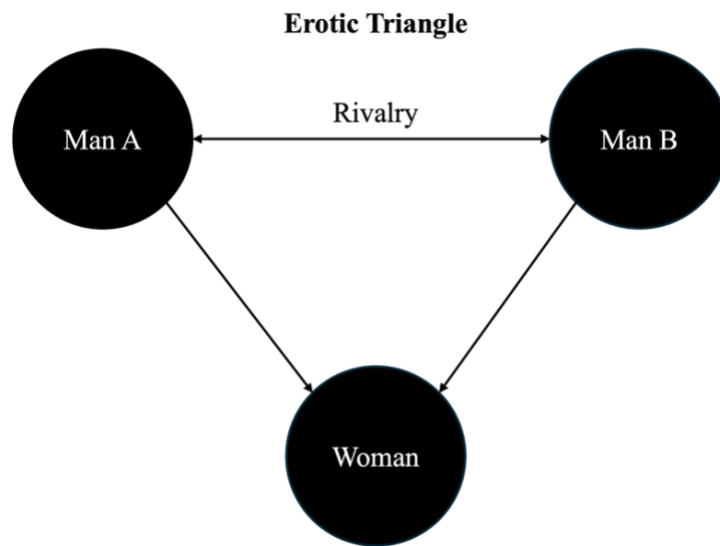
4.2 Erotic Triangles and *Qing Triangles*

Elaborating on male homosocial desire’s discontinuity, this section turns to one of the common narrative manifestations, the erotic triangle. The permeability between homosocial and homosexual bonds is mostly vividly expressed through this triangular structure. To address the

often hidden, downplayed, or displaced male-male bonds, Sedgwick (1985/2016, p. 21) draws on the triangle that “schematizes erotic relations” and investigates its appearances in mid-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century English literature.

Figure 3

Erotic triangle (René Girard)



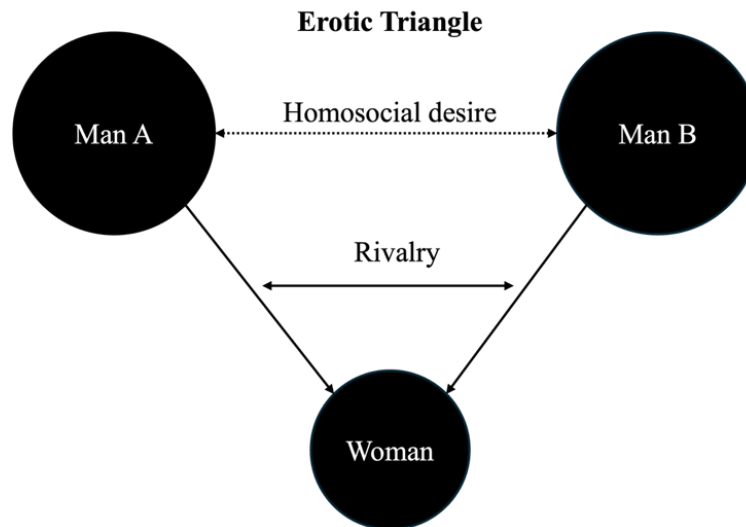
Note. This diagram illustrates the triangular relationship of traditional heterosexual romance according to Girard (1976). All three characters are of the same power as suggested by the same size of circle.

Departing from René Girard’s earlier work (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 1976), Sedgwick highlights how the erotic triangle typically involves two men connected through rivalry over a woman (Figures 3 and 4). Although the men are ostensibly competing for the woman, the primary bond lies between the two men themselves, with the woman functioning as a conduit or medium for their connection. Therefore, male-male bonds are deeply significant yet

are always mediated through a heterosexual framework. However, Sedgwick (1985/2016) critiques Girard's assumption that the triangle is symmetrical and universal:

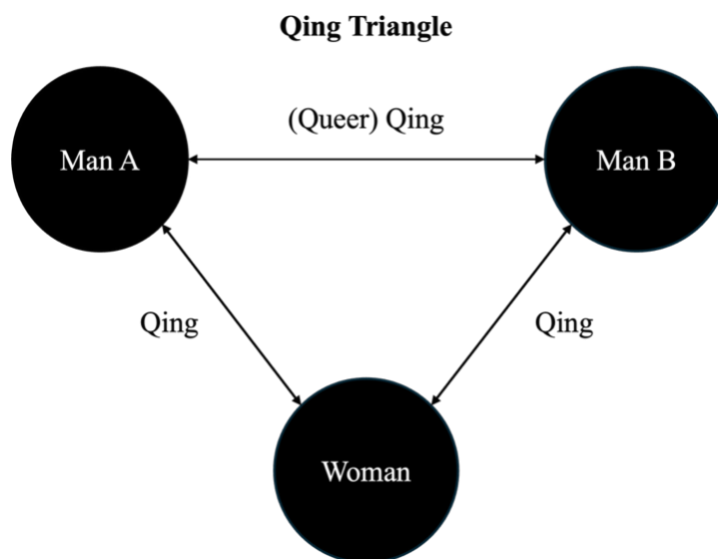
Thus, both Girard and Freud (or at least the Freud of this interpretive tradition) treat the erotic triangle as symmetrical—in the sense that its structure would be relatively unaffected by the power difference that would be introduced by a change in the gender of one of the participants (p. 23).

On the contrary, she argues that power asymmetry based on gender is always present and must be taken into account. In this regard, in heterosexual and patriarchal societies, the bonds between men, whether mediated through or not through a woman, are not only about personal desire but also about structuring patriarchal power. Therefore, it is essential to identify the structural context that shapes and regulates male homosocial desire. Figure 4 illustrates Sedgwick's adaptation of the erotic triangle, highlighting how the primary bond exists between two men ("Man A" and "Man B"), mediated through their mutual rivalry for a woman.

Figure 4*Erotic triangle (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick)*

Note. This diagram illustrates male homosocial bonding mediated by rivalry over a woman. The size difference of circles symbolizes power relations; the larger the circle is, the more powerful the person is.

As Sedgwick demonstrates, attention to the triangular structure is crucial for uncovering the dynamics of male bonding within ostensibly heterosexual frameworks. Building on this theoretical foundation, this project similarly focuses on the triangular configurations—what I term “*qing triangles*” (Figure 5)—that recur in *dangai* dramas.

Figure 5*Qing triangles in dangai dramas*

Note. This diagram is based on Sedgwick's (1985/2016) schematization of erotic triangles. It depicts an alternative structure found in *dangai* dramas, highlighting *qing*¹³ as the foundation of the triangular relationship. The female character is not an object of rivalry herself. The *qing triangle* acknowledges the potential gendered power differences.

Not unlike previous triangles, the recurring narrative structure in *dangai* dramas involves two male protagonists and a female character. However, in *dangai* dramas, the power relations are more complex. Female characters are not merely passive conduits for male desires; they are situated within the triangular relationship without becoming the direct object of rivalry. As an essential part of the narrative, she provides fans with a lens through which to interpret their relationship as romantic. At the same time, her own relationship to both men adds another layer

¹³ The key element in *dangai* dramas' representation of bonds among the triangular relationship, including affects and desires.

of complexity to the narrative. This reconfiguration of the erotic triangle in *dangai* dramas acknowledges the existing gender asymmetry and patriarchal structure. It suggests a queer way of schematizing complex affective structure due to heteronormative censorship. The *qing triangle* features the flow of *qing* among the triangular relationship. As illustrated in Figure 5, instead of reducing female characters as the property exchanged between men, the *qing triangle* acknowledges the possibility of *qing* departing from female characters despite the gendered power differences. Therefore, through this *qing triangle*, the role assumed by female characters in *dangai* dramas is able to be recognized.

Finally, as a new means of examining the triangulated affective structure, *qing* must be thoroughly discussed in terms of its subtextual nature in the context of censored Chinese *dangai* dramas. To further supplement this schematization, the following two sections revolve around the definitions of *qing* and queer before introducing a new framework for analyzing male bonds.

4.3 *Qing*

Qing is understood as a culturally specific affective form akin to “love,” yet broader in scope and more narratively pliable. Under the pressures of censorship that prohibit explicit depictions of male romance, *qing* operates as both an *emotional register* and a *narrative strategy*. It enables the subtextual representation of queer love through ambiguity, allowing male bonds to circulate without violating censorship constraints. In this sense, state censorship plays a paradoxical role. While it prohibits overt representation of male romance, it ironically encourages the emergence of *qing* as an indirect yet potent vehicle for presenting queerness. This transforms *qing* into a culturally sanctioned mode of queerness—subtextual, ambiguous, yet

emotionally resonant. Consequently, *qing* emerges as a new narrative strategy for formulating queer subtext.

As previously mentioned,¹⁴ *qing* is a symbolic concept incorporated in traditional Chinese literary romance, and it is often highlighted as the source of power through which protagonists could overcome any obstacle and be together (Wang, 2019; Lee, 2007; Zeitlin, 2007). Moreover, Liang Ge (2024, p. 2) argues, *qing* encompasses both *affects* and *desires*. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s theorization of affects, Ge rejects differentiating affects from *feelings* and *emotions*; instead, affects are understood as “the feeling of bodily change” and “the attribution of feeling is an effect of encounter, which moves the subject away from the object” (Ahmed, 2004/2014, pp. 5, 8). Additionally, Ge situates this understanding of *qing* within the historical context of late Ming dynasty China, when literati scholars began to merge *qing* with *yu* (欲 desire) as a way to “reinvent and/or challenge the suffocating Confucian cultural heritage.”¹⁵ In this regard, in contrast with male homosocial desire often triangulated through women, *qing* signals a more integrated and embodied experience of human feeling—one that refuses to separate sexual desires from emotional affects.

Therefore, by constructing the bond between men as queer *qing*, *dangai* dramas present male bonds as transcending binaries of homosocial/homosexual. In this regard, producers create a subtextual yet safe queer space for fans to examine the queerness in narratives. Drawing on this point, Luo (2023) further argues that, through *qing*, such subtextual queerness could facilitate queer worldmaking by celebrating queerness and gender nonconformity.

¹⁴ Chapter 3.3

¹⁵ For more information about the literati scholars’ practices of *qing* in late Ming dynasty, please refer to Huang (2001).

4.4 Queer subtext

In *dangai* dramas, queer subtext is formulated through the portrayal of *qing*, especially between male protagonists. Before turning to the discussion on queer subtext, it is crucial to review the definition of *queer* to signify *qing*'s essential nature as rejecting heteronormative interpretation.

Queer theory, in essence, is a critical stance against normativity, and any attempt to define queer is fraught with the danger of disrupting its essence. Although it could be referred to as an umbrella term to encompass sexual identities of “not straight” (Somerville, 2014), its conceptual richness extends far beyond taxonomy. To narrow queer down to a label term risks oversimplifying and diminishing its subversive potential. As Halperin (1995, p. 62) argues, queer is anything that challenges or disrupts what is marked by society as “normal,” “legitimate,” or “dominant.” In a similar vein, Sedgwick emphasizes queer as a means to destabilize fixed binaries (e.g., heterosexual/homosexual) that maintain and reinforce social norms (as cited in Johnson, 2005).

Furthermore, queer is, first and foremost, a praxis: a synthesis of political critique and creative resistance. Warner (1999) refers to queer communities as *salon des refusés*—communities that convene marginal subjects in their collective rejection of normative ideals. Hence, queer is not merely a theory but an everyday political practice that can destabilize and reimagine cultural norms.

For the aims of this study, this research uses the term queer in the fashion of Jack Halberstam's (2011, p.29) interpretation, which “is not represented as a singularity but as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies.” Halberstam (1998) believes that queer theory is a way of thinking that resists binary oppositions and emphasizes heterogeneity, diversity, and

variability. Thus, queer is employed not solely to denote non-heteronormative ways of representation; it also serves to underscore a resistant approach to interpretation. Following the understanding of queer, I then identify queer subtext here as the implicit representation of queer relationships negotiated under constraints of censorship.

However, it is noteworthy that *queer subtext* should be distinguished from another term, *queer coding*. There are two reasons for this rationale. First, queer subtext is the implicit representation of non-homonormative norms. As Alexander Doty (1993) explains:

The queerness of mass culture develops in three areas: (1) influences during the production of texts; (2) historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers; and (3) adopting reception positions that can be considered “queer” in some way, regardless of a person’s declared sexual and gender allegiances (p. xi).

As a result, queer subtext can be recognized as a combination of both media producers’ production and fans’ collective interpretation. By contrast, queer coding refers to “attributing stereotypically queer traits to them without explicitly stating their gender and sexual identity” under limitation (Piluso, 2023, p. 131).

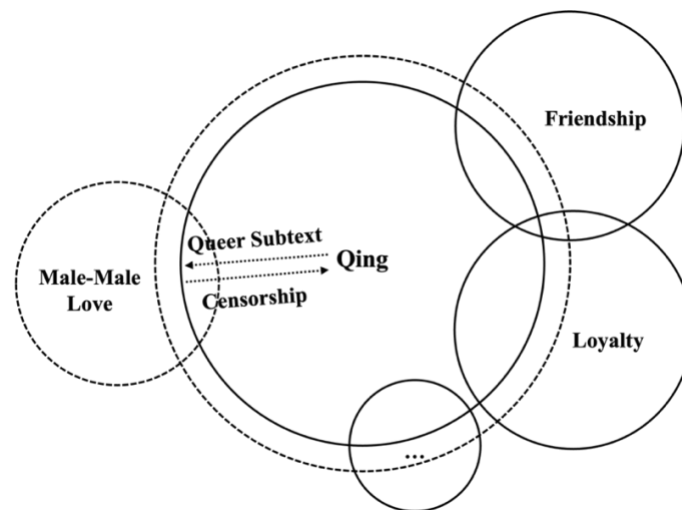
4.5 Queer *Qing* Framework

Building upon Sedgwick’s concept of male homosocial desire and the traditional Chinese literary notion of *qing*, this research proposes a culturally nuanced theoretical framework, *queer qing* (Figure 6), to better comprehend male bonds in *dangai* dramas. While Sedgwick’s continuum theorizes the bond between men as precariously poised between homosociality and homosexuality, queer *qing* conceptualizes *qing* as an affective force that sustains male bonds

without requiring a resolution into either sexual or platonic categories. Rather than stabilizing queer representation in a direct sense, *qing* provides a narrative cloak that shadows male romance, allowing queer subtext to emerge safely within a heteronormative and censored media landscape. It is not the emotional bond that is made explicit; rather, it is the cultural acceptability of *qing* that renders romance narratively sustainable.

Figure 6

Queer qing framework



Note. This diagram illustrates *qing* as a culturally sanctioned affective space encompassing multiple emotional registers. Under state censorship, expressions of romantic love between men are pushed into the broader, more ambiguous realm of *qing*, becoming subtextual. However, by formulating queer subtext through *qing*, the male bond could be queerly interpreted as love again. Dashed lines indicate affective states that are marginalized or obscured, while solid lines represent state-acceptable forms. The other acceptable forms, such as friendship and loyalty (other possible forms are represented as the circle with "..."), remain visible, while "male-male love" becomes *qing*, allowing queer love to circulate indirectly within *dangai* narratives.

In contrast to the progression of male homosocial desire through a linear spectrum, queer *qing* is characterized as a subtextual affective space. Unlike frameworks that cast male bonds in *dangai* dramas either as homosocial bromance or as “transgressive” homosexuality, queer *qing* offers an alternative logic for understanding male bonds without collapsing into binary tension.

As illustrated in Figure 6, queer *qing* acknowledges the diverse and context-specific ways in which emotional bonds between men are portrayed in *dangai* dramas. Thus, male bonds in *dangai* dramas are not only sites of latent homoerotic tension but also explicit expressions of culturally resonant emotional intensity, rendering traditional Western binaries insufficient for analysis.

After explaining the mechanism of queer *qing*, it is now necessary to turn to the application of this framework in context-specific narratives to validate its effectiveness. In *Word of Honor*, the female character Gu Xiang and the intricate triangular relationship among her and the other two male protagonists are of particular analytical relevance because they exemplify the constant negotiation between censorship and queer subtext. Through the analysis of this intricate relationship, queer *qing* can thus enable a rich analysis of *dangai* male bonds by attending to the role of female characters, challenging the conventional analytical framework inherited from Western heterosexual romance narratives.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has proposed queer *qing* as a new framework for the analysis of male bonds in censored *dangai* dramas. While Sedgwick’s analysis foregrounds the disrupted fluidity of male homosocial desire, the incorporation of *qing* expands this framework beyond Western-centric conceptualizations.

Furthermore, as *qing* problematizes the binary distinctions between homosociality and homosexuality, it serves as a subtextual way of portraying male bonds in *dangai* dramas, offering a nuanced analytic approach to interpret queer subtext within *dangai* dramas under censorship pressure.

Moreover, drawing on Sedgwick's analysis of erotic triangles, queer *qing* also emphasizes the gendered triangular relationship, the structural context in which male bonds are constructed and shaped. By focusing on the female character Gu Xiang in the last *dangai* drama *Word of Honor*, this framework reconsiders the frequently ignored role of female characters. Queer *qing* is thus a resistant approach to interpret queerness in a non-Western context.

Chapter 5: Methodology

Building on the conceptual framework established in the previous chapter, this research now turns to the methodological approach used to analyze the *qing triangle* and queer subtext in the *dangai* drama *Word of Honor*. To explore *qing* among the three characters, this research is situated within an interpretive paradigm, underpinning the use of film analysis as the research method. This chapter begins with the rationale underlying the method, followed by an introduction to the systematic filtering process used to select scenes for analysis. In the end, it justifies the selection of *Word of Honor* as the object of study.

5.1 Interpretive Paradigm

This research follows an interpretive paradigm to investigate the formulation of queer subtext and queer *qing* featured in *Word of Honor*. There are two rationales for this choice. First, the interpretive paradigm aligns with this research's aim of conducting an in-depth film analysis to uncover the layered meanings instead of producing generalizable, "reliable" data within the text. As interpretive research, it examines the drama as a text possessing "plenitude" or a "surplus of meaning," allowing it to be understood in new contexts (Ricoeur, 1976). In this way, it reduces the risk of losing the essence of the queer nature of *qing* and accords with Halberstam's (2011, p.29) interpretation of queer "as part of an assemblage of resistant technologies."

Within the confines of censorship, male-to-male romance—represented as queer *qing*—is embedded into the triangular affective structure, the *qing triangle*, which consists of two male protagonists and the female character Gu Xiang. Their intricate relationship, cemented through *qing*, is rather content-specific across the whole narrative arc of the drama. Therefore, the

analysis requires careful attention to how *qing* emerges and flows among their triangular relationship and, more importantly, how *qing* between male protagonists escalates as queer *qing*. Consequently, the analysis of *qing* dynamics necessitates an emphasis on interpretive depth over generalizability.

Second, the interpretative paradigm enables close engagement with the drama's narrative and formal elements. Since this study's warrants are hermeneutic, its validity rests not on "reliability" but on "congruence" and "plenitude." Congruence is achieved by demonstrating the fit between the interpretation and the textual evidence (Ricoeur, 1981/2016). In each scene, the dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, sound, editing, and cultural context collectively contribute to the construction of queer subtext and *qing* dynamics. The plenitude of the analysis—or its "surplus of meaning"—emerges from connecting these congruent readings to a broader network of meanings. In contrast to paradigms relying on measurement and statistical analysis, the interpretative paradigm allows for a rich, context-sensitive exploration of narrative complexity and formal expression. The layered meanings, emotional nuance, and the politics of representation in the drama thus necessitate an interpretative paradigm that reads beyond surface content.

5.2 Film Analysis

Within the interpretive paradigm, this study employs film analysis as its research method, focusing on the analysis of the narrative and *mise-en-scène* of the three selected scenes. According to Mikos (2016), film analysis is a research method that requires a systematic investigation of a film's narrative, aesthetic, and communicative components. Following this approach, this research regards films not merely as a vehicle for storytelling but as a medium of

communication, where meaning is constructed through visual form, structure, and reception. This method is specifically effective in pinpointing the hidden messages in *Word of Honor*. As queer subtext surfaces through euphemisms or non-verbal cues, film analysis provides the necessary space for interpretive inquiry (Monaco, 2009).

When analyzing the selected scenes, this research first unfolds each scene's narrative context before further examining *qing* dynamics among the three characters, and Gu Xiang's role within their triangular relationship. As Bordwell and Thompson (2023) note, narratives shape meanings and audience interpretation in terms of character development, plot structure, dialogue patterns, and thematic articulation. In this research, narrative is at the core of understanding how *Word of Honor* constructs queer subtext as a form of compromise. Underpinned through character exchanges and a variety of *mise-en-scène* elements, the narrative context provides essential information about the formation of the three characters' *qing triangle*. By following the narratives of three scenes selected from the drama, this research also traces the evolution of the *qing triangle*.

Moreover, with a close focus on the character Gu Xiang, including but not limited to her character formation, interactions, and dialogue encounters in relation to the other two male protagonists, it also responded to another critical inquiry of this research, that is, what roles does Gu Xiang assume in formulating the queer subtext within their triangular relationship?

In summary, this film analysis, with the focus on narrative and *mise-en-scène*, facilitates an in-depth examination of how male bonds, mediated by female character Gu Xiang, are narratively and visually constructed to represent queer love despite censorship. The following section outlines the systematic filtering process for scenes and rationalizes the case study selection for *Word of Honor*.

5.3 Data Collection

To address the research questions¹⁶, only the most relevant scenes containing queer subtext in which Gu Xiang is present are selected for analysis. It is important that this research favours in-depth analysis of narrative and *mise-en-scène* elements over the breadth of content to delineate the evolution of the *qing triangle*. Accordingly, it collects pivotal, exemplary turning scenes across the drama to function as a microcosm of the drama's affective strategy for representing queer *qing*. The essential objective is to examine Gu Xiang's role in mediating queer *qing* between the two male leads. To achieve this goal, this research applied a *three-stage filtering approach*.

5.3.1 Three-Stage Filtering Approach

As introduced before, the story of *Word of Honor* unfolds through a series of consecutive plots concerning multiple characters, which are not limited to Wen and Zhou's queer *qing*. Instead of adopting a holistic approach towards each episode of the drama¹⁷, it is rather important for this research to carefully identify scenes with queer subtext. Accordingly, to ensure a systematic and rigorous selection process, the three-stage filtering approach was adopted to refine scene selection:

1. **First Pass (Broad Identification):** The entire drama was viewed in full, and all scenes involving Gu Xiang in interaction with either or both male protagonists were noted. For each scene, the following elements were documented:
 - **Context:** Placement within the overall narrative.

¹⁶ RQ1: How is *qing* (emotional bonds) constructed among Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu, and Gu Xiang in their triangular relationship as depicted in *Word of Honor*? RQ2: What roles does Gu Xiang assume in formulating the queer subtext within their triangular relationship?

¹⁷ *Word of Honor* has 36 episodes, each of which consists of around 40 minutes.

- ***Qing***: Indicators of deep emotional bonds.
 - **Mediation**: Whether Gu Xiang plays a role in mediating male relations between the male protagonists.
 - **Significance**: Contribution to overall plot development or character evolution.
2. **Second Pass (Relevance Filtering)**: After completing initial notes, the selected scenes were revisited and evaluated based on their relevance to the research focus on queer subtext between two male protagonists. Scenes that centred on Gu Xiang's personal relationships or individual character development, without influencing the representation of *qing*, were excluded.
 3. **Final Selection (Focused Case Material)**: The final stage involved narrowing the dataset to *three* scenes that best exemplify Gu Xiang's mediating role in shaping *qing*.

These scenes then serve as focal points for the subsequent narrative analysis. By applying this structured filtering method, the study ensures a focused and meaningful engagement with the drama's most thematically rich and methodologically relevant content.

5.3.2 Selected Scenes for Analysis

Based on the above three-stage filtering approach, the following three scenes were selected for in-depth analysis. Each was chosen for its narrative significance, its contribution to the representation of *qing*, and Gu Xiang's mediating role within the triangular relationship. The selected scenes span key turning points in the drama and illustrate different modalities of queer subtext formulation.

Scene One: *Qingyun* Restaurant. In this scene, Gu Xiang meets with Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu at the *Qingyun* Restaurant, discussing her safety and future due to recent dangers at

the Yueyang Sect. The conversation takes a parental tone, with the two male protagonists debating whether she should remain in the sect or leave for her own protection. The dynamic is further complicated when the male side character, Cao Weining, appears. He expresses his worry for Gu and unintentionally reveals his romantic affection. The two male protagonists then hint at their desire to find a trustworthy partner for Gu so that they can be relieved and free to wander the world together.

Figure 7

Scene One: Qingyun Restaurant (Ep. 12, 37:39-42:39; Ep. 13, 02:03-03:00)¹⁸



This scene was selected for its clear illustration of a pivot point at the very beginning of the whole drama. It introduces Gu's relations to the two male protagonists, providing a thumbnail of their relationship dynamics. In this scene, Gu's presence enables Wen and Zhou to

¹⁸ All screenshots are from *Word of Honor* (Youku, 2021). See Appendix A for copyright and fair dealing statement.

articulate emotional vulnerability and long-term desire in a way that adheres to heteronormative framing, allowing queer subtext to emerge through familial and matchmaking discourse. The scene also highlights the subtle ways that Gu's position is constructed to legitimize the male bonds, making it central to the research's exploration of *qing* and her roles.

Scene Two: Night Conversation. In this scene, Gu Xiang shares a drink with Zhou Zishu in a quiet moment while Wen Kexing is not present. Zhou mentions that he heard from Wen that Gu was raised by him, and Gu confirms. They go on to talk about Zhou's health, where Gu informs him that she found out from her master Wen that Zhou does not have much longer to live. She expresses concern, saying that if Zhou were to die, her master would become very upset.

Figure 8

Scene Two: Night Conversation (Ep. 12, 30:53-34:17)



This scene was selected due to its clear relevance to the research's focus on subtextual *qing* and the narrative function of female characters within the queer *qing* framework. The conversation between Gu and Zhou takes place in a private, emotionally intense moment, during which Gu relays information about Zhou's health and implicitly conveys Wen's emotional investment in Zhou's well-being. Although Wen appears only briefly at the end of the scene, his presence is central to the conversation, making the scene a strong example of an indirect affective exchange structured through a female intermediary.

The scene offers a concentrated depiction of the triangular relationship as it provides a rich context for how subtextual *qing* is formulated in dialogues, how female characters mediate male bonds, and how *qing* is invoked or expressed without explicit romantic language. Its dialogue-driven structure and restrained visual composition also make it particularly suitable for close *mise-en-scène* analysis.

Scene Three: Jealousy. In this scene, Gu Xiang privately speaks with Wen Kexing before his planned return to the Ghost Valley. She fears for his life and pleads with him not to leave. Wen calms her and instructs her to take care of Zhou Zishu during his absence, instructing her not to reveal his perilous alliance with the Scorpion King. Their exchange ends with a light-hearted moment, in which Gu Xiang teases Wen for always prioritizing Zhou and jokingly accuses him of ignoring her. Wen laughs and remarks, "You're jealous of a man?"

Figure 9

Scene Three: Jealousy (Ep. 31, 24:50-28:16)



This scene was selected because it centers on Gu Xiang's intimate interaction with Wen Kexing, while also foregrounding Wen's concern for Zhou Zishu. It exemplifies Gu Xiang's position as both trusted confidante and caretaker, reinforcing her narrative function within the triangular relationship. The dialogue also introduces a moment of gendered and culturally specific language that signals shifting relationship roles, making the scene valuable for the research's focus on mediated emotional structures and character positioning in *Word of Honor*.

These three scenes were selected to provide focused case material for the analysis. Each scene captures a distinct configuration of Gu Xiang's interactions with the male protagonists, offering insight into her role within the affective structure of the *qing triangle*. While the first scene presents their conversation together, the other two present Gu's individual conversation with one of the two male protagonists. Together, they play a crucial role in tracing the evolution

of the *qing triangle* and queer *qing*, offering a microcosmic view of the drama's representational strategy.

5.4 Why *Word of Honor*?

Prior to the 2021 *dangai* crackdown, as one of the most famous and the last released *dangai* dramas, *Word of Honor* registered ambivalence towards the representation of male romance under censorship constraints. It provides an instructive lens through which male romance was forced to concede, yet reborn through queer subtext. Through an investigation of how *Word of Honor* survives through the intensifying censorship, this research presents insights into the tension between queer visibility and state regulation.

Moreover, *Word of Honor* is noteworthy for its detailed portrayal of the main female character, Gu Xiang. Different from many female characters in conventional *danmei/dangai* narratives, Gu Xiang actively facilitates and legitimizes male bonds between Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu. Her role is crucial in framing queer subtext, through which male romance is to some extent made “acceptable,” while also providing audiences with narrative cues that invite queer interpretations. By focusing on the character's narrative role, this research can explore the ways in which female figures are strategically portrayed to both obscure and reinforce male romance in *dangai* dramas.

In contrast to other previous *dangai* dramas (e.g., *The Untamed*), *Word of Honor*'s unique approach to formulate queer subtext is also significant and thus requires examination. While its pioneers rely heavily on ambiguity and restraint in formulating male romance, *Word of Honor* tends to apply bolder subtextual choices, which often push the boundaries of what is

permissible under censorship. This distinction renders *Word of Honor* an ideal case for analyzing how different adaptation strategies shape the representation of male romance in *dangai* dramas.

Based on the above consideration, this research could engage with broader discussions concerning the representation of queer love under censorship. In doing so, it establishes *Word of Honor* as a key text for understanding queer love storytelling in different cultural contexts, demonstrating the evolving strategies that media producers employ to manage the conflict between regulatory constraints and audience anticipation.

Chapter 6: Analysis

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of three scenes selected from *Word of Honor*. Through film analysis, it examines the construction of *qing* among the three characters and Gu Xiang's role in mediating and shaping the formulation of queer subtext. For each scene, the chapter first introduces the necessary narrative context before discussing the triangular relationship formed by the three main characters. Then, it focuses on Gu Xiang's role in each scene as well as the *mise-en-scène* analysis of significant frames.

6.1 Scene One: *Qingyun* Restaurant

6.1.1 Context

This scene occurs at the midpoint of the series, immediately following a period of significant turmoil at the Yueyang Sect. During this time, Gu Xiang was injured in a violent confrontation. Set in the quiet, enclosed space of the *Qingyun* Restaurant, Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu are first seen casually drinking and chatting before Gu joins them. The visual framing around the low and square table establishes a triangular arrangement with Gu positioned centrally between the two male protagonists (Figure 10). Their conversation begins with Zhou expressing concern for Gu's health.

At first, they discuss the current precariousness of continuing to stay at the Yueyang Sect. As the Scorpion Sect dares to openly kidnap people, Wen expresses great concern about Gu's safety and suggests that she should leave the Yueyang Sect to avoid further complications. Gu hesitantly seeks confirmation from Wen about whether he wants her to return to his side. Instead of responding directly, Wen redirects the question to Zhou, asking if he would mind having Gu follow them. Zhou playfully affirms, whereas Wen immediately contradicts him, suggesting

instead that Gu take a break and go wherever she pleases. Gu firmly resists this suggestion, clarifying her intention to remain at the Yueyang Sect specifically to protect Zhang Chengling.¹⁹

Figure 10

Gu Xiang, Wen Kexing, and Zhou Zishu sit together at Qingyun Restaurant (Ep. 12, 38:11)



Suddenly, Zhou discovers someone eavesdropping, and it turns out to be Cao Weining. Cao's unexpected arrival interrupts the previous discussion about whether Gu should leave or stay at the Yueyang Sect. When Zhou reproaches Gu for being unaware that she was being followed, Cao explains that he followed Gu only because he was afraid that Gu would leave with Wen (Figure 11). Upon hearing this, Zhou realizes that Cao is the reason Gu is hesitant to leave the Yueyang Sect, indicating a heterosexual romantic subplot. Cao then changes the topic, offering to find doctors for Zhou, as he had heard from Gu that Zhou was seriously ill. Zhou

¹⁹ Zhang Chengling is the young heir of the Jinghu Sect. After his entire family is killed because of conspiracies surrounding the artifact, Glazed Armor, Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing take on protective and mentorship roles toward him. They treat him as a younger brother or son figure.

politely declines and discloses his terminal illness and his desire to spend his remaining time wandering around the world with a “soul mate.” Zhou then strategically shifts the conversation back to Gu’s future, suggesting finding her a reliable partner.

Figure 11

The arrival of Cao Weining (Ep. 12, 39:40)



The scene ends with a conversation between only Zhou and Wen, questioning each other about their contradictions (Figure 12). Zhou playfully encourages Wen to accept Gu’s romantic settlement with Cao. However, Wen immediately displays strong unwillingness to marry Gu, provoking Zhou to question Wen’s contradictory attitudes toward Gu’s future (“You were the one who asked Xiang to get a husband. But you’re also the one who can’t stand her being with someone else”).²⁰ In response, Wen turns around and questions Zhou’s contradiction (“You’re

²⁰ In this thesis, all the original lines are in Mandarin. English translations are taken from the Netflix subtitle version of the series.

the one who always finds ways to hide from me. But you're also the one who wants to wander around the world with me.”).

Figure 12

The conversation between Wen and Zhou (Ep. 13, 02:04)



This scene stands out for its layered conversation and representation of intricate relationships. It unfolds *qing* under the theme of Gu's future, along with the interruption of Gu's romantic pairing with Cao. Gu's uncertain departure paves the way for the expression of closeness between Wen and Zhou. Cao's entrance introduces a romantic pairing that eventually supplements comprehension of the original triangular relationship. Through these layered interactions, the scene constructs a queer structure of *qing*—one in which affection, protection, and longing circulate implicitly through gestures of care without needing to be explicitly romantic or competitive.

6.1.2 *Qing triangle*

In this scene, the triangular dynamic among Wen Kexing, Zhou Zishu, and Gu Xiang is not organized through rivalry, but rather through emotional negotiation and redirection. Wen and Zhou dominate the narrative logic, with Gu participating and mediating. Although the conversation revolves around Gu's future on the surface, the deeper implication concerns the two male protagonists' future. Below, Table 1 provides a careful review of the flow of *qing* within this scene.

Table 1

Qing triangle in Scene One

Relationship	Direction	Dynamic
Wen–Zhou	Mutual: Wen to Zhou (intimate, romantic) Zhou to Wen (intimate, concealed)	Wen takes on an emotional responsibility for Zhou, expressing possessiveness and assuming a caregiving authority that subtly positions Zhou as his life companion. Zhou hints at romantic attachment by referring to Wen as his “soul mate” and imagining a shared future in front of the other with poetic or ambiguous language.
Gu–Wen	Gu to Wen (respectful, affectionate)	Gu listens to Wen's guidance and receives his teasing without resistance. Although Wen discusses her future, Gu remains composed and cooperative, suggesting trust in his judgment without overt objection.
Gu–Zhou	Indirect (acknowledged, narratively consequential)	Although Gu interacts minimally with Zhou, her presence prompts significant narrative and emotional shifts. Zhou speaks of her with polite regard and envisions her as part of their future. Later, he redirects that future through matchmaking language. Their bond is not emotionally deep, yet it is structurally significant because Gu's role must be

		“resolved” for Zhou and Wen to continue on their shared path.
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Wen Kexing suggests that Gu Xiang leave the Yueyang Sect for her own safety. Then, he turns to Zhou with a telling question: “Ah Xu, do you mind her following us?” (*Ep.* 12, 38:56–38:58). The casual phrasing masks the emotional stakes. Zhou replies warmly, “Of course not. I’d love to have a beauty with us.” (*Ep.* 12, 39:01–39:06), blending courtesy with the coded displacement of desire. This moment establishes Gu Xiang as a temporary companion. The conversation suggests that she will eventually be “settled,” which will free the male leads to continue their journey together.

The triangle shifts with the arrival of Cao Weining, whose genuine feelings for Gu Xiang create the potential for a romantic pairing. Zhou seizes this moment to suggest that he and Wen would be relieved if Gu Xiang could find a trustworthy partner. However, the narrative resolution hinges not on Gu’s choice, but on the ability of this romantic subplot to clear space for the central male bond. As Zhou puts it:

“Since Ah Xiang is a girl, it’s inconvenient for her to follow us around. Today we were discussing how we could find her a trustworthy partner so she can settle down. Then we would be relieved” (*Ep.* 12, 42:08–42:34).

This is a telling example similar to what Sedgwick calls the erotic triangle. However, unlike her model, which often features male rivalry for a woman, this scene queers the structure. Gu Xiang is not the object of desire; rather, she is the narrative mechanism through which the men’s relationship is legitimized. The triangle becomes non-rivalrous, refracting *qing* through socially acceptable roles—mentorship, guardianship, and arranged partnership—while sustaining

the emotional intensity between Wen and Zhou. Their desire to travel the world together is framed as friendship, but it functions narratively as a deferred romantic ideal.

The closing exchange between Wen and Zhou reveals this subtext:

Wen: When you were coaxing Cao Wei Ning just now, which words of yours were true?

Zhou: Some of them are true, some are not. Have a guess (*Ep.* 13, 2:50–3:07).

This line particularly blurs the boundary between performance and sincerity. Their flirtatious ambiguity lifts the veil of heteronormativity, revealing the affective core beneath the scene's polite discourse.

6.1.3 Roles of Gu Xiang

Gu Xiang's role in this scene is unique because of its emphasis on facilitation, negotiation, and emotional prompting. Although she is not at the emotional centre of the *qing triangle*, she is essential to initiating and guiding the evolving relationship between Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu.

As a perceptive *observer*, Gu is an early witness to the growing closeness between the two men. Her initial reaction to Zhou's being together with Wen in a private space (Figure 13) reveals her intuitive awareness of their intimacy. While Wen deflects with a teasing mark, Gu responds quickly and calmly, neither confrontational nor surprised:

Gu: Master! Master, are you looking for me? Sick Man? Why are you still here?

Wen: What? You don't approve of him staying with me?

Gu: No. Why would I? It would be fine (*Ep.* 12, 37:49-38:11).

This exchange allows the moment to register emotionally without becoming uncomfortable. Rather than questioning their bond, Gu registers it with quiet acceptance instead of disapproval or suspicion.

Figure 13

“Sick Man? Why are you still there?” (Ep. 12, 37:59)



As a *negotiator*, she briefly attempts to shape her own place within the unfolding triangle. When Wen suggests that she leave the Yueyang Sect, Gu hesitates, asking, “Master, do you want me to go back and serve you?” Her question opens space for emotional affirmation, yet Wen redirects it toward Zhou. By doing so, he shifts the focus of authority and care away from himself and toward Zhou. Gu does not resist this redirection but adapts, continuing to voice her concerns without pushing for centrality.

Her role as a *facilitator* is especially evident when her presence enables indirect emotional exchanges between the male leads. For example, when Zhou responds playfully and Wen reacts in a “jealous” manner, Gu becomes the conversational hinge (*Ep.* 12, 38:42-39:18):

Wen: Ah Xiang, maybe you should not risk staying in Yueyang Sect. Make up a lie and leave.

Gu: Master, do you want me to go back and serve you?

Wen: Ah Xu, do you mind her following us?

Zhou: Of course not. I’d love to have a beauty with us.

Wen: No, I disagree. I’ll give you a break, Ah Xiang. Just go anywhere you want to go.

Gu: I... I don’t want to go anywhere.

Gu then is the reason for the discussion, yet not its object. Her presence allows the two men to test boundaries, express jealousy, and demonstrate attachment without stating it outright.

Later, when Cao Weining interrupts the scene, Gu’s role shifts again. She is no longer only facilitating emotional currents between the male leads; she becomes the reason for their emotional negotiation. Wen and Zhou’s exchange centres around Gu’s future, and marriage is one option, as they wish for a stable and safe life without being concerned with their dangerous affairs. This not only registers their shared concern for Gu but also portrays their rapport through the tacit agreement. Specifically, the term “my family girl²¹ (我家丫头)” used by Wen assigns Gu a quasi-filial position. This again confirms Wen’s relation to Gu as parental guardian and frames his care for her in a familial rather than romantic way. In contrast, Wen refers to Zhou as “Ah Xu (阿絮),” a term of intimacy that signals emotional priority:

²¹ The original line “我家丫头是去是留自由我做主 (It’s up to me to decide whether *my family girl* stays or goes).” was translated into “I’ll decide whether *she* could leave or not” in official English subtitles.

Wen: I'll decide whether *she* should leave or not (It's up to me to decide whether *my family girl* stays or goes) (*Ep.* 12, 40:17-40:20).

Wen: I'll take care of Ah Xu, so don't bother (*Ep.* 12, 40:47-40:50).

This distinction of calling between Gu and Zhou is essential to understanding her role. She is neither marginalized nor central. Instead, she functions as the relational glue that allows Wen and Zhou's emotional world to form and stabilize. Her actions and presence hold the triangle together without demanding its focus. She neither competes for affection nor withdraws from it. She simply enables its expression.

Gu Xiang's role in this scene is thus defined by her ability to observe, negotiate, and facilitate the formation of male bonds. She sets the stage for the triangle to unfold, not by demanding space, but by allowing space to be made. In this way, she ensures that the affective architecture of *qing*—its tension, care, and intimacy—can begin to take shape.

6.1.4 *Mise-en-scène*

The frame captures the moment when Cao Weining sits together with the other three, forming a nearly symmetrical tableau. Its visual arrangements for stage props and character performance work in tandem with the narrative to represent the triangular relationship among Wen, Gu and Zhou. While the framing initially appears balanced, subtle dissonances reveal underlying emotional imbalances. This *mise-en-scène* suggests a crucial meeting among the four, and every element supports a sense of restrained composure.

This medium-wide shot shows the four characters seated around a low wooden table in a private room of an ancient Chinese interior. They are arranged in a square, evenly spaced, with the jade flagon at the centre of the frame. The room is symmetrical and tidy, with classical architectural

elements and soft lighting. At first glance, this composition suggests a casual gathering with food and liqueur on the table.

Figure 14

Four-way composition in Qingyun Restaurant (Ep. 12, 41:33)



Note. From left to right: Zhou Zishu (left 1), Cao Weining (left 2), Wen Kexing (left 3), and Gu Xiang (left 4).

Within this frame, the central flagon occupies the focal point. As a cultural symbol of both carefreeness and sorrow, it becomes an important motif of Zhou's lifestyle throughout the whole drama. The colour range of this frame also centres around the frosted jade colour of the flagon, accompanied by the furniture's wooden colour. In the background, the Chinese-style landscape (*shanshui*) paintings with emphasis on ink tones and washes convey the idea of harmony between human and nature, echoing the symmetrical composition.

The four characters wear traditional Chinese robes in muted jewel tones, each distinct yet harmonious with the room's colour scheme. While Wen's deep teal costume slightly contrasts with Zhou and Cao's soft blue ones, Gu's lavender costume stands out, suggesting her as the topic of their conversation. Visually, Zhou and Cao contrast with Wen and Gu in terms of their costumes' colour depth, splitting the frame into two parts. Furthermore, the scene is lit with soft lighting as natural daylight filters through the paper windows on the right side of the background. Similarly, the frame split Zhou and Cao from Wen and Gu, with the former's back to the sunlight and the latter facing the sunlight.

However, the seemingly harmonious emotional dynamics of this frame also face the risk of rupturing the relationship between Wen and Zhou as represented through their character performance. Wen and Zhou sit across from each other, not making direct eye contact. Zhou faces Wen, appearing open with his hands resting on the chair. In contrast, Wen lowers his head, crossing his arms over his lap. His reluctance, reflected in a sorrowful facial expression, shows a temporary disconnect related to Zhou's terminal illness.

Gu and Cao's body language similarly matches the disconnect between Wen and Zhou. Cao angles his body toward Gu in a gesture of openness and concern. However, Gu remains still and composed. She is filmed from behind, her face only partially visible. Her hands rest on the arms of her chair rather than on the table, differentiating her from the other three men. Instead of responding to Cao's anxious look, her eyes seem to focus on her master. This suggests her concern about Wen and also indicates her knowledge of Zhou's health background.

The *mise-en-scène* reinforces this emotional dynamic. Soft lighting, traditional furnishings, and celadon teapots create a familiar mood. However, the camera avoids perfect composition. A vertical pillar in the background separates the frame between Wen and Zhou, but

it is slightly off-center, introducing a subtle visual imbalance. This misalignment quietly hints at the unresolved tension between Wen and Zhou's relationship because of Zhou's terminal illness.

Gu plays an important mediating role. Although her facial expression is the least presented, she stands out as an important visual clue guiding the frame. Her stillness provides stability within the group. While Cao looks toward her, his gaze ultimately draws attention back to Wen and Zhou. Gu serves as a visual link; her presence supports the emotional current between the two men without causing conflict.

The queer *qing* between Zhou and Wen is conveyed through posture, silence, and spacing. Gu's obscured face highlights her quiet labour of care. Through her steady presence, the scene stays emotionally balanced despite a slight visual imbalance. Instead of dramatizing queer *qing*, this moment allows it to emerge through fairly restrained elements of *mise-en-scène*.

6.1.5 Conclusion

This early scene of the three main characters together (along with Gu's romantic partner, Cao Weining) illustrates how queer *qing* between Zhou Zishu and Wen Kexing is established and validated by Gu Xiang's strategic positioning as a stabilizing presence. Her "removal" from the narrative is discussed under the guise of concern for her safety and romantic future.

However, this action subtly creates space for the male protagonists to express their emotional connection. Through oblique language, coded humour, and a *mise-en-scène* that acknowledges but does not resolve emotional asymmetries, the scene maintains a queer subtext within the context of *qing*, transcending the boundary between friendship and traditional romance.

Visually, the composition is built on near-symmetry, using careful character placement and subtle spatial misalignments to express a scene of emotional stasis and restraint. While

everyone except Gu Xiang offers emotional cues, it is her composed neutrality and visual partiality that allow the relational field between Zhou and Wen to exist. Her role is not to compete but to support. The presence of Gu carves out a new narrative possibility for the two men to engage with their *qing* to each other through the proxy of Gu. As they express care and guardianship for Gu, their *qing* circulates in a non-transgressive way. The result is a compelling example of mediated, queer *qing* expressed through the restrained visual interpersonal interactions.

Table 2

Scene One Summary

Element	Description
Scene	<i>Qingyun</i> Restaurant (<i>Ep. 12, 37:39-42:39; Ep. 13, 02:03-03:00</i>)
Key Characters	Zhou Zishu, Wen Kexing, Gu Xiang, Cao Weining
<i>Qing triangle</i>	Non-rivalrous triangle: Gu Xiang is not the object of desire but the medium through which <i>qing</i> are negotiated and facilitated.
Queer Subtext	Expressed via displacement, humor, and oblique language (e.g. soul mate, matchmaking); never directly verbalized.
<i>Qing</i>	Emotional sincerity expressed through protection and shared destiny rather than romantic declaration.
Gu Xiang's Role	Negotiator and facilitator: positioned as a figure whose departure legitimizes male togetherness and proposes new narrative possibilities.

<i>Mise-en-scène</i>	Balanced four-way tableau with near-symmetry; slight misalignments (e.g., room pillar vs. table) reflect hidden tension.
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6.2 Scene Two: Night Conversation

6.2.1 Context

Set in the stillness of a starlit glade, this late-night scene contrasts with the indoor meeting at *Qingyun* Restaurant in Scene One, offering a quiet, open-air setting. The atmosphere is hushed and introspective, providing an ideal setting for a private conversation between Zhou Zishu and Gu Xiang. Meanwhile, Wen Kexing rests inside the house (Figure 15). Gu stumbles upon Zhou's drinking alone and is surprised by his similar affinity for alcohol to Wen. What begins as playful banter quickly deepens into a conversation laced with suppressed grief, indirect confessions, and concern, underscoring the emotional stakes of Zhou's terminal illness.

Figure 15

Gu and Zhou sit together outdoors at night (Ep. 22, 31:17)



While the tone is initially light, the emotional undercurrents become unmistakable when Gu confronts Zhou about his health. Having learned of his terminal condition from Wen, Gu tentatively asks if his fate was self-inflicted. Zhou deflects the question, laughing and playfully scaring her in an attempt to mask the pain with humour (Figure 16). However, Gu pierces through the façade. She chides him for his recklessness and urges him to consider Wen’s feelings. Her voice grows sharper as she reveals how devastated Wen was when he learned of Zhou’s condition—a grief deeper than anything she had seen before.

Figure 16

Zhou avoids answering Gu’s question (Ep. 22, 32:51)



The scene ends with Wen’s interruption, confirming his emotional presence all along. Gu ends her tirade by “threatening” to revive and kill Zhou again if he dares to die with vulgar language. Zhou gently remarks that her way of speaking mirrors Wen’s and points out Wen’s eavesdropping. Wen then appears from behind (Figure 17) and seamlessly shifts from an

eavesdropper to a speaker. Wen wordlessly takes over the conversation and asks Gu to find more liqueur.

Figure 17

Wen gets out of the room (Ep. 22, 33:37)



This scene is noteworthy for presenting a consolidated triangular relationship. While the narrative centres upon Zhou's terminal illness, it clarifies each one's personal stake in the affective structure. There are two special arrangements for character performance. First, the comparison of Gu's attitude to Zhou's health with that of Zhou leads their conversation back to Wen, suggesting Wen's presence throughout the scene. Both Gu's urging Zhou to stay alive and Zhou's seeming indifference are based on their deep *qing* for Wen, however, in a different way. Second, Wen's silent eavesdropping and his subsequent appearance further serve as an indirect response to Gu and Zhou's *qing* for him. While he shares his sorrow for Zhou's terminal illness

with Gu, he remains constrained about this topic and avoids direct confrontation with Zhou.

These narrative choices together provide an interesting tableau to investigate the flow of *qing*.

6.2.2 *Qing triangle*

In this scene, the triangular relationship is enhanced through an intimate, emotionally intense conversation between Zhou and Gu. Unlike the strategic interactions in Scene One, this moment centres on emotional expression and vulnerability, especially concerning sorrow, illness and hidden feelings. Although Wen Kexing is not physically present for most of this scene, his influence is remembered throughout the conversation, showing how deeply he is ingrained in the hearts of Gu and Zhou.

Table 3

Qing triangle in Scene Two

Relationship	Direction	Dynamic
Wen–Zhou	Wen to Zhou (intimate, protective)	Through Gu’s voice, Wen’s emotional investment in Zhou is revealed. He is portrayed as being devastated by Zhou’s terminal illness and as positioning Zhou as his only friend and emotional priority.
	Zhou to Wen (affectionate, reserved)	Although Zhou avoids acknowledging his terminal illness directly, his reluctance to speak and his retreat into humor and drinking suggest emotional avoidance rather than detachment.
Gu–Wen	Gu to Wen (loyal, protective)	Gu defends Wen’s reputation and speaks with emotional urgency on his behalf. She honors Wen’s <i>qing</i> to Zhou and helps make his care for Zhou legible to the audience.
	Wen to Gu (familial,	Wen treats Gu with a blend of casual authority and affection, teasing her as one would a younger sibling or child. His physical gestures (such as pulling her ear) and his commanding tone are offset by his emotional familiarity. He

	teasing, protective)	interrupts her emotional outpouring with humor rather than criticism.
Gu–Zhou	Gu to Zhou (concerned, persistent) Zhou to Gu (trusting, tolerant)	Gu confronts Zhou about his terminal illness, mixing humor with deep concern. She insists that he stay alive, for the sake of Wen, thereby demonstrating her care and perceptiveness. Zhou allows Gu to see his emotional vulnerability and does not resist her concern. He engages with her in a teasing manner and acknowledges her closeness to Wen. His openness suggests trust and emotional regard, though subdued and peripheral.

The conversation begins with Gu discovering Zhou alone at night, drinking. She expresses frustration at his behaviour, dismissing the liquor as “bitter and astringent” and recalling that her master also drinks when unhappy. Zhou replies that liquor is also called “Sorrow Relieving Medicine (忘忧散)”, suggesting that sorrow shared by both he and Wen is deep enough to require multiple bottles. This reference subtly links the two male leads through a shared emotional coping mechanism at different moments, even though they are not physically together.

Zhou’s poetic explanation, “If one bottle can’t relieve your sorrow, two bottles can... (31:49-31:51)” highlights the emotional depth beneath his calm exterior. At this moment, the triangle forms not through direct interaction but through affective projection. That means, Wen’s emotional habits are informed by Gu; Zhou builds on that message, and both characters affirm Wen’s importance without his actual presence.

As the conversation shifts to Zhou’s health, the emotional stakes intensify. Gu confronts him about his terminal illness, which she had learned of from Wen. Zhou avoids the subject by startling her with a shout and laughing it off, using humour and deflection to manage his

vulnerability. Gu's reaction, however, is direct and emotionally raw. She pleads with Zhou not to die, not only for her own sake but for Wen's: "If you die, Master will be very sad... He has finally made a friend. You have to live! (32:54-33:13)"

Here, the word "friend" has a double meaning. It allows Gu to stay within the bounds of socially accepted discourse while clearly suggesting that Wen's *qing* to Zhou transcends ordinary friendship. Gu's framing also provides insight into Wen's inner world, affirming that Zhou is his only friend and the one who could shatter him emotionally. Her humorous yet heartfelt threat, "I'll revive you from the netherworld and then kill you again (33:19-33:23)," intensifies this moment of emotional vulnerability.

The triangle that emerges in this scene is non-competitive and effectively asymmetrical. Wen's *qing* for Zhou is relayed through Gu's words. Zhou's evasiveness shows that he is burdened by this knowledge yet not prepared to face it directly. Gu functions as both an emotional relay and an interpretive voice, bringing Wen into the conversation and forcing Zhou to confront the emotional impact of his illness not only on himself but also on others. In this way, she facilitates a dynamic where *qing* can be acknowledged even in Zhou's silence and Wen's non-presence in this scene.

The arrival of Wen at the very end of the scene serves to halt the emotional exposure. He interrupts the conversation under the pretense of asking for more liquor, redirecting Gu and teasing her like an elder brother (father) figure. His banter reasserts control over the emotional space, suggesting his mild discomfort with hearing Gu speak so openly about his attachment to Zhou. Yet even in this interruption, the depth of his care is implied. He does not correct Gu's mentioning of his concern for Zhou, nor does he deny the significance of their bond.

Through this triangular configuration, the scene deepens the emotional terrain laid in earlier episodes. It shows that the bond between Wen and Zhou is not only visible to others but also cared for, guarded, and interpreted by someone else. As a family-like character to Wen, Gu seeks to identify and articulate her observation and comprehension of their deep bond. Her role in shaping this triangle is not to insert herself between the men but to make visible what they cannot yet voice.

6.2.3 Roles of Gu Xiang

In this scene, Gu Xiang plays a key role as a facilitator of queer *qing* and a proxy for Wen. Although she is not positioned at the centre of the triangular relationship, she clarifies the male bond as she relays and reinforces Wen's unspoken words.

During her conversation with Zhou, Gu promotes the narrative by linking Zhou's fondness for alcohol with Wen, thereby articulating Wen's sorrow of knowing Zhou's terminal illness. As a witness to the drinking alone of Zhou and Wen, she sees through their inner sorrow. Puzzled as to why Zhou drinks alone at midnight instead of sleeping, she immediately associates this habit with her master Wen, suggesting their shared vulnerability as deeply burdened by sorrow. In doing so, Gu then foregrounds liqueur as a powerful motif shared by Wen and Zhou. While similar to the role as analyzed in Scene One, where she serves as a central topic of the narrative, Gu performs more agency here as she leads the conversation. Furthermore, Gu's caretaking is also literal. The scene begins with her noticing Zhou's late-night drinking and ends with Wen teasing her as if she were still a child. This quasi-parental relationship underscores her position as someone deeply trusted by both men, yet distinct from them. She is not a romantic rival or emotional burden. She is the glue that helps hold their shared emotional world together.

Additionally, Gu also serves as a proxy for Wen when he is absent. Although Wen simply rests indoors, her loyalty to Wen brings out his presence as if he were present. There are two important moments manifesting this role. First, when Zhou makes a light joke at Wen's expense, Gu immediately jumps in to defend her master, responding harshly with a tone that breaks their previous lighthearted rapport. Her response signals deep respect and emotional loyalty. Second, when her knowledge of Zhou's terminal illness is confirmed by Zhou in person, Gu's wish for Zhou to stay healthy derives not only from her own worry but also from Wen's emotional position. She puts herself into Wen's place and sincerely pleads with Zhou not to die. As a proxy for Wen, she emphasizes the disastrous consequences of Zhou's death for Wen's well-being. In this regard, her proxy role is in tandem with her facilitator role to articulate and reinforce queer *qing* between the two men.

Notably, while performing these two roles, Gu clarifies her position in the triangular relationship. Rather than being disappointed at the hierarchy of the *qing triangle*, Gu acknowledges the difference between Wen's *qing* for her and that for Zhou. She articulates what Wen cannot say and what Zhou does not want to hear. Her role is not to resolve tension but to hold space for it, to enable feelings to surface without demanding resolution. Moreover, Gu identifies herself as an intimate family member, whereas she recognizes Zhou as Wen's romantic partner. Despite her title for Zhou as "friend" due to censorship, her performance contributes to the formulation of queer subtext, through which queer interpretation is possible. In this way, queer *qing* has been channelled through Gu's emotional labour that helps maintain a delicate balance that could otherwise render male bonds between Wen and Zhou censored.

In this way, Gu Xiang is more than a supporting character. She is a vital agent of queer *qing*—bringing emotional clarity, facilitating affective exchange, and maintaining the triangle’s emotional coherence through presence, care, and interpretive intelligence.

6.2.4 *Mise-en-scène*

This shot captures a playful moment between Gu and Zhou, contrasting with the serious topic of Zhou’s terminal illness. While character performance highlights their different attitudes towards death, props arrangements and camera blocking remind the audience of Zhou’s presence all the time.

Figure 18

Night Conversation (Ep. 22, 32:51)



First, the comparison of sitting behaviours and facial expressions between Gu and Zhou serves as the first clue to understand Wen and Zhou’s queer *qing*. Both sitting in the nighttime

outdoor space, the atmosphere of peace and tranquillity is pierced through a contrast between the two characters' postures and facial expressions. On the one hand, Zhou sits and laughs in a relaxed and unrestrained manner. He leans to the right with his legs crossed comfortably. With his right hand holding the flagon to his lips, he naturally rests the left hand on his hip. While his demeanour is loose and informal, it camouflages his complicated feelings about his future death. Tipping his head back, looking up, and appearing to chuckle and take a swig from the bottle after teasing Gu reveals that these are more than joyful gestures. Through a combination of these actions, Zhou's performance suggests a defence mechanism that hides his emotional inaccessibility.

On the other hand, in contrast to Zhou's seemingly composed demeanour, Gu's performance reveals her serious concern for Zhou's health. She sits upright on an off-white woven cushion with her legs elegantly crossed beneath her. One hand rests calmly in her lap while the other is poised to grasp the small liqueur cup in front of her. Her face, caught in mid-reaction, shows a complicated mix of concern and annoyance, prompted by Zhou's evasive comments and teasing after her serious question about death. Her relatively formal posture signals a different attitude towards Zhou's terminal illness, especially when compared with Zhou's sprawling ease. She appears emotionally open, engaged, and receptive during the conversation despite Zhou's avoidance.

Second, arrangements for props contribute to evoking a feeling of sadness. The low table not only separates the two characters but also suggests the possibility of a third presence—a potential space left open for Wen Kexing. The floor cushion arranged in the foreground creates a visual absence through the intended emptiness, reminding the audience of Zhou's absence and possible interruption. Furthermore, although Zhou pretends to remain relaxed, the size difference

between the wine cups on the table and the flagon held by Zhou conveys Zhou's hidden sorrow. Instead of pouring liqueur into the small wine cups, he uses the relatively large flagon to drown his sorrow. Altogether, they effectively imply that Wen might be as sorrowful as Zhou when drinking alone, suggesting their shared vulnerability of losing each other.

Moreover, one of the most striking aspects of this frame is the wooden pillar standing vertically in the foreground. It partially blocks the audience's view. This deliberate obstruction positions the viewer as an observer and a listener of the emerging dialogue. The importance of this blocking is further emphasized in the narrative when Wen's eavesdropping is confirmed by Zhou. Cinematically, the pillar serves two purposes: it obstructs the view while also symbolically filtering the partial visibility of emotional truths in this scene. The emotional intimacies between the characters, especially between Zhou and Wen, are implied to be accessed indirectly and verbally rather than expressed directly.

Overall, this shot contributes to the portrayal of queer *qing* through multiple comparisons between character performance and props. Apart from the narrative, the intended camera blocking and visual absence serve to remind the audience of Zhou's presence throughout the scene.

6.2.5 Scene Conclusion

Table 4

Scene Two Summary

Element	Description
Scene	Night Conversation (<i>Ep. 12, 30:53-34:17</i>).

Key Characters	Zhou Zishu, Gu Xiang, Wen Kexing (off-screen for most of the scene)
<i>Qing triangle</i>	Maintains a non-rivalrous configuration; Zhou and Wen's bond is foregrounded through Gu's perspective and concern.
Queer Subtext	Suggested through Gu's references to Wen's grief, Zhou's evasive sorrow, and their shared emotional habits (e.g., drinking); romantic desire is implied but not named.
<i>Qing</i>	Expressed through indirect dialogue, care, grief, and the plea for survival; Wen's attachment to Zhou is framed as irreplaceable.
Gu Xiang's Role	Affective conduit and emotional translator; voices what others will not say, stabilizes the triangle without inserting rivalry.
<i>Mise-en-scène</i>	Minimalist and domestic; low wooden table, shared bottle, dim lighting, and partial visual obstruction suggest intimacy, emotional restraint, and overheard feelings.

This scene showcases a relatively stable *qing triangle* facilitated by Gu. Unlike the previous scene, which revolves around Gu's future to promote the plot narrative, this scene unfolds through a conversation concerning the emotional stakes of the three main characters. Although Wen only appears at the end of the scene, he remains at the centre of their discussion. Gu's frequent references to Wen imply the two men's shared vulnerability of losing each other. Zhou's unrestrained drinking further conveys his struggle to speak of his death in front of Wen. Through analyses of narrative context and *mise-en-scène*, this bewilderment is also found in Wen. In this way, queer subtext is formulated through Gu's facilitation and her role as a proxy of Wen.

Throughout the scene, Gu acts as an active agent who stabilizes their triangular relationship and relays queer *qing* between the two men. She expresses her sincere concern for

Zhou, albeit through blunt humour. However, the true weight of her words lies in her references to Wen. She conveys Wen's sadness to Zhou and insists that Zhou must stay alive, not just for himself, but to spare Wen the sorrow of losing his only friend. Through Gu's words, *qing* remains unspoken between Wen and Zhou comes into view. In other words, their *qing* is triangulated through Gu.

Thus, the scene captures the drama's central logic of formulating queer subtext. *Qing* does not emerge through direct declarations but rather through deflected conversation, contrasted gestures, and subtle motifs. Gu becomes the voice for what the two men cannot say aloud. Her role as a facilitator and a proxy reveals the care, longing, and vulnerability that define the two men's relationship. As such, the scene quietly and powerfully articulates the elusive queer *qing* despite harsh censorship.

6.3 Scene Three: Jealousy

6.3.1 Context

Prior to a critical narrative turning point—Wen's coming back to the Ghost Valley—nearly the end of the series, this scene features a private conversation between Gu and Wen. The scene starts with Wen trying to figure out how to fold his robes when Gu suddenly enters the room (Figure 19). Taking over the clothes from Wen, Gu skillfully folds and settles them on Wen's bed. Seeing through Gu's glum look, Wen asks her the reason for being so worried. The scene then unfolds their conversation.

Figure 19

Wen tries to fold his robe when Gu enters his room (Ep. 31, 24:56)



Cognizant of the peril Wen will confront after returning to the Ghost Valley, Gu sincerely implores him to reconsider the decision. Her anxiety comes from the possible consequences of Wen's sudden plotting with the Scorpion King. In response, Wen maintains his typical composure, assuring that he will be back soon. He then redirects the focus to Zhou by asking Gu to attend to him during his absence.

However, Gu's not assured by Wen's words, and she expresses her feelings of guilt about bringing the Scorpion King in front of Wen. While Gu calmly analyzes the potential risks of working with the Scorpion King, Wen listens with a fond and proud smile (Figure 20). Instead of treating Gu's analysis carefully, Wen deflects Gu's worry away from this problem through praise for the progress Gu's making in eloquence.

Figure 20

Wen listens to Gu's analysis of risks (Ep. 31, 24:56)



Gu quickly figures out Wen's aim and pleads with him to tell her what he has promised the Scorpion King to save Zhou previously. Wen suddenly becomes serious and restates that Gu should never mention his cooperation with the Scorpion King to anyone else, especially Zhou (Figure 21).

Figure 21

Wen tells Gu not to tell his plot with Scorpion King to anyone else (Ep. 31, 26:47)



Replying to Wen that she has never mentioned, Gu feels wronged. She again expresses her deep worry for Wen, and Wen reassures her that he will explain all to her in the future, and he will be back before the removal of the deadly nails in Zhou's body. In the end, the scene ends with Gu bantering with Wen. When Gu playfully teases Wen that he is biased towards Zhou over her, Wen laughs at her "jealousy" (Figure 22).

Figure 22

Wen laughs at Gu's "jealousy" (Ep. 12, 27:43)



This scene is pivotal as it presents *qing*'s different modalities among the three characters. As Gu worries about Wen's safety and Wen reassures her, they convey their family *qing*. In contrast, Wen and Zhou's queer *qing* is conveyed through the queer subtext behind Gu's "jealousy."

6.3.2 *Qing triangle*

This scene's narrative creates an uneven but deeply interdependent *qing triangle* among the three characters. Although Zhou is not physically present, Gu and Wen's private conversation revolves around him through themes of concern, secrecy, comparison and displacement. Wen's emotional focus is still on Zhou, whereas Gu navigates her own complicated feelings for both men. This results in an uneven affective structure, reflecting the dynamics Sedgwick (1985/2016) discusses as gender asymmetry in erotic triangles. The following table illustrates the developed triangular relationship in this scene.

Table 5

Qing triangle in Scene Three

Relationship	Direction	Dynamic
Wen-Zhou	Mutual (devotional, protective)	Wen prioritizes Zhou's health and emotional well-being above his own; expresses deep care through secrecy and sacrifice. Zhou's prioritization of Wen can also be inferred from Wen's stern warning against telling Zhou about his plotting with the Scorpion King.
Gu-Wen	Mutual (familial, loyal)	Gu shows concern and loyalty to Wen, expressing guilt and affection; Wen responds with reassurance and closeness.
Gu-Zhou	Gu to Zhou (mediated, mixed)	Gu indirectly expresses displacement and mild jealousy, acknowledging Zhou's emotional centrality without resentment.

This scene prioritizes the queer *qing* between Wen and Zhou, which serves as the central axis of the triangular relationship. The instruction Wen provides to Gu, “You only need to take care of Zhou Xu for me,” is uncomplicated but informative. Notwithstanding the imminent peril he confronts when entering Ghost Valley once more and collaborating with the dangerous Scorpion King, Wen evinces no apprehension for his personal safety. As a result, Wen redirects the conversation to Zhou’s recovery before the operation (the removal of the deadly nails in Zhou’s body) to avoid addressing Gu’s concern. Through demonstration of his reliance on Gu, Zhou deflects attention from his own safety.

Additionally, Wen’s prioritization of Zhou’s recovery remains the key to understanding how their *qing* is mutual. When Gu mentions Wen’s sacrifice for Zhou, Wen issues a relatively stern warning to Gu, instructing her to refrain from disclosing his plotting with the Scorpion King to anyone else, particularly Zhou. The moment stands out because Wen seldom poses such a serious face in front of Gu, indicating his extreme worry about Zhou’s potential emotional distress on hearing the risk. However, this is not to suggest that Zhou’s *qing* for Gu is inferior to that for Zhou. Instead, this moment serves to infer that Wen would also risk his life for Zhou, hence the two-way *qing* between them.

In contrast, the *qing* between Gu and Wen is evidently mutual, as in previously analyzed scenes. Gu’s *qing* for Wen is characterized by a profound sense of concern, a protective instinct, and a sense of culpability. Following the introduction of the Scorpion King to Wen, it becomes evident that she is concerned that she has ensnared him in a situation that could potentially result in his demise. “But if you get hurt from by this, I... I will never forgive myself.”, says Gu, reflecting a mixture of loyalty and fear. At this moment, she harbours no resentment towards Wen’s prioritization of Zhou. Her tone remains deferential, even as emotion begins to swell

beneath it. When she asks what Wen has promised the Scorpion King, she is not demanding answers from entitlement but expressing a desire to share his burden. “I just think I should also know what the plot is. Master, I’m so worried about you.”

Hearing these sincere words, Wen responds not with revelation but with reassurance. His *qing* for Gu is familial and sincere. He addresses her as “silly girl”, attempts to soothe her concerns, and offers promises delivered with familiar bravado, “Have confidence in me, OK?” While Wen’s care for Gu is distinct from the protective sentiments he harbours for Zhou, his concern for Gu is nonetheless palpable. She is portrayed as an individual of significant trust and emotional intimacy.

The scene ends with the queer subtext behind Gu’s pretended jealousy. Gu’s sense of humour is evident in his statement, “Right. You may leave me behind a hundred times, but not even once when it comes to that Sick Man.” Her remark is humorous yet incisive. It teases Wen’s desperate attempt to protect Zhou even at the risk of his own life. Wen’s reply, “You’re jealous of a man? No. Why are you jealous because of me?”, is also teasing rather than defensive. He does not deny the truth behind her words. What might seem like a competitive moment instead reflects the tacit understanding between Gu and Wen. Therefore, male romance between Wen and Zhou has been brought back through this queer subtext, intensifying *qing* between Zhou and Wen as queer *qing* without being censored.

Overall, this scene presents a *qing triangle* that defies conventional patterns of gendered rivalry in erotic triangles. While Sedgwick (1985/2016) notices the gender asymmetry hidden beneath male homosocial desire, this scene presents how women actively queer male bonds, marking a departure from the roles assigned to women within erotic triangles. Instead of portraying women as either passive or exchanged, the *qing triangle* analyzed in this scene relies

on Gu to formulate the queer subtext that allows male romance to be interpreted. When Gu pretends to be jealous of Zhou, she implicitly acknowledges the mutual queer *qing* between the two men. She is not instrumentalized or excluded. Instead, her affective labour visualizes and queers the bond between the two men without diminishing her own narrative importance. In this way, the triangle resists patriarchal logic and creates space for queer *qing* to be affirmed through queer subtext.

6.3.3 Roles of Gu Xiang

Gu Xiang's role in this scene extends beyond what Sedgwick critiques as the traditional function of the female figure in erotic triangles. She is neither exchanged nor excluded. Instead, she becomes *a witness, participant, and affective labour* of the queer *qing* between Wen and Zhou.

Gu articulates what the men cannot, thus the reinforcement of the scene's affective structure. She is not simply a narrative device through which male bonds are managed. She is also a character whose insight and loyalty enable the queerness of the scene to be both visible and sustained.

Throughout the conversation, Gu functions as a witness. She expresses concern for Wen, laced with guilt and affection, yet never insists on occupying the emotional center. In contrast to queer *qing* between Wen and Zhou, her *qing* for Wen is more explicit. Her language oscillates between filial loyalty and sibling bond, voicing what her master hesitates to say. Notably, she verbalizes Wen's emotional priorities more clearly than he does himself. Her lines, such as "You would give it all to save Zhou Xu back then," and "You may leave me behind a hundred times, but not even once when it comes to that Sick Man," reflect an awareness of Wen's desperate

devotion to Zhou. Even in these humorous moments, Gu channels emotional truths that ground, rather than disrupt, the dynamic.

Gu also participates in the creation of queer subtext. She refers to Zhou with a mix of formality and teasing distance, highlighting her awareness of his centrality without seeking to challenge it. Her words do not interrupt or compete with the bond between Wen and Zhou; instead, she makes space for it to be acknowledged and sustained. Her humour becomes a mode of care, softening the weight of emotional imbalance while affirming mutual trust.

Last, the portrayal of Gu as a caretaker for the two men further highlights Gu's role as an affective labourer. A subtle detail at the beginning of the scene presents her affective labour in a non-stereotypical sense. As Wen struggles to fold his clothes, he mutters, "How does the silly girl usually fold the clothes?" followed by "You're here in time," when Gu enters (Figure 19). This playful exchange reflects Gu's familiarity with Wen's daily routine and underscores her quiet support within his private life. While Wen may serve as her protector in dangerous settings, it is Gu who attends to the small, intimate rhythms that shape his personal world.

This caretaking motif reappears when Wen entrusts her with Zhou's well-being: "You only need to take care of Zhou Xu for me." This line is not a command but a gesture of deep trust. Gu is not positioned as a stereotypical woman relegated to domestic service; instead, she is presented as someone capable of holding the emotional well-being of both men. She becomes the person Wen turns to when he must leave his most valued relationship in another's care.

Gu Xiang's role is defined by her active maintenance of the triangular relationship. She does not simply perform chores or carry out instructions. Instead, she sustains the relationship through her attentiveness and relational insight. Her presence allows the two male protagonists to focus on each other without feeling rivalry or disruption. By caring for both men in different

ways—practically, emotionally, and narratively—she becomes a stabilizing force whose affective labour brings coherence and depth to the scene.

6.3.4 Other observations

Instead of analyzing one frame's *mise-en-scène*, this section investigates the different terms of address for Zhou in this scene. Throughout the whole conversation between Wen and Gu, Wen consistently calls “Ah Xu (阿絮).” This intimate nickname demonstrates his genuine care for Zhou. The constancy of this name signals Wen’s closeness to Zhou and his emotional prioritization of him.

In contrast, Gu Xiang refers to Zhou in different ways. At first, she uses his formal full name, “Zhou Xu (周絮)”, which keeps a formal tone. Later, however, in a moment of frustrated affection, she jokingly calls him “Sick Man (癆病鬼).” This shift does not show disrespect; instead, it highlights Gu’s complex feelings. She discerns the queer *qing* between her master and Zhou while remaining nostalgic about memories of days only between Zhou and her. In this way, she acknowledges Zhou’s importance to Wen not by competing with it but by addressing it humorously.

These shifting terms of address, ranging from intimate to formal to humorous, subtly reveal the relational dynamics within the triangle. Wen addresses Wen from a place of emotional closeness, fully embedded in his queer *qing* with Zhou. Gu, by contrast, refers to that bond from a distance. She is aware of its depth and centrality but does not attempt to challenge it. Instead, her language reflects a quiet understanding and acceptance.

6.3.5 Scene Conclusion

Table 6

Scene Three Summary

Element	Description
Scene	Jealousy (<i>Ep.</i> 31, 24:50-28:16)
Key Characters	Wen Kexing, Gu Xiang
<i>Qing triangle</i>	Wen's deep concern for Zhou is mediated through Gu, who recognizes and helps create queer subtext for their queer <i>qing</i> to be interpreted.
Queer Subtext	Expressed through redirected care, joking accusations ("jealous of a man"), and emotional prioritization; queerness emerges through affective displacement rather than direct declaration.
<i>Qing</i>	Articulated via concern, secrecy, loyalty, and emotional hierarchy; Zhou is absent yet placed at the emotional center of the scene.
Gu Xiang's Role	Mediator and affective anchor: she expresses concern, defuses emotional tension, and articulates Wen's unspoken feelings through teasing, emotional intelligence, and caretaking.
Other Observations	Different terms of address for Zhou in this scene: In contrast with Wen's closeness to Zhou, Gu's shifting terms for Zhou implies her gradual acknowledgement of Zhou's importance to Wen.

This scene presents a clear structure of the *qing triangle* among the three characters.

Within the *qing triangle*, Wen and Zhou's queer *qing* is highlighted through the queer subtext formulated by Gu. Although Zhou is absent from the scene, he remains the primary topic of Gu

and Wen's conversation, during which Wen's desperate devotion to him and Gu's acknowledgement of the two men's queer *qing* are revealed. As evidenced by his frequent instruction for Gu to take care of Zhou during his future absence, Wen's concern for Zhou replaces any discussion of his own safety. This prioritization demonstrates both Zhou's importance and Gu's trustworthiness to Wen.

The scene's representation of queer *qing* lies in redirected care, playful accusation, and emotional deferral. Gu's teasing question, "Right. You may leave me behind a hundred times, but not even once when it comes to that Sick Man," foregrounds her understanding of the bond between Wen and Zhou as different from her bond with her master. While it seems to be emotional displacement, it actually reflects her acknowledgment of the emerging queer *qing* between Wen and Zhou. Furthermore, Wen's humorous reply, "You're jealous of a man?" validates his unspoken affection for Zhou while remaining surprised about Gu's sudden "jealousy." Though delivered as humour, their conversation renders visible the queerness that underpins the scene. The affective structure thus operates through veiled recognition rather than open rivalry, transforming the triangle from a site of competition into a space where mutual understanding is possible.

Ultimately, this scene shows the mechanism of the *qing triangle*. Within it, feelings are articulated through trusted intermediaries, humour is used to mask devotion, and affective labour is unevenly distributed but not devalued. Gu Xiang is not the object of affection, nor a narrative obstacle; she is the affective anchor. She enables Wen's care for Zhou to be articulated in the language of command and banter. In this way, she helps foreground queerness that is often buried beneath male bonds without upsetting the original bromantic arrangements.

This triangulated moment, like the two previous scenes, challenges traditional patriarchal models of rivalry or exchange. Instead, it reimagines male bonds through mediated *qing* and displaced desire. The *qing triangle* here is not a site of resolution, but of quiet endurance. Through Gu's presence, queer *qing* is not only affirmed—it is stabilized, rendered intelligible, and allowed to flourish in the queer subtext between what is said and what is left unsaid.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The three analyzed scenes exemplify *Word of Honor*'s subtle construction of triangulated relationships through the affective logic of *qing*, framed within the constraints of media censorship. As outlined in Chapter 5: Methodology, the selected scenes span different narrative moments, representing shifts in the emotional dynamics among Gu Xiang, Wen Kexing, and Zhou Zishu. By comparing *qing triangles* presented in each scene, this chapter presents both the evolution of *qing* and the roles assumed by Gu Xiang in formulating queer subtext.

7.1 *Qing triangle*

The direction and flow of the *qing* registers the evolution of the triangulated relationship among the three characters. Across all three scenes, *qing* is primarily mediated through Gu Xiang. She acts as a proxy, allowing emotional bonds—particularly between the two male protagonists—to be articulated indirectly and legibly to the audience. In this way, the *qing triangle* becomes increasingly visible through her narrative function.

In the first scene (*Ep. 12 & Ep. 13*), the triangular relationship is still forming. Zhou Zishu has only recently come to know Wen Kexing, yet a bond of mutual intimacy begins to emerge. While Wen treats Gu Xiang in a familial manner—like a daughter or younger sister—his relationship with Zhou carries romantic and emotional depth. The dynamic becomes particularly interesting when Cao Weining enters the scene. Wen's strong possessiveness over both Gu and Zhou reveals his desire to preserve their emotional unit. Zhou later uses the news of his terminal illness to shift the conversation toward Gu's future, suggesting she be paired with Cao. This heteronormative solution not only legitimizes Gu's departure but implicitly parallels it with the possibility of a romantic relationship between Zhou and Wen. As Gu leaves with Cao,

Wen and Zhou remain together, engaging in a playful, intimate exchange. The focus of the scene thus shifts from Gu's safety to Zhou's mortality and ultimately to his desire to wander the world with his "soul mate."

While the *qing triangle* in this scene is emotionally asymmetrical, it is Gu's narrative displacement—through matchmaking—that creates space for the Zhou and Wen's bond to intensify. Although Gu's role is somewhat passive in terms of decision-making, she is not entirely silenced. She initially resists Wen's suggestion to leave the Yueyang Sect and expresses doubts about the matchmaking plan. These moments reveal that Gu recognizes the emotional closeness between Zhou and her master, yet she still asserts some agency in negotiating her own future. Within the triangle, she is not erased but rather resolved—her narrative trajectory managed by Wen and Zhou in a way that allows their bond to come into clearer focus.

Scene two contrasts with the first by focusing on the rarely depicted Gu–Zhou relationship, suggesting Wen as the node of their relationship building. Although Wen is absent from the frame, his emotional presence dominates the conversation. Gu references him repeatedly, becoming the intermediary through which Wen's *qing* for Zhou is expressed. The primary topic—Zhou's terminal illness—draws out emotional vulnerability. Gu's concern, though voiced on Wen's behalf, is sincere. Her plea for Zhou to stay alive is framed in terms of what his death would mean for Wen: "He has finally made a friend." This line, while staying within heteronormative boundaries on the surface, clearly gestures toward the depth of Wen's emotional investment in Zhou.

Zhou refrains from responding directly. He shows vulnerability and engages in playful teasing with Gu to avoid fully acknowledging the emotional weight of Wen's concern. In this way, Wen is both off-screen and omnipresent in this scene. He connects Gu and Zhou by sharing

private information with each of them, forming an affective triangle based on mutual trust. The scene reaches a climax when Wen suddenly interrupts, pulling Gu away under the excuse of finding liqueur. This quiet disruption reveals his concern about overt emotional openness to Zhou and also reasserts his control over the emotional flow within the triangle.

The triangular relationship in scene two is more balanced than that in scene one. Wen treats both Zhou and Gu as emotionally intimate confidants, allowing private information to circulate. Gu becomes an emotional proxy, speaking for Wen's *qing* in a way that bypasses censorship and deflects direct romantic expression. Meanwhile, Zhou's *qing* remains more concealed, surfacing through his silence, avoidance, and subtle humour.

Last, scene three presents a rather solid triangular relationship through Gu and Wen's private conversation. Zhou, once again, remains physically absent yet emotionally central. The two's conversation centers on Wen's plotting with the Scorpion King. Gu expresses deep concern, fearing for Wen's safety and feeling guilty over his involvement. Wen, however, refuses to focus on his own safety. He redirects the conversation toward Zhou, instructing Gu to "take care of Zhou Xu for me." This directive not only places Zhou at the center of Wen's emotional priority but also affirms Gu as his most trustworthy figure. As he trusts Gu with Zhou, the two less-connected characters become closer.

Furthermore, Wen's emotional clarity is later confirmed when he reacts with slight anger at the idea of Gu telling Zhou about his plan—he wishes to shield Zhou from distress, even at personal risk. Gu responds not with resentment but with humour. Her playful accusation—"You may leave me a hundred times, but not even once when it comes to that Sick Man"—functions as both acknowledgment and acceptance of Zhou's importance. Wen's teasing reply—"You're jealous of a man?"—only affirms the truth behind her words. The triangle in this scene is the

most stable of the three. Each character understands the emotional structure and participates in maintaining it. Gu is not displaced but knowingly steps into the role of affective anchor, enabling *qing* to circulate between the men while offering no resistance to her own marginality.

Across the three scenes, the triangulated relationship evolves from tentative and uneven to emotionally coherent and stabilized. Scene one uses heterosexual matchmaking to deflect and legitimize queer bonding. Scene two deepens that bond through indirect dialogue and emotional triangulation, while scene three confirms and stabilizes the triangle, with Gu functioning as the affective anchor of the Zhou–Wen relationship. Throughout, it is through Gu Xiang that *qing* is able to flow—concealed, translated, and ultimately affirmed.

7.2 Roles of Gu Xiang

As summarized in the table below, the female character Gu Xiang plays the following roles in each scene analyzed.

Table 7

Summary of Gu Xiang's role

Scene	Roles
One	Affective stabilizer: She is positioned as a figure whose departure legitimizes male intimacy and narrative progression.
Two	Affective proxy: She voices what others will not say, stabilizes the triangle without inserting rivalry.
Three	Affective anchor: She confirms the male bonds and foregrounds queerness through queer subtext.

In scene one, Gu Xiang functions as both a narrative catalyst and an indirect facilitator of Wen's *qing* for Zhou. By negotiating her own role—resisting relocation and introducing her romantic interest in Cao Weining—she prompts Zhou to articulate his desire to remain with Wen in his final days. Her departure with Cao enables the emotional closeness between Zhou and Wen to come to the foreground. While she is positioned as someone whose future must be “resolved,” she is not passive—she asserts her agency while also enabling male romance to emerge.

In scene two, Gu's role as a proxy becomes more explicit. During her conversation with Zhou, Gu's words serve as a remedy for Wen's unspoken deep concern for Zhou. Her emotional appeal—pleading with Zhou to stay alive for Wen's sake—acts as a form of narrative translation, turning private affection into public expression. Her role is not to displace either man, but to make their male bonds visible and emotionally legible.

Scene three reaffirms Gu Xiang's role as both a facilitator and witness of *qing*. She expresses Wen's emotional priority in a teasing but clear manner, effectively speaking for the audience by acknowledging the centrality of the Zhou–Wen bond. Her humour helps her express emotional truths that others shy away from, without destabilizing the triangle. In this way, Gu becomes more than just a narrative device; she is the means by which *qing* is communicated, affirmed, and sustained.

As the narrative of *Word of Honor* unfolds, Gu Xiang's role transforms from a potential disruptor of male intimacy to its key enabler. She does not fulfill the traditional role of the woman in Sedgwick's erotic triangle—she is not exchanged, competed over, or silenced. Instead, she operates outside of patriarchal logic, facilitating desire where it cannot be openly expressed. Her character enables the integration of affect and desire within the broader framework of *qing*,

rendering queer subtext emotionally intelligible within the constraints of censorship. In this sense, *qing* is only made complete—only able to circulate—through Gu Xiang’s presence, voice, and emotional labour.

7.3 Limitations

While this research aims to provide a detailed analysis of *qing* and female characters’ roles in *dangai* dramas, it acknowledges potential theoretical and methodological limitations. First, deeply relying on the Chinese literary concept of *qing*, queer *qing* as the conceptual framework, is both culturally sensitive and bounded. In this regard, the affective structure of the *qing triangle* and queer subtext as a compromised representational strategy necessarily constrains the framework’s applicability across other cultural contexts. While it can be effective for analyzing Chinese *danmei* and *dangai*, the framework would require adaptation for the analysis of other male romance fiction.

However, instead of viewing this cultural specificity simply as a limitation, it must be recognized as an affirmation of the necessity for situated, context-sensitive approaches to queer theorization. To address queerness in various cultural contexts, future research could investigate queer relationship dynamics in relation to different yet symbolic affective traditions. It is also important to consider other socio-political factors that might reconfigure the triangular relationship structure emphasized in this research.

Second, this study’s findings are shaped by two primary methodological choices: the use of an in-depth single case study and an interpretive paradigm. The reliance on a single case means the findings are not intended to be “generalizable” to the entire *dangai* genre.

Furthermore, the interpretive approach, by its nature, values a deep, specific reading over a “reliable,” objective measurement that could be replicated by any researcher.

However, these limitations were deliberately chosen to privilege analytical depth over breadth. As an interpretive study, its warrants are not based on “generalizability” or “reliability” but rather on “congruence” and “plenitude” (Ricœur, 1981/2016). Therefore, the structured and rigorous approach is demonstrated by its congruence, the consistent and demonstrable fit between the textual evidence (the dialogue, *mise-en-scène*) and the interpretation, which was a primary goal of the three-stage filtering process. Similarly, the limitation of the single case study is precisely what provides the plenitude of the analysis, allowing for a deep, rich exploration of the text’s “surplus of meaning” (Ricœur, 1976). While my position as a fan of the genre provides a deep understanding of its conventions, this “insider” perspective is always validated against the text itself.

The above limitations emphasize the importance of reflexivity in interpretive research. As Horsburgh (2003, p. 309) explains, reflexivity is the “active acknowledgement by the researcher that her/his own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation.” The awareness of one’s subjectivity, “social position..., personal experiences, and political and professional beliefs” (Berger, 2015, p. 219), plays a crucial role in interpretations of the film. Therefore, future studies could enhance congruence by employing collaborative strategies such as inter-coder agreement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Additionally, expanding the methodological scope to include a comparative analysis of multiple *dangai* dramas would enhance the plenitude of the study and enrich scholarly comprehension of mediated queer representation in China and other media-restricted environments.

7.4 Conclusion

This thesis has examined how *Word of Honor* articulates queer love through triangulated affective structures grounded in the culturally resonant concept of *qing*. Through a meticulous examination of three pivotal scenes, it has been established that Gu Xiang plays a crucial role in the articulation and circulation of queer *qing* between the male protagonists Wen Kexing and Zhou Zishu. Rather than serving as a barrier or romantic rival, Gu Xiang performs a unique narrative and affective role: she mediates, interprets, and enables the development of bonds between the two men, allowing queer *qing* to emerge and evolve despite constraints imposed by heteronormative censorship.

Across the three scenes, the characters' initial tentative triangular relationship has evolved into a stable one by virtue of *qing*'s versatility. At the beginning, Gu's potential departure creates a narrative possibility for Wen and Zhou to build their male bonds. In the ensuing exchange between Gu and Zhou in the second scene, Gu articulates and conveys Wen's profound *qing* for Zhou, queering their existing male bonds. Subsequently, during the exchange between Gu and Zhou in the second scene, Gu articulates and conveys Wen's deep *qing* towards Zhou, subtextually queering their existing male bonds. By the end, Gu's tease of Wen's "prioritization" of Zhou further showcases her official acknowledgement of their queer male bonds. In all cases, Gu does not disrupt or dissolve male bonds but instead affirms and enables the queerness of *qing* that transcends heterosexual romance tropes.

This study has two major contributions. First, following an increased scholarship towards Chinese *danmei* culture, this research further examines the *dangai* drama as one of the most popular transmedia adaptations. By attending to queer subtext, it identifies *qing* as a culturally specific form representing male bonds. Second, this research helps to provide an additional

means of theorizing queer love beyond the frameworks of explicit sexuality and Western identity categories. By centring *qing* as a Chinese concept of male bonding, and by highlighting the role of female characters as affective agents rather than romantic rivals, the analysis offers an alternative way to read queerness in Chinese media. In a context where censorship constrains the articulation of queer love, it is precisely through figures like Gu Xiang that desire can be deferred, displaced, and yet still deeply felt. Figures such as hers act as witnesses, facilitators, and conveyors of inexpressible *qing*, making space for queer possibilities under constraint.

Future research could extend this analysis to other *dangai* dramas or examine how audience interpretation, fan practices, or international reception reshape the queerness of these narratives. Moreover, given the congruence of cultural origins and literary traditions,²² the queer *qing* framework has the potential to elucidate the analysis of queer love's representation in the other two East Asian countries (Japan and South Korea). At present, *Word of Honor* serves as a compelling exemplar of the ways that queer *qing* can be conceptualized, contested, and maintained in the face of pressure from media censorship.

²² Both Japan and South Korea use the character 情 (*qing*) to express as a type of emotional bond.

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Appendix B: Writing Tool Usage Disclosure

This thesis acknowledges the use of DeepL Write and Grammarly for proofreading purposes. All content has been reviewed and edited by the author before submission.