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Borderless Fandom
and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace

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Abstract

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This dissertation introduces the current Chinese internet fan culture, a subculture basing on consumption and rewriting media and literary texts of various national origins. In seven topics and case studies, I discuss the relationship between the online fan subculture and the mainstream cultural value system, showing the dynamic of consumption, reproduction and community building process of media fans. I argue that Chinese fan culture is far from a subversive community in the periphery that simply rebels against the center, but a constantly negotiating subculture that adopts various evaluation system and hierarchies from the mainstream culture and the educational institution. Compared to the pre-internet age, reading and (re)writing practices of the online fan culture do not present a significant break in its taste, content or form.

Instead, online fan culture manifests its uniqueness in the special intimacy that each individual enjoys with the texts he/she likes and the idiosyncratic evaluation systems contingent to personal preferences and desires.

This dissertation uses ethnography, including self-ethnography as the main methodology, also incorporating textual analysis and historical analysis. I assume double identities in this study as both a scholar and a fan, taking both perspectives and being responsible for both communities. This position does not guarantee that I have privilege in knowledge, but it constantly reminds me to question the relationship between the studying subject and objects in ethnography.

Fan culture's research value lies not in its literary merit as the canonical literature. It should be understood and studied under a new logic of a decentered and tribalized global society, but not without a neoliberal cultural hierarchy. Fan culture has thoroughly saturated into people's daily life experience and shifted the meaning of being an audience in the new digital world. Fan culture is never an independent entity, but is deeply rooted in the contemporary social and cultural environment, responding to social issues and cultural debates, including the convergence of global popular culture, the complicated interactions between the internet and the print media, the blurry boundary between the mainstream and the subculture, among others. These issues directly present the unique cultural experience of contemporary Chinese youths and provide an insightful perspective to view social changes that are taking place in China.

Because fan culture and community manifest themselves on the internet as decentered but interconnected tribes, they are not easily generalized and quantified. The phenomena I study are biased and localized. I do not aim for a conclusion based on a generalized view but instead, focus on the particularity of each phenomenon, especially its relationship with contemporary sociocultural details. I aim to provide a glimpse into the authentic online subculture in China, not

as an example for youth subversion, but as a mode of cultural experience on the internet in a globalizing world.

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DEDICATION

For My Son Muyun Fang, aka Mengmeng

For all the mornings and afternoons

in which Mama had to write dissertation and could not play with you.

But one day, she'll teach you everything about the hobbits,

the muggles, and Iserlohn Fortress.

INTRODUCTION

To many netizens' bewilderment, all of a sudden, official Chinese press as Xinhua started to address the present Chinese president Xi Jinping as "Xi Dada" in 2014.¹ The official explanation says that "Dada" is the dialect word for one's elder male, a regional equivalent of "uncle" in Northwest China; given that Xi's ancestry hometown is Shaanxi, such title would be both appropriate and amicable.² But as an active fan in online subcultural community, only after correcting many people's translation based on the official explanation, I gradually and finally realized that this word "Dada," which originated in the online fan community, has transgressed the semiotic barrier into the mainstream and become an oxymoron that is interpretable under both logics and vocabularies. For fans as I am, the first impression for the word "Dada," literarily "Big Big," would be a casual nickname for those talented fan writers, artists, and video editors, etc., who have earned fame in the fan community by their fabulous secondary creations based on a beloved original text. Fellow fans address such non-professional talents as "Your Excellency" (大人 *daren*), or "Big Hand," referring to the Japanese word "大手" (pronounced as *ōte* in Japanese, and *dashou* in Chinese), which means someone who is excellent at doing something in Japanese, and means big hand in Chinese. Around late 2012, many nationalistically sympathetic young fangirls started to adopt this word to address Xi Jinping, as "Xi Dada," the connotation of

¹ On the word entry page for the phrase "Xi Dada" on Baidu Baike (<<http://baike.baidu.com/subview/10080833/15855868.htm>> accessed 6 June 2016), an online encyclopedia editable to all registered users, someone claims that the founder of a so-called "the Fan Club of Learning Xi" (学习粉丝团 *xuexi fensi tuan*), Zhang Hongming was the first who used the title. He received interviews from various media, including the one below: Tang, Xiaojun, Chen Kejiang and Deng Chengman. This title is first seen in the news when it was used by a teacher from Zunyi, Liu Ming during Xi's visit to Beijing Normal University on September 9, 2014, as recorded in Ding Gang and Feng Xuejun's article.

² According to Ding Gang and Feng Xuejun, the word "Xi Dada" is translated into "Uncle Xi" by foreign press and this translation is considered accurate by the Chinese press.

which might be roughly translated as “the well-respected fellow community member Xi,” a familiar and kind title, not necessarily flattery, but so intimate that it can only strictly be used and understood inside the community. Xi is not the only one that earned this title, Chinese fangirls address Vladimir Putin, Barrack Obama and many significant figures in the political lives as “Dada.”³ Such intimate titles represent the influence of the “moe” culture that turns everything, including those in the realm of serious international politics, into something cute and amiable, for an entertaining stance, and for female fans to enter a male domain. All of a sudden, however, the mainstream media adopts the title, which both surprises and somewhat embarrasses the fan community. Yet till today, many fans, just as I did, do not realize that for the mainstream media and population, the word that travels through the invisible boundary between the subculture and the mainstream has altered its meaning and context completely. By using this title, the mainstream media appropriates the online fan subculture, but the connection is never acknowledged, or even realized. This word is a powerful metaphor for the online fan culture in China, a significant but sometimes almost invisible community, a community closely dependent on heavy consumption and capitalist commercial literary/media production, but a dynamic, creative and interactive community based on affection and affinity among one another, a community that mainstream often dismiss but constantly draw inspiration, creativity and resources from, a community whose productivity would never be fully legitimized, but would migrate through various restrictions towards the mainstream media and culture.

The migration for such cultural signifiers, however, is not always complete and unchanged, just as the word “Dada,” while appropriated by the mainstream media, is taken only as its

³See examples of netizens referring Putin and Obama as “Dada” in the Weibo postings of Mochazaizaimanguoxi-biu and Jia Binxuan.

phonetic appearance, never the complicated cultural and semiotic connotations it bears in the community. While mainstream media use, overuse, and abuse this title for political figures like Xi Jinping, the affective connotation associated with the title is gradually wearing off, both inside and outside the online fan community—people already use this title ironically to satirize the president after the bombardment from the official media. Of course, most signs circulated in a fan community are ultimately polysemic, or, in Cornel Sandvoss's word, neutrosemic—they carry completely different meanings in different occasions or for different people (*Fans*). The annotation and connotation of the word “Dada” underwent dramatic shifts when it was appropriated by the mainstream media. After the mainstream media and the “mundanes” use it daily and indifferently, the title is for the common Chinese people a cheesy flattery and clumsy gesture of pleasing, and for the netizens, an awkward reappropriation of the online fan culture. However, we still use the word in the community, well aware that we mean totally different thing within ourselves.

In my dissertation, I examine this online subculture, which is starting to emerge from the underground to the mainstream, travel from the periphery to the center, through several case studies around this particular community. Through this flourishing dynamic culture, I question and break some boundaries that often explicitly or implicitly associated with fan culture studies, including the distinction between the popular and the canon, between fantasy and reality, between the commercial world and the gift economy, between “fan” and “*otaku*,” among various nations, regions and languages, and between the present and the history. Through these vague borders and broken dichotomies, the ever-changing fan culture in China is presenting and representing both the pleasure and the anxiety, both revolutionary and reactionary sides of the culture and the society. I argue that on the level of content and form, online fan productions

based on a shared collection of materials do not differ significantly from mainstream (or commercial) writings. Moreover, the evaluation system for fan productions inside the fandom has its idiosyncratic aspects, but still highly resembles and relies on institutionalized canon system and cultural hierarchy. The real unique aspect of online fan culture, I argue, lies in the intimate relationship between texts (original or derivative) and individual human beings. With such intimacy, other aspects of the community, such as the evaluation system, grow highly personalized also. Because the fan community is intrinsically decentered, I do not aim for a comprehensive presentation of the phenomenon, statistically or verbally, but instead, focus on the special aspects that speak to a broader social context.

Invisible (or Nonexistent?) Dimensional Shield

Similar to the word “*Dada*,” meaning changes are taking places constantly. The mainstream popular culture is literally feeding on the online subculture, from anecdotes, humorous pictures, memes, and even signs. In the past years, various words went through the same path into the mainstream, among which quite a portion of them misunderstood, including, for example, “*zhai* 宅,” which is supposed to be the Chinese translation for “*otaku*.” Because both China and Japan uses Chinese characters as a writing system, a Japanese word is usually imported into the Chinese language in the form of Chinese characters. Therefore, even though in Japan, the word “*otaku*” is usually written in *hiragana* or *katakana*, the Chinese translation takes the word in its Chinese characters “御宅族,” literally, the *otaku* tribe, shortened form “*zhai* 宅” (see Lin and Gao for more information). The shortened form is widely circulated in the mainstream. With its literal meaning of “house, home,” the general urban public use it to

nominate “people who prefer to stay at home in their spare time.” While it is a stereotype and a partial truth that many *otaku* love to stay at home with their beloved media products, such phenomenon has another name in Japanese: *hikikomori* 引きこもり, which literally means someone that hides from the society and stays at home, and an idea totally different from *otaku*. The widespread misunderstanding in the Chinese public goes even to the academia when scholars write essays studying the “*zhai*” phenomenon, translating the word into “Chinese urban hermits,” without even realizing that the word was originally imported from Japanese, and has a direct relationship with the ACGN culture.⁴ Such tendency is hard to reverse or to resist. The only solution to bring in the voice of the subculture is perhaps letting people from the subculture to enter the mainstream and speak from there. And it is happening.

In the *otaku* culture, people love to repeat the myth of a “dimensional shield,” a shield that separates the two-dimensional world from the three-dimensional world. The two-dimensional world originally refers to the world of Japanese *manga*, *anime* and game, all of them media and art form based on images on a flat two-dimensional space. This saying originates in a scene in the *anime* comic *Martian Successor Nadesico* (*Kidō Senkan Nadeshiko* 機動戦艦ナデシコ 1996-1997), in which a group of alien invaders, while watching their favorite *anime*, exclaim that their beloved character “is so lovely, but she only exists in the two-dimensional world” (Lin and Gao). Intriguing empathy from the *otaku* community immediately, the saying went virus. ACGN (traditionally “ACG,” N, i.e. light novel is added in the 2000s) is the acronym of Japanese *anime*, comic (which refers to *manga* here), game and light novel, a term coined by Taiwan netizens in the 1990s, and widely adopted in the Chinese-speaking world (in Japan, the

⁴ See Yipeng Shen’s email on the Modern Chinese Literature and Culture email list for an example. Apparently Shen interprets “*zhai*” as “social hermits” that hide away from the society.

same idea is expressed through another acronym: MAG, which refers to *manga*, *anime* and game)⁵. Two-dimensional world, aka *otaku*'s world originally refers to the world of ACG. On its vague boundary, various media products as superhero comics from the United States and Hollywood sci-fi /fantasy films with a considerable fan following could also be counted as two-dimensional. ACGN-culture-related entertainment professionals, dramas and shows played by three-dimensional people, and materials equivalent to geek/nerd culture in the West might be called “2.5 dimensional;” light novels, on the other hand, are often called “1.5 dimensional.” In Japan, *otaku* is an underground identity, a formerly stigmatized identity which is still not widely acceptable (Ito Introduction). Therefore, the *otaku* population usually hide behind the dimensional shield, leading a doubled life. The two-dimensional world is not only a place of refuge and self-declaration, but also a place of socialization and community building. The abstract and metaphorical dimensional shield, in my understanding, refers more to different modes of consumption towards ACGN products, different mentalities in understanding media products and the world around, and a completely different vocabulary in (especially online) conversation. Indeed, *otaku* culture has become a new section for economic growth, and the Japanese government is officially promoting ACGN products internationally for what Koichi Iwabuchi called “Brand Nationalism” and for possible economic incomes.⁶ The “dimensional shield” seems to serve to keep the two-dimensional world somewhat intact, autonomous and self-sufficient. Yet most *otaku* have a life in the three-dimensional world, and sharing social space—

⁵ As Lin Pin suggests in his entry of the word “ACGN,” the acronym actually shows the sequence that an average audience member in the Chinese speaking area encounters Japanese media materials: he/she usually watch the *anime* adaptaion of a certain *manga* before the *manga* itself, then games and light novels related. While the Japanese acronym “MAG” put “*manga*” ahead of “*anime*,” showing the usual sequence for average Japanese audience members encounter the same set of materials. The different sequence also suggests the mode of transcultural acceptance works in media culture.

⁶ “Brand Nationalism” refers to the soft power in national culture, especially popular culture, as represented by the Japanese ACGN culture.

now including the virtual social space of social media—with three-dimensional people, the shield, if it was once sturdy, is almost translucent and easily trespassed now. We see, for example, that the Chinese government promotes an amateurish web animation with strong Chinese nationalistic sentiment, originally voluntarily created by Chinese ACGN fans—in this case, the borders are crossed for multiple times.⁷ What does the mainstream know about us? What have we contribute to the mainstream? Considering the cultural exchange occurred across the shield, I do not think it is a project that requires ethnographers to act as an outsider, enter and observe the community as a complete, self-sufficient and secluded object, just as Bronislaw Malinowski did in New Guinea. The most exciting and resourceful moment for online fan culture, an imagined community behind the dimensional shield, happens sometimes just in the process of drawing the line between the subculture and the mainstream, and trespassing it. To find and describe such lines, is what I do in this dissertation.

Fan Culture in China

“Fan,” an English word originates from “fanatics,” which ultimately traces back to the Latin word “fanaticus,” travels to China in a most peculiar form. The direct and literary translation for the word, *mi* “迷” is never utilized as a description of an identity. It often combines with another word to create phrases as “*dianying mi* 电影迷” fans of films, or

⁷ The web *anime* *Year Hare Affairs* (*Nanian natu naxie shi* 那年那兔那些事), was originally created by a netizen handled “Niguangfeixing” 逆光飞行, on the discussion board “Military Free Talks” 军事畅谈 at an online forum *cjdbdy.net*. from June 2011. The web comic presents the international relationship in modern Chinese history from the establishment of the People’s Republic to the end of the Cold War through personifications of nations, in which China is personized into a rabbit. Presenting nationalistic sentiments, this comic soon gained popularity in China, and was adapted into web *anime* by Shanghai Huimeng Culture Communication Studio. Since the *anime* started serializing online, organizations such as Communist Youth League of China participated in promoting it. The attitude of the state officials could be found in news reports by Yu Wan and Ma Jian.

cinophile, referring to someone more academically elite. Another word, and a much frequently used one, is invented in very recent daily life and online discussions, a phonetic transcription “*fensi*” 粉丝 (literarily meaning “cellophane noodles”) serves as the translation for “fan” and “fans.” Indeed, “*fensi*” is a much better choice than “*mi*;” this casual word choice reflects the popular circulation of the writings and culture of the fan community, and at the same time show its direct connection with the global influence of the recent decades. The slang nature of the word “*fensi*” may lead to confusion, especially for people not so familiar with the subculture. While acknowledging the existence of similar modes of consumption and (re)creation in more traditional reception process, I still insist that contemporary fan culture is peculiar as it is, for the particular cultural and historical situation in which it is situated. Chinese fandom, with a relatively short history, is particularly interesting because of its interaction with an especially complicated Chinese society. As the Chinese society rapidly and unexpectedly changes, fan culture in China is also complicated, constantly shifting, lined with various forms of power and influence, presenting at the same time the most utopian discourses and the most outdated declarations, and demonstrating simultaneously the problems that the US or the Japanese fandoms dealt with during the past several decades.

To be precise, the fan community that I am most familiar with is similar to the community that Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith examine in *Textual Poachers* and *Enterprising Women* respectively, albeit the differences in the media and space each of these communities interact with. Despite we use the internet (especially social network websites) as the main space for daily activities and community building, the female media/literature fans still retain features as they carry in the pre-internet ages. This dissertation will draw a great portion of examples and cases from female media and literature fans, referring sometimes to debates taken places a

couple of decades ago. The reason that I am reluctant to further narrow down my discussion, is that clear divisions among various fan communities hardly exist. Most people can be fans of various activities, media and literary texts, celebrities and other types of objects at the same time. As Jenkins suggests, the identity of “fan” is gradually becoming a mode of living: “this kind of fandom is everywhere and all the time, a central part of the everyday lives of consumers operating within a networked society” (Afterword, 361). The materials in circulation and the logic of communication, used to belong to distinct forms of consumption and national origins, such as Japanese ACGN fans, American drama fans, Hollywood fans, Anglo-American star fans, J-pop fans, K-pop fans, are converging as the people converge. As a matter of fact, as fan identities grow further detached from singular media texts, the fan culture serves as a large online community with only a vague border that sustains based on identification and a mode of consumption and (re)production.

Chinese fandom in its current form started in the 1990s and has developed almost simultaneously with the internet, which entered common urbanites’ homes approaching the end of the 20th century. With the ever going information flow, studies on a national fan culture at the age of global popular culture have become increasingly problematic. For Chinese fan culture, it is especially true, since the current Chinese fan culture online cannot even pretend to be indigenous, because it has developed directly under the influence of the Japanese ACGN culture. Japanese *anime* was broadcasted on a daily basis on Chinese television channels until in 2006, when any foreign animation was forbidden to be broadcast during prime time by SARFT (i.e., the State Administration of Radio Film and Television in China).⁸ Under such circumstances,

⁸ According to the policy by SARFT in 2006, television stations should only broadcast Chinese animation programs during 17:00 to 20:00 every day in order to protect the development of Chinese indigenous animation. The time span was further extended to 21:00 in 2008. Refer to “Guangdian zongju guanyu jiaqiang dianshi donghua pian bochu guanli de tongzhi (Notification from SARFT concerning Intensification of the television animation broadcasting).”

Japanese ACGN culture almost enjoyed a mainstream status for children who grew up in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Besides the official broadcast, some Japanese media products are introduced to the Chinese children through underground pirate copies of Hong Kong and Taiwan translated *manga* prints. After 2006, all ACGN products circulate online in the form of illegal downloads. Very recently, with Chinese websites buying online streaming rights of *anime* directly from Japanese producers, the media products circulated in the Chinese fan community are finally legal. It is not a surprise that the first generation of fan products in China was generated from Japanese media and literary products. For example, the space opera sci-fi novel *Legend of Galactic Heroes*, sports-themed *manga Slam Dunk* and *shōnen manga Saint Seiya* are respected as the three most influential fandoms in the early 2000s (Wang Zheng 157). The *danmei* genre, closely associated with fan culture, entered mainland China through the form of original BL *manga* and *anime*, including the famous *Zetsuai-1989* by Osaki Minami, and through *shōjo manga* with homoromantic suggestions, such as Clamp's *Tokyo Babylon*. Most female oriented fan fiction explores interpersonal relationship; Japanese homoerotic materials then plays a crucial role in shaping Chinese fangirls' imagination, imagery and writing style, making homoerotic fan fiction a predominant portion of Chinese fan fiction. Chinese fan culture also has its inseparable legacy from the Chinese literary and popular tradition, as well as the influence from the other part of the world. Starting from the fantasy films' fad in the early 2000s, especially with the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* series and *Harry Potter* series, media products from the English world also quicken their pace in taking over the Chinese fandoms. Terms, ideas, clichés and subgenres started to enter Chinese fandom through fan translations and introductions since then.

The contemporary fan culture in China by far has been a youth subculture; even the oldest participants are still in their 30s when I am writing my dissertation—though it is hard to estimate whether the fans in the community will carry their interest into a far future. Currently, Chinese fan culture bears clear hallmarks of the generation born after the late 1970s: the only child generation, the generation who grew up in a post-socialist marketizing China, the generation that migrates from the paper media to the internet at a young age and therefore does not hold a substantial nostalgia towards the paper media as their elders do, the generation that face the ever changing society and translate the changes in their cultural experiences. Their experience and activities in fan culture, in many ways, always indirectly present the current society.

Fan culture itself has never been a pure form in any sense. It cannot be an outsider of the current cultural institution and ideology because it is literally built on existing texts produced inside the institution. It depends entirely on the pre-existing network of texts, and fans' interpretation and reappropriation of the original text is largely shaped and in response to the contemporary social and cultural circumstances and context. The ultimate significance of fan culture and the meaning of fan culture studies, from my point of view, lies exactly in the ways that it reflects on, echoes with, responses to, and sometimes subverts against the existing literary/media texts and social cultural value system in unexpected ways. Therefore a study in fan culture is never a study on the fan community and its productions as their own, but rather a field with various elements that participate in shaping this culture. Chinese society has gone through a rapid transformation from a socialist state to a post-socialist state in which the commercial is taking charge again. The 1990s, marked by the violent closing down of radical attempt of social reform and the entry of total commercialization, had a very different appearance and atmosphere from the previous decades. Fan culture is one of the phenomena that

emerged in that era. With fan culture drawing from all aspects of popular culture, mainstream ideology and commercial mass communication products, fan culture involves myriad ideas and narratives from and about the society. It would be useful to put this culture back to the historical context to see its significance and function. In this dissertation, I aim to analyze Chinese fan culture, through ethnography and textual analysis, with historical accounts from Chinese genre fiction, global popular culture, and internet phenomenon.

Fan Studies and Aca-Fan

Fan Studies as an area emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1992, we see the publications of three major works in Fan Studies, Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers*, Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women*, and the edited volume *Adoring Audience* by Lisa Lewis. These works signify their difference from earlier writings about fan culture, either academic or journalistic, in that they examine closely the specific fan activities as insiders, instead of commenting on the culture through outsiders' imagination. Besides, they are more sympathetic to fans, instead of treating them as brainwashed immature fanatic individuals unable to make meaningful judgments, a media stereotype of fans. These scholars, taking the theoretical background and assumptions from the British Cultural Studies School, especially early studies on British working class culture and youth subculture, suggest that fan culture, while resides over mainstream popular culture, has a utopian possibility. Fan culture stands in a peripheral position, destabilizes and questions the value system of the center. For instance, most early fan critics view slash fiction as a feminist project that challenges the social expectation of female's desire and presentation. One of the critics, Joanna Russ, boldly claims that slash fiction is the true porn "created by women, for women, with love" (82). Of course, their major target is the Frankfurt

School and the mass culture industry theory. While Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue about that the capitalist society produces cultural products that are derived of individuality and authenticity, and therefore manipulates the consumers into passivity, early cultural studies scholars manage to present the lively and living working class culture and popular culture as active manipulators of the cultural products and signs offered to them.⁹ Adorno and Horkheimer's critique represents a typical logic of criticism towards mass culture, and more or less defines the public opinion towards popular culture: meaningless, banal, cliché, ideological manipulation and capitalist cultural control. Such social environment partly forces early scholars in Fan Studies into a polemic position to defend the value and power of fan culture, which is presented in their highly utopian representation and envision of this culture. (However, as Matt Hills suggests, some detailed implication of Adorno's writings might have been overlooked during the process (*Fan Cultures* 34)). Under such condition, fan community and activities are sometimes set at a direct binary with the commercial media and the "mundane" world. Such rhetoric presents clearly in the "textual poaching" metaphor that Jenkins takes from Michel de Certeau, by which he describes the relationship between the fan and the producers. "Poaching" suggests that such activities are conducted upon an unequal basis through flexible tactics. Fans are poachers who pillage products from a dominated resistant position, but through their own labor and creativity, they appropriate the products from the original producers, shaping them according to their own desire. Under such rhetoric, fan culture is often envisioned as a subversive subculture in the margin that constantly challenge the mainstream.

The direct dichotomy between the fan and the producer, between the fan and the non-fan, between the early critics that devalue fan culture and the new aca-fan assumed by John Fiske and

⁹ Refer to Dick Hebdige and John Fiske for examples.

Jenkins has been constantly challenged by later scholars, including Hills, and partly overthrown by Jenkins himself in his idea of “convergence culture.” Confrontations between fans and the producer is partly true when Jenkins’s book was first published in the early 1990s, but grows less applicable when the internet enters the picture, and when the dynamic between the audience and the producers grows more and more intertwined. Under the current condition, most fan studies have moved beyond the stage of self-defending and self-definition, moving toward a more comprehensive understanding of the fan community as it is, not as the subversive model in the popular culture. Specifically, for example, Hills is against any kind of moral dualism in presentations of fan culture and fan studies, suggesting to understand fan culture as it is, opening to various types of interpretation without attempting to achieve an easy conclusion (*Fan Cultures*). Other fan scholars of the second and the third waves of fan scholars, according to Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington’s discussion, also move away from the resistance rhetoric, attempting instead to capture the hierarchy inside the fan community, and individual fans’ motivation in fan activities (Introduction 5-10). As a significant component of fan fiction studies, scholars on slash fiction also experienced the move from slash fiction as a radical feminist project to slash fiction as a functional genre fiction, created based on conventions and formulae of previous genre literature to meet the need of the community.

While both started from the 1980s, and describe a subculture originated in the late 1960s, media Fan Culture Studies and *Otaku* Studies do not often share or even communicate their research results or paradigms. The identity and culture of “*otaku*” carries a Japan-specific connotation that *Otaku* Studies is almost a Japan-Studies-only issue in the English-speaking academia. The narrative of Japanese popular culture follows a standard rhetoric of pre-war and post-war Americanization and Japanese infantilization, as well as the social crises of the 1990s,

with the widespread *otaku* communities serving as a social presentation of the breakdown of the larger social order. However localized the discussion is, discussions on *otaku* and *yaoi*, provides us important perspectives that would facilitate fan studies. For example, Azuma Hiroki's important work on *otaku*-styled archival consumption provides a way to understand fans' identity and mode of consumption. Besides, *Otaku* Studies have provided the English academia almost the first large transcultural fandom as a sample, of a phenomenon happening everywhere now—and this is what I will discuss in my dissertation.

Fan culture is of course localized, resourcing on the immediately available materials, yet fan culture is never denied the possibility of transcultural flow; in the case of Chinese fan culture, the transcultural influence defines the appearance, modes of communication, and the basic knowledge background required for the community. No study or theory is available to directly apply to the current Chinese fan culture. While scholars such as Sandvoss has made an effort in constructing a theory that is generally applicable to several connected field of interests in fan culture, including media fans, sports fans, and star fans, a theory that is internationally applicable is still hard to envision (*Fans*). In this dissertation, I take the role of an aca-fan in China, a fan and a scholar at once, accessing to both categories and both identities, achieving a better understand of current Chinese fan culture and the fans themselves. I use theories from both British American fan studies and Japanese *otaku* (and *yaoi*) studies, aware of their local contexts, but at the same time, understanding the common experience of fans as a global popular phenomenon.

Aca-fan is an identity, a position and a methodology. Such combination of academic and fannish interest provides a perspective simultaneously inside the fan subculture and inside academia. “Aca-fan” is by no means a new idea; it has been in practice and in debate for at least

two decades. The split identity, allegiance and subjectivity of aca-fan involves a double marginalized process for Jenkins. For Bacon-Smith, it is an irresponsible position that enables Jenkins to use fan culture for his own political purposes. Therefore, she herself insists on keeping a traditional anthropological distance. For Alexander Doty, the position provides a convenient way for a “personal is political” investigation for his personal account of childhood queer reading of *The Wizard of the Oz*. For Hills, aca-fan is a constant process of constructing and deconstructing moral dualisms, between the fan identity and the aca-fan identity, between academia and fandom, between academic knowledge and vernacular fan knowledge, etc. The position of aca-fan does not guarantee anything, either truth or representation: it is of course personal, biased, restricted, and timely. None of the moral dualisms cited by Hills is easily encompassed, but collectively, they remind us the importance of self-reflection in constructing a self, an authority and a studying autonomy in the studies—nothing should be taken for granted, be it values or judgments.

Up until recently, only a handful of scholars have ever used the position and methodology of “aca-fan” on Chinese fan culture studies. Yang Ling’s study on “Super Girl” fans presents a good example of how insider knowledge can be incorporated in studying fan communities and activities—and how a groundbreaking aca-fan scholar should fight to legitimize her subject of study. Jin Feng’s work on internet literature provides abundant insider knowledge, but not always an insider’s perspective, in that she keeps an emotional distance from her community, and refuses deeper excavation of her materials (*Romancing the Internet*). Besides these rare examples, generally, studies on Chinese online popular culture, especially fan culture, often blatantly lack insiders’ perspective and knowledge. It may lead to critical factual mistakes. For example, the word “*xiao shou*” 小受, roughly translated as “bottom” in a gay couple, is mistaken

with “*xiao shou*” 小瘦, a little thin man, in an early paper on Chinese fangirl culture (see Yang Ya). Of course, after the earliest generation of fangirls, and the first generation of indigenous residents of the internet, are able to make a voice in the academia, the situation is gradually changing. With such condition in mind, I hope my dissertation is able to present some views from a Chinese aca-fan as an insider of both the fan community and the academic institution.

I have been in the fan community for more than a decade since my college years, after I accidentally found the information of a fan forum for *The Lord of the Rings* in the appendix of a biography of J.R.R. Tolkien. Before that, I was an avid lover of some novels and TV series, but felt very lonely not being able to find friends with similar interests. Only after getting access to the online fandom did I realize how pervasive the fans and fandoms are in our daily lives. I am now a devoted fan for literary and media materials from many different origins, and I am working as a fansubber and translator online in various languages. I also create fan art and edit fan videos if I have time to spare, though I have never published any fanzines. The fandom in general is too large and complicated to get a comprehensive view. However, thanks to my friends in the fandom (many of them have become close personal friends after year-long online and offline discussions, many of them are still online friends who I have never met in person), I am able to get information in the fandoms I am not familiar with. Yet even as an insider, this subculture is too large and diversified to give a generalized view. Actually, cultural practices in the fan community are too scattered to have a thorough calculation in the first place, and the situation is aggravated by the internet, thus a general statistics and survey of the culture will not only be impossible, but also unnecessary.

My position as an insider, just as Hills points out, does not guarantee the information and knowledge I produce is accurate and reliable. This dissertation, partly an autoethnography, partly

a historical textual analysis, opens a window to the complicated online fan culture in China, and therefore lead to a truthful but often overlooked reflection of the even more complicated post-socialist Chinese society.

Chapters Overview

In this dissertation, I discuss the current Chinese online fan culture, emphasizing the relationship between the fan community and the mainstream, aiming to tear down the imaginary borderline between fan culture and the realm traditionally seen as non-fan. In Chapter One, I question the textual differences between typical fan fiction and other transformative writings in the canonical literature. The literary lineage and “ancestors” of fan fiction in China here is retrospectively imagined and created, but in certain aspect, not totally falsified, because all of these writings are the products of a similar human mentality in reading. I argue many practices in pre-modern and modern Chinese literature bear significant similarities with the fan culture. Even though they do not directly influence Chinese fan fiction, they do have certain influence on the social and literary tradition that fan culture situates in. I am also pointing to the possibility for linking fan writing to the “rewriting” tradition in high art, which is traditionally never associated with fan culture. I suggest that fan fiction writings are not distinguished from other types of transformative texts with any textual presentations, but through the sense of community constructed around and inside the texts.

With the historical and literary background I build in Chapter One, in the following chapters, I focus on one topic in each chapter, each taking a different perspective on Chinese online fandom, and introduce in each chapter important related issues in the fan community. Chapter Two offers a case study of a creative fiction project called Novoland, which falls

curiously on the intersection between commercial genre fiction writings and online fan communities' creative practices. It is also an interesting case in community building and maintenance of one in the internet environment. Through this example, I will also briefly introduce the so-called "internet literature" fad in the post 2000 China, detailing its connotation, significance, and its relationship with the rise of fan communities.

Chapter Three offers another case study on a fandom of a Japanese web comic, later adapted to *anime*, *Axis Power: Hetalia*. This unique media product, with its nature of lighthearted parody and mockery on the world history and international relationship, is at the same time closely linked to the issue of national identity and nationalist feelings, but also deliberately deviates from any direct expression of these issues. Under such condition, I want to go back to the issue of mass media, popular culture and its relationship with ideological manipulation in the discussion. The Chinese fandom of *APH* presents an unexpected mode of reappropriation, which shows the importance of identification in creating a fandom, but at the same time, the importance of shared frustration of the inability of identification also can be a source of community building.

Homoromantic writings by and for women (slash fiction and *yaoi* respectively) produced in fandoms have received disproportioned attention in the West and in Japan. In China, the genre *danmei* has also attracted wide attention from the mass media and the academia. With its close connection with feminist empowerment, queer imagination, and youth subculture, this topic has been thoroughly debated and discussed. With discussions by scholars as Constance Penley, Russ, who view slash fiction as a feminist project, and with discussions by Japanese *yaoi* scholars, such as James Welker or Tomoko Aoyama, who suggest that *yaoi* is a form of imagination irrelevant to both gay men and masculinity, I aim to enter the discussion on several issues.

Acknowledging that international homoromantic writings are complicated and heterogeneous thematically and ideologically, I divide my discussion on this topic into two chapters, presenting several aspects of fangirls' imagination and representation of male and female sexuality in this genre.

In Chapter Four, I examine the differences and connections among slash, *yaoi*, and *danmei*, pointing to the social cultural condition that each of them is situated in, discussing the possible common female anxieties presented by these writings. After that, I use two genres in fan fiction, Mary Sue, and Alpha Beta Omega dynamic to further discuss the female experiences, thoughts and gender politics presented in homoromantic writings, under the guise of male sexuality.

In Chapter Five, I use several Chinese homoromantic writings as examples, to discuss how the cultural capital works in the *danmei* subculture. Specifically, I use a *danmei* novel *Favilla Mundi*, with a European setting as an example to discuss the blurry boundary between high culture and popular consumption. Then, I compare a *danmei* novel, *Diverged Roads*, with two connected texts: Beijing Comrade's internet novel, a piece of well-renowned "comrade literature" (or gay literature), *Beijing Story*, and Stanley Kwan's film *Lan Yu* (2001), which is adapted from *Beijing Story*. By the comparison, I aim to discuss the complicated relationships between *danmei* and "comrade literature," suggesting a similar melodramatic structure in the narratives, and a different sense of reality and authenticity.

In Chapter Six, I introduce a fan product of all fandoms on a foreign text relies upon: fansub, or fan translation. Similar to fan fiction and fan art, fan sub is produced by fans voluntarily and involves intellectual labor, but fan sub and fan translation negotiate with the original producer or author (and sometimes with the official translators) directly on the way to articulate the original text in a different language and cultural semiotic system. In China, foreign

media and literary products rely on translation to circulate and to build up a fan community; for those which are not imported in the official legal venue, fansubbers play a crucial role of program selection, introduction and commenting besides the simple task of linguistic translation. In this chapter, I provide an ethnography (and auto-ethnography) on amateurish fansub groups, with several case studies as examples. I focus on fansubbers' role as a semi-official or quasi-official voice presented explicitly and implicitly in fansubbed media materials, emphasizing how the ecosystem of fansubbers and audience determines interest, taste and expectations for fan translation. By referring to the current condition of translation for foreign media products and literary works in the official venue, I also points out the relationship between fans and the original product further presents on their high expectations and obsessive identification with translations of the original texts. By this chapter, especially, I suggest the power relationship between fans and producers in an oversea fandom has to be negotiated by translators. Translation and translators are far more than loyal apathetic linguistic experts assumed by the industry; for fans, they are the ones that shape the appearance of their beloved texts in their mother tongue.

In Chapter Seven, I study a special type of online video streaming websites called "barrage subtitle websites." Started by the famous Japanese site Niconico, barrage subtitle system allows users' comments appear directly on the screen over the video at a specific playback time when the video is played. The quasi-synchronicity and instant communication allowed by barrage subtitle system makes video viewing a collective ritual, during an era of localized viewing on small screens instead of the traditional theatrical experience. I focus on the Chinese barrage subtitle website, Bilibili, to discuss the ritual of speech practiced on these websites, and how such ritual helps to build and sustain an interest-based community.

Concerning Terminology

There is an old saying by Confucius, that “If terminology is not corrected, then what is said cannot be followed. If what is said cannot be followed, then work cannot be accomplished.” However, correcting terminology, for me, would be rather counterproductive in this dissertation. The culture that I study is alive and constantly changing, and is lack of an official grand narrative. If defined too strictly, most definitions would be outdated sooner or later. I question unpronounced assumptions concerning fandoms in the Fan Studies area, including for example, the limit of “fan fiction,” the idea of “mainstream;” from there, I do not claim for a strict definition, but instead, try to clarify the mechanism in deciding the borderline of each idea. In other words, I want to raise the questions of: Who gets to decide the definition of these terms? How do different social cultural backgrounds change the definitions? Why are there so much different opinions on the terms? Are these distinctions important?

On the other hand, because contemporary Chinese fan culture is imported from Japan and is still receiving significant influence from both Japan and the English-speaking world, I meet the challenge of choosing terminology, probably even research paradigms between the two areas: the Euro-American “Fan Studies” and the Japanese “*Otaku* Studies.” As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, *otaku* culture currently describes a subculture related to consumptions of media products of Japanese *manga*, *anime*, games, light novels, etc., is far from an ethnic variation of Western fan culture. The two cultures, though is lack of communication traditionally, grows almost simultaneously in the West and in Japan. “*Otaku*” can be roughly translated to “nerd,” “geek” or “cult fan,” with a certain selective manner associated with certain type of media or literary products. In China, specifically, the word “*zhai* 宅” is now also used in translating “geek” and “nerd” culture in the United States. Such word choice clearly demonstrate similar

modes of consumption and similar types of media products that fans are interested in. However, these two cultures are different in some important aspects, for instance, the importance of “*kawaii*” culture in Japanese *otaku* culture, and the popularities of virtual celebrities that build up their significance and narrative through users’ consumption.

The situation I face is: there are two different sets of terminologies in the Euro-American fan culture and in Japanese *otaku* culture studies in the English academia. Should I, doing research on another localized fan culture, invent a third set of terminology to set myself apart from both of them? I do not think it is necessary, but because of the complicated influence Chinese fan culture has received, I would not use a terminology from either of them without a question. In this dissertation, there will be multiple cases in which I introduce the terms and their origins, and introduce their synonyms in the fan cultures in other countries. For example, how should I call the homoerotic fan fiction in China, “slash fiction” based on the US tradition, or *yaoi* in the Japanese tradition, or neither? Should I call it *danmei* as the pronunciation of its most often seen name in Chinese? Or should I separate Chinese fan fiction with homoerotic elements according to each of their original sources, those based on Japanese source *yaoi*, those based on Euro-American source slash? Terminology is a serious question, and sometimes a political question. Generally the transmission and translation process is clearly observable in the terminology one cultural group choose to use. At the same time, the terms carry the cultural and historical meanings in their original context that usually is ignored in the new context. In this dissertation, I will “correct the terminology” in my best effort, but my general principle is that I will not “correct” the fan community from misunderstanding and misusing some translated terms, I will in my best effort use the same or similar terms as they do in the organic environment.

Specifically, I choose to call the cultures I study as “fan culture” instead of “*otaku*” culture. Chinese fan culture resembles in a large degree to Japan’s *otaku* culture. I have two main reasons that I end up using “fan” instead of “*otaku*” as a nomination for the community I study. First, *otaku* culture itself is heavily laden with cultural and historical significance. Its almost automatic masculine tag is difficult to fully avoid. The female-dominated subculture of *fujoshi* culture is treated as a female counterpart of *otaku* culture; Japanese media sometimes even treat the word “*fujoshi*” as the title for female *otaku*, which is very problematic, considering that not all female *otaku* are interested in homoromantic materials. For my dissertation, in which I will use examples from Japanese, Chinese and English language media products, both male and female dominated fandoms based on all of them, if I adopt the word “*otaku*,” the discussion might be misleading. The word “fan” is less value-laden, comparatively neutral on the thematic level, and national level. The problem of the word “fan” refers also to celebrity fans and sports fans, etc. All of them share significant similarities with media fandoms that see secondary creation a major mode of consumption; and among all these types of fan cultures, there are overlapping. The second reason for the word choice of “fan” instead of “*otaku*” is more straightforward, the word “*zhai*” is so misunderstood in the Chinese mainstream culture, that I fear that the title may cause misunderstandings.

CHAPTER 1.

CHINESE FAN FICTION: ITS “ANCESTORS” AND LINEAGE

Shi Xiu fastened his gaze on her. Hmm . . . she certainly is a beauty. But I can't even guess just how wonderfully pretty it'll be when the blood begins to pour out from the seams where the skin has been severed. You said I trifled with you, but actually it was much more than that. I just went much farther than that monk. I went so far as to fall in love with you. Surely, you wouldn't begrudge your life to someone who loves you that way? You wouldn't refuse to let me see you at your prettiest, your most arousing moment, would you?

. . . Yang Xiong . . . cut out her tongue. Blood sprayed out from between her narrow lips. . . Shi Xiu watched, and with each slash of the blade, he felt a refreshing spell of pleasure. (Shi Zhecun “Shi Xiu” 1932)¹⁰

At that moment, he was no longer the amicable clerk that smile to everyone in Yang's meat shop, nor the brave young man who was willing to risk his own life to stand up to the injustice. Shi Xiu only felt that his soul had totally fallen, turning into a coldblooded murderer.

So many years' wandering in the Jianghu, he had fought many fights; but when it came to the knife and killing, it was the first time ever. Just like the intimacy he had shared with Yang Xiong that night, he had no previous experience to refer to.

¹⁰ Translated by Andrew Jones, qtd. in Jones 576. See Appendix 1 for the original Chinese text.

An eye for an eye, a life for a life. What is worse, it was a well calculated murder. If anyone discovers and sends me to the local officials, there is no reason that I can survive.

My brother is the prison warden and executioner. If he is the one to send me for the last journey, it should be interesting. (Alanruojia “Thousands of Mountain Passes” 2011)¹¹

The two very different stories I quoted above are both based on *The Water Margin*, a Chinese vernacular novel commonly dated back to the 14th Century. In this long and episodic novel, the authors of the two stories above choose and build their imagination upon the same set of characters, Shi Xiu 石秀, Yang Xiong 杨雄, and Yang’s wife, Pan Qiaoyun 潘巧云. In the original novel, *The Water Margin*, Shi is a penniless firewood merchant, and Yang is a prison warden in the county government. Grateful for Shi’s righteousness when he stands for him during a fight, Yang Xiong decides to become Shi’s sworn brother and invites Shi to live in his home and help with his family butcher shop. Yang’s wife, Pan Qiaoyun tries to seduce Shi into an affair. Shi refuses and soon discovers that Pan has an extramarital relationship with a monk, Pei Ruhai 裴如海, who is also her cousin. He reveals his suspicion to Yang Xiong; but Pan Qiaoyun manages to convince Yang that Shi was blackmailing her because he failed to seduce her. After being chased away by his sworn brother, feeling wronged, Shi kills the monk to show his righteousness. With evidence in hand, he convinces Yang to kill his wife and maid as punishment and to prevent any harmful consequences. After the brutal murder, the two men join the rebels to escape punishment from the officials.

¹¹ My translation. See Appendix 2 for the original Chinese text.

The two stories, Shi Zhecun's "Shi Xiu" and Alanruojia's "Thousands of Mountain Passes" both take the original story, and build upon the established text and readership to create a new story, related but different from the original one. "Derivative story," or "secondary creation" are the names often given to this type of rewriting, and sometimes carry slightly derogatory connotations. Hereby I follow the lead of Organization of Transformative Works, an NGO founded by fans for promoting fans' interest, in calling these writings "transformative works," which acknowledges the legitimacy of such secondary creation.¹² Shi's short story, written in 1932, is a part of a collection named *General's Head* (将军底头 *Jiāngjūn de Tóu*), containing three modernist revisions of old stories recorded in classical Chinese history and fiction. The second example I raise is a typical *danmei* fan fiction, known as a female created and female audience oriented homoerotic writings, based on an already well-circulated popular media or literary text (I will elaborate on *danmei* writing further in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this dissertation). The story, titled "Thousands of Mountain Passes (千山渡 *Qianshan Du*)," is written by a fan with the handle "Alanruojia" (阿兰若伽) and published on the page for the coupling Yang / Shi in Baidu Tieba, a forum system that did not require registration at that time.¹³ Baidu Tieba ("tieba" literally means "posting bar") linked with the Baidu search engine, is among the most easily accessible online resource for Chinese fans, serving a variety of fannish interests, ranging from sports teams, to popular stars, to film or television shows, to historical and fictional characters. The page on the pairing Yang / Shi (it is called "Xiong Xiu" 雄秀—combining one Chinese character from each character's name—as the title of the page), is meant

¹² About the legal and moral connotation of the phrase "transformative works," refer to OTW's explanation, "What We Believe."

¹³ The website policy has changed and now requires registration to publish, though simply browsing remains anonymous.

for discussions about the pairing, which means that participants are expected to be interested in and support the pairing.

Despite the different publication and circulation environment, these two stories almost mirror each other. Both take the same original story, both shift the characterization and interpersonal relationship according to a modern moral standard. For some scholars, it is sacrilege to suggest that these two stories are similar in terms of the intertextual relationship they each have with the original text. Yet, if seen through the lens of rewriting methods, the differences between this online fan fiction and this canonical high modernist rewritten story, come from the different communities within which they are situated, and from their identification with the story, much more than from their textual and intertextual features or literary value. I argue that the strategies of transformative writing are visible and universally applicable to all texts, both high modernist experiments and contemporary online fan writing included.

Intertextuality and the Boundary of Fan Fiction

Whether I choose the term “fan fiction” or “transformative text” for a major body of works that I examine in my dissertation, I need a definition. The difficulty in choosing a definition, however, is that the common trait of this body of texts lies in their close intertextual relationship with another text, more than any common, internal textual features. Does intertextuality count as a criterion to decide a genre?

Intertextuality, a keyword in poststructuralist theory, refers to the relationship between texts. Such relationships range from close references and lengthy quotations, as in transformative works, to the loose contextual background formed by previous texts. Julia Kristeva suggests that

“each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read” (“Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 66). By quoting Bakhtin, she claims that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (“Word, Dialogue, and Novel” 66). In Roland Barthes’s paradigm, intertextuality is not relegated to the level of self-conscious references usually seen in transformative writing, but instead intrinsic intertextuality forms the basic mode of existence for all writing. According to him, “intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation-marks” (“Theory of the Text” 39). These poststructuralist position on texts reminds us of the prevalence of quotation in the supposed originality of individual genius. On the basis of this vast intertextuality, Barthes claims the death of the author, suggesting that “[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (“The Death of the Author” 148). The intertextual relationship that Kristeva and Barthes discuss provides a general view of any text, that all texts relate and rely on one another. Instead of pointing out detailed intertextual relationships, they undermine the basic distinction among various texts, and especially between fan productions and the original texts. In the case of fan fiction, however, appropriation and recycling is so straightforward that no reader would doubt the fan products depend closely on the original text.

While the aura of individuality and creativity of a singular genius is overall questioned under the assumption of poststructuralist intertextuality, the identity and uniqueness of authors is also under reevaluation. Tracing the history of authors, Michel Foucault suggests that an author’s

name serves “to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society,” therefore instead of an individual author, what matters is an “author-function” (124). In other words, when we discuss texts, the author is better understood as a sign that legitimizes a text, rather than an individual genius. The author-function is particularly clear in the collective and anonymous storytelling of the folk tradition, in which the identities of the multiple original authors are lost in the process of performance and circulation, and in which texts are constantly under revision by individual performers. In contemporary fan culture based on commercial literary and media products, while fan fictions each have their own identifiable author, they are produced and circulated in a folklore-ish fashion. If taking the universe of the original story as an autonomous universe constructed but not completed by the original story, then the hierarchy between the original text and fan texts is largely diminished. The original text, then, serves not as a complete, self-sustained story, but as a “canon,” a collective of information, from which fans decide whether fans’ alternative versions accord to the “canon” or not. Fan’s transformative writings, in this way, present a collective response and retelling of the original text, whose author only functions to determine the legitimacy and fidelity of fan fictions’ representations. Within the fan studies area, Cornel Sandvoss follows the poststructuralist direction and suggests, “what is needed is a broad definition of texts that is not based on authorship, but on texts as frames of realizable meanings that span across single or multiple communicative acts, including visual, sound-based and written communication,” so that “the notion of the single text that can be distinguished from other texts becomes impossible to maintain, as it is now not by the producer but by the reader that the boundaries of texts are set” (“The Death of the Reader” 22). He further claims “the death of the reader,” suggesting that “if we cannot locate aesthetic value in the author, text, or reader alone, it is in the process of interaction between these that aesthetic value

is manifested” (“The Death of the Reader” 28). In a more community based form of reading and writing inside the fandom, the singular reader is not more reliable than the author.

This discussion of intertextuality provides legitimacy and a basic theoretical background for the concrete transformative works. In a nutshell, all texts are intrinsically intertextual, differing only in degree; that the textual meanings do not lie in authors’ intention or genius; and that textual meaning results from the process of interaction among authors, texts and readers. While Terry Eagleton accuses the poststructuralists of transgressing the clear distinction between the high literature and the popular culture (192), such transgression enables a thorough and probably less biased insight into the role of intertextuality in transformative works as a whole, suggesting a strong connection between contemporary online fan fiction and an older folk tradition and the general condition of human literary production.

Let’s come back to the definition of “fan fiction,” which is curiously, not even one of the major concerns of Fan Studies scholars. While pointing out that the term “fan fiction” did not appear until 1944, Hellen Hellekson and Kristina Busse count five different definitions for “fan fiction,” most of which trace back to even earlier dates. The first is collective storytelling, therefore all folk literature can be considered fan fiction, and the earliest fan fiction would then be ancient myths and legends (their example is the Greek myths of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*). The second is a response to specific written texts, which at least traces back to the medieval era (Keller 2011). The third suggests that fan fiction only becomes possible with the invention of the authorial copyright, which makes the original text something to be “borrowed.” In that way, the earliest fan fiction may be 19th century rewritings of Jane Austin’s works. Then the fourth suggestion for “fan fiction” emphasizes an actual community of fans who share an interest, therefore the earliest fan fiction communities would be those established around Sherlock

Holmes, who wrote Holmes pastiche. The last definition, and the most narrowly defined, is the most widely used one: fan fiction is “(sometimes purposefully critical) rewriting of shared media, in particular TV texts, then media fan fiction, starting in the 1960s with its base in science fiction fandom and its consequent zine culture, would start fan fiction proper” (5-6). While all of them are culturally contingent, the increasing specification of the definitions does show us various possibilities in understanding the relationship between fans and the texts.

In Western (or should we say, Anglo-American?) scholarship on fan culture in the early 1990s, fan fiction refers strictly to what contemporary media fans write based on their favorite shows, most of them sci-fi. For these fan critics, fan fiction is a significant component of fan culture. In the heritage of John Fiske, especially, the most intimate mode of meaning production by the audience is “textual reproduction,” by which he refers to fans’ writings inspired by the products they love, in contrast to the other two types: “semiotic” and “enunciative” productions (“Cultural Economy” 37-39). Henry Jenkins, while also clearly identifying the fan communities through their textual productivity, does not give a strict definition for the word “fan fiction.” He suggests that fan fictions are produced by fan communities, for the fan communities, and fan communities predominately consume popular media products, especially sci-fi television series (*Textual Poachers*). Fans as “subversive participants” that “poach” the original texts, and as an alternative group of consumers in opposition to the regular “mundane” audience, marks the basic position of Jenkins and other early fan culture studies scholars, especially those who study slash fiction from a feminist position (see Russ, Lamb and Veith, Penley).

Such absolute separation and binarism between fan and non-fan is now questioned and often discarded. Matt Hills, for example, introduces the social hierarchy inside the fan community and challenges Fiske’s distinction between the “good” fan culture and the “bad”

commercial culture, because fan culture does not only depend on commercial culture for sources, but also incorporates the tastes and hierarchy of mainstream commercial culture (*Fan Cultures*). At the same time, the understanding for fan culture and fan identity has also been expanded outside the sci-fi genre and contemporary media products. Hills further incorporates popular icons in his theoretical framework on cult fandom. Then Sandvoss develops and challenges Hills' distinction between the two, naming both categories as "fan text," suggesting that they are intrinsically the same (*Fans*). To an extent, we are all fans of something, even if people do not always engage in activities or communities that resemble those in media fan communities. Alan McKee describes scholars in a parodic tone as "fans of cultural theory," while Roberta Pearson suggests the similarities and connections between "Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies, and Sherlockians," four terms describing fans for Bach, Shakespeare, *Star Trek* and Sherlock Holmes fiction respectively, even though those in the first two categories are probably not willing to accept these titles. In Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's words, "as everyday life becomes more aestheticized, so does art become more like everyday life" (86). By using theories by Mike Featherstone, they suggest "the boundary between high and popular culture may be undermined by de-emphasizing the auratic quality of art" (86), which leads to the proliferation of images and spectacles in contemporary society.

These theoretical approaches to fan culture focus more on the original fan texts to which fans attach themselves, than the actual production process of fans' transformative writings. While acknowledging all these shifting understandings of fan culture, textual analysis of fan fiction is still limited by concerns about literary value. Fan fiction is often raised as evidence of certain social and cultural phenomena, but rarely discussed as texts themselves. Slash fiction receives disproportionate attention from academia and is often examined from the perspective of

the representation of sexuality, gender relations and affection, as opposed to its intertextual relationship with the original text.

Abigail Derecho, while still failing to articulate a strict definition between the two extremes of “all collective writings” and “fan culture in the contemporary form,” provides a definition of “fan fiction” that disrupts the distinction between “high culture” and “popular culture.” She suggests that fan fiction is a subgenre of a larger type of writing that is generally called ‘derivative’ or ‘appropriative,’ which she calls “archontic literature,” following Derrida’s narrative on archives. She quotes an online debate among fans concerning the definition for fan fiction:

(1) fan fiction originated several millennia ago, with myth stories, and continues today, encompassing works both by authors who identify themselves as fans and those who do not write from within fandoms;...(2) fan fiction should be understood as a product of fan cultures which began either in the late 1960s, with Star Trek fanzines, or, at the earliest, in the 1920s, with Austen and Holmes societies; or (3) the first argument may be too broad, but the second line of thinking may be too narrow; some other identifying traits of fan fiction might be expressed that would more accurately situate the genre within the larger field of literature. (64)

While taking the third option herself, Derecho suggests that “it is the specific relation between new versions and the original versions of texts, the fact that works enter the archive of other works by quoting them consciously, by pointedly locating themselves within the world of the archontic text, that makes the concept of archontic literature different from the concept of intertextuality” (65). If self-conscious reference towards the original text is presented textually in rewritten texts, then the author is intentionally keeping the original and the rewritten apart as two

different texts. At the same time, the relationship between the original and the rewritten would be unequivocally clear, unlike hazier references in other texts.

This definition is far from perfect, but it provides a useful place to start investigating fan fiction as a literary practice. While Eagleton complains about the poststructuralist destruction of traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries, fan fiction is in itself a literary practice. I am not arguing that fan fiction is of the same literary value as some transformative writings in the mainstream canonical literary production, in fact, the fan fiction I mentioned previously, “One Thousand Mountain Passes”, does not represent the best writings of *danmei* fan fiction writings in China. Yet as the perfect mirror image of Shi Zhecun’s high modernist experimental writing, it might suggest greater common ground between such literary practices, which are still overlooked and dismissed by the mainstream. Neglecting to acknowledge its resemblance and connection to some of the more traditional rewriting practices in canonical literature means a poststructuralist continuous space “nobody quite knew where *Coriolanus* ended and *Coronation Street* began” has not fully manifested itself (Eagleton, 192). Ultimately, this definition highlights the conversational relationship between a reader and a text, which means that any presumptions about value and pleasure need to be re-examined.

If fan culture is restricted to the realm of the popular media and mass culture, or “mainstream popular media and literature,” then the definitions of “mainstream” and “popular,” need to be contextualized and strictly defined. For instance, there are serious academic discussions about the canonized popular novel *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* across East Asia, but that does not prevent its almost omnipresence in the popular culture, including fan culture, since the stories ever exist. This situation does directly relate to that of popular literature and culture in ancient China, and the relatively recent elevation of fiction as a whole in Chinese

literary field at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. But does academically canonized work, which is formerly low-brow fiction catering to the masses and still circulating among the masses as folk tradition, count as “popular?” The word “mainstream” is even more difficult to nail down, especially considering the condition of globally circulating popular media products among enthusiasts of various cultural and national origins, a phenomenon that Jenkins terms as “pop cosmopolitanism,” which he further incorporates into his idea of “cultural convergence” (Jenkins “Pop Cosmopolitanism,” *Convergence Culture*). Center and periphery easily switch positions when literary tradition and canonical writing enter a different cultural background, sometimes out of cultural understanding and sometimes coincidentally.

With the variety of definitions of fan fiction discussed above, and with nearly all of them under debate, I suggest that fan fiction is an intertextual play that negotiates with the original texts—it should not be “popular texts only” or “sci-fi only”—but at the same time, I suggest, it would be useful to incorporate a consideration of cultural communities to compliment the definition—not necessarily a contemporary cultural community, but definitely a community based on interest and affection that gathers around the text.

Shi Xiu and His Three Avatars

For quite a long time, I had difficulties explaining the connotation of “fan fiction” to outsiders, or in fandom jargon, the so-called “people of the three dimensions.” However, I find the examples taken from canonical literature helpful in explaining the idea of secondary creation and rewriting. Once I explained how people would take on an already established fictional world, using the characters and settings to create one’s own stories, a friend immediately asked me, “So it is something like *Old Stories Retold*, isn’t it?” *Old Stories Retold* (*Gushi xinbian* 故事新编),

the most unconventional collection of short stories by Lu Xun, considered the father of modern Chinese, consists of rewritten ancient legends, folktales and other stories recorded in Chinese classics. Most of these stories are playful, yet they are still traditionally seen as a sacred component of canonical Chinese literature. Comparing *Old Stories Retold* with online fan fiction writing, is legitimate only when the distinction between the Internet and the print media diminishes, and the supposed boundary between “high culture” and “popular culture” becomes unimportant. It then leads us to question the relationship among various forms of transformative texts, and ultimately to question the scope of fan cultural studies as a whole.

My investigation for this chapter starts with the two rewritten stories I quoted above. While both stories are transformative or secondary creations based on *The Water Margin*, Shi Zhecun’s short story is an important work of modernist writing in the thread of canonical high literature inside the May Fourth tradition, while Alanruojia’s story is far from such a canon, merely one piece of the online fan fiction—to be exact, *danmei* fan fiction based on popular literary and media products—without even an editor.

On what level and aspect do “Shi Xiu” and “One Thousand Mountain Passes” differ from each other? To understand the two transformative stories, we need to first examine the character Shi Xiu in the original novel of *The Water Margin*. Traditionally, he is accepted as part of a small pool of vividly depicted characters in the 108 heroes on Liangshan; he is brave, shrewd and willing to help others, but at the same time, violent, emotionally sensitive and overreacting. His nickname “Daredevil Third Brother” is widely used in ordinary Chinese people’s daily conversations as a compliment.

Despite being a classic with brilliant characterization in traditional Chinese literature, the novel, *The Water Margin*, is actually extremely misogynist—brotherhood is the most valued

human bond; women are often in direct opposition to such bonds and thus violently persecuted. Shi Xiu's violent and somewhat excessive retribution towards Pan Qiaoyun and her lover, then, should not be viewed as ironic; it was supposed to be a heroic deed for a brave and righteous young man who only thinks about the good of his sworn brother. However, even back in the 17th century, the famous commentator Jin Shengtan (金圣叹, 1608-1661) repeatedly uses the words "fearsome" (*kewei* 可畏), "vicious" (*hendu* 狠毒) to describe Shi Xiu, which shows that Shi's violent and calculating conduct is not glorious, though Jin is not always consistent with his moral judgment (*Shuihu zhuan* 397, 399). As only one segment of this typical Chinese vernacular novel compiled from numerous folk tales and stage performances, Yang and Shi's episode is but one of many similar retribution and rebellion stories in *The Water Margin*. Episodes in which a loyal male younger family member (or servant) of a husband punishes and kills an amoral, unfaithful wife, and then joins the rebels occur at least three times (the other two being Wu Song, who kills Ximen Qing to avenge his elder brother, and Yan Qing, who tries to warn Lu Junyi of his adulterous wife but is wronged), but Shi Xiu is different from the other two. For Shi Xiu and Yang Xiong, the murder happens before the adulterous wife has done any damage (except to her husband's ego) to the legal husband, which makes this crime crueler.¹⁴

While *The Water Margin* is a well beloved book with enormous impact on both premodern and modern Chinese literature, its grave misogyny and depictions of violence, as well as its problematic representation of the rebel-official relationship, are strongly criticized by modern readers and critics. Since *The Water Margin* was constantly criticized and censored over the

¹⁴ In *The Water Margin*, Wu Song's elder brother, the ugly Wu Dalang is murdered by his beautiful wife and her wealthy lover Ximen Qing. Wu Song then kills his former sister-in-law and her lover brutally as revenge. Lu Junyi was framed up by his butler Li Gu, who secretly has an affair with Lu's wife. His loyal servant Yan Qing asks for assistance from Song Jiang, rescues him from the execution ground. Lu then kills his wife and her lover by himself.

course of its reception, modern readers in particular, must first examine and distance themselves from the moral judgments inside the text before wholeheartedly embracing the story. Authors of both modern rewritings that I quoted above have to face these infamous murders committed by a supposed candid and virtuous man, whose personality does not seem appealing to a modern reader. Both rewritings work to subvert and destabilize the original text, especially its characterization, but in completely different directions. Shi Zhecun's Shi Xiu is a morbid and perverted antihero, while Alanruojia's Shi Xiu is a sentimental but flawed hero. The cultural and literary background of the two writings differ significantly, but all these distinctions trace back to the motivation of rewriting presented in the texts.

In "Shi Xiu," Shi Zhecun invites his readers into Shi Xiu's mind for a psychoanalytical case study. For Shi, Shi Xiu is a young man who has never encountered any beautiful young women in such a close relationship, the dysfunctional male sexuality then develops a morbid reaction, mixed with love and hatred, eroticism and violence towards female erotic longing and imagination. The story is told from the perspective of Shi Xiu, meaning its scope is simultaneously restricted and extended: the story loses the omniscient point of view of the original novel, but gains insights into the protagonist's mind. While staying mostly within a third-person restricted narrative, the narrator insists on inserting a non-diegetic commentator, who frequently and intentionally deviates from the narrative and directly analyzes Shi Xiu's psychological behavior as if he were teaching a course in psychoanalysis. Through a word-to-word comparison, Shaeffer points out that the last section of "Shi Xiu," which details the psychological motivation when Shi convinces his sworn brother to kill his wife, borrows many sentences from the original novel, word for word. But at the same time, Shi also excises other portions of the original text and inserts detailed internal psychological description to justify Shi

Xiu's actions and change the dynamic between Yang Xiong and Shi Xiu (59-60). As William Shaefter points out, the contempt towards Yang Xiong, added to the original story by Shi Zhecun, makes Shi Xiu's action "appear intense and conniving" (60). Such narrative strategy and structure turns Shi's short story into an annotated repetition and elaboration of the original novel. It is as if Shi Zhecun attaches an inner, subjective layer to the original story, based on his interpretation, which was previously unavailable to readers because of the original novel's comparatively indifferent and objective descriptions. Shi is the major point-of-view character and the patient under observation; although the narration is mostly from his perspective, readers are psychologically distanced from fully identifying with him because of the unsympathetic characterization, and also because of the constant change of voice. The narrator, an omniscient expert in psychoanalysis, repeatedly highlights the irony in the text and rationally points out the character's morbid psychology. In this way, Shi Xiu's behavior and motivation is rationalized (or psychologized), humanized, and demystified; the misogynist appearance of the original novel is then stripped of its glorious celebration of brotherhood, leaving only the failure and frustration of male sexual desire.

Alanruojia treats the same material differently from Shi Zhecun: she censors murder scenes and extensively details the psychological movement with a first person perspective accompany the murder instead of detailing the gruesome scene. She modernizes the original lawless story through her extreme emphasis on moral standards, showing characters' awareness of the legal and moral consequences of their brutal actions and their self-doubt and ambivalence. Shi Xiu denounces himself as a "coldblooded murderer" during his revenge; his desperate willingness to prove himself is further intensified because of this self-doubt and therefore presents his extreme emotional attachment towards Yang Xiong. Alanruojia develops the plot to

fill in the narrative gaps in the original story, creating a comparatively convincing emotional basis for a homoromance—from a modern perspective. While keeping Shi Xiu as the main point-of-view character, the author alternates between the two main characters to show their mutual understanding and sentiments, explicitly exposed to readers. Generally sentimental, this story tells a conventional love story in a wholly male environment, reinterpreting as homosexual attachment the bond previously understood as brotherly. Shi Xiu murders Pan Qiaoyun's lover as an overreaction towards his sworn brother's misunderstanding and as a bizarre way to express love. Yang Xiong then murders Pan Qiaoyun (without much prodding from Shi Xiu, in Alanruojia's rewritten version) to repay to Shi's murder, and as a declaration of love (so that both of them are in the same position, both murderers that should be put into jail). The moral judgment is therefore slightly skewed: by putting readers totally in the position of the lovers, the fan author prioritizes the value of romantic love, therefore celebrating the protagonists, even though they are both coldblooded murderers.

While both stories present an ideological shift, emphasize interpersonal relationships and detailed psychological description, and make sexual desire and attachment the most significant factor in plot development, "Shi Xiu" and "Thousands of Mountain Passes" differ greatly in their emotional attachment towards the main characters. Shi Zhecun strives to alienate his readers from all three characters, and shows no empathy for any of them, while Alanruojia attempts to make readers identify with the male protagonists and be sympathetic to all of them; Shi Zhecun's rewriting emphasizes rationalization of the amorality in the premodern text, while Alanruojia's rewriting comes utterly from her love and identification with the characters.

To be more specific, Shi Zhecun tells the story primarily from Shi Xiu's perspective, thereby objectifying and distancing readers from Pan Qiaoyun, onto whom Shi Xiu attaches his

sexual fantasy and anxiety, which later turns to extreme violent sadism. Pan Qiaoyun is from the beginning, “the thing of his sworn brother 义兄底东西,” therefore Shi Xiu’s sexual attraction is strictly forbidden under the patriarchal order. As readers, we never know whether Pan Qiaoyun is aware that Shi Xiu desires her. At the same time, since we see Pan’s expressions and actions—which are supposed to be lascivious and flirtatious—totally through Shi Xiu’s eyes, we are never sure if the accusation of seduction can be objective under such circumstances. By such a shift, Shi Zhecun makes the male character the direct target of accusation, thereby aiming at the representative of the dominant power of patriarchal society and the utopia of brotherhood, Liangshan, instead of the female character—a silent victim of morbid desire. In fact, whether or not Pan Qiaoyun is guilty is no longer important in this story, because Shi Xiu’s unresolved sexual tension and sadistic desire, in Shi Zhecun’s rewriting, leads inevitably to violence as a final release. The untouchable Pan Qiaoyun, functions as a female “other” that triggers Shi’s desire, and has to be destroyed in order for him (and his environment) to return to normal again.

Yang Xiong, on the other hand, is both respected and despised by Shi Xiu in this story. Shi Xiu respects him for his authority as a sworn elder brother, and owes him his gratitude for offering him a place to live. Yet he represents the first obstacle to Shi Xiu’s sexual desire. Because of his respect for the patriarchal order, Shi Xiu represses his desire, only to be triggered later by Pan Qiaoyun’s affair with Pei Ruhai, the monk. In the last part of the story, Yang Xiong is depicted as a stupid, foolhardy and violent man—no better than Shi Xiu himself, only less cunning. He is the executioner of Pan’s gruesome murder, which causes Shi Xiu both secret pleasure and disgust, pleasure from the realization of his sadist desire, and disgust from Yang Xiong’s less anesthetized way of murder. Nevertheless, Shi Xiu ultimately achieves consensus and empathy with Yang Xiong for the first time after their declaration of brotherhood, through

Pan Qiaoyun's death. When sexual desire is finally fulfilled in a distorted way and the target physically destroyed, the two male characters enter Liangshan, a male dominated utopia of brotherhood, at the price of heterosexuality and female bodies.

In "Thousands of Mountain Passes," however, close identification and empathy towards the male characters, especially Shi Xiu, is required for both the author and the readers. The author faces a far more challenging task to rationalize and legitimize the coldblooded murders under modern moral standards. The author first implies that Yang Xiong is gay and married only to sustain the appearance of heterosexuality. He almost starts an intimate relationship with Shi Xiu when the latter goes to the government to drink with him on the night of the Mid-Autumn's Day, and he calls out Shi Xiu's name while having sex with Pan Qiaoyun. The angry and sexually frustrated wife then naturally pursues affairs with Shi Xiu and the monk. However, even with the greatest kindness possible towards the woman character, the author is not able to shift her demonized representation in *The Water Margin*. Yet Alanruojia manages at least to distribute the blame somewhat equally among all three of them: Yang ignores and remains cold to his wife; Shi is too proud to take the blame and kills to prove his own integrity; Pan is promiscuous and treacherous to both men. Not that I am suggesting this moral judgment is fair, but the story manages to sustain the moral judgments of the original text, while at the same time making all of them comparatively sympathetic under modern moral standards.

Different from Shi Zhecun's rewritten version, this piece does not linger on explaining the motivation for Shi Xiu to commit murder, but instead turns completely to the strong emotional connection between Shi and Yang. As the quoted part at the beginning of the chapter shows, this Shi Xiu constantly thinks about Yang Xiong even while he commits murder. In other words, the murder victims are excluded from the narrative, leaving the fan fiction author's attempts to

revise the misogynist tendency only partially achieved. Interestingly, in this rewritten story, Yang Xiong takes the full responsibility for killing Pan Qiaoyun, not for reasons of retribution of her betrayal, but for sharing in Shi Xiu's circumstances and stay with him. Such revision shows that Shi Xiu probably is the more favorable character of the two for the author; at the same time, the murder scene takes on the significance in the development of their relationship. In other words, Pan Qiaoyun functions as a narrative strategy to augment the emotional development between the two male characters. The fan fiction author's ambivalent position is further complicated when the characters face the other consequences of their murder. While Yang and Shi seem to live happily ever after, in the latter half of the story, they return to the city and meet Pan Qiaoyun's father, Yang Xiong's former father-in-law, who is sick, mad and in extreme poverty after both men fled after the murder. Shocked by this, Yang and Shi pay neighbors to take care of the old man. Although these characters do not regret the woman's death, they do feel sympathy for the innocent old man, another representation of the patriarchal order. Compensating the old man represents another attempt to go back to the original patriarchal order, paying filial piety as symbolic sons. Alanruojia acutely understands that Pan Qiaoyun's death may lead to complicated consequences in their former peaceful life, but she places the consequence in the family relationship. Therefore, the murder Yang and Shi committed is interpreted as a crime towards the patriarchal family, instead of a woman; their rebellion against the society is then presented as a homosexual/homosocial brotherhood versus heteropatriarchal family institution, which has nothing to do with female identity and experience at all. I am not suggesting that "Thousands of Mountain Passes" is a misogynist text, rather that the way that the author chooses to align the text with modern moral standards is itself morally unstable and ambivalent; with feminist concerns in the foreground (the issue of gay men hiding their sexual

orientation and marrying heterosexual women is a common and often discussed social problem for feminists in Mainland China), she does not keep the feminist stance. While she questions the stability of the male-centered nonsexual brotherhood and the demonized depiction of female characters in the original novel, the immediate value system she relies on is the traditional Chinese hetero-patriarchal family institution. In the end, however, the two protagonists also abandon this system, seeking personal happiness, instead of serving the family, the brotherhood, the emperor or the nation.

The story is centered on the love affair between the two characters, especially in the portion of the plot after they join the Liangshan rebels, which ends tragically. Alanruojia reverses both men's destiny in the original novel (in which Shi Xiu dies a tragic death after falling in a trap on the battlefield, while Yang Xiong dies of sickness shortly after the war between Liangshan and another rebel army is over), and makes both miraculously survive after most of the heroes in Liangshan die. The "happy ending" enforced by fan imagination strongly contrasts with the overall tragic tone of the original novel. With our extra-textual knowledge of history, we are also aware that for this novel, which was originally adapted from historical records, less than two years after the Liangshan rebels were vanquished by the government, Northern Song Dynasty was invaded and occupied by the nomads from the north, the Jurchen, leading to a disaster for common people. This history is frequently incorporated into rewritings, especially in sequels to *The Water Margin* throughout history.¹⁵ The happy ending for "Thousands of Mountain Passes," that evades the obvious and supposedly influential historical fact, further

¹⁵ Historically, Song Jiang's rebel was vanquished in 1124, while Northern Song Dynasty was invaded and occupied by the Jurchen in 1127. Two major sequels of *The Water Margins*, *Shuihu hou zhuan* 水浒后传 by Chen Chen 陈忱 and *Hou Shuihu zhuan* 后水浒传 by Qinglian Jushi Zhuren 青莲室主人 alludes to this history and fictionize a story of the Liangshan heroes combating the Jurchen invaders. It is worth noting that both sequels were written in early Qing Dynasty, clearly they took the Northern Song history as an allegory for the Ming Dynasty. See Widmer for more information about the sequels to *The Water Margin*.

separates the love story from the nation's grand historical narrative and from the doctrine of "loyalty" and "righteousness"—the two core beliefs of *The Water Margin*. The story starts with a woman sacrificing herself for the sake of true love between two men, and ends with the two men romantically retreating from the grand historical and political narrative after the failure of both the Liangshan brotherhood within the story, and the Song dynasty and the Han people. Although the latter remains outside of the narrative, it is inevitably brought to mind due to the historical setting.

If Shi Zhecun's Shi Xiu is convincing in its own logic, then Alanruojia's Shi Xiu is also consistent in her characterization. On thematic level, both stories start from questioning the heterosexual patriarchal order of the original novel, from a failure (or lack) of male heterosexual desire repressed under the doctrine of loyalty and brotherly righteousness proclaimed by *The Water Margin*, while each one offers a different explanation of the overtly celebrated brotherhood: repressed heterosexual desire or the ambiguously suggested exclusive homosexual bond. Shi Zhecun brings in libido and, in that context, depicts the conflict and coexistence between eroticism and violence; Alanruojia downplays violence as much as possible and makes everything else in the story serve as background for the homosexual romance. Shi Zhecun shows the possibility to twist the moral judgment through demystifying the male protagonist, exposing his dark secret and morbid desire; Alanruojia keeps the moral judgment intact with an ambiguous compromise, that the male protagonists are in fact guilty but are never punished for the crime they commit, prioritizing the homosexual love above everything else.

These two stories are by no means representative of the two seemingly separate trends of transformative writings. While I have analyzed some of the key differences between the two texts, the degree to which these different characteristics apply to a larger collection of rewritten

texts in either tradition is not easy to discern. In fact, it is highly possible that there are no such significant distinctions at all. Then, should we discuss these two stories as belonging to a singular genre or category of writing? The problem with the term “fan fiction” and all transformative works is, we still need to find legitimacy to discuss and analyze such works as a separate category. Transformative works share no essential qualities, except that they are all created based on a storyline and a set of characters that have already been fully constructed by someone else. And then we come to the vaguely defined category of “fan fiction.” What is the “fan” in “fan fiction?” Is it a status, a mode of re-creation, or an identity? In other words, how does the quality of “fan” manifest itself in the transformative creation, certain textual traits, rewriting methods, intertextual interactions (like manifested affection towards the original text), or the authors’ self-identification as a fan, or any combination of those above? Just as Sandvoss suggests in his claim that “readers are dead,” I would suggest that fan fiction is only distinguishable from other modes of transformative writing in the way that texts are consumed and produced according to a specific community’s definition. In other words, the quality of “fan” is presented in the whole process in which the fan texts interact with the community, because fan fiction is written by and for readers who love the original texts and the characters, based on a more or less collectively agreed upon assumptions about the plot and the characters. We can locate these community-based qualities on both textual and intertextual levels when we compare “Thousands of Mountain Passes” with “Shi Xiu.”

While both stories presume an audience with the knowledge of the original text, their narrative strategies suggest different readerships: Shi Zhecun’s story makes it possible for readers with less adequate information of *The Water Margin* to fully understand the plot, while Alanruojia’s story does not. Shi Zhecun presents an annotated version of the original story and

more or less retells the story, although with certain excisions and additions of plot details.

Alanruojia, while also retelling the story and tracing the timeline of the characters in the original novel, detaches her annotations from the original narrative: one needs to be very familiar with Shi Xiu's story in *The Water Margin* (as well as the clichés and conventions circulated in the fandom) to understand complicated references of temporal and local details. Shi Zhecun's rewriting rebels against the traditional storytelling methods in premodern Chinese literature; the significance of his short story comes from the contrast between the original and the rewritten text, and the overall reception context of *The Water Margin* in Chinese literary and social history. However, readers are able to sense the incongruity within the text without sufficient knowledge of *The Water Margin*. The combination of Freudian psychoanalysis and a premodern Chinese text is enough to signal to readers Shi Zhecun's efforts to challenge the temporal and geographical boundaries in this rewritten story—something not present in Alanruojia's story.

Alanruojia's story has a significant presumption: because it is posted on the page for lovers of the pairing Yang Xiong / Shi Xiu, she and her readers all already love the character Shi Xiu before they write and read the story. They had to embrace the violent and calculating side of Shi Xiu and find a way to rationalize and modernize the characters' motivation. Love for the character preexists the reinterpretation of the original story, therefore authors like Alanruojia face a far more difficult task than Shi Zhecun, whose objective distance and absolute critical attitude are out of reach for them. Alanruojia's ambiguous attitude towards Pan Qiaoyun comes from this double-sided task. Besides, Shi Xiu has traditionally been a beloved character, no matter how Jin Shengtan dislikes him. Alanruojia's fan fiction also represents rather a collective attempt at reinterpreting and representing a traditionally beloved male character in an updated retelling.

One last thing to emphasize about Alanruojia's writing, is its double identity of being the fan fiction of the original vernacular novel and of the 2010 TV series adaptation. Fan fiction for a literary text usually flourishes after an audio-visual adaptation is made. In this case, most fandoms based on Chinese premodern vernacular novels refer to film, television or animation adaptations for visual representations. Therefore the handsome actor, Liu Guanxiang 刘冠翔, cast for the role Shi Xiu in *All Men are Brothers*, the 2010 TV adaptation of *The Water Margin*, also attracts fans' attention. Besides, concerning the reversed or revised moral judgment, interestingly enough, the 2010 television adaptation itself attempts to demystify the original novel and rid it of at least part of its misogynist tendencies, though most of its attempts fail. The female antagonists, such as Wu Song's sister-in-law, Pan Jinlian, and Song Jiang's concubine, Yan Xijiao, are given particular attention in the television adaptation, stressing the motivation for their adulterous behavior: their longing for real love, which creates a strange incongruity in the plotline. Pan Qiaoyun, no different from the two aforementioned female characters, is portrayed with special attention—she is seductive and lascivious, yet her actions are understandable for her particular situation. Pan Qiaoyun's last lines before her death in the TV adaptation, for example, show her frustration towards her marriage with Yang Xiong: "Two nights I spent with my lover, is better than two years' marriage life with you!" and "Go accompany your knives and spears! Go accompany your brother!" (Episode 45, *Shuihu zhuan*). These lines clearly present an ignored and frustrated wife and allude to a possible homosexual subtext, hinting at the "bromance" of the story (which might be intentional, considering the current visibility of *danmei* fan communities). While the original novel is definitely the major source text for Alanruojia's fan fiction (the fan fiction refers to scenes from the original novel that are never presented in any TV adaptation), the TV series provides a convenient visualization to rely upon. Some of the characterization

observable in Alanruojia's description, comes directly from the TV adaptation, not the original novel. For example, Shi Xiu's delicate features and sentimentality in the story, come almost solely from the actor, Liu Guanxiang's appearance and acting style. In the television adaptation, when Yang Xiong wrongs Shi Xiu and scolds him, the camera lingers on Shi Xiu's close-up, which clearly captures his eyes rimmed with tears. Such sentimentality softens the character and triggers an almost maternal sympathy towards this young man from the female audience. Just as this case shows, transformative writing does not usually interact exclusively with a single original text, but rather with an intertextual network of rewritings and adaptations of many previous generations, before itself becoming another node in the same network.

In short, fan fiction is placed within the fan community and operates inside the community, even though as a text, it presents similar textual and intertextual traits as non-fan-fiction transformative writings. The strong feeling that authors and readers of fan fiction have for the original texts, especially for the characters created by the original author, guarantees that most well-received fan fiction encourage direct identification and emotional empathy with at least some of the original characters, which is not required of transformative writing created outside fan communities. However, the degree to which authors of transformative writings identify with the original text and characters is not quantifiable, and in fact, all writings assume a reader community, though not necessarily one organized as a fandom. We still see ambiguities in transformative writings created outside contemporary fandoms, therefore it would be helpful to trace the generic definition for these transformative writings, taking Shi Zhecun's "Shi Xiu" as an example, in literary history.

Rewriting, Modernism, and Genre

Existing scholarship of Shi Zhecun's transformative stories have all linked his writings to the modern perception of the hectic metropolitan city of Shanghai. The modernist features of Shi's writing are sometimes identified as a generic conventions or characteristics for whatever genre that scholars decide to name this particular trope of writings in (usually) modern and contemporary Chinese literature. As I enlarge my scope by including other rewriting practices outside the May Fourth tradition in modern Chinese Literature, most generic terms, be it "*gushi xinbian* fiction," "historic fiction," or "rewritten fiction," so localized in their context, lose their signification. For example, modern Shanghai is not essential to Shi Zhecun's intentional ideological break from the original text. Therefore I find all of these terms inappropriate if we take stories as "Thousands of Mountain Passes" for a comparison. I adopt the term "transformative text" following the lead of Organization of Transformative Works, as a more descriptive term without a specific social or historical reference; as far as I know, no one has applied this term to Chinese literature. Focusing on the intertextual relationship and the author-reader interaction dynamic, I read transformative texts as a common, even universal mode of reading, interpretation, and wish fulfillment inside a particular community of readers, rather than a special trope of modern Chinese literature specifically. Such writing practices, for fans of popular TV shows, or for May Fourth writers aiming for cultural enlightenment and salvation, rework the original material for wish fulfillment and for self-expression, especially on the ideological level. The only difference is the reader communities they each face.

Temporal displacement is the key characteristic when scholars try to decide the genre for Shi's stories. Three critics, Andrew Jones, Andrew Stuckey and William Schaeffer, all define "Shi Xiu" as a "historical fiction," an ambiguous category, denoting the period of time in which

the story takes place, while all of them also clearly note its nature as a secondary creation, and its intertextual relationship with other texts, especially *The Water Margin*. Ann Huss, however, questions the generic term “historical fiction” while tracing it back to Lukacs, claiming that the writing similar to Lu Xun’s *Old Stories Retold* is intrinsically different from what is usually identified as historical fiction.

As Zhu Yuhong notes in her discussion of what she terms “rewritten stories” in modern Chinese literature (which mostly means the “Thirty-Years-Literature” [1919-1949], by writers of the May Fourth tradition), the designation “historical fiction” involves secondary writings based on historical record, but these two categories are not identical to each other. According to her research, the term was first raised by Liang Qichao 梁启超, in his suggestion for a new modernized fiction, “New Fiction” 新小说. In Liang’s discussion, historical fiction is placed first in his ten examples of new fiction, which he proclaims to be the educational tool for a modernized nation and people. His definition for “historical fiction” is based on the older Chinese fiction tradition of “*yanyi* 演义,” in which a writer takes a piece of historical record and uses grand, marvelous and extraordinary (*huiqi shugui* 恢奇俶诡) plots in place of the seriousness and elegance (*zhuanyan dianzhong* 庄严典重) of historical records (Zhu, 118). The representative writers among Liang’s contemporaries include Wu Woyao 吴沃尧 and Cai Dongfan 蔡东藩. Creation of such writing stresses fantastical storytelling, the plot, and for the responsibility of educating ordinary Chinese people. Liang’s definition is not widely accepted, since he himself is not a literary writer. In the May Fourth period, Yu Dafu 郁达夫 later suggests that historical fiction refers to stories based on famous historical events and people, with a

historical background.¹⁶ He further divides historical fiction into two types: for one, authors “put modern life onto historical figures,” for the other, authors use the historical events to express their own feelings. Or in Guo Moruo’s 郭沫若 words, historical fiction has two different functions: explanation (*jieshi* 解释) and allegory (*fengyu* 讽喻) (3-5). Both implicitly suggest a temporal gap between the original text and the rewriting, thus historical fiction requires that the author applies a new mode of thinking and understanding to the events in the stories.

Ann Huss, starting from Lu Xun’s *Old Stories Retold*, directly creates a “*gushi xinbian*” genre, to refer to the type of writing, in which “[t]he authors of these pseudo or anti-historical novels question both historical truth and fictional realism” (3).

Gushi xinbian are not historical novels or drama, a key limitation to this study and one that will be discussed in detail in a moment. Unlike strict works of historical fiction or satire, this mixed genre of “old tales retold” is a very self-reflexive genre, a parody of the historical novel. It always invests its subject in a double perspective, the “past” and the “present,” thus enacting a dialogical mode of discourse. Gushi xinbian writers are aware of the gap between the old and the new. They do not attempt to create the illusion of the past, as do historians and historical fiction writers. Instead, they stress the breaks, the inconsistencies, and the connections. They address the issues of Chinese “modernity,” of Chinese “postmodernity,” by rewriting the past. (62-63)

Huss emphasizes the juxtaposed modern and past in the rewriting, as a self-conscious investment in a historical text, a deliberate and blatant hybridity of the past and the present, which, she suggests, does not exist in historical fiction in György Lukacs’s definition. This

¹⁶ See Yu Dafu “Lishi xiaoshuo lun.”

“*gushi xinbian*” genre shows specifically the transgression against literary realism, constantly forcing readers to retreat from belief in the world constructed by the text. Zhu Chongke basically follows Huss’s lead and also categorizes writing that exploits the tension between the original text and the rewritten one on a parodic level as “*gushi xinbian*.”

Zhu Yuhong calls this tradition “rewritten fiction” (*chongxiexing xiaoshuo* 重写型小说), an idea that builds on previous studies of *Old Stories Retold*. Again, she notes the necessary temporal span between the original and the rewritten. According to Zhu, rewritten fictions are different from original fiction because they have a pre-text, they rewrite on a semiotic level an already established system of signs extracted from the vast world, while original fiction faces life as it is, aiming to establish a semiotic system of their own (6). By this definition, she suggests that rewritten fictions are all based on an original story with a similar plot, and therefore express the authors’ intention through the contrast between the original and the rewritten.

These three terms: “historical fiction,” “*gushi xinbian* genre,” and “rewritten fiction” more or less describe the same type of writing, with different emphasis. “Historical fiction” emphasizes the premodern theme, “*gushi xinbian* genre” emphasizes the terminal and ideological heterogeneity in the text, while “rewritten fiction” emphasizes the self-conscious intertextuality presented in the rewritten texts. These terms all describe Chinese literature in the twentieth century; other than Liang Qichao’s contemporaries (and a couple of contemporary writers, such as Li Bihua), they basically discuss only the high literary tradition of May Fourth literature. “Shi Xiu,” serves as a perfect example for all of these generic traits. No matter whether they approve of the ideological message expressed in “Shi Xiu,” scholars suggest it displays a direct relationship with anxiety about modernization in the work of Shi Zhecun’s contemporaries and connects to the national past, a shared target of May Fourth intellectuals. Jones discusses the

representation of violence towards female bodies in “Shi Xiu” alongside Yu Hua’s “Classical Love Story.” He suggests that “‘Shi Xiu’ enacts a characteristic May Fourth faith in the power of representation to unproblematically transpose modernity onto Chinese soil” (574). But at the same time, he points out that both the author and the readers participate in this voyeuristic pleasure:

In this light, one cannot help but note the underlying consonance between the voyeuristic pleasure Shi Xiu derives from the violent revelation of what lies inside Pan Qiaoyun’s body, the invasive ways in which Shi Zhicun extracts from Shi Xiu a confession of what goes on inside his head, and finally, the pleasure we take in these revelations of a truth that lies underneath the surface of things. I do not mean to collapse these three processes together as the manifestation of a single, sadistic “will to power/knowledge.” I do mean to suggest that even as we explain away the text’s disturbing representations of violence, we may well be enjoying the inherent violence of its mode of representation. (590).

With such an observation, Jones suggests the irony in secondary creation, especially those written to subvert the original, is to reaffirm the idea that it is against. Stuckey develops Jones’ observations, suggesting that “Shi Xiu” has an ambiguous relationship towards the source text *The Water Margin* because of the double-sided nature of parody: imitation and opposition, that “while the motivation lying behind the parody ‘Shi Xiu’ seems clearly to be a song in opposition, the narrative becomes, through the very action of differance that enables it in the first place but returns in the end to a sameness which is only deferred, a song of imitation” (41-42).

Shaeffer, while noticing the blurry boundary between the past and the present and the original and the rewriting, does not hold a similarly critical stance towards Shi Zhecun. He

studies “Shi Xiu” together with two of his other short stories in the same collection, examining Theme of split identity and boundary crossing. From Shaeffer’s point of view, Shi Zhecun questions the separation between tradition and modernity and articulates his experiments “through ritual killing, through representing in his fiction the dialectic of, on the one hand, the ritual violence used to enforce a separation and the purity of a line, and on the other, the violence of the eruptive returns of repressed heterogeneity” (53). Shaeffer suggests that Shi deliberately keeps the past and the present, the local and the global fragmented and adulterated to express the bewildering experience of modernization. In other words, the rewritten is not supposed to replace the original; it only complicates it. Similarly, Ann Huss also notes the issue of boundary crossing in Shi Zhecun’s writing, to suggest that Shi is radical in his manipulation of time, for he “comfortably go[es] beyond the confines of the past/present, historical/fictional dichotomies — to make the readers believe we are “seeing” something new, only to realize after some contemplation that the boundaries are not quite so clear” (160). In other words, she suggests that it is erroneous to see Shi’s manipulation as only projecting the modern to the past, but rather, suggests that the past and the present are not that different after all.

All the above critics stress the importance of Shi Zhecun’s environment, the half-colonial Shanghai in early 1930s, and see “Shi Xiu” as a direct literary response to the social cultural condition. Shi Zhecun’s short stories, then, according to them, have to be understood through extra-textual historical information, and within the discourse of modernization, which haunts modern Chinese literature. Nevertheless, such comments are actually applicable to a significant portion of transformative writings, because fan fiction originates from both identification and alienation. Rewriting might be triggered by one’s urge to reshape a flawed but potential text into a form ideally suited to one’s own desire. In this aspect, Alanruojia’s rewritten story is not

necessarily different from Shi Zhecun's story, in that her rewriting also responds to the desires and experiences of current Chinese society, especially those of the fan subculture. Alanruojia's story, like many other works of *danmei* fan fiction, revises the original text, to destabilize its heteronormative assumptions and create a homoromance utopia. It also destabilizes the "brotherhood" doctrine of *The Water Margin*, not only by questioning its sincerity (especially in its description of the leader Song Jiang, who is criticized by many fans as valuing his own reputation over the life and happiness of the brothers) and sustainability, but also by transforming the homosocial bond in *The Water Margin* into an exclusive homosexual bond between two male characters. By stressing this exclusive relationship between the two instead of a broad inclusive brotherhood, the two main characters' emotional indifference to the Liangshan authorities gradually retreats into a total withdrawal from the national political narrative. Similarly, Alanruojia also struggles with the issue of balancing imitation and opposition, which leads to an ambiguous moral presentation. Putting aside the issue of literary value—which I will not comment on in this chapter—the two texts are not so different in their tasks and effects.

Besides Derecho's work on "achronic literature," scholars of fan cultural studies do not seem to be interested in extending the idea of fan fiction to the more traditional texts for literary studies, i.e. canonical literature. Yet as I have shown above, a fan fiction piece can be the perfect mirror image of a high modernist canonical text. The difference lies elsewhere. I suggest that contemporary online fan fiction is defined by its process of creation and consumption, by the way that fans interact with texts and with one another, which emphasizes specifically the love and affection that one holds with the original, the transformative texts, and with other fans in the community. Such qualities are not observable in a significant portion of transformative writings traditionally categorized as canonical literature. Shi Zhecun's "Shi Xiu," because of its alienated

perspective towards all the characters, serves as an appropriate example. The creation mode and interpersonal/intertextual relationships in fan fiction is materialized (in a virtual way) and facilitated through the Internet, but a similar form has existed in readers' daily intellectual practice and in folk tradition for a very long time. By tracing the transformative writing tradition back to the premodern era, I suggest that contemporary fan writings echo earlier practices of transformative writings associated with collective traditions of creation in folk culture. Fan fiction and community is a postmodern reprisal and counterpart of storytelling before the modern idea of authorship. Transformative texts share important similarities with texts circulated in earlier folk literary traditions and oral performance. Fan fiction is the closest to this old folk tradition of collective creation and community consumption, yet it is part of commercial culture, which prevents it from being fully acknowledged as a legitimate literary practice, or simply as a form of folk literature.

Folk Practices of Collective Writing, Premodern and Postmodern

The case studies and theoretical debates above all build on modern and contemporary literature, the moment at which modern notion of copyright came into practice and enforcement. However, as some critics above suggest, theoretically, fan fiction / derivative / appropriated / secondary / transformative writings can be traced back to the earlier folk tradition of collective creation, Chinese vernacular novels included. Techniques of modern transformative writings, including contemporary fan fiction circulated in subcultural communities, can often be found in rewritings of the ancient classics, including, expanding the timeline of the original story (i.e., sequels and prequels in the narrow sense, which can be found in various sequels to *The Water Margin*, for example), expanding a specific moment in the original story (expanding the episode

of Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing in *The Water Margin* into *Golden Lotus*), filling in the gaps or excavating the excess of the original story, centering the story on a originally marginal character (*Golden Lotus*, again, centers on minor characters in *The Water Margin*), or shifting the setting and identities of the main characters from (usually called “alternate reality” in fan fiction, mostly seen in Late Qing rewritings, for example, *New Tales of Stone* 新石头记). In fact, most usual techniques of rewriting and reappropriation can be found in these rewritten stories. Resemblance does not guarantee a direct influence, yet similar rewriting techniques may point to a similar mentality that authors of rewritten stories hold towards original texts and their own rewritings.

Discussion of modern transformative writings based on historical original stories often emphasizes that the original and the transformative are produced under different time periods, social and cultural constructions, and moreover, cultural semiotic systems. Therefore “*gushi xinbian*” stories, “rewritten stories” often subvert, or at least destabilize the original texts, without attempting to achieve a sense of realism, or congruency with the moral standard of the original texts. In other words, according to the critics I quoted above, these modern transformative writings in the canonical literary tradition are self-reflexive rewritings. This quality, I suggest, has two major causes: first, the actual time span between the original text and the transformative text. As we see in the case of “Thousands of Mountain Passes,” while a modern fan may identify with a character created half a millennium ago, the perspective remains modern; the cultural semiotic system needs updating, but not necessarily in the direction a literary modernist would choose. The second cause is more straightforward. These writers are generally detached from the original text and characters enough to destabilize the characterization and alienate themselves from the original text. Nevertheless, given that all these ideas refer back at least to the Late Qing transformative writings, it might be helpful to extend

these ideas, originally only applicable to modern Chinese literature, to premodern fiction writing and circulation.

When discussing transformative writing in the vernacular novels in premodern Chinese literature, by quoting Lin Chen, Martin Huang proposes that *xushu* (sequels) should be understood broadly, and “can be characterized as an expansion, abridgment, and rewriting of a previous work for the purpose of improvement” (3). He further quoted the four types of sequel writing techniques proposed by another literary historian Li Zhongchang: “continuations” (*xu* 续), “supplements” (*bu* 补), “rewritings” (*gai* 改) and “imitations” (*fang* 仿) (4). In such a fashion, Huang actually draws an equation between the “sequel” and transformative writing.

Huang Dahong, in his study of rewritten versions of Tang Dynasty short stories, also points to various forms of such literary production. He suggests that the rewritten Tang Dynasty short stories, or *chuanqi*, come in three completely different forms. Later authors either imitate the style and the genre of *chuanqi*, taking the similar linguistic formulae and plot elements to rewrite the original story, or adapt the original story into another form, often stage or oral performance, in which way, the language used is shifted to vernacular Chinese. He further notes that there usually exists a string of rewriting for each story in the long history of rewriting of Tang *chuanqi*. Because “rewriting” does not have a fixed definition, the writings that Huang deals with actually take three different modes: first, adaptations from one medium to another, e.g., adapting a literary text into a stage script or oral performance; second, rewriting with clear and direct textual reference, taking characters and settings from another work to tell one’s own stories; third, generic imitation, in which an author, inspired by an earlier work, imitates its plot development, narrative structures, or linguistic traits, but without direct reference or identical characters/plot. Generic imitation may be present in various aspects, from plot structure to

linguistic traits, but they are not strictly transformative texts. Nevertheless, this slippery distinction reminds us the universality of intertextual references and the artificiality of the idea of originality.

Martin Huang's discussion reveals that two major waves of sequel creation occurred in Chinese literary history; both periods are marked by social crisis, wars and conflicts: the first one happened in the mid-17th century, i.e. the shift between Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty; the second is the turn of the 19th and the 20th century, another chaotic and complicated historical period in Chinese history and the starting point of Chinese modernization. Huang suggests that "the *raison d'etre* of a *xushu* lies in the 'interstices' (space/time) between 'what has ended' and 'what lies beyond that end'" (32). Historically and literarily, *xushu* deals with transitions between the past and the future, showing nostalgia towards the past (especially a collapsed dynasty or declining past, i.e. Ming and traditional Chinese mental state), while constructing a utopian imagination for an alternative future. When characters from a traditional novel are put into a new environment, as shown in the early 20th Century trend of rewriting, usually termed as "*nijiu xiaoshuo* 拟旧小说" (fiction that imitates the old) or "*fanxin xiaoshuo* 翻新小说" (fiction that brings the new out of the old), these characters, already familiar to readers, struggle to adapt to a hectic pace of the modern world, just as people of the early 20th Century strived to do. Therefore, "*xushu* as a genre of transition helped to create a strong sense of the 'epochal inevitability'" (33). This characteristic draws a direct similarity with Shi Zhecun's modernist rewritings in 1930s, and Alanruojia's story that presents a new perspective for sex and gender.

As we trace the rewriting tradition back into earlier history, we also approach a folk tradition similar to contemporary fan culture. In these earlier sequels of premodern vernacular fiction, the desire for self-expression is presented through the process of appropriation,

manipulation, and transgression towards the original texts. As Jenkins analyzes, most fan fiction derives from a doubled reaction from the readers: strong emotional attraction and identification with the original text, and at the same time, an impulse to revise, supplement, and improve the original text into something that better suits the readers' desires (*Textual Poachers* 86-107). A perfect example would be Yu Wanchun's *Vanquishes the Bandits* (*Dang kou zhi* 荡寇志), a *The Water Margin* sequel written in the mid-Qing Dynasty, in which the author revises the heroes' destinies in the original novel, leaving the bandits totally destroyed by the government army. Yu's rewriting presents his belief in loyalty, by which he judges rebellion totally irredeemable. Considering the questionable and sometimes inconsistent value judgments in *The Water Margin*, this revision refocuses the loyalty doctrine theme, bringing the text back to self-consistency. Similar to Yu Wanchuan's example, scholars raise various cases in which an author rewrites a story with an altered fictional world, in order to present his/her understanding of the original text. For instance, Qiancheng Li notes that several sequels to *Journey to the West* demonstrate the authors' intention to correct "wrongs and lapses," turning the original story, which is a "discontinuous allegory" into a "continuous allegory," stressing the resolution of the logical lapses in the original novel to conform to Buddhist doctrines.

Huang's generic term for transformative texts, "sequels," touches upon another problem. The creation process of premodern Chinese vernacular novels is not only a collaboration among oral performance entertainers, but also an open text without a fixed and settled appearance. Editing and revision can last for centuries. However, a not-yet-closed text does not prevent readers to approach it, appreciate it, and rewrite it to fulfill one's desire. As Martin Huang explains, sequels of premodern Chinese vernacular novels are sometimes created upon texts that are not yet closed. Sometimes the sequels, instead of the original texts, present a more complete

and self-contained image because they each have only one writer. Ironically, it is often through the intentional rewriting process of sequels that we distinguish the existence of personal creation and voice.

Xiaoshuo was an open-ended discursive space where writers, editors and commentators could collectively fashion a narrative text and where the roles of these three ‘participants’ were often difficult to distinguish. The fact that many works of xiaoshuo were initially circulated in the form of hand-copied manuscripts before they were published might have contributed to their ‘openness.’ However, being in print did not necessarily prevent these texts from undergoing further textual transformations. (19).

This question may further lead to the age-old debate about the definition of “*xiaoshuo*” and its differences from fiction / novel in the Western tradition, yet the importance here lies in fictional texts’ openness and collective creation process. To better illustrate the issue, I give a detailed description below of the creation process of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*sanguo yanyi* 三国演义), largely due to the rather simplistic transformation process of this novel, as compared to texts like *The Water Margin* and *Dream of the Red Chambers*.¹⁷

Romance of Three Kingdoms is based on the real history of the late Eastern Han and the whole Three Kingdoms era (approximately 184-280 BC). Historical events were first recorded in the official historical record and adapted into folk performance at late as the Tang era (618-907), with Tang writers sporadically mentioning the popularity of Three Kingdom stories in their contemporary daily life. For instance, “The Poem of the Beloved Son” (*Jiao'er shi* 骄儿诗) by

¹⁷ I am only giving a very brief history of the novel *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. For the history of compiling and distribution of the vernacular novels as *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margins*, refer to Plaks.

late Tang Poet, Li Shangyin 李商隐 (813-858), describes his young son imitating the famous generals in Three Kingdoms era: Zhang Fei, by gesturing his funny large beard, or Deng Ai, who had a stammer (*Huo xue Zhang Fei hu, huo xiao Deng Ai chi* 或谑张飞胡，或笑邓艾吃).¹⁸

Three Kingdom stories then were adapted into stage performance, in the Song and Yuan periods. At the same time, folklore about Three Kingdom history also circulated in the folk culture. Then in Yuan period (1271-1368), the widely circulated individual stories were collected and edited into a single work with a more or less complete form, titled *Sanguozhi pinghua* 三国志平话.¹⁹

The novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, with the complete form of the title *Sanguo zhi tongshu yanyi* (三国志通俗演义) was not completely compiled and settled until the turn of Yuan and Ming Dynasty—that is approximately 1400 BC. The author is generally believed to be a man called Luo Guanzhong 罗贯中, whose identity and experience are little known to us. The currently circulated version of the novel is traditionally understood as “seventy percent of historical truth and thirty percent of fictional stories” (Lu Xun). The historical facts are taken from various official historical records. Some of the fictional stories are taken directly from folklore, storytelling and stage plays, while other fictional details are first seen in the novel. This novel does not have an authentic pure origin as the creation of a certain individual; instead, it represents a process of collective imagination and adaptation over many centuries. The historical origin of the texts also breaks the distinction between the fictional and the non-fictional, questioning the definition for fictional narrative.

¹⁸ In *Jiao'er shi*, Li Shangyin depicts his beloved young son as a smart, active and bright boy, describes his daily activities, his interactions with other people, and the games he plays. Therefore, one could see that the Three Kingdoms storytelling was part of a young child's daily life back in the ninth century.

¹⁹ *Sanguozhi pinghua* was finalized in Yuan Dynasty. It is a collection of Song Dynasty storytelling scripts about the history of Three Kingdoms. It had impact on *Romance of Three Kingdoms*.

The openness of texts does not stop after a canonical text is first written down. Texts sometimes need more multiple centuries to finally settle into one, or several, printed versions. Revision and rewriting happen after the novels are written, in the process of circulation, printing and editing. The earliest version of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* available now was published in the Jiajing 嘉靖 years (1522-1566), that is more than 100 years after the novel's commonly agreed upon date of origin. Before the mid and late Ming period when printing media expanded to include low-brow material like vernacular novels, according to Song Lihua's study, vernacular novels circulated among literati mainly through the form of handwritten copies. During the process of copying, literati may revise plot and details. Some good copies (which often suggest significant revision) were highly welcomed, without any expectation of fidelity. That is to say, the writing process for the novel was never officially closed; the process of circulation is sometimes simultaneously a process of revision and rewriting. Editors also took part in the circulation and revision process.

Martin Huang connects the phenomenon of sequel creation with the emergence of the author in critical discourse, and the boom of *xiaoshuo* commentary. His example is *The Water Margin*, which is notorious for its many versions (there are at least three most popular versions—a 100-chapter version, a 70-chapter version, and a 120-chapter version—with many differences between them). The most famous editor for *The Water Margin*, Jin Shengtan, legitimizes his own revision by claiming that only the first 70 chapters of the novel were written by the “true” author Shi Nai'an 施耐庵, while the rest of the novel was added by Shi's student, Luo Guanzhong, and therefore not legitimately part of the story and should be deleted completely. Being a loyalist to the imperial court, Jin does not approve of the last thirty chapters of *The Water Margin*, in which the rebels are recruited back into the imperial army. To edit out what he disapproves of, he

establishes and performs the authority of the “author.” In this way, he echoes Jenkins’ description of media fans, who build a “meta-text” canon from the TV series they watch as a criterion to criticize the further development of the series and disqualify content that does not accord to the meta-text expectations.²⁰ In the case of these editors, they also establish a “meta-text” in order to edit the original text. They do not assume such authority for themselves, but borrow the authority of a constructed author-figure, or in Foucault’s words, “author function.” Huang argues that these novels started to become canonized and connected to a fixed author just around the time when critics and editors started to edit and critique the novels, and only then were the open texts of vernacular novels finalized and completed.

The Romance of Three Kingdoms experienced a similar process. The version that we generally see in circulation is edited by a Qing literatus called Mao Zonggang 毛宗岗 (1632-1709). If we compare his version and the earliest version, it is clear that Mao deletes and adds chapters, changes chapter titles, alters details, and sometimes changes commenting poems; all of these elements are integral components of the traditional Chinese vernacular novel. For example, the current opening poem of the novel, “*Linjiangxian* 临江仙,” was written by Yang Shen 杨慎 (1488-1559), much later than when the novel was first written, and the original topic of the poem is not the history of the Three Kingdom, but the history of Qin and Han Dynasties²¹. But Mao Zonggang added this poem to the novel, and since then, it has been closely tied with this story and even became an icon for the novel. Then, if we estimate that the novel of *Romance of Three*

²⁰ “Meta-text” in Jenkins’s discussion refers to the ideal appearance of a work that a reader (or audience) constructs from the previous reading (or watching) experience. In other words, one concludes an ideal from (usually the favorite part of) the original work, and uses the ideal to evaluate whether the other part of the work meets this high standard.

²¹ Yang Shen’s lyric *Linjiangxian* was originally the opening poem of the Qin and Han part of his *Tanci of Twenty-one Historical Records* (*nianyi shi tanci* 廿一史弹词).

Kingdoms was written around the year 1400, more than two hundred years passed as it evolved into the most popular and widely available version now. During the process of circulation—including copying, revision, editing and printing, the text was totally open for revision and recreation. In this way, the open text makes the identity of the “author” very unstable.

To sum up the literary phenomenon above, I suggest that the premodern rewriting practices in China can be roughly divided into two types: one is incorporated in the “canon” of the literary text, through collective practices of revision, copying, retelling, and compiling of previous materials in circulation, with some of the materials dating back to historical records written a millennium ago. This process is largely anonymous, unacknowledged and undocumented. Such a process usually concludes with a famous and authoritative annotated version by a well-known commentator, who would claim and settle the identity of an individual author for the story long in circulation. All of the “Four Great Books” in premodern Chinese vernacular novels experienced this process.²² The other type is the more standard transformative writing, which sets up a text independent from the original text, but also relies upon the text for intertextual meanings. Such a process can happen at any time during the circulation of the original text, and sometimes itself leads to a string of rewritings. Since transformative writings are usually created by an individual instead of collectively, they often display a coherence seldom seen in the original text.

²² In the “Four Great Books” of premodern Chinese vernacular novels, *The Water Margin* and *Journey to the West* are similar to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* because they all ultimately come from the storytelling tradition and collective creation: *The Water Margin* storytelling of the historical records, and *Journey to the West* storytelling of Buddhist doctrine. *Dream of the Red Chambers* is different because it was created by individual literati, generally believed to be Cao Xueqin. While there are still various versions of the novel, and the novel is believed to be unfinished, only to be finished by another writer, *Dream of the Red Chambers* is still linked to the creativity of individual writers. However, all these books experienced the process of being canonized by commentators and editors.

While the rewriting tradition has an obvious connection with the tradition of collective writing in folk literature, we could also see that such practices often mirror what we would see in contemporary popular culture. Even collective creation may find its counterpart in creation systems like those of Marvel and DC comic books, in which the timelines are never singular or settled.²³ Transformative writings of the premodern era, with their clear self-expression intention, their direct affection and identification with the original text, find their counterparts in fan fiction in contemporary popular culture, in which fans write from their affection and desire of self-expression.

“Internet Literature” and the Revival of the Folk Tradition?

At the turn of the 21st century, a certain type of writing suddenly gained popularity in China. This so-called “internet literature” comes from new media and seemingly sets itself apart from all previous literary writings. Early critics of internet literature even treat it as a new genre. Ouyang Youquan (2004), for example, claims that internet literature is lighthearted, not serious, interspersed with a special style of online chatting language, often builds on an existing text, and uses parody as a major creation method. Two of the most famous examples of internet literature around 2000 are: Jiang Nan’s 江南 *There They Were* 此间的少年, and Jin Hezai’s 今何在 *Biography of Wukong* 悟空传. Similar to many other Chinese writings first published online, these two novels were later taken to the traditional print media, partly due to their incredible online popularity. They are very different in style and in theme, but both of them are built upon works written by others with a large, already-established readership, or fans in a sense.

²³ In traditional Marvel and DC comic books, the storyline, the life experience of the protagonists would change constantly from author to author.

Jin Hezai's *Biography of Wukong* is roughly based on the traditional Chinese vernacular novel, *Journey to the West* 西游记, and some other details are directly taken from a 1994 slapstick comedy and cult film, *A Chinese Odyssey* 大话西游, extremely popular during the late 1990s in Mainland China. In this novel, Jin Hezai retells the story of Tang Sanzang, who journeys to India for Buddhist scriptures, accompanied by his three apprentices, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Heshang, while altering the personality of each character. For example, Sun Wukong remains a rebellious soul that refuses to compromise from beginning to the end, even though he has lost his memory of his glorious past. Jin responds to the desires of fans, who are dissatisfied with his compromise with the gods and Buddha in the latter half of *Journey to the West*. On the other hand, the unexpected and tremendous popularity of *A Chinese Odyssey* series in Mainland China can be viewed as the first tide of fan fad on the Chinese internet, especially among college students, which is another important cultural element of the novel's popularity. These two films were never officially imported or screened in Mainland China, and they circulated among their fans mainly through pirated VCDs and unofficial small-scale screenings. Through this process, these two films enjoyed cult status among Chinese young people for several years after the films were made. The cult following of the films was phenomenal, in which imitation of the language style or even specific quotes became memes that remain popular today. There are a couple of characters (especially female characters) taken from the films in Jin Hezai's story. Moreover, the pervasive existence of fan imitations created a special reception context for Jin Hezai's novel, which further inserts itself into the collective fan activity of rewriting and recreation.

Jiang Nan's novel, however, takes the heroes and heroines from Jin Yong's popular martial arts novels and puts them into an alternative universe of a contemporary Chinese

university campus, a university called “Bianjing University” 汴京大学, based on the university that Jiang Nan himself attended, Peking University. While in Jin Yong’s original stories, these characters are involved in saving the whole nation or defending justice, in Jiang Nan’s story, these young heroes and heroines do nothing but live a mundane everyday life in the contemporary campus, where young people fall in love but are constantly thwarted for various reasons. These two novels, among many works of internet literature, are often seen as the most representative and of the best written internet literature around the turn of the century.

Though quickly challenged, various early Chinese critics of internet literature drew conclusions about “internet literature” as a whole through consideration of only a handful of popular writings in the early 2000s. Ouyang Youquan, for example, raises a number of characteristics of internet literature, including lack of seriousness, the usage of new words that are only seen online, a direct resemblance with folk literature, and instant interaction between readers and writers, etc. One of them is parody of an already written work, which directly refers to the works such as *Biography of Wukong* and *There They Were*. This definition of internet literature has long been questioned. Because most critics of this period are outsiders to internet culture, their observations of internet literature can only focus on the most phenomenal writings, or those that spread most easily in the general public, such as jokes and short anecdotes. With critics getting more familiar with online literary writing, and with online writing growing astoundingly diversified and commodified, “internet literature” is no longer understood as a separate genre, but the extension of the popular literature in a different medium, with a lower barrier to entry and freer writing style. While transformative writings took a prominent proportion of early internet literature, they have largely retreated from general public’s attention partly due to more organized and standardized fan communities, as well as intellectual property

enforcement. Novels like *Biography of Wukong* and *There They Were* opened up the age of popular internet literature and soon migrated into the mainstream; this same elevation process does not seem possible to repeat now or in the future. Though Jin Hezai does not have to worry about copyright issues, since the identity of *Journey to the West*'s author is under debate and dates back five centuries, Jiang Nan's case was risky. He did not really encounter legal trouble, though there are rumors that Jin Yong was very unhappy that his characters were appropriated by another author for profit.²⁴ The rumors further suggest that as an old writer Jin Yong chose to show some generosity towards an emerging writer, and clearly announced that Jiang Nan's novel can exist in print media due only to his mercy.

Why were such novels so popular and representative of the internet literature back then? I personally would argue that the comparative ease of basing one's work on another with an already established fame and readership does enable emerging amateur writers to present themselves even without perfect writing skills, and connect to an established readership more easily. As a result, such works stand out when the samples of internet literature are still limited, and when the participants on the internet are small in number.

Fan fiction, which from the beginning of Chinese internet literature has been a major component of internet writing, has long been hiding in the margins. The impossibility of publication further restricts it from migrating permanently into the mainstream. Rare cases of publications do exist, in which authors may choose to alter the identity, names and other personal details of the characters and shift the settings; therefore, the story may take on the look of an originally created story. But then, the published version of the story is no longer strictly fan

²⁴ See Xia Qi's news report for Jin Yong's attitude. Jin Yong did not name the author who profited from his characters, but he expressed his upset towards Jiang Nan's novel.

fiction, for one of the most important aspects of fan fiction is lost. It is interesting to see that many recent young authors of internet literature, for example, a very well recognized young author with the pseudonym Ma Boyong 马伯庸, actually made his fame first in fandoms.²⁵ It was not in a fandom for mainstream literature, but Japanese ACG fandom, largely unknown to people outside the subculture. Because of the awkward position of fandoms, authors' activities before they become famous in the mainstream writing scene remain largely unknown. This condition makes fan fiction a site for improving writing techniques or facilitating literacy for younger children, but at the same time, many ideas, thoughts, assumptions that circulate in comparatively small communities, are able to enter mainstream literature and culture through these authors.

The phenomenon of fan fiction, from a certain perspective, can be seen as a recurrence of the premodern folk tradition of collective creation, with each participant engaging in the process of telling the same stories in their respective way. The anonymity of popular trends in the community, the repeatedly clichés, conventions, and the somewhat equalized relationship among various retellings, all show the possibility for an internet folk tradition. However, the commercial power of the rights holder and the ever present existence of the canonical original text, set this culture apart from the premodern practice.

Transformative writings in all of the historical backgrounds that I mentioned above have clearly displayed a desire to change the original text. And the desire often originates from one's affection towards the original text, as well as one's dissatisfaction with the original text. Such dissatisfaction might be presented through parodic disruption of the original text on an

²⁵ Ma Boyong was a famous fan fiction writer of *Legend of Galactic Heroes* before he started to write original novels. His fan fiction could still be found in his fiction archive on Jinjiang Literature under the pseudonym "Mali o."

ideological level, or more subtle revisions to justify a character, or a thorough reworking of the structure, aiming for a coherent value system. The major difference that the modern and contemporary writers of the May Fourth tradition (represented by authors such as Shi Zhecun) presents in their writings is their comparative lack of identification towards the original text and characters. This sets this tradition apart from the premodern folk tradition and the contemporary online fan fiction writing, which both emphasize affection. The community value of fan fiction is more pronounced since the current fan communities' practices are directly observable online. Yet folk tradition itself suggests a community and collective identity is present in the text. In many ways, contemporary fan fiction based on popular literature or media, is the newest avatar of the long transformative writing tradition in Chinese literature (and I would claim, world literature); it is never completely new or unique, and it could be seen as a reprisal of a premodern folk tradition. As I will further show in the following chapters, such connection does not deem fan fiction as uncreative or banal, but suggests a completely new way to look at intertextuality, literary practices and the meaning of readership for literature.

CHAPTER 2.

GENRE LITERATURE, FANDOM AND THE GLOBAL COMMUNICATION TIDE: NOVOLAND AND PHENOMENA RELATED

The so-called “internet literature” in China developed from casual writings, storytellings and gossips that netizens exchanged online. From the first day of Chinese language internet community, fandoms are an irreplaceable player in shaping and developing internet literature. To deal with Chinese online fandom, there are at least three relationships to examine: between traditional paper media and the internet, between foreign influence and domestic reaction, between authors and readers. As I have already shown in the previous chapter, the divides between these factors are fluid and conditional. This chapter will mainly use a case study: a Chinese fantasy creation system named Novoland (*Jiuzhou* 九州) as an example to show the dynamic interaction and convergence of the various powers in the contemporary popular cultural scene. All three relationships above clearly present in the texts and the extratextual relationships of this fantasy system, presented as cultural hybridity, instant communication of the internet age, and the diminishing boundary between authors and readers. Yet the current “internet literature” does not present a significant break with the previous popular literary production in China, nor does it single out as the only cultural form that receives the blow of globalization and information age. Cultural productions in various media, including in the traditional print media equally has adapted to coexist with the internet media. Internet literature is less of a new phase for literary production than for consumption. Literary production is directly and already in an intertextual network of reference and influence, which is blatantly visible in the internet age, when the identity of author and reader switches instantly during the production and accepting process. Literary creations in print media can still be examined as itself, independent from the

internet environment, but it will be more helpful and informative if we put them back into this dazzling cultural environment, especially fandom.

Jiuzhou (the English title *Novoland* 九州) is a set of fantasy system developed by a group of writers. There are seven launchers of the system, Jiang Nan 江南, Jin Hezai 今何在, Pan Haitian 潘海天, Zhan An 斩鞍, Shui Pao 水泡, Shakespace 遥控, and Duo Shi 多事, usually titled as “the seven celestial gods” 七天神. Most of them gained their fames around the turn of the century as first generation internet literature writers in China, especially Jiang Nan, known for his university campus love story *There They Were* (*Cijian de shaonian* 此间的少年) and Jin Hezai, known for his 2000 novel, *Biography of Wukong* (*Wukong zhuan* 悟空传). Some others, such as Pan Haitian 潘海天 had already achieved his fame and received awards in science fiction writing. But none of them were professional writers.²⁶ The fantasy system has been advertised as the “China’s true fantasy of its own,” and attracted numerous young readers, especially college and high school students, starting from the early 2000s. One advertisement of it says: “*The Lord of the Rings* is gradually diminishing; numerous *Xuanhuan* stories are making their debut. But when *Novoland* appears on the stage, none of them can compete with its glorious! (*Mojie jian yin, xuanhuan fan chen, jiuzhou yi chu, shui yu zhengfeng* 魔戒渐隐，玄幻泛陈。九州一出，谁与争锋。)” It does grab its context and its effect at its initial stage of development: *Novoland* has received direct influence from the Western fantasy—or, more accurately, post-20th century Western “high fantasy” with the emphasis on complete and independent worldview building. Then, out of the various *xuanhuan* novels that hardly deserve a second look, *Novoland*

²⁶ Many of them became professional authors afterward. One of them, Jiang Nan, was the author that received the most royalty from publication in China in 2014. The route from internet writer to professional writers presents to be a very successful one in China.

succeeded in creating a complicated and intriguing worldview to attract the audience, especially around the year 2004 and 2005. Although I do not necessarily think Novoland is the most successful fantasy system or group of fantasy fiction in China, it provides an interesting case for the researchers to understand the current online community and online literary creation in China.

What is Fantasy Anyway?

The main case I examine in this chapter is a fantasy system and writings in China. But what is fantasy anyway? This word does not have a fixed translation in Chinese; the connotation of both English and Chinese word for this idea is unfixed. In other words, if we randomly choose a couple of scholar writings on fantasy, very possibly they target two completely different bodies of works; they could be discussing Lewis Carroll, Jorge Borges, Italo Calvino or J. K. Rowling, or a random combination of several of them above. The issue with fantasy is: as a genre, it is seldom categorized by its internal textual characteristics (as Tzvetan Todorov does in his definition of the genre “fantastic”), but extratextual knowledge—whether the story contains anything incompatible with the real-life logic/natural rules. Similar to the case for “fan fiction,” the criterion of “fantasy” is straightforward in theory, but in practice, hard to decide, because distinctions between “reality” and “fantasy” are directly contingent to the cultural environment. For example, a certain degree of artistic manipulation of martial art scenes in Chinese language films will not be considered “fantasy,” even though many body movements are far beyond both physical rules and human body’s extremes. Whether certain fictional works are fantasy or not, depends highly on the reception history, much more than the “probability” it really has.

Currently “fantasy” is treated as a genre, which comes side-by-side with science fiction, and is often ostracized from the “literature” bookshelf in a mainstream bookstore. Contemporary

fantasy is deeply influenced by the high fantasy subgenre that started around the mid-20th Century. By “high fantasy,” I am referring to the fantasy fiction set in an imaginary secondary world that is separate from the real world, that has complete geographic, historical settings, and that have an epic storyline. This tradition was arguably the start of contemporary fantasy writings (for example, fiction by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis), but for their Western readers at least, it fits into the long history of fantastic writings. The crucial figure in modern fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien, with his grand secondary world building of the Middle-Earth, presented to the readers a deep and sophisticated cultural construction. One of his motivations is to write a myth and epic for the Anglo-Saxons (*240 Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*). His main themes and character prototypes come from various traditions and cultures, most evidently, Norse myth of elves, dwarves, the Nibelungen’s ring, and several references to magical swords and weapons in Icelandic Saga, etc. All of these attempts successfully remove Tolkien’s world from the more recent tradition, and back to the Medieval. His writings mold contemporary reader’s perception and expectation for “fantasy” as a genre literature. The “fantasy” I am dealing with in this chapter is more-or-less the fantasy shelf in an American bookstore, but they fit so differently in a Chinese literary scene. Then I will investigate this cultural distinction and some reasons behind it.

The “fantasy” tradition in the West is a retrospective construction. As “fantasy” does not have a strict definition, while all admit that fantasy tradition is something that the modern people inherited from the literary tradition, but most pre-modern fantasy works were never considered “fantasy” in their own time. “Myth” and “epics,” for example, are considered fantasy in a broad definition, even though they were never invented to serve a similar function of modern day

fantasy fiction.²⁷ Todorov's discussion is very clear: he defines fantastic through textual features of the genre, as a state of hesitation, "a break in the acknowledged order, an interruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality" (26). Therefore, only the state of hesitation between a natural and a supernatural explanation is a state of fantastic. His examples are mainly from Gothic literature and horror. Even though the definition he gives fit into many of the "fantasy" writings, high fantasy should be placed under his category of "marvelous" that "achieves the impossible union, proposing readers believe without really believing" (83). Strictly speaking, Todorov's "fantastic" and the "fantasy" in the current daily conversation barely overlap. Yet his definition tends to focus more on distinguishing subgenres by their detailed plot structure inside fantastic literature than distinguishing the fantastic literature from the rest.

Rosemary Jackson does not give a clear definition for "fantasy." While tracing the fantasy tradition back to ancient myths, her main discussion focuses on the post-Romanticism fantasy, including Gothic novels, fantastic realism, Victorian fantasies to the 20th century fantasy, represented by figures such as Kafka and Calvino. By using Freudian psychoanalysis, she argues that fantasy is a genre that brings in the consideration of the repressed and the hidden social unconscious; the pervasive idea of "double" and "mirror image" also clearly links to the idea of self-identity and signification. We may notice that her interest generally falls outside the commonly acknowledged popular writings, most of which she suggests are close to the mainstream dominant ideology, making the unrepresented and repressed aspect of humanity into total "others," therefore do not qualify her description of a "subversive genre." She further suggests that except this "faery" fiction represented by high fantasy, the fantasy genre is

²⁷ See Dubois as an example. While he argues that myths deal with the relationship "between mythic, fantasy and daily life stories, illustrated as a triangular spectrum," his definition of "fantasy" is extremely vague. His definition makes myths fantasy, if one expand the idea of fantasy to the "everything that deals with supernatural beings."

intrinsically irrelevant to the nostalgic expressions. She implicitly suggests that there are two types of fantasy, a subversive one, and a dominant one, which is popular, regressive, backward facing and close to the mainstream ideology.

J. Timothy Bagwell's definition for fantasy puts it in the binary with science fiction, a common couple in the popular genre literature area. He claims that fantasy as a genre developed almost simultaneously with science fiction. The distinction between these two types of writings becomes the definition for "fantasy." The semiotics of "realism" is a driving force in backwardly determine the definition of "fantasy," as well as drawing a distinction between science fiction and fantasy, even though the purity of genres has always been a false idea (Bagwell, 39-42). While science fiction has a clear starting point in the history, fantasy does not, because it is always pushing the lineage backward, even though earlier works were never labeled so when they were created.

As we examine these three definitions, we find that each scholar has a different set of "fantasy/fantastic" works in mind, but only Todorov's definition is based on textual characteristics, the other two concern more about the literary and genre history. All of them point to the blurry boundary—no matter between genres or subgenres—and the complexity inside the genre. The retrospectively constructed history and its current popularity in the market make fantasy an impossible genre to ignore, but also, an impossible genre to be really serious of.

Things get only more complicated in China, where the English word does not find a simple equivalent. The most common translation for the word "fantasy" in China as a generic term is "*qihuan* 奇幻," and it is the most commonly used generic term, with an extremely short and controversial history. This word was invented by translators in the 1990s, when works of Western fantasy literature, such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Dragon Lancer* series were translated

and introduced into the whole Sinophone area. This word originally refers specifically to high fantasy produced in the West, so the phrase “Western fantasy (*xifang qihuan* 西方奇幻),” soon became so widely used that it is now often directly referred to by its abbreviation “*xiqi* 西奇.” In other words, “*qihuan*” has a much restrictive connotation than “fantasy,” both culturally and temporarily: it strictly refers to stories with fantastic imaginary traits of (mostly) contemporary Western fantasy writings.

Modern Western high fantasy has a special tone and means of presenting magical elements, including but not limited to a magic system that resembles physical system, an often epic secondary worldview, etc., can now be identified and imitated in Chinese fantasy writings. This situation put the traditional Chinese literary works with fantastic elements into a strange position: It is definitely not the *qihuan* basing on the criteria of Western fantasy, and it does not have a clear lineage in the current literary context. After the word *qihuan* becomes popular on a daily life basis, sometimes some traditional Chinese fiction is tagged as “fantasy,” especially in the case of film or TV adaptations, even though this word is only retrospectively applicable to these traditional fictional works.²⁸ The categorization and terminology for popular literary production are still a mess, but I notice that the closer the discussion is to the popular media (television drama, blockbuster movies), the closer the terminology usage is to the Western popular media. Even though many Western fantasy fictional works are also retrospectively attributed, a cross-cultural identification makes Chinese “fantasy” films and books even more awkward.

²⁸ *Monster Hunt* (*Zhuo yao ji* 捉妖记 2005) was a mainland Chinese produced film blockbuster in Summer 2015. The story was set vaguely in ancient China, with supernatural beings. It was publicized as a “qi huan” film. For example, the weibo account for the film has a short sentence of self introduction, calling itself a “fantasy hilarious blockbuster” 奇幻爆笑巨制. See the account page “Dianying zhuo yao ji” 电影捉妖记 (Monster Hunt the Movie).

If we trace the fever on fantasy in the Chinese market, we can clearly perceive the influence of Western fantasy literature and films imported to China during the turn of the century, which created a fad out of nowhere. There have been some fictional works labeled in the Euro-American market as “fantasy” translated and introduced to the Chinese audiences, but none of them really made a phenomenon, until around 2000, when the translation of *Harry Potter* became a hit in Chinese book market, and in 2002, when both *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* appeared on the film screens in China. The emerging fandom on fantasy is, on the one hand, the free expression of imagination in the internet age, but on the other hand, largely a reaction towards the invasion of the Western fantasy tradition.

This fad on fantasy accompanied a self-defensive separation from the children-oriented “fairy stories” from the past. Fantasy fans attempted to gain legitimacy in producing and consuming writings irrelevant to the reality. For them, the usually assumed “children’s literature” has to be separated from this newly acquired genre. The children’s literature tradition in the Western fantasy genre was once overlooked in the Chinese reception. At the same time, because one of the most influential fantasy works imported is *The Lord of the Rings*, “Western fantasy” in current Chinese usage is often directly linked to the high fantasy tradition, without even mentioning the well-read children’s book like *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Although such writings do exist in Chinese literature prior to this Western influence (for example, multiple Martial Art novels have secondary world setting), they are also overlooked. The Chinese fictional works often raised to compare with “Western fantasy” are quite limited. The novel about a Chinese monk’s journey to India, which is also epic in scale but humorous and folk tale in style, *Journey to the West* is often referred to as the contrast to many imported fantasy novels. But however important this novel is, it cannot represent all Chinese novels with

fantastic elements. As a result, the word “*qihuan*” has a much smaller connotation than “fantasy.”

While similar retrospective categorization of a “*qihuan*” tradition does not seem to be happening in China—the situation may more of the result of the messy translations for this word and genre than of a different cultural and literary history, readers and the market swiftly respond to the imported Western fantasy tradition by revision on genre categorization, even though mostly locally and sporadically. Secondary world-building—a world created with its own history, language, geography and language—is especially eye-opening for Chinese readers at the early 2000s. Indeed, traditional Chinese novels, which depict a journey in a faraway land, for example, *Journey to the West*, finished in Ming from folk storytelling, and *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jing hua yuan* 镜花缘, 1800), created by Li Ruzhen 李汝珍 (1765-1830), often have the tradition of depicting exotic nations and peoples. But they differ from modern Western high fantasy (and the Chinese imitations) because high fantasy usually refuse ironies and direct allusions toward the real life. Secondary world is then seen as a characteristic of “fantasy,” even though many earlier Martial Arts Novels created in the first half of the 20th Century share this trait.

Literature with supernatural elements has been a part of Chinese literary tradition, dated back to pre-modern legend and folklore collections. Several categories contain such stories. Lu Xun’s canonic works on Chinese fiction gives a basic guideline of genre division in ancient Chinese literature, half retrospectively. He primarily divides Chinese *xiaoshuo* written in literary Chinese into three categories: *Zhiren* (records of people 志人), *Zhiguai* and *Chuanqi* (see *Zhongguo Xiaoshuo Shilue*). *Zhiguai* (records of the strange things 志怪) is the tradition of recording weird events, legends, heresy and celebrities’ anecdotes that have connections to

supernatural beings, dated back to East Jin Dynasty (317-420 C.E.). *Chuanqi* (tales of extraordinary), are longer stories about supernatural and extraordinary heroes and their legendary deeds written in literary Chinese, from the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.). Another tradition in vernacular novels is usually titled *shenmo* (神魔, stories about deities and deamons), lengthy storytelling or novels that tells stories about celestial beings. Chen Pingyuan suggests categorization of fiction in ancient China was never strictly defined. According to the type of storytelling methods (for example, *chuanqi* stories vs. colloquial storytelling performance), the genre categories also differ. Genres in the traditional types of writings tend to depend on detailed themes, such as Three Kingdom stories; the issue of reality vs. imagination, realism vs. fantasy was never the important aspect in Chinese narrative literature. Before the creation of Chinese fantasy in today's definition, the literary texts with fantastic elements are never considered belonging to one specific genre.

A closely associated genre: martial arts fiction sustains the imaginary tradition in Chinese literary history throughout the 20th Century. Martial art fiction is often considered as a pure domestic popular genre that is often traced back thematically to the historical writings as Sima Qian's 司马迁 *Shiji* 史记 (Hamm, 12). Most martial arts novels contain supernatural elements, including secret manuals of martial arts, or certain types of supernatural power like walking/flying in the air, otherworldly beasts, drugs and healing techniques beyond any modern scientific explanations, etc., all of which are clichés in martial arts literature genre. These elements make martial arts fiction meet some criteria for Western fantasy, but in most cases, they are not considered as “*qihuan*,” because most of them have clear historical references, so concrete that the supernatural and the historical come to a perfect mixture. A 1920s martial art fiction –often viewed as the earliest—*Jianghu Qixia Zhuan* 江湖奇侠传, written by *Buxiaosheng*

不肖生, tells a historical event in Qing Dynasty with highly unrealistic supernatural abilities. *Huanzhu Louzhu's* 还珠楼主 *Shushan Jianxia Zhuan* 蜀山剑侠传 has a setting and plotline much closer to Western high fantasy, because its setting is almost a secondary world without frequent reference to real historical events. Traditionally, there was not a separate “fantasy” genre outside the martial art novels; the supernatural elements are almost a default in martial arts fiction. Moreover, martial arts fiction share with high fantasy (“faery literature” as termed by Jackson) a deep nostalgia for a pre-modern, pre-industrial world. Most martial art fiction take place in a specific moment in Chinese history, but the physical location is less important than a metaphorical symbolic location of “*jianghu*” (Rivers and Lakes), an idealized secondary society outside the mundane world, with its own sets of value judgment and logic, “the complex of inns, highways and waterways, deserted temples, bandits’ lairs, and stretches of wilderness at the geographic and moral margins of settled society” (Hamm, 17). If examined in this way, martial arts fiction do take place outside the real world, even though this secondary world is parallel to and depends on the real historical world. In sum, secondary world building is often taken as the key characteristics of Western fantasy by the late 20th Century Chinese readers to distinguish from a Chinese tradition. Yet such distinction is very problematic.

Such view, even though represent a type of imagination towards Chinese “fantasy,” also only localized around a certain population and readership. Many others translate “fantasy” differently: a similar word, *xuanhuan* 玄幻, invented by a Hong Kong author, Huang Yi 黄易 for imaginary fictional works created by meditation, is often seen as a Chinese counterpart for “*qihuan*.”²⁹ Some people use this word to translate “fantasy.” But in the mainstream market,

²⁹ Qidian Literature, for example, named these two genres as “Eastern *xuanhuan*” and “Epic and *qihuan*,” the latter implying that *qihuan* is Western, since Han Chinese do not have an epic.

Xuanhuan usually refers to stories with supernatural elements, that origins in China, and stylishly and thematically differ from Western fantasy. In a bookstore, *Xuanhuan* is often juxtaposed and combined with martial arts fiction, but usually not retrospectively categorized (which means, while new Martial Art fiction is often also categorized as *Xuanhuan*, earlier ones are not. With the rapid development of commercial online fictional reading websites (such as *Qidian*) *Xuanhuan* also broadly refers to those long online novels with some supernatural elements, and with lower literary quality, even exclusively refer to something published on *Qidian*,³⁰ with a stereotype of stories badly but quickly written, supposed to be consumed instantly and discarded, with a somewhat secondary world setting, and target majorly male readership.

Another similar word *mohuan* 魔幻 is often used in pure “high literature” area as the translation of “magical realism” 魔幻现实主义, referring specifically to magical realist fiction, represented by Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who was immensely influential and popular in mainland China back in the 1980s. With contemporary Chinese writers making constant contribution to magical realism (represented by Nobel Prize winner, Mo Yan), this word also has entered the vocabulary of Chinese criticism in other area, including but not limited to pre-modern Chinese supernatural themes. However, strictly speaking, the word for *mohuan* in English is “magical,” not “fantasy.” Yet it is also a common translation for “fantasy,” especially in the first several years after the fantasy fad started in China, and especially for Western fantasy with a medieval and magical background. This word bears with it the touch of high art, very different from *qihuan* and *xuanhuan*.

³⁰ Qidian Literature 起点中文网 is a professional literature website, famous for its genre novels and its pay to read system. Because writers on professional internet literature websites usually need to publish at least 3000 characters per day, the quality of writing is not always as good as what one would expect in a literary journal. As a result, “stories on Qidian” is sometimes a derogative term for those writings that lack literary esteem, and written only to meet certain desires of the readers.

Although all three words share one character *huan* and each claims to be a translation/counterpart for “fantasy”, they represent three different time spots and three different sets of understanding. Because the terminology has settled neither in the book market nor in academia, any standardization attempt would be futile. Intricate differences exist among these three words, and most notably, on the cultural origin embedded in the words. *Qihuan* is overall Western and foreign, though not inclusive; *Xuanhuan* is Chinese, but often with low cultural esteem and low literary value; *Mohuan* is, in a way, culturally neutral, but not entirely relevant to this category. But they are used sometimes interchangeably in popular media. While choosing “*Qihuan*” as the Chinese translation for “fantasy” does signal a stance in understanding Chinese fantasy as a genre that emphasizes the influence that 20th Century popular fantasy from abroad on China.

“Genre” as a literary idea is never clearly defined in the Chinese context. As Chen Pingyuan introduces, the idea of “*leixing* 类型,” the common translation for the English word “genre,” can serve as the translation for a variety of ideas, such as class, category, kind and species (*Xiaoshuoshi* 129). With such context, the idea of “genre” still needs definition if one needs to discuss on this issue. Yet to simplify the situation, at least in the literary and media market today, “genre literature” and “genre films” are considered to be opposition to “high literature” and “art house films” suggesting especially the market and commercial aspect of the word “genre.” In the case of “fantasy” specifically, the generic terms created around the imported genre and its application in Chinese background, suggest that the close relationship between the term and commercial publication. Some of the particular genres such as “detective fiction,” “science fiction,” “romance (here refers only to the female-oriented genre consists mainly of melodramatic love stories),” and the more indigenous “Martial Arts novels,” have long

been in the daily language and in the market. But overall, identification of fiction genre has not been in place until very recently. Actually, the tentative definition and categorization of “fantasy” back in the turn of the 20th and the 21st century was one of the earliest cases in Chinese literary market to create and sell a genre.

So what does the word “*qihuan*” really mean for *Novoland*? What is the “Chineseness” in *Novoland* that tells it apart from its Western counterpart? What does this genre speak to the global flow of popular literature and media? I will go to some details in this writing system.

High Fantasy, *Novoland* and the Re-imagination of “Chineseness”

The current understanding of “fantasy” in China is based on the dialogue among at least three types of writings: current Chinese fantasy writings, pre-modern Chinese works with supernatural elements, and the Western high fantasy. J. R. R. Tolkien’s role model is only too obvious for his Chinese imitators to go back to the mythology age in China. Tolkien famously brings the Norse elves, who were already turned to small-scaled fairies in Shakespeare’s play, back to their tall, glorious and noble images as in Norse mythology. This is also a process of move backward beyond the folk tradition in the nearer past and links the secondary world building with the far ancient past, especially the ancient past that in some ways have more or less disappeared in one’s own cultural environment in the modern age. Tolkien’s writing emphasizes the power of literary and folk tradition, through his famous metaphor of “the caldron of story,” which “has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty” (“On Faerie-Stories” 52). By this metaphor he suggests that writers should take benefit from and make benefit to the elements created and accumulated by their predecessors, including especially the folk tradition and source material.

There has not been a comprehensive theorist as Tolkien in Chinese fantasy genre, yet the same logic is in practice. Whether they are titled “*Qihuan*” or “*Xuanhuan*,” different from most ancient Chinese writings on supernatural beings, the current Chinese fantasy relies less on the current folklores and folk religion or tradition that are still in practice, such as the folk tales of reincarnation, fox and flower spirits, and beautiful female ghosts, but more on older and remoter myths and legends that are no longer circulated in the medium of folk culture. Such legends that reside “elsewhere” in time and space are often considered more “highbrow” and “classic” because of their remoteness and their connection with the more ancient Chinese tradition, such as the monsters only seen in *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing 山海经)*—a book of mythic geography dated back to the 4th century BC—or images borrowed from *Chuci*. For example, Xiao Ding’s 萧鼎 *Zhuxian 诛仙*, a best-selling *Xuanhuan*, the legendary celestial beasts find their place usually not in such popular writings, but often as allusions in traditional poetry, etc³¹

On the one hand, Chinese fantasy imitates the Western fantasy’s tendency of going back to the myths, especially the genesis myths of each nation. On the other hand, with the unusual success of Western fantasy at the beginning of the 21st Century, such stories affirm the Chinese self-identity facing the foreign fantasy literature, through the attempt of symbolically elevating the supernatural elements in Chinese literary traditions through incorporating the far ancient myths and legends, instead of the often considered superstitious folk religion. I cannot say that these Chinese fantasy writers do this with the purpose of self-elevation in mind, yet I argue such

³¹ In *Zhuxian*, there are various mythical beasts recorded in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, for example, *taotie* 饕餮 and *kuiniu* 夔牛.

a distance that the writers draw from their novel and the daily lives does achieve a nostalgia much more intense and glorified than the other way would be.

Novoland, which self-claims to be an example of “true Chinese fantasy,” is very different from typical *xuanhuan* fiction because it presents traces of significant influence from Western fantasy. This is not the first time for Chinese popular writers to do so. Martial art fiction writers as Gu Long 古龙, for example, already takes the writing style and themes of Western detective fiction in many of his serialized novels, such as Chu Liuxiang series and Lu Xiaofeng series. Both male characters play the role of a charismatic detective who encounter various mysteries in their journey and solve them through their intelligence. Huang Yi’s *Xunqin Ji* 寻秦记 (1994), freely utilized science fiction clichés to tell a story of time travel (this novel is loosely categorized as Martial Arts Novel and arguably started a trope in internet fiction called “stud fiction,” in which the male protagonist, serving as the projection for male readers, keeps multiple female sexual partners). While the influence from the Western detective story tradition is mainly thematic and linguistic in Gu Long’s novels, Western influence manifests itself in more concrete forms of imagery and settings in Novoland.

In the Novoland system, the whole universe is set as a whole alternative universe with its own history, geography and culture. Although the idea of secondary universe is very old, *Novoland* is clearly taking from Western high fantasy, especially from *Lord of the Rings* and novels with Dungeons and Dragon system as the background, such as *Dragon Lance* series.³² Several detailed settings bare the mark of certain signature features of standard Western commercial fantasy. For example, the blonde, tall, slender and beautiful race of “feathered

³² Novoland once claimed that it wants to be the Dungeon and Dragons system in China, and it did start a set of rules for role play games, but without much success.

people,” who are especially good at ranged weapons, is clearly taken from the setting of elves in Western fantasy—dwelling in houses on the trees, with their culture comparatively secluded from the outside world, and have an unusually long life comparing to human beings; the fishtailed race living in the sea has an obvious connection with the mermaid legend in the Western culture, even though similar stories about “Jiaoren” 蛟人 who cries tears into pearls are also available in traditional Chinese legend; the setting of “Heluo” 河洛, takes from the dwarves in the Germanic myth through Western fantasy system, are short and stout, miners and craftsmen who have the best handcraft in the world, and who also live a secluded life away from all other people. The authors give the settings a Chinese switch from time to time, for example, the feathered people, though very similar to the elves in Western fantasy, have a very similar dynasty system with the human world. Generally, the history lines of the this world follows clearly the paradigm of the Medieval Chinese empire, including ten subsequent dynasties in the central human world, with rich lands and wealth, and dozens of tribes of nomad people in the north suffering from cold weather, who also was able to conquer and establish dynasties in the central area. With also the usage of traditional Chinese poetry in the stories, including many composed by the authors themselves, Novoland novels in many ways approaches Jin Yong 金庸 styled martial arts novels in presenting the culture of a historical period comprehensively through literature. From all the details above, we are able to find that Novoland is a cultural hybrid product, and in many ways, borrows elements from both Chinese and Western traditions. The original launchers of this fantasy system claimed that they were attempting to build up a “Chinese Dungeons and Dragons” system. Of course, the DnD system itself is a Western invention. One has to admit that however Chinese it is attempting, there is still the ambiguous presence of Western influence.

The interesting aspect of the Novoland setting is that the launchers of this system seem to interpret all the “non-Chinese” elements as “fantasy,” especially the strictly defined racial identities, which is previously not a major component in Chinese literature with imaginary elements. But ironically, these elements are also not necessarily the component for Western fantasy. I am not trying to claim for a truly “indigenous and pure” Chinese fantasy. I do not think such thing is necessary, neither do I think it is possible today’s context, considering that the “fantasy” in the context of today’s China is never able to return to the premodern Chinese *shenmo* fiction such as *Journey to the West* 西游记 or the *zhiguai* vignettes, which does not support an elaborate plot development. We can safely claim that even the fantasy in the Western literary context is also an ambiguous and culturally suspicious existence, with the tradition of Norse, Celts, Greek, Roman and Christian traditions totally mixed together into a cultural pastiche, while still expressing the same type of good vs. evil dichotomy and a sense of nostalgia. The cultural choice of Novoland is a very typical local nostalgic approach as the reaction towards the expanding global popular culture. These secondary worlds built in contemporary fantasy have pre-modern elements that link directly to a pastoral legendary and comparative innocent past of certain culture. It is not an obvious celebration of a culture’s heritage or history, but through a thorough reconstruction of an ideal past—according to the contemporary understanding—that literary has never existed before. Since such past has nothing to do with reality, variations are permitted. Such nostalgia also leads to the obsession with details as the authors write the stories, and as the readers consume the text. The longing for a pastoral past and a more clearly defined mode of war and struggle makes the genre of fantasy an ideal choice for the contemporary popular writers, which is still happening world-widely. Is the cultural hybridity

of Novoland an intentional choice? I suggest this hybridity is inevitable. But I also suggest that it does not interfere with the expression of the nostalgic approach towards an ideal old China.

Quasi-Fan Fiction Community: *Novoland* as a Participatory Cultural Community

Novoland does not only provide us with an interesting example of transcultural literary influence and indigenous reaction, it also presents a case for participatory literary community in the internet age. Novoland and writings based on the system is a quasi-fan fiction community. It is stuck in between an author-centered hierarchical system and a flat platform of equal participatory culture. While active participation and interactivity from fans is crucial for its success, the official Novoland narrative still need its fans to pass an entrance to achieve effective participation. In many ways, Novoland shows in negative ways how a fan community establishes and sustains. Even though there are good stories and a detailed setting that potentially supports many epic stories and characters, the writing system is almost always in the middle between moneymaking and idealist dream of quality writing and an “authentic” Chinese fantasy system. It represents an interesting attempt in creating a new type of writing and communication in the internet age, but it is not sustainable.

The idea of Novoland system first started as an online activity of a literature forum, Qingyun 清韵, inviting several writers to write the same story back in 2002. The most original version of the Novoland world as a Chinese styled fantasy system is finished in April 2003, with the establishment of the forum of Novoland its own.³³ Much discussions and debates concerning the world setting were done online and discussions are still going on. The Novoland stories

³³ With the writing community gradually falling apart, the original Novoland forum <<http://bbs.9zfun.com/>> is no longer in operation.

printed on paper media first started in other magazines, such as *Fantasy World* (*Qihuan shijie* 奇幻世界) and the Fantasy issues of *Science Fiction World* (*Kehuan shijie qihuan ban* 科幻世界奇幻版). In 2005, three of the seven key figures of Novoland project, Jiang Nan, Jin Hezai and Pan Haitian started their own magazine named *Jiuzhou huanxiang* (Novoland Fantasy 九州幻想), in which the authors serialize their fiction. Also from 2005, several finished pieces of fiction, including the first two volumes of Jiang Nan's novel *Eagle Flag* (*Piaomiao lu* 缥缈录), Jin Hezai's novel *Legend of the Feather* (*Yu chuanshuo* 羽传说), and Zhan An's *The Princess from the Plateau* (*Zhuyan ji* 朱颜记) were published. After a tour in universities in 2005, Novoland became a fad in China, majorly in Chinese universities. Because most writers involved were not significantly older than their readers when the project started, their communication with readers was (and still in some sense, is) smooth and pleasant. Most of them had already established fame as internet literature writers, with an advantage over writers who only publish on traditional print media. With the grand and complicated story structure they presented in front of their fans, and also through their image of dream seekers, that were clearly presented online and in their earlier writings, they were successful in attracting new fans and new writers. However, the fad on Novoland does not last for too long.

The creation system of Novoland is supposed to be a collective process. The seven original "Heaven Gods," i.e. the seven original internet writers that launched the system, design the basic geography, history, population, races, magic and religion systems. To fill in the blank of the rough structure of a historical chronology, each Heaven God picks a historical period, write fiction to add in details in the history of the Novoland. They also invite other writers to write inside the same worldview framework, especially the ones that have already established their

fame in writing in the genre of fantasy.³⁴ As the time develops, talented young writers, who are often at the same time the first group of Novoland fans, were absorbed into the writing group as “Minor Heaven Gods.” It is also worth noting that the selection of new writers majorly relies on real personal networks and connections. For example, students in Peking University established a “Novoland” discussion board on the official Peking University BBS, BDWM, in 2005.³⁵ Since its establishment, at least ten active participants and amateurish writers on this discussion board wrote long or short stories for the magazine, not as participants from internet (which are more restricted to writing smaller vignettes), but as writers invited by the editorial board and would take charge of depicting some major historical events.³⁶ Some of them are still regular authors for Novoland. The phenomenon of friends writing together and exchanging stories is hardly new. But it is never a sustainable commercial successful mode of creation, which Novoland attempts to be. Actually, both editorial boards of the two current Novoland magazines have encountered multiple times of financial crisis, and were driven to the verge of closing down completely. This probably is the situation faced by many Chinese magazines, but it also shows the difficulty for the Novoland to sustain its attractiveness after all these years.

Besides the newly invited young writers or writers who did not participate in the Novoland project previously, the magazines also hold events, put up a topic, often the basic setting for a particular plant, animal, character, or legend on the forum or in the magazine, and ask readers to participate in writing short stories about the topic in order to make the Novoland world more

³⁴ For instance, writers as Ning Caishen 宁财神, Shu Feilian 舒飞廉, Qitong Ren 骑桶人, etc. were not inside the fixed writers’ group for Novoland, but they were all invited to write stories for certain volumes of the magazine.

³⁵ BDWM BBS 北大未名 BBS is the official broadcasting board system of Peking University. Registration is restricted to people with IP addresses inside Peking University campus.

³⁶ Mo Yusheng 莫雨笙, Yan Ran, Su Lixian 苏离弦, Gongzi Mu 公子木, among others were all once frequenters of the Novoland discussion board of BDWM BBS. They all wrote stories for Novoland. Yan Ran was even given the “Duan Dynasty” history to elaborate on. This information is acquired through personal conversation and knowledge.

vivid.³⁷ Yet seldom do ordinary readers participate in deciding the major events in the Novoland history. In fact, people that have this power are very limited. According to a younger author, Yan Ran 燕然, who I know personally, writing for Novoland is not always a pleasant experience because of the strict restriction on settings. Even though she is of the young writers who are privileged to be able to complement Novoland's major narrative through her imagination, she still feels restrictions. She said, "Those characters are not mine. I have to write characters whose entire history is already decided by other people. That can be very frustrating. (personal conversation)" What is interesting here is, though at the first glance, the creation system is the same situation with fan fiction creation, where writers take a character that are designed or written by other people and appropriate in their own way, the situations differ fundamentally. Fan fiction usually takes a well-designed and well-described character that readers already fall in love with, not a character with a very rough setting on personality and personal history, but has very detailed and strict setting on his/her role in the social and historical context. Fan fiction authors often have already fallen in love with the characters that they write fiction, they write fan fiction in order to remedy the aspects that they do not enjoy, or the less explored aspects of the personality that they want to show. In other words, a lovable character and interesting plot should come before any intervention from the fans to start fan production. But this is not the case with the Novoland writing system, for which lovable characters and intriguing storylines have to be filled in by the new writers. They come to a completely new and unfamiliar set of characters.

As we can see my description of the Novoland creation style, the Novoland system relies highly on continuous production of good writings on the Novoland themes. With such a massive scene to describe, and with the problem to have enough content to fill up one issue every month,

³⁷ Because the online forum is closed now, most online activities by the ordinary readers are no longer retrievable.

ultimately, it is about having a strong and supporting fandom and devoted fans, who are not only willing to buy the magazines, but also ready to participate in all the activities and writing assignments. While on the other side of the story, we see that fans are nomads, they do not linger upon a place only for a piece of unfinished story without new updates, just as a fandom on a TV series can be sustained only if it is still serializing.³⁸ This is another thing that the fan fiction writing community shares with this quasi-fan fiction community. If their favorite materials are no longer available to them on a regular basis, they will definitely migrate to other fandoms, making Novoland another abandoned dream from the teenager years. So here we come to the question, what exactly do Novoland fans really love? In order to sustain such a fandom, what do they expect? And for these questions, I suggest that Novoland system is lack of a powerful original text to attract readers.

For such a loosely connected texts and setting, Novoland needs a strong and concrete text to attract enough readers to sustain its development. Because it is lack of such a “main text,” it also differs from cross media storytelling systems such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or even the Dungeons and Dragon system (which is also a major target of imitation for *Novoland*). Dungeons and Dragon system is special in that it is partly sustained by a set of rules for role play games, which sometimes backwardly support the production of fictional texts based on the setting. But the Novoland gaming system is still very rudimentary, while some attempts have been made to produce an online gaming system, the idea did not seem to work well in the current Chinese market of gaming, which is totally different from the ages when the majority of RPG was done on a tabletop. If we consider some of the best written and the most prominent and attractive novels such as Jiang Nan’s *Eagle Flag*, are the stars that attract the most readers and

³⁸ See Chapter 1 of Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers*.

attention. Their frequent update can guarantee fans' interest and attention like a serializing TV show. But these writers are not completely reliable in their speed. Actually, signature quotes from *Eagle Flag*, such as "The iron armours are still here (*Tiejia yiran zai* 铁甲依然在)," sometimes are treated as the representative of the whole Novoland writing system. Until when I am writing the dissertation, during occasions that fans express their unchanged love for Novoland, they would chant this sentence. The idealistic Novoland writers do not self-identify as the writers of low-brow genre fiction who keeps writing several hundreds of words to sustain the serializing story in the earlier period, nor are they the writers on Qidian website (which is one of the largest center of Chinese genre fiction online, and a popular literary website that now have developed a system to make money out of online browsing) that produce exploitative material in a speed of 5000 characters per day: they still concern highly about the quality, even though they are still comparatively slow and easily distracted. If the star writers are not reliable, then the magazine and websites now relies on the number of people writing. But then, the new texts produced by other writers, no matter whether they are established fantasy writers from elsewhere, new writers that are promoted from the fans of the first generation, or fans who are interested in writing their own stories to contribute in the whole picture, may not always meet fans' standard. The differences between fan texts and professional / commercial writings are clear: while the atmosphere in a fandom is generally supportive and tolerant towards poor writings of new writers, tacitly agreeing that the new writers need more time to practice and mature, but such tolerance is seldom offered from professional authors and publications, especially if the publication is supposed to be part of the story canon. Actually, because the "star" writers and novels in the whole Novoland system is so famous and attractive, that many

fans care little about other texts in the same system and therefore easily migrate to other fandoms with the “star” novels coming out so slow.

According to Matt Hills, cult texts share three “family resemblance,” including: auteurism, endless deferred narrative and hyperdiegesis. By hyperdiegesis, he means “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension (*Fan Cultures* 137).” This characteristic is part of the reason for many science fiction and fantasy narratives—especially high fantasy—gain their large amount of cultish followers. What the fans are in love with is not necessarily the story itself, but the fact that the story is only a segment of a whole beautiful and enticing world. If we simply look at several novels in the Novoland system, for example, *Eagle Flag*, they very much fit into the criteria. *Eagle Flag* is generally a bildungsroman of two future emperor and king of two peoples. The author Jiang Nan, however, refers frequently to the “historians of the later age” to create a sense of tragedy and historical heaviness, and this strategy does work well. But however good *Eagle Flag* as a fantasy novel is, I have to point out that the realism of the world in the hyperdiegesis cannot be sustained by a skeleton of brief events and characters’ names. On the other hand, the process of creation is too exposed during the whole process of creation, therefore the “hyperdiegesis” is no longer concluded from the details from a fictional text, but a set of information that pre-exist the novels, which will definitely affect the experience in the reading process. So the interest in several texts does not necessarily leads to the interest towards all the texts written under the same setting. By this example, we can clearly see that for such a cult text that emphasizes the integrity and completeness of the world building, the general issue involved in the Novoland writing

community is the difficulty to immerse in if the settings are not concrete and comprehensive enough.

The creation system of Novoland resembles, in a large degree, a fandom, in which people take elements freely based on a core setting decided by other people, and then use it to write his/her own stories. Even though readers may grow in love with some of the new authors, they were originally attracted into this writing system by the old “Heavenly Gods” writings. However, as Henry Jenkins describes using Michel de Certeau’s terms, fan fiction creation is mostly likable to a process of “poaching,” of freely taking use of elements that are useful to the readers (*Textual Poachers*). Yet in the case of Novoland, the “poaching” process is highly restricted and monitored by the “original authors” who dominates one level higher on the hierarchy of the literary creation. If fan fiction creation is a process of cultural re-appropriation and recirculation in the gaps and fractures of the original media products, then a writing process in Novoland system is a restricted creation process of inventing a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that exactly fit a certain blank on a picture. For this reason, authors writing under this literary system are very restricted in their own imagination and choices, and the stories that they write are for this reason, do not accord to or resemble with regular fan fiction.

The major problem of the Novoland system is that this system requires a grand and unchangeable narrative, while the creation process is intrinsically incompatible with it. Taking a piece of setting to elaborate into a narration is totally a different process from fan fiction creation, which usually involves a process that a fan first reads and gets familiar with the text, read into the intentional or unintentional details laid out by the author, then out of the desire to better the story, or to fill in the “gaps” in the plot, they create stories of their own. Fans are free to alter even some of the basic settings in the original story if they want. But if the only available

material is a rough draft of a worldview setting, there is not too much information to start with. And more detrimental to the situation is that one does not really have the power to determine what he/she wants to write. One of the main characteristics of fan fiction creation is that different types of re-creation and retelling of one single original story does not interfere with each other. In other words, different fan creations usually treat each other as “alternative universe” in which characters develop in different possibilities.

Fan Community, Gossip Community

The writers and the fandom of *Novoland* took an unexpected turn as the popularity for this system decreases: what appear most attractive towards fans are no longer the stories, nor the setting, nor the characters, but the drama among writers involved in this project. The consumption process shifted completely away from the epic grand historical narrative of *Novoland*, but real-life gossip texts. The *Novoland* community turns from a group that gathered because of the shared reading experience towards a community that gathered around gossips and shared memory of *Novoland*'s development through these years, a space of affect that celebrates the experience and feelings towards a group of people and texts.

The editorial board of *Novoland* split in 2007, one located in Beijing, which started a new magazine named *Record of Novoland* (*Jiuzhouzhi* 九州志), and the other in Shanghai, keeping the original magazine of *Novoland Fantasy*. The two editorial boards both shifted and changed since then, but one thing doesn't change: ever since the split, the two editorial boards have been in an age long quarrel online, blaming each other of betrayal. This quarrel started with the two representative figures of both sides, Jiang Nan and Jin Hezai. So far as I know, this quarrel has never updated into a legal issue (though both of them have threatened to suit each other), yet it

continues year after year. As Jin Hezai once terms the quarrel, “I spank my kid in the New Year break; I have time to spare, so why not? (*Guonian da haizi, xianzhe ye shi xianzhe*. 过年打孩子, 闲着也是闲着.) (See Jin Hezai’s discussion thread on Douban).” This gossip becomes metaphorically a case of domestic violence, so mild that do not need outside intervention, or a domestic dispute that constantly displays in the public. Fans and strangers alike can observe as bystanders and feed on gossips from it. This split and quarrel event develops itself into a plot convention of young friends growing into enemies. In the internet age, especially when the slash tradition is deeply rooted in the fan community, this incident soon turned into a huge entertainment event and a spectacle. How attractive this spectacle is? A frustrated fan once exclaims, “You two weirdoes have made your own coupling more popular than any coupling based on your own fiction! Nowadays there are more people like the Jiang Nan / Jin Hezai coupling than people who read *Novoland!*” (See Bajipaopao for a repost of this famous complaint). This event has taken the place of the readings, becoming the main target of fannish consumption.

The fan products based on this incident all fall under the category of RPS (real person slash), which refers to the slash fiction (female created and female oriented fan fiction with two or more male characters and have homoerotic descriptions) that takes use of characters and events from real lives. RPS of all types has been a phenomenon for a while on the internet, but one basic ethic for RPS writing is to hide the stories at least from the real people involved. The participants who are supposed to be “Heavenly Gods” are netizens not too many years older than the fans. The mode in which they communicate with the fans are not too much different from communication between regular netizens. As a result, people do not really care whether the two protagonists see how they consume this incident, even though “keep the RPS away from people

involved!” is a basic ethical discipline for slash community. In this case, the RPS community is directly in the public view, not even try to stay away from people’s attention. The relationship between the two editorial boards and between the two authors is reinterpreted as a love-hate homoerotic relationship with an evitable tragic ending. This interpretation becomes so popular that fan fiction, fan videos and fan songs are created based on it. For example, a piece of real person slash fiction based on these two writers, titled *Yet the Love Is Never Spoken* 只是爱未讲, takes the biographical information of the two authors and elaborate on it, integrating the materials into a fictional and sentimental love story with a sad ending (Wuheikuangxueyuan). The story is published online, and on one of the largest bases for Chinese *danmei* writings, *Jinjiang Literature*, which is an obvious choice for any *danmei* writers. But Jiang Nan has his own forum on *Jinjiang*, surprisingly or not surprisingly: the fans and authors of the incident do belong to the same community.

A widespread fan song, performed by Qianye Liuli 千夜琉璃 and Dayu Fensi 大宇粉丝, titled “*Jiang Nan Jin Hezai* 江南今何在,” is another famous piece of fan product based on these two writers (See the song and the lyric in Ranjinyiguan’s video). The lyric writer of the song, Xiaohongdichang 小红低唱 take a Japanese song “Thousand Year Rainbow” of a Tibetan female singer, Alan, who went to Japan for career development from China. Just as many other fan singers do, they take the melody, put in new lyrics, perform, record and distribute it through the internet. The lyrics are very well written. With stylized and poetic lyrics such as “The old-time Novoland is nowhere to be found (The penname “Jin Hezai” literarily means “nowhere to be found,” therefore a pun here), the rivers and mountains all fall into solitude tonight, (*Xiri jiu Zhou jin he zai, Jiangshan ci ye ren liaoluo* 昔日九州今何在, 江山此夜任寥落),” exclaims a love that never returns and a now scattered old day dream shared by both people. By the

reference of Jin Hezai's name, this line clearly is uttered by Jiang Nan. The lyric author also cleverly use the words in their online quarrel in the lyric, such as Jin Hezai's word for Jiang Nan, "I just don't like you Jiang Nan's tone like a woman with a changeable nature! (*Wo jiushi kan bu guan ni zhe shuixingyanghua de jiangnan diaodiao* 我就是看不惯你这水性杨花的江南调调!)”³⁹ This sentence is hard to translate with puns and heavy allusions, and it is then turned into a lyric of "Changeable is the Jiangnan tone (*Shuixing yanghua jiangnan diao* 水性杨花江南调)." The word "*shuixing yanghua*" refers to two changeable objects and is usually used to describe women with loose morals. The word choice here is quite interesting with the background of the queer subtext that fans enjoy.

Making this scene more interesting, the two singers of this fan song are two women. For this reason, another fan take use of this song and make a fan video, remixing film clips taken from period films—especially *wuxia* films—played by two famous actresses Brigitte Lin and Maggie Chang (see the video "Jiang Nan Jin Hezai," originally posted on Youku by Wuyudaozhuren). In this immensely popular video, the video maker makes the two actresses play the role of Jiang Nan and Jin Hezai, acting out their actions metaphorically (i.e. drinking wine, talking and laughing with each other in the first, to kissing and caressing later, to wielding swords toward each other at the end) and then let the female singers in the song to speak in the voice of Jiang and Jin. The involvement of the two actresses not only introduces a transgender play, but at the same time implicitly refers to *Novoland's* heritage from martial arts novels and films; it also echoes with the stylistic lyric that reads at least very similar to literary Chinese. The

³⁹ This sentence can be found in the thread of "spanking kid." Fans that observed this quarrel took the sexual connotation of the phrase "changeable (*shuixingyanghua* 水性杨花)" and interprets this quarrel into domestic fights between former sexual partners. The lyric writer clearly uses the same idea.

transgender play transfers a story with male homoerotic connotation towards a story with female homoerotic connotation. The setting in an unknown past goes with the Novoland setting of a secondary world with medieval Chinese flavor. This fan video plays with the genre distinctions and it plays also with the gender roles. Implicitly, it also points to the entertainment nature of such incident, and suggests that all these quarrels and debates are intrinsically more of a performance following certain conventional plot, from which all participants and bystanders are able to benefit from.

But in the case of Jiang Nan and Jin Hezai quarrel, fans never seem to mind the presence of these two writers when they make explicit jokes about possible homoerotic bonding between the two writers. In the thread that Jiang Nan and Jin Hezai quarrel, many fans publicly reply “Hey, why bother quarreling in front of people? Why don’t you two just simply get a divorce?” or “Till today, do you still hold fast to your shared dream? The case of you two can be concluded in one phrase: Divorce with a Chinese characteristic.”⁴⁰ In fact the two authors involved in the incident seem do not mind such words; sometimes they seem to act according to the expectation of the audience, speaking with words that are easily interpreted with homoerotic meanings. Partly it should be out of the fact that the carnival environment is able to instigate all people involved in the community to participate in the collective celebration. But on the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility that these two commercial writers are using this incident to attract more potential spectators and fans. Such incident, which fits perfectly well into a plot convention of *danmei* stories, becomes the substitute text for the Novoland fans.

⁴⁰ See Bi’anxiaoshengmo 彼岸箫声莫 and Xiemei yixiao 邪靛一笑’s replies in Jin Hezai’s thread, “Da guonian da haizi, xianzhe yeshi xianzhe.”

One reason for such carnival is the structure of this particular writing community: from the beginning, Novoland was designed to be a set of products that can be easily commented and critiqued by ordinary readers. With low entrance criteria and high enthusiasm to participate, the hierarchy between the authors and readers are largely downplayed, even though not totally diminished. The still existing centers, the “Heaven Gods” and major writers, together with the “grand narrative” they have written to this world, play the role of drawing the fans together, but not regulating them. The more and more broken down internet world also guaranteed its happening. On the other hand, the flattened network-like connection among people in the social network websites as in Facebook, and in this case, Chinese sites as *Douban* 豆瓣 and *Sina Weibo* 新浪微博, guaranteed a communication that is on the one hand fragmented, but on the other hand collective. That is to say, the fan community in this case plays the role of a center of gossip, a site to freely and comfortably talk about anything that fans are interested in, or using the term I mentioned at the beginning of the section, “space of affection.”

In many ways this “splitting up” event bears a much clearer hallmark of internet age than the literary productions of Novoland. The texts being consumed and recycled are no longer only the strict “text” but the whole discourse of the community. The creativity expressed from the fan products they produce, fan fiction, fan video, fan songs and others also tend to blur the boundary among media. All these fan products add into the community experience and creates the identification for all the readers. In many ways, internet literature, or any internet cultural activity cannot be only viewed by itself, but in combination with the social cultural and media context. As the case of Novoland, the literary creation can also be viewed as entertainments inside a community, for the community, and by the community. This shows that this event is closer to the structure and experience of a fandom in the internet age, which is based on free

imagination, collective gossiping experience, much more than the writing communities in the control of a top-down model. And another tricky fact here is that homoerotic elements do not present in the official Novoland stories (even though they also present in fans' writings), the entertainment case of public quarrel is highly attractive and entertaining mainly because of the homoerotic undertone and subtext presented before the fans' eyes.

The Novoland writing community and its literary products represents an interesting case of genre literature in the age of internet and the age of globalization. The fantasy genre is just one case in which how the contemporary readers and writers redefine the older literary tradition. The most interesting aspect of this case is: in the dualism between the Western influence and the indigenous tradition, between the commercial and the fans' voluntary works, between the top-down model of producers' control and the equal mode of fans' free participation in the production and circulation in the writing community, the Novoland is in an ambivalent middle ground and sometimes go to both extremes.

Between Western influence and indigenous tradition, Novoland's setting generally reimagines the definition of "fantasy" and "China." Many genre literature creations in Chinese literature present a similar pattern of Western influence plus domestic reaction and imitation with the elements taken from the domestic literary tradition. My observation is that Novoland is labeling everything absent from traditional Chinese literature and tradition but present in their setting as "fantasy." This may not accord to the definition for the genre in English, and may go against the other attempt of fantasy writing in Chinese. However, this hybrid mode of imagination is totally logical, understandable and even representative in the current global trend of literary and popular cultural influence.

Between commercial benefits and voluntary fans' work, Novoland system seems to be benefiting from both area, but the main problem for such strategy is that the real fandom of Novoland that create secondary creation is totally separated from the official fandom organized by the editorial boards for helping creating the "canon" of the universe. I suggest that the ultimate reason lies in the recognition for the true "cult texts" that fans fall with. Though the setting of Novoland is grandiose and elaborate and intriguing, fans cannot be drawn to the setting without a well-written primary canon text. In other words, while the editorial boards and the launching "Heavenly Gods" suppose that fans are attracted to the setting, the fans are actually attracted to more elaborated texts with full and vivid character descriptions.

Concerning the dualism between the mode of top-down designation and the relationship between equal fans in a fandom, Novoland is also in an ambiguous position. Because fans and the newly invited writers do have freedom of a degree of what they can read and write from the settings and the primary texts, they are not completely fall under a top-down model of officially designated fandom. Plus, Novoland editorial boards do not have a direct control on the mode of fans' readings and writings; usually seen strategies like the ban on slash material on the original stories does not ever present in this community. Actually because the fans are intrinsically in the same community with the authors and the authors also have the access to all the forums and materials with the fans, fans do not hide their secondary creation from the original authors. But this smooth relationship between fans and authors do not assist the condition of secondary creation, not because that authors ban fan creation, but because the primary sources does not publish in a regular base.

I have pointed out the reason why it is intrinsically not a fandom and while still highly determined by the existence of a large quantity of followers. But the issue may be out of the

generally barely surviving condition for Chinese magazines in the printing venue, or just because of the bad timing that Novoland decided to enter the market of, for example, online gaming and board game designing. Too many factors are in play for the Novoland system, but still, the writing community that is so similar with a fandom but inherently different; this factor is playing the major role in determining the current condition for this writing system: a difficulty position in between fully participation mode and a top-down mode. In the next chapter, another fandom is going to be examined, and this time a real fandom, the Chinese fandom of a Japanese webcomic and *anime*.

CHAPTER 3.

BORDER CROSSING FAN CULTURE, IMAGINARY COMMUNITY AND NATIONALISM:

AXIS POWER: HETALIA AND ITS CHINESE FANDOM

In 2012, at the heat of the Sino-Japan conflict regarding the conflict of the Diaoyu Islands (钓鱼岛), a Chinese fangirl, with the pseudonym “Shimiao 史喵,” created a fan comic that she published on the Chinese SNS site Sina Weibo, with characters borrowed from *Axis Powers: Hetalia* to tell a story of the Japanese attempting to take this island away from China, while the Chinese character reclaims it with newly gained confidence (See Figure 3-1). This comic, however, soon ignited controversy online: while some fangirls celebrated it with full enthusiasm, others satirically remarked that the fan author was using Japanese media products to proclaim anti-Japan sentiments (see Shimiao’s original post on Sina Weibo for the original image, replies and reposts). One post read: “APH belongs to Kiku’s family, so just let it be with him. Don’t bother it with the politics.”

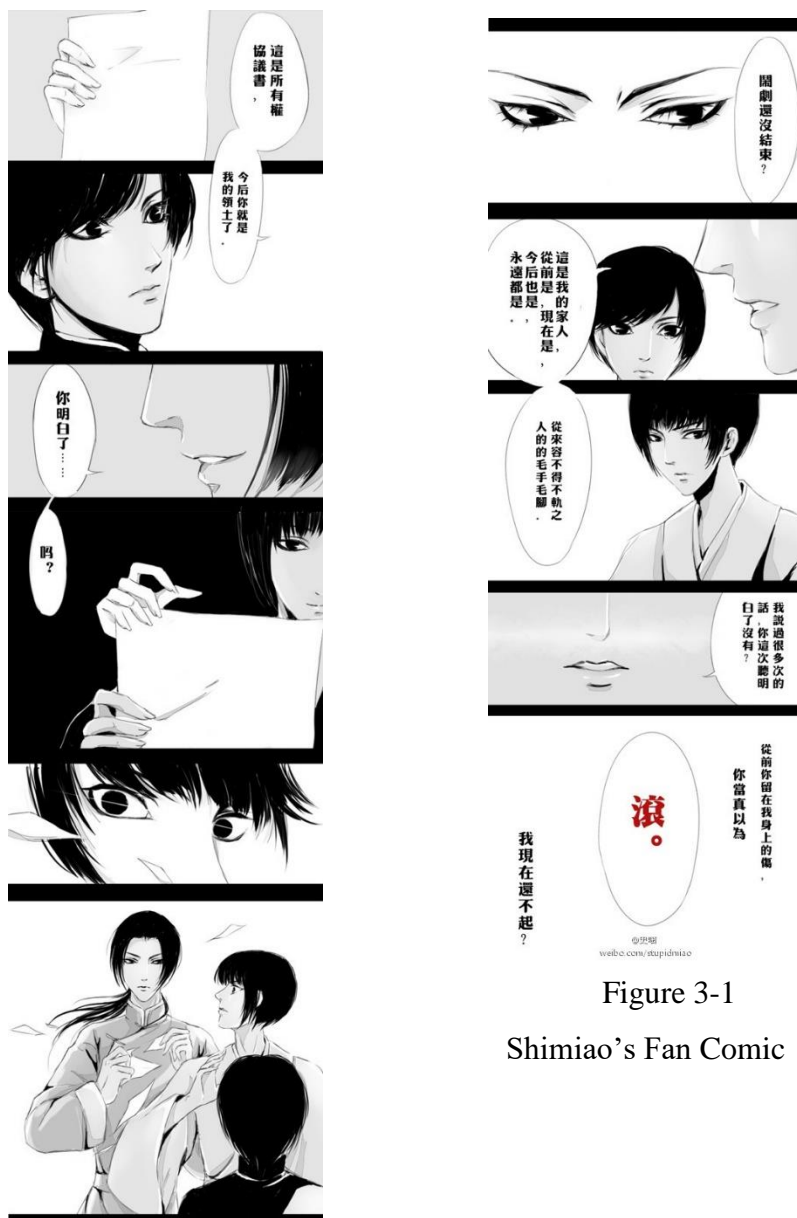


Figure 3-1
Shimiao's Fan Comic

This was not the first time that fans got into trouble while appropriating the *APH* setting to tell their own stories. The irony in taking use of this story often comes from the nationality of the author and the particular type of media form (*anime* is often seen as a pure Japanese property, which at least raise questions in East Asia). Another issue often involved in these debates, however, is the degree of mockery, jokes, and irony. The fundamental problem for this issue lies in a barrier that seemingly is impossible to trespass: the barrier between the “two dimensional

world” and the “three dimensional world.” Specifically, the barrier presents a broken dualism between the periphery and the center, the internet and paper media, subculture and mainstream, politics and entertainment, the male public and the female private. In many aspects, the existence of the *APH* fandom in China provides a curious case to challenge these actually nonexistent binaries. At the same time, it raises an important question of how and by whom the issue of political affiliation is negotiated and decided in fandoms, which is particularly acute with a Chinese fandom of a Japanese media product.

Axis Powers: Hetalia (*Axis Powers: ヘタリア*, referred to *APH* below) is a Japanese webcomic, later adapted into *manga* and *anime* by Himaruya Hidekazu 日丸屋秀和.⁴¹ *APH* consists of parodic descriptions of the world military and political history, especially of the World War II era, with vignettes about various countries’ culture; each character is an anthropomorphization of a country or geographic region. These anthropomorphized characters, different from the traditional fixed national personifications such as John Bull for Britain, Uncle Sam for America, and Marianna for France, are created by the author Himaruya himself, and according to the author’s intentions, they do not intend to carry any political significations. The anthropomorphized characters each has a name, usually a common name in this country. The number one major character of *Hetalia* is Italy; the title of the *anime* is a joke or sarcastic name for Italy in Japanese. “Heta (へた、へタ、下手),” meaning “poor, clumsy, awkward, ineptitude” in English, is combined with the Japanese transcription of “Italy,” “Itaria (イタリア).” This name satirizes the Italian army’s cowardness and incompetence during WWII. The other main characters are the other two axis countries in WWII, Japan and Germany, and five ally

⁴¹ See Himaruya’s personal blog *kitayume* for the list of his original web comic.

countries, US, UK, France, China and Russia. Some other countries and historical countries also appear as supporting characters.

APH is not a female-oriented *anime* in a traditional sense, but with its explicit queer baiting content, its narrative is clearly supposed to be female oriented; yet with its plot centered around world political and military history—traditionally a male domain—it does not repel the male audience either. However, with brutality and confrontation among historical states transformed into mild and half-joking personal conflicts, the historical narrative in *APH* is politically tamed. Much of the historical drama is turned into homosocial rivalry and camaraderie that intrigues fan appropriation. Because of such a tamed historical narrative, the lighthearted *APH* caters to a global fandom, even in those countries whose personifications are presented less likable, such as Russia.

The *anime* of *APH* was originally broadcasted online through video streaming websites such as YouTube. As the broadcasting started in 2008, it is one of the first *anime* series that uses the internet as the primary broadcasting venue. It created a huge fad in Japan, with more than 1.3 million copies of the original series of comics having been sold, and more than 150,000 DVD copies of DVDs from the first five of the series were sold. It has also been translated and imported to various countries, including the United States.

Similar to many recent Japanese TV animations, *APH* is widely circulated in Chinese fan communities basically through online video streaming websites and through non-copyrighted fansubbed video files. The original comics are also circulated in downloadable digital files. Similar to many other Japanese *anime*, *APH* inspires a large amount of fan creation, including fan fiction and fan video, and also cosplay shows. The *APH* fandom was such an influential phenomenon on the internet that people satirized it as a fandom whose participants are blindly

enthusiastic and willing to spend a fortune on any related merchandises, including *anime* DVDs, spin-off products such as fanzines, DIY costumes, in Chinese, a *shaduosu* 傻多速 fandom⁴². The popularity peaked around 2009 in China and declined afterwards. While there is always an in-fashion fandom, *APH* was a phenomenon. In the search engine of Chinese language fanzines, *tianchuangwang* 天窗网, there were 927 fanzines of *APH* produced during spring 2010, the most out of all fandoms, in contrast to other fandoms, most of which have fewer than 100 fanzines. Some of the most famous fan creations in Chinese speaking circles are *Be a Dragon* (*Weilong* 为龍), which I will examine in detail below, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Bainian gudu* 百年孤独), written by *Xun Yeyu* 荀夜羽.

In this chapter, I will mainly look at the serialized *anime APH* as a reinterpreted historical narrative given by a Japanese young author. Through the cross-cultural acceptance process for this *anime*, I argue that the nationalist discourse often manifests in popular cultural narratives, no matter how much the author (and the audience) avoid the political debates. Consequently, cross-cultural acceptance and reproduction turn the original popular cultural narrative a battleground between two different nationalist discourses. Having the postwar Japanese narrative of WWII and the relationship between the “East” and the “West” as a background, this parodic media product translates political events into a database of clichés and stereotypes, with an intentional distance from the most polemical issues and an intense emphasis on social cultural stereotypes of various countries and international relationships. Dominated by the nationalist imagination and logic, the plot of *APH* is far from its alleged neutral or non-political. At least a portion of

⁴² So-called “*shaduosu*” 傻多速 is an abbreviation of the three phrase “*rensha, qianduo, sulai*” 人傻, 钱多, 速来, meaning “stupid people, affluent money, come quickly (to make some money)!” This is a slang in Chinese fandom, usually used to satirize those fandoms whose fan products are prolific but without good quality.

Chinese *APH* fans experience a shared frustration of using a semiotic system based on a Japanese historical narrative, then create fan productions with the Chinese nationalist narrative, falling into another set of conventions and clichés. *APH* and its fandom transgress the imagined “dimensional shield” for multiple times, further challenging the assumption that entertainment is divorced from politics. It would be too optimistic to assume that the global flow of media products and fan culture would lead to a completely transnational identity of a fan or an *otaku* without a cultural or national background. The dimensional shield generally functions as a means of self-protection for Chinese *otaku* community to defend their love for foreign texts, yet it might well serve to legitimize a relatively inhibited nationalistic sentiments, assuming that it would not cross the shield and serve the national state in the real politics.

Cultural Politics and Japanese Historical Narrative

“Popular culture is political” might be self-evident for scholars in Cultural Studies, even though it might not be in the common knowledge for fans. For a cultural product as *APH*, the word “political” can even take its most traditional definition, something related to government and governmental policy, because of the problematic relationship that the Japanese government has with WWII history has been the central issue in Japan’s relationships with its neighbors, particularly China and Korea. The Japanese government is notorious for its unapologetic position towards the atrocities it brought to its Asian neighbors during the Second World War and its colonial history. While the historical narrative of WWII has ever haunted Japanese popular culture, including recurring motifs of the imperial Japanese navy in space opera *anime*, such as the the issue of invasion towards Asian countries is much less popular. Generally, nostalgia and longing for a pre-1945 Japan is usually ambiguously depoliticalized in post-War Japanese

popular culture. *APH*, however, directly presents the WWII history (though in a parodic way), and addresses the Asian battleground, adopting the popular historical narrative of post-war Japan.

Japanese society, according to Yoshikuni Igarashi, presented the Second World War in a self-victimized fashion. The sense of humiliation experienced by the Japanese people immediately after the war, because of the defeat and occupation of the US army, was gradually transferred by the economic miracle into a necessity for Japan's postwar success. In the 1960s, with the war gradually put behind into a social memory, the survival guilty and compulsory repetition of the humiliation was still largely visible in the literary works. Only in the 1970s did the Asian people as the victim of Japanese invasion finally enter Japanese people's understanding of WWII. The victimized bodies in the war shift from Japanese bodies to other Asian bodies under the Japanese army's invasion, and create certain unease for the Japanese society to face this history. The victim that Japanese society sees in itself is compatible with the whole narrative of WWII as a simple Japan vs. US binary.

Yumiko Iida links the breakdown of the "grand narrative" of the Cold War paradigm and the breaking of the Japanese bubble economy at the end of the 1980s to the serious social crisis in Japan. The social problems in the mid-1990s, including the emergence of neo-nationalism, which presents a revisionist attitude towards Japanese colonial history around WWII, the *Aum Shinrikyo* incident in 1994, as well as the notorious teenager murderer, who is referred to as *Shōnen A* in the media, as well as the emergence of moral crisis of young people in the society, all reflect the crisis of both personal and cultural identity in Japan as a whole. The neo-nationalism is presented not only in mass media, but also in the *otaku* subculture, such as in Yoshinori Kobayashi's manga *On War (Shin Gōmanism Sengen Special - Sensō Ron)* (1998-

2003), which pushed him into the forefront of left vs. rightwing dispute almost immediately. While the *otaku* culture has been traditionally viewed as pro-Right Wing, Kobayashi's involvement in such disputes is unprecedented and irregular.

Many historical revisionists' arguments, according to Iida, are based on the assumption that the current Japanese social problems come from the "masochism" related to admitting Japanese war crimes. Fujioka, for example, advocates a denial of the Japanese imperialist past, mainly because such a history has a harmful effect on the cultural identification for the younger generation in Japan. Moreover, he questions the reliability of Japanese war crimes mainly because the Tokyo trial at that time presents only the Western perspective of the war, which is unfair to Japan. The rest of the East, in other words, the Asian countries invaded by Japan, is never mentioned in this discourse (247, qtd. in Iida).

As a conclusion for the brief historical summary, I want to point out two traits in the representation of WWII in post-War Japanese narrative: first, the East and the West are interpreted as a dichotomy without possibility of reconciliation, with WWII a direct confrontation between these two forces; Japan is viewed as the representative of "the East" while other Asian countries do not have a place in this scene. Of course, the mythical East and West binary is largely a construct by the European colonialists back in the 19th century, yet it was widely accepted and adopted in East Asia in the process of modernization. Japan is no exception. All debates concerning historical revisionism and related issues are based on the two aforementioned assumptions, because under such historical narratives, the major conflict in the scene happens between the United States and Japan, with the former the powerful successor, the latter the defeated and the victim.

In *APH*, battlements in WWII are presented in a stylized, conventional, and repetitive way: The three axis countries rest on a beach at the foot of a high cliff; Japan and Germany are alert, looking at the camp fire, while Italy sleeps lightheartedly on the ground. Suddenly, the ally five appear at the top of the cliff. “Mr. Hero,” the US, makes a command to China. China jumps down, and with a Chinese wok, he beats Japan and Germany, while Italy eagerly waves a little white flag in the background. This sequence repeats more than four times in the first two seasons of the *anime*, with very slight changes in conversation, only to be followed by a hilarious interruption from someone totally irrelevant to the battle scene. Depictions of exact battlement scenes are deconstructed into a meaningless daily routine, which makes the basic historical background for the stories lose any significance. In fact, in order to show friendship and cooperation, war and hatred, *APH* develops a tamed euphemism for international relationships. “Cohabitation” means colonization, domination or occupation; “marriage” means coalition; “bully” means oppression. Violence in the modern international relationship is seldom clearly pronounced, but is presented in a hardly critical mode, turning this secondary world in the *anime* a harmonious and joyful environment. The characterization also suggests that *APH* could hardly cover the dynamic in between the first world and the third world. Even in the first five minutes into the *anime*, *APH* is highly Euro-centric: Euro-American countries, especially Italy, Germany, Britain, and America, are at the center of the stage; few African and Latin American characters ever appear. Most international conflicts and cultural interaction in *APH* happen solely between developed countries. Without African and Latin American characters, *APH* largely avoids the issue of Western colonization and slave trade, turning the history into a game between independent countries, especially European colonial powers. While I am not arguing that there is

some “must-speak” in international history narrative, such history narrative still appears hypocritical in that it avoids nearly all the darker sides of the history.

In *APH*, Japan seldom serves as the central figure, and its personality almost always demonstrates through its interaction with Euro-American countries. Its role clearly follows the narrative of the Japanese identity during the 20th century’s intellectual discussion. We see the attempt in this story to create for Japan a free autonomous and an environment of self-reliance. The Japan character, named Honda Kiku 本田菊 in *APH*, presents an ideal image of Japan in the common Japanese narrative. Concerning especially for the choice of the WWII background, *APH* pushes the Japanese identity back to the time before American occupation. (Though, however, the postwar history of being “forced” by the US to do various things also appears in the story, but the Japanese character generally acts upon his own will.) The Japanese character, though obviously received influence from the West, which could be told from his Western-styled military uniform: he acts upon his own free will to become Westernized and to become stronger. Comparing to a post-war Japanese identity, this Honda Kiku has a “pure” Japanese identity that is not contaminated by the American postwar occupation. Honda, who also has a grand narrative of the fixed identity and historical background, and who has a personality of being independent from the ones who influence him, is then not troubled by identity as the Japanese people in the 1990s experienced. The surname, Honda, besides being a popular one in Japan, also alludes to the representation of the Japan miracle directly after the WWII, i.e. Honda vehicles. On the other hand, Honda is the only Eastern character that has a close relationship with the West, and in one way, he serves as a representative of the East in communication with the West. Very similar to

the ways that Japan is depicted in the war-time propaganda of *Nihonjinron*, he is an in-between character that connects both and stands as an irregularity from both sides.⁴³

Strictly speaking, *APH* does not intentionally glorify the Japanese identity, nor does it aim for history revisionism. It keeps an intentional distance from a direct confrontation towards current international relationship issues, yet it shows a Japanese style of imagination and representation of the world history, culture and current political situations through an opposition between two cliques in WWII, and through the relationship that the Japan character establishes with others.

Concerning the Asian case, most attention is paid to East Asia, including Japan, Greater China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), and Korea. Korean netizens and government strongly protested against the image of the Korean character in *APH*, calling it a denigration (see news report on Anime News Network for details). Partly because of this reason, the importance of the interaction among Asian countries is further reduced. Japan, because of its earlier development and its relationship with the Euro-American countries, is more frequently put in a position of Eastern representative in interaction with the West. For example, the treaty between Japan and UK in the early 20th century is directly referred to in the narrative, even though the cultural differences between the two countries—especially the attitudes towards supernatural beings, rather than the political influence of the treaty—is the focus of the story. The colonial history of Japan is presented in *APH* through interactions between China and Japan in a tamed interpersonal love-hate relationship. The historical trauma between China and Japan is depicted

⁴³ *Nihonjinron* refers to a type of writings that stresses the uniqueness of the Japanese nation, culture and people, claiming that Japan is a unique, isolated nation with a language and culture completely different from both the rest of Asia and the West. Basically serving as expressions of cultural nationalism, *nihonjinron* was the war-time propaganda since the Russo-Japanese War and further in WWII. Similar writings were written after WWII to proclaim the Japanese postwar economy miracle.

through an emotionally intensified occasion in a web comic, in which the Japan character hurt the China character with a katana, leaving a deep scar on his back. The betrayal of the “little brother” and the scar it brings to China becomes an important motif that repeats in the Chinese *APH* fandom. But even without this episode, the complicated Sino-Japanese relationship is alluded to in various aspects, including the characterization of the China character.

While Himaruya denies any political intentions in *APH* by taming and circumventing most scandalous issues, characterizations that the stories are based upon are still mostly cultural stereotypes, including, for example, taciturn Japan, megalomaniac US, etc. Cultural stereotypes directly present solidified discrimination and global cultural hierarchies inherited from the colonial period, which still persist in the popular culture and media. One example in *APH* implicitly refers to the unpleasant history between Japan and China: all characters in the *anime* speak standard Japanese (dialect variations existing), with occasional utterance of their respective native languages; the only character that does not speak standard Japanese is the China character. Adding a mostly redundant “*aru*” (ある) at the end of most sentences he speaks, this trait presents the characteristics of a Creole language called “*kyowago*” (協和語) promoted by the Japanese colonial government in Manchuria during the 1930s and 1940s. Even though Japanese colonization is never directly mentioned, this linguistic trait implicitly alludes to this history. This stereotype appears frequently in Japanese *anime* and other art forms in presentation of Chinese characters or characters with Chinese heritage, combined with other stereotypes of the cheongsam and the double-bun hairstyle (consider, for example, the young girl character dressing in traditional red cheongsam in *manga Gintama* (2003-present), Kagura has

the habit of adding a redundant “*aru*” at the end of a sentence, too)⁴⁴. Yet, curiously enough, this linguistic trait is a forgotten history on the Chinese side, with most Chinese fans interpreting this linguistic trait as a simple personal language style.⁴⁵ Of course, interactions between the Chinese language and the Japanese language have a very complicated history. Some *kyowago* language traits do not directly derive from Japanese colonial occupation, yet this language was so engaged in the Japanese colonial history and its atrocity in WWII, that a connection is almost inevitable.

Although *APH* sets WWII as a basic historical background and divides the countries into two large groups to go with this setting, the war itself is serves merely a backdrop for each country character’s characterization and the complicated personal relationships among them. Even though sometimes the ruler or president of a certain country is mentioned as the “boss” or “supervisor” of a character from that country, in most cases, little (if any) moral judgment is passed. For example, Hitler is mentioned but in passing as a demanding and troublesome “boss” of Germany, and the tragedy of the Holocaust is never mentioned. The characters appear to be more of a part of a cultural nation rather than a political state (the latter being blame-worthy), even though the boundary in between is rather blurry and often transgressed. Asynchronous events are presented side by side with each other—nations are understood as essentialized and unchanged throughout the history, as, for example the national flag for China in the story

⁴⁴ *Gintama* is a serializing *shonen manga* (targeting young male audience) created by Sorachi Hideaki 空知英秋, which was first serialized in 2003 on *Shonen Jump*, and is still serialized to the point. The story is set in a science fiction version of late 1800s Japan, in which the Shogunate is a puppet government controlled by invading aliens. The character Kagura is an alien of a people named *yato*. *Yato* people’s dressing style is close to the stereotypical traditional Chinese clothing in Japan, but there is no direct connection between China and this alien people in the story.

⁴⁵ In Xun Yeyu’s fan fiction of *APH*, “One Hundred Years of Solitude,” Wang Yao constantly speaks with the redundant “*aru*,” which is transcribed into Chinese characters “阿鲁,” pronounced as “*alu*.” In one chapter of Xun Yeyu’s story, “New Continent, Old Gold Mountain,” Wang Yao speaks to Alfred, “Well, can I also sue you for illegal trespassing *alu*?” (*nage, wo keyi tongshi gao ni feifa chuangru ma alu?*) 那个，我可以同时告你非法闯入吗阿鲁？ The last two characters, “*alu*” is exactly treated as a meaningless habitual word.

belongs to the People's Republic, not the Nationalist government during WWII. Under such circumstances, these characters are further removed of any historical specificities, possessing instead a mythical national identity that remains static. On the other hand, the split between a lovable country character and a bossy boss deprives the characters from taking any responsibility for certain historical events, focusing instead on the abstract cultural aspect of international interactions. While each nation / geographic region is represented through the character of one singular personage, this personage, however lovable, is a collection of cultural stereotypes based on an outdated myth of national character. Furthermore, the mythical discourse of each country's national character is further based on a Japanese imagination, a perspective shaped by the Japanese historical narrative.

While I suggest that the way in which international politics and national identity identification presented in *APH* is problematic, I am not suggesting that audiences will necessarily be "brainwashed" by the ideas and ideology involved in the story--interpreting the audience's reaction towards a media product through textual analysis is counterproductive. Still, fans are highly restricted by the framework already laid out by the original product in their secondary creation. John Fiske famously points out that polysemic texts in the popular realm encounter a battle of power and resistance in the receiving end of popular media. He also suggests that "to be popular, the commodities of the cultural industries must not only be polysemic,... they must be distributed by media whose modes of consumption are equally open and flexible" (*Understanding Popular Culture* 125). In other words, popular media is supposed to be open to interpretations and reproductions, in ways not always dominated by the producers. He suggests that consumers of popular culture and media have three different forms of fan productivity: semiotic, enunciative, and textual ("The Cultural Economy of Fandom"). The

starting point of productivity starts from semiotic production: making meaning in the intrapersonal level. Fiske's discussion on meaning production at the receiving end, and even Dick Hebdige before him, places a dichotomy between the mainstream and subculture, but also at the same time, a dichotomy between commercial culture and subculture. Fiske especially defines fan culture as a "sematic warfare" between the dominant official reading and fans of various disempowered communities. Meanwhile, Cornel Sandvoss questions the universality for such a paradigm: "whether the pleasure of fandom are indeed *necessarily* constructed in opposition to the dominant power system, and, secondly, whether such pleasures work to erode or sustain power relations in society" (*Fans* 14). At the same time, he pushes Fiske's argument into an extreme by suggesting fan texts are usually "nerosemic," by which he means "the semiotic condition in which a text allows for so many divergent readings that, intersubjectively, it does not have any meaning at all" (*Fans* 126). While I do agree with the polysemic nature of commercially produced texts and signs in its receiving end, it is problematic to extend such conclusions to any signs circulated in popular culture.

The example of *APH* and many similar cases in popular media recently shows the complicated relationship between a widely acceptable icon and subversive use. I agree with Sandvoss that having the freedom of interpretation does not equal being oppositional to the mainstream, while being non-mainstream does not guarantee an effort for the disempowered. In other words, while audiences are able to make their own interpretations and reproductions with mainstream signs, they do not necessarily benefit the disempowered. In this case in particular, we have to ask: What is mainstream at all? Then who are the marginal? While the historical narratives and icons are inherently polysemic, if we consider the fact that such narratives differ

from state to state, they are also positioned in a power structure of cultures and states, ruled by a Eurocentric logic that still prevalent in global media.

My example here is not necessarily about the binary between the dominant and the opposition, but rather, a much more complicated process of reading, reading with disagreement, and how should the word “mainstream” be reconsidered in a transnational background. At the same time, the older metaphor of “textual poaching,” raised by de Certeau, and elaborated by Jenkins, does not fully register the situation in a new media based and setting based narrative structure of *APH*. *APH* provides not a grand narrative, but numerous “small narratives,” with a grand structure and background setting as the true “original narrative” to be based on. While the absence of a grand narrative seemingly limits the amount of ideological information involved in the original text, the polysemic popular “icons” such as Fiske’s example of Madonna do not necessarily allow easy and unlimited free reinterpretation.

APH* Fandom, Database Consumption and *Otaku

APH begins as a short four-grid comic; when adapted into *anime*, it becomes a serial of fairly short episodes, lasting only 5 minutes per episode, which is significantly shorter than the 25-minute-long episodes of most average TV *anime*. The comic, *manga*, and *anime* are all still being serialized. With the *anime* went into its sixth season, it already developed into a long serialized *anime* of 135 episodes. However, with only 5 minutes per episode, it still contains less content than one season of usual TV *anime* (with around 24 minutes per episodes and around 13 episodes per season). Compared to the prolific fan products, the original narrative is notably small.

The global popularity of *APH*, I suggest, rests in its special consumption structure, by which I mean that *APH* is a pastiche of popular elements recycled from the whole ACGN world, but at the same time, it trespasses the barrier between real-world politics and entertainment, reappropriating the grand narrative of world history and translating it into the grammar of *otaku* culture. Furthermore, the language belongs to a female sector of *otaku* culture, which makes the transgression even more aggressive. During the process of consumption, the small narrative created by the translation, usually already familiar to the audience, is much less important than the grammar itself, by which fans are able to translate additional similarly small narratives by themselves.

The *APH* fandom is an interesting example and exception for Azuma Hiroki's theory of layered structure of *otaku* community's information consumption process. Azuma argues that the *otaku* community at the present stage consumes media products through a double-layered structure: the database consisted of extremely chopped up non-narrative *moe* elements (in Japanese, *moe yoso* 萌え要素); and small narratives that tell stories using characters drawn from the database. So-called *moe* elements refer to certain character traits (including the traits of physical appearance, of clothing, of personality, of the relationship with the protagonist, etc.) that are considered to be cute (with implicit sexual connotations). These otherwise meaningless elements usually have little to do with the plot. Additionally, as one characteristics of the postmodernist condition in Azuma's description, *moe* elements do not have a true origin. They are shared and recycled in the whole ACG media without discrimination, forming characters that are intrinsically postmodern simulacra, mass produced imitations without an origin. Typical examples of *moe* elements are: eye glasses, double ponytails, school uniforms, miniskirts, stockings, cat ears, animal tails, etc. The database of *moe* elements is independent from the

individual narratives; therefore we observe the importance of the character setting preceding and overwhelming the stories themselves. A character may be loved only because of her adequate combination of *moe* elements, with comparatively little reference to the story plot.

The consumption process for *APH* follows this database consumption mode, because fans are supposed to read beyond the short nonsensical stories to catch the *moe* elements in characterization to fully appreciate them. However, *APH* is successful because the database that the audience is encouraged to utilize is further layered: the hilarious interaction between country characters makes up the small narrative; the characters with *moe* elements is the first database layer; the bottom layer of all the narratives is the real social political history, a grand historical narrative. Such narratives, while sometimes seeming to confluence into an international mainstream judgment, still do not escape each individual nation state's perspective, full of iconic signs that does not usually translate. The surface layer interacts simultaneously with the other two layers. Taking Jameson's definition for modern and post-modern, one may clearly see that if the random combination of chopped-up *moe* elements is a postmodern "pastiche," in which the deeper level meaning is completely removed from the newly constructed discourse, the allusion to the grand narrative of world history should still be categorized as "parody," in which the deeper level meanings always associate with the surface appearance. The grand narrative of nationalism and world history is an omnipresent existence in *APH*, however lighthearted the narrator may be. By including intentional and clear allusions to world history, *APH* creates a series of anecdotes that stylishly rewrites world history, or in other words, transformative writings of a historical narrative. The triple-layered structure is kept intact, though the bottom layer of the grand historical narrative is often overlooked, intentionally or unintentionally, by the audience.

Because of this triple-layered structure, a fan does not need to rely on the small narrative in the webcomic or *anime* to consume *APH*. Most *APH* fan fiction only takes the characters, the setting, and the narrative devices including metaphors and euphemisms created by Himaruya, to tell different historical events never used by Himaruya, or to tell the same story through a different perspective. During this process, fans are free to refocus on the marginalized characters, to shift the ideological judgment system, or even add original characters. The ultimate original narrative that fans appropriate is a grand narrative of world history, slightly (or significantly) different from one another, deciding on their individual perspectives. In this sense, the original narrative of the *APH* web comic and *anime* can almost be treated equally with its fan product. The hierarchy between the original and the copies diminishes. The hierarchy between the original author and fan authors also is minimized. *APH* and its fan products are both small narratives structured above the double layered database, therefore serving as a perfect example for Azuma's non-hierarchical "grand non-narrative." In many ways, *APH* as a media text is not as "mainstream" in Fiske's model as it heavily embodies the qualities of fan products. It is a perfect example product of cultural convergence in the internet age in Jenkins's account, but also an example of a storytelling mode that prioritizes settings over the story.

Here I want to first distinguish "parody" and "pastiche" in this context. According to Jameson, parody, which has a deeper level attached to the outside appearance, is the characteristic of the modern era, while "pastiche," which has only an appearance without depth, is a characteristic of the postmodern era, or in his words, late capitalism.⁴⁶ In Margarate Rose's discussion of parody, one essential aspect of parody is that although it has various types of

⁴⁶ Jameson gives various contrasts of presentations between modern and postmodern; parody and pastiche is only one of them. Refer to Jameson for more details.

definition, its main meaning lies in the coexistence and interaction of “parallel” and “subversion.” The meaning of parody comes directly from the interaction between the similarity of original narrative and parody, and the changes that parody makes on the original narrative. In Azuma’s paradigm, the database, or the “grand-non-narrative” structure—the layer of finely divided narrative elements and appearance traits—are taken without context outside this database structure. Or in other words, the meaning and reference of these elements cannot be linked to any “grand narrative” outside the database structure.

However, the character traits in the *APH* setting can be interpreted in various ways. Take, for example, the linguistic trait of the Chinese character that I mentioned above: should we consider the redundant “*aru*” at the end of each sentence as a depthless *moe* element without a specific signification? Or should we take it seriously as the representation of the colonial history of Japan? For audiences of *APH*, micro non-narrative elements are extracted from two layers of databases; the supposed-to-be meaningless *moe* elements are not clearly distinguished from iconic elements of the grand historical narrative, which often bear real-life political significance, especially in Japan. While Fiske’s girl fans of Madonna freely utilize her as an icon for female freedom and power, we face a far more difficult case with *APH*, where micro-cultural historical details are nailed down to a specific meaning. Supposed polysemic icons might not be so open to interpretation, when popular culture spreads outside its usual scope. A good example is the *Kyowago* linguistic trait that I have pointed out in the previous section, which refers to Japanese colonial history, and a stereotype accompanying this history, but it is also often taken by fans as simply an insignificant *moe* element.

Before I proceed, I need to clarify the gender issue involved. *Otaku* is usually gender-coded as a male identity, though usually feminized, implying immature male adults. The

majority of Azuma's examples are male-oriented ACG products, especially male-oriented Galgames, featuring romantic relationship between the players and the beautiful female characters. Thomas LaMarre in a more literal sense, identifies *otaku* culture as a male subculture, describing the indiscriminating consumption of female *anime* characters as the process for a male subject to regress back to the infantile experience. However, both Azuma's "great non-narrative" and LaMarre's fantasizing subjects hold true for female ACG fans. In fact, I suggest that this consumption mode has nothing to do with gender. There is also a breakdown of characters' appearances and personalities into *moe* elements in female-oriented media products. In *APH*, for example, there is the character's appearance, such as the thick eyebrows of the British character, the "antenna hairs" that many characters have, and the eye glasses that the American character wears; for characters' personalities, there is the *tsundere* British character and the simpleminded Italian character.⁴⁷ Most *moe* elements are gender neutrally consumed. The *moe* elements may appear differently for female audiences in terms of interpersonal relationships and personality traits, including homoromantic related elements, yet the consumption structure remains the same.

Homosocial bonding among characters plays a significant role in *fujoshi*-oriented media products, as well as in *APH*. Defined by their interest towards romantic stories among male characters, *fujoshi* audiences write and read *yaoi* fan fiction, interpreting male characters in the original narratives as gay couples. *Yaoi* is a standard component of the Japanese ACGN industry right now; additionally, slash-baiting homoerotic subtext inside both male-oriented and female-

⁴⁷ *Tsundere* ツンデレ is a Japanese character development process that describes a person who is initially cold and even hostile towards another person before gradually showing their warm side over time. The word is derived from the terms Tsun Tsun (ツンツン), meaning to turn away in disgust, and Dere Dere (デレデレ) meaning to become "lovey dovey."

oriented media products has also been standardized. The homoerotic subtext puts *APH* inside an already established narrative structure and an audience expectation of *yaoi*. With homoerotization, real-life international conflicts exhibit and celebrate love between the characters. Establishing alliance shows unquestionable affection, but confronting each other on the battlefield can also present a love-hate relationship. By turning serious historical events into melodrama, the twist of narrative mode has a playful meaning in its rejection of the definite political meaning, even in the most serious cases. Melodramatization, sometimes in a highly conventional and exaggerated way, is effective in reducing or even detaching from the traditional signification of historical events. In this way, it achieves its own subversion or reinterpretation towards the dominating historical ideology. At the same time, the *fujoshi* audience for *APH* then also shifts from the position of accepting the historical grand narrative into the position of a “player” and narrator of history (with or without a capital H). This playfulness and this homoerotization is only shared and celebrated inside the *fujoshi* community. Of course, such reinterpretation is far from original or avant-garde, since *yaoi* fan fiction interpretation has established a system of cliché and formulae, not the ideal “subversion” examples that many would search for in *yaoi*. In a straightforward and probably over-simplified manner, I suggest that *APH* and its fan creations uses the database of *moe* elements to create a simplified and compressed pastiche, which constitutes a parody against the great narrative of world history, standardized in each nations’ history books.

To raise an example, here is a central story that lasts for several episodes from the first season of *APH anime*. The American character, Alfred Jones, is depicted as a child raised by the British character, Arthur Kirkland. But after Alfred grows up, he rebels for independence from Arthur, who is still deeply in love with Alfred. In the *anime*, the sequence for the final battle

between Alfred and Arthur is presented as a heartbreaking farewell between a doting but inconsiderate parent-like youth and a rebellious adolescent, though clearly these two characters are still in love with each other. The interpretation the convention of love and homoromantization and emotional intensification is standardized in *yaoi* writings.

The sequence of Alfred's memory of the American War of Independence presents a variety of methods and clichés in *APH*'s storytelling. The context is that Alfred is cleaning his storage room, where he finds a rifle with a knife cut—a souvenir of the War of Independence. Then the *anime* cuts to a flashback, which intentionally imitates the effect of badly kept old film stock. The color is dark and brown tinted. The background music—a sentimental melody that appears rarely in this *anime*—suddenly shifts from piano to orchestra, suggesting an emotional intensification. Besides the music, there is a loud sound of rain. We see Arthur and Alfred point their rifles at each other in the rain; Arthur is standing alone, while Alfred has two rows of American soldiers behind him (See Figure 3-2). After hearing Alfred shouting “I am no longer the child, nor am I your younger brother, England. I want independence!” Arthur charges at Alfred, disarms him, and points the rifle at him. The background music stops at the moment that the two rifles clash. Alfred's rifle flies away and falls onto the wet muddy ground. After the American soldiers nervously try to shoot Arthur, Arthur himself puts down the rifle and kneels down, covers his face with a hand, cries and murmurs with self-irony, “You fool, do you think it's possible for me to shoot you... How has it come to this...” The background music starts again when Arthur's words stop. Then Arthur's voice appears in the voice-over “Let's go back home,” which sound bridges into a close-up of a child Alfred looking up, blinking his large blue eyes. The next shot, a point of view shot of the child Alfred, tilts up a side lighted Arthur, holding out his hand at him in the bright sunshine. After cutting back to the reverse shot of

Alfred smiling and nodding happily, a close-up appears: a small hand clenching on another hand holding out in the sunshine in slow motion (Figure 3-3). This small flashback-inside-flashback appears in a very bright overexposure color, accompanying steady melancholy orchestra music. This little sequence feels jerky, as the animator does not fill in the transitional frames between key moments. Then the scene of two holding hands dissolves into a kneeling Arthur, still crying, and Alfred standing in front of him.



Figure 3-2 Frame from Episode 20, *Axis Powers: Hetalia*.



Figure 3-3 Frame from Episode 20, *Axis Powers: Hetalia*.

This sequence intentionally imitates a nostalgic feeling by appropriating visual and sound effects of badly preserved old film stock and visual elements of old styled Hollywood films. Brown tint, black spots that come and go, flicking frames, and jarring sound effects are all elements that bring out an aesthetics of film as aged material (very ironic since the *anime* is neither filmed, nor material; it's digitally animated). The dominating background music is over-the-top melodramatic; the highly exaggerated sentiment emphasizes the homosocial bond between Arthur and Alfred, even when they are in a fight. While animation tends to exaggerate movement and affect to achieve its emotional effect, the melodrama here is still too clichéd and lacks buildup. When we put the story back to the intertextual networks of *anime*, and especially *yaoi* fan fiction, this hyperbolic story falls in between sincere storytelling and a parody, and welcomes both readings—it can be a joke, or a sincere story, or both at the same time. The effect expressed through these stereotypical conventions and clichéd love-hate relationship is firstly

conventional. But once the conventions are accepted, the presence of possible homosexual relationship put on a new appearance for the conventional narrative of the American independence war. The juxtaposition between the melodramatic atmosphere in this episode and the serious content is the parody gesture towards the history and mainstream narrative. In other words, the parody gesture towards history is a playful deconstruction process for meaning and political significance. Therefore, the parody meaning in *APH* is never traditional: even though the events themselves are repeated in the narrative, they are retold in such a playful way that deconstructs the seriousness. The homoerotic meanings are especially devastating in alleviating the severe nationalist sentiments in the narrative. Yet if the overall atmosphere is accepted, it can be a heartbreaking story, because it is the most serious this *anime* can achieve.

Yaoi and *moe* elements are so crucial for *APH* that they define an audience community: those who know *moe* elements in the ACGN culture, especially those who are familiar and eloquent in clichés and narrative devices of a *yaoi* text. By utilizing *yaoi* and *moe* elements, applying them to the grand world history narrative, *APH* intentionally is distanced from the traditional serious grand historical narratives, yet through parody, it deviates but also repeats this narrative, creating an alternative way of political expression. Rather opposite from Himaruya's non-political approach, *APH* is intrinsically political, not only because its heavy reliance on cultural stereotypes, but also because how transgressive the *APH* narrative is, it is still a parody, the repetition of the original historical narrative.

Chinese Online Nationalism and the Trespassed Dimensional Shield

Nationalism, roughly referring to identification with one's own nation, is often negatively perceived as a source of hatred and violence in the contemporary world. Defending the

legitimacy for nationalistic sentiment, Xu Wu defines Nationalism as “a historical, economic, cultural, political and ideological consequence that helps people to establish collective identity, cultural cohesion, social solidarity and political autonomy” (117). By quoting Craig Calhoun, Yingjie Guo emphasizes the ideological aspect of the idea, suggesting that “Nationalism is then understood as ‘an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’” (14). Benedict Anderson’s famous argument on nationalism points to some historical specificities for the idea. In this widely used, and sometimes abused theory on nationalism, Anderson argues that the starting point for modern nation states and nationalism presents exactly in the shared reading experience provided by modern media and print industry, which creates the idea of simultaneity. The rising of modern languages directly fixes a language to a territory and creates a dominate dialect. This also helps establishing modern nations, first in Latin America, then in Europe, and then spread to the other parts of the world. A nation is therefore understood as a fixed community without beginning and ending in a “homogeneous, empty time,” a notion he borrows from Benjamin.

APH as a narrative structure and signification system relies heavily on the idea of nationalism in Anderson’s paradigm. The country characters are supposed to be a personification of all the “national characters” of a nation or a geographic region, and be responsible for all the events happened there (at least those events that appear in *APH*). The unchanged essentialized identity for a nation or a region is solidified into a single character with little (if any) character development with the course of time. In fact, because in *APH*, the plot is not continuous, but episodic and anecdotal, with an event happened in the 21st century juxtaposed with a historical event in the 17th century, characters are usually not supposed to be significantly changed inside

the story. Anderson describes the mode of nationalist imagination as a homogeneous community unchanged through the long history, “the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (26). Such a mode of imagination is epitomized in *APH*'s characters, with their longevity and unaltered identity and personality throughout the long history, albeit with changes to country names, territories, and political structures. *APH* intrinsically creates and recycles cultural stereotypes, making audiences indulge in this increasingly problematic entertainment, based on a dominant cultural and political power structure inherited from the colonial history. These characteristics make the idea of nation in *APH* those mythical retrospective constructions that share a common founding myth in history, independent from chronological time. For audiences, understanding *APH* also involves turning daily impressions about a nation or region into stereotypes; at the same time, international relationships also involve fitting relationships into *yaoi* conventions and clichés. In many ways, *APH* relies on a system of fragmented significations to create meaning and enjoyment.

Contemporary Chinese nationalism, especially what is presented online, is often portrayed negatively as a belligerent troublemaker. As Maria Hsia Chang claims, contemporary Chinese nationalism now presents “a volatile mix of potentially troublesome attributes that social scientists have identified to have a high propensity toward aggression” (182). Much discussion on Chinese nationalism, including Chang's discussion here, is convinced that Chinese nationalism is something inculcated by the party government to ensure the party's rule. As Christopher Hughes accurately notes, after the Maoist era, “although ‘communism’ still figured in this formula, its meaning had become so diluted that it had come to signify not much more

than a kind of patriotic selflessness characteristic of a past era” (18). In other words, the party shifted from a class-based party into a nationalist party in the post-socialist era, and therefore nationalism has been a powerful discourse to legitimate party rule. While most authors realize this situation, some simply condemn the Communist Party for its propaganda and “Patriotic education” that leave ordinary Chinese people angry and violent against the outsiders; others, however, accurately point out the complexities of contemporary Chinese society, especially the existence of two nationalisms: state nationalism, and cultural nationalism.⁴⁸ Viewing the nationalist sentiments that Chinese netizens express online as totally spontaneous, Wu defines Chinese cyber nationalism as: “a non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed in China's online sphere over the past decade (1994-present). It is a natural extension from China's century-long nationalism movement, but it is different from both the CCP official version of patriotism, and the traditional Chinese nationalism movement” (2). He emphasizes this idea throughout his research by repeatedly showing that Chinese cyber nationalism is a natural reaction to an entire century's worth of humiliation that China suffered from colonial powers, which is completely different and sometimes in conflict with the state nationalism promoted by the government. The problem with his assumption that cyber nationalism is non-governmental sponsored is critically flawed in that the national historical narrative is still strongly affected by governmental policy and education system. However, even though the CCP tends to equate the party state with a cultural China, the “nation” in state nationalism has double-tiered significations, referring to a party state and a cultural, historical, ethnical, mythical identity that only partly overlaps with cultural nationalism's ideal. Guo

⁴⁸ The so-called “Patriotic Education” here refers specifically to the education campaign in primary schools and middle schools carried out by the Jiang Zemin's government in the early 1990s, directly after the 1989 political crisis.

suggests that the disjunction between the nation and the state makes the nation-state relationship a site of contest. “What cultural nationalism is fundamentally against is the ideology of the Party, not the state, not even state nationalism as a whole ... Cultural nationalism is thus able to feed on the official discourse in its attempt to ‘nationalize’ the Party-state by contesting the meaning of the same signifiers that the Party-state seeks to hegemonize” (4). In other words, the cultural nationalism that we encounter on the internet in the post-socialist era may have different aims than state nationalism, but these two ideologies still borrow support and discourse from one another, making cultural nationalism “cooperative” forces to the party state, and therefore often criticized and blamed as “chauvinistic” and “extreme.”

Guobin Yang’s discussion on cyberspace as a site for citizen activism, notes that popular nationalist movements (such as anti-Japanese parades ignited by the *Diaoyu* islands dispute) are distinctive in Chinese online activism, in that “there was clear evidence of state support or acquiescence, prompting one author to argue that nationalistic protests are expressions of loyalty rather than dissent” (73). The complicated relationship between state nationalism and cultural nationalism in a way makes the nationalist sentiments expressed in the popular cultural scene harder to entangle. Japan and the United States are the two countries most sensitive in Chinese nationalist expressions, with both of them being the origins of popular media products celebrated in Chinese society. Domestically, Japanese *anime* has been viewed as a weapon for Japanese global interest; as Iwabuchi criticizes, “we have witnessed the rise of what I would call ‘brand nationalism’—uncritical, practical uses of media culture as resources for the enhancement of political and economic national interests, through the branding of national cultures” (91). Such brand nationalism as a promotion of soft power may be less efficient in China considering the

tradition of an arbitrary disjunction between the perceived “culture,” “entertainment,” and the largely imagined “politics.”

In the *APH* fandom, largely in accordance to the narrative mode in the original narrative, the audience also attempts to create a politically detached perspective far away from real life political debates. In the Chinese-speaking world, specifically, there is a set of “internet etiquette,” first promoted by the Taiwan fandom, then spread into mainland China.⁴⁹ This set of etiquette serves to prevent any possible conflicts between fans and “outsider” readers / audience members who happen to see fan writings/videos that probably will enrage him/her because of the lighthearted presentations of political history. According to this etiquette, fans should use characters’ names designated by Himaruya, instead of country names in *APH* fan products. If a country name is unavoidable, fans should use signs such as “|,” “_” to separate the country name in order to make it ‘unsearchable’ through searching engines such as Google. This etiquette is well enforced by most discussion boards that I have encountered on the internet; even in everyday discussions, fans tend to avoid directly mentioning country names, and keep reminding each other to obey the etiquette. All these efforts are carried out to prevent people with no knowledge of *APH* from entering the discussion or fan fiction accidentally through Google and starting unnecessary arguments. For fans themselves, it is also agreed that no serious consideration should be taken when viewing the original *anime* and its fan writings. Such etiquette, as I observed online, does not exist in the English speaking world. Although the *APH* fandom has a more marginal position in the English speaking world in the first place, the *APH*

⁴⁹ Refer to the webpage “*APH wanglu liyi tuiguang*. APH 網路禮儀推廣 (Promoting Internet etiquette for *APH*)” for the whole text for the “*APH* internet etiquette.”

Refer to “Yizhi renming yilan” 已知人名一覽 (Collection of the known characters’ names) for the whole list of the character names in *APH*.

etiquette in the Chinese speaking fandom shows how sensitive certain aspects of the *APH* plot are in Greater China.

The mentality of “keeping away from politics” is very common in Chinese fandoms, especially fandoms of Japanese cultural materials. One of the common accusations from the older generation and mainstream society towards the *otaku* community is that they are obsessed with cultural materials from a country that has always been hostile to China, and that the Japanese are brainwashing Chinese younger generations through entertainment (see Sizhizhuzai’s post on Baidu Tieba, which questions whether the younger generation has been brainwashed by Japanese *manga* and *anime*). A usual self-defending strategy is to separate entertainment from the grand political narrative. The Chinese *otaku* community tends to clearly distinguish two “Japans”: one is the political governmental of Japan, who still refuses to formally apologize for their imperialist invasion in Asia and its military nationalism, and the other the cultural (and especially popular cultural) Japan, who represents cultural trends and “Japan cool.”⁵⁰ Such a split can be viewed as strategic self-protection from animosity from unsympathetic outsiders, but at the same time, this split also builds up a totally imaginary shield between their entertainment media interest and what they would confront in the daily political lives. Of course, the deep rooted Sino-Japanese conflict is omnipresent, only half relieved or hidden by Japanese media products’ popularity in China. In my personal experience, I have encountered many friends who claim to be an ACG fan, but do not self-identify as a Japan lover without this distinction. However, it might well be the result of the *otaku* community trying to overcompensate their guilt in falling in love with Japanese media products in the first place.

⁵⁰ Such split understanding for the idea of “Japanese” could be found in the discussion thread “Ruhe lijie wo xihuan riben dongman, dan taoyan riben ren zhe ju hua?” 如何理解「我喜欢日本动漫，但讨厌日本人」这句话？(How do we understand the sentence “I like Japanese ACG, but dislike Japanese people?”).

The distinction between culture and politics is itself an illusion, for it is impossible to separate a pure “culture” totally devoid of political narratives; the acceptance of narratives with certain reference to real-world politics, such as *APH*, becomes even more difficult with a Japanese worldview, and especially a typical Japanese narrative and self-representation in the stories. As a result, the “dimensional shield,” set up to keep the “three-dimensional world” outside the entertaining “two dimensional world” constructed by various ACGN products, is infiltrated, transgressed backwardly: the *otaku* modes of consumption and reproduction in the subculture are now applied to the “three-dimensional world,” the world history and nationalistic feelings, that Chinese *otaku* usually shut away from the constructed cultural space of entertainment. We observe in *APH* fandom an interesting phenomenon, that fans constantly use their interpretation and fan creation to tell a three-dimensional story, accepting the “Japan” on the cultural level, i.e. taking the setting and the *moe* characters, while refusing Japan’s self-interpretation on the political level, instead using the Chinese mainstream narrative of history to adapt the original narrative and create a new small narrative. The characterization of the Chinese character, especially, is redefined in the Chinese fandom according to a celebratory self-image of a glorious past and “national character.” With *APH* itself being a narrative system built upon cultural stereotypes and a mythic narrative of homogeneous unchanged nations, such a development in its fandom is hardly surprising. Considering the process that a fan community establishes and sustains, the alienation caused by the Japanese social historical narrative pushes the Chinese *otaku* audience back to their own familiar zone of Chinese self-narrative.

Considering that the *APH* fandom is a worldwide phenomenon, with the existence of perspectives from other countries or regions, the self-identity creation tends to rely more on the imagined community of a nation according to Anderson’s theory. The imagined community of

China is shared by the Chinese *APH* fans based on their familiarity of the mainstream historical narrative and their alienation towards a foreign mode of historical narrative. Here comes another imagined community: the transcultural *otaku* community. Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities, while originally describing modern nation states and the rise of nationalist sentiments, describes online fan communities adequately, if only metaphorically. Sandvoss further concludes that fan communities as "imagined communities" are "communities which are based on shared symbolic, mediated events as well as the knowledge of such shared activity" (*Fans* 55). This virtual community is, indeed, an imagined one—not only does each individual know few other members of the community, but also the interpersonal connection is maintained in a virtual space. Similarly, for fan communities, mostly invisible in daily lives, the connections among fans are maintained by shared media consumption. The same consumption process, the same database of knowledge, and the similar mode of taking usage of this database connects the comparatively isolated fans and creates a shared new identity for them.

Jenkins's idea of "convergence culture" gives a description of the new mode of media communication in the new millennium, stating that media content circulates "across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders" (*Convergence Culture* 3). Increasingly, traditional national borders are downplayed in the current media scene, yet they still persist. In the case of the *APH* fandom as an "imagined community," the issue of nationalism, and the original meaning of nation as an imagined community, comes to the foreground. In the specific case of the *APH* fandom in China, the sense of shared experience of alienation and distance becomes the base for collective imagination and production against the original narrative.

Morikawa Kaichirō argues that in the Japanese case, the *otaku* identity is ultimately defined by their intentional embracing and constant reaffirmation of their marginal identity in society and their unacceptable interest in textual consumption. He notices the phenomenon that the Japanese *otaku* usually migrate to a more unacceptable interest once their old interest is more or less accepted by the larger society. The constant “self-queerification” that the *otaku* tries to achieve is indeed part of the *otaku* community. Taking a peripheral position in both the aesthetic aspect and thematic aspect, fan communities around the world embrace cultural products that are generally debased as naïve, childish, and nonsensical. When the outside world gradually accepts these media products, one has to move further away from the mainstream standard, including moral standards, to create a marginal position. According to Morikawa, this is the reason for the Japanese *otaku* to shift to the perverse, or *hentai*, sexual descriptions that have more and more explicit sexual appeal in media products.

This “self-queerification,” however, seems to work only on the two-dimensional side of the shield. *Otaku* communities’ political position and opinions are usually irrelevant to their subcultural identity. And in Japan, specifically, *otaku* culture has a closer relationship with the conservative right wing. This seemingly paradoxical situation, for the self-affirmation on mainstream Chinese cultural nationalism in the Chinese *APH* fandom is further determined by the fact that part of the allure of *APH* comes from the three-dimensional implication, and from another state and culture. In the assumed three-dimensional nationalist issues, certain fans would rely on their imagined community of the nation rather than a transnational *otaku* community. The Chinese nationalist perspective is definitely marginalized in the original narrative of *APH*, however subtly. The identity of peripheral fan culture operates in a different way when the

national border is crossed, because the assumed “mainstream” and “center” for the audience and for the original narrative may not overlap.

In her study of contemporary Chinese commercial culture, *Brand New China*, Jing Wang points out that among contemporary Chinese urban youth culture, there exists a tendency of “safe cool,” that the youth do not want to deviate too far from the mainstream (237-43). Even for the sake of showing one’s rebelliousness, the distance they keep from the mainstream narrative is not too far to become “dangerous.” On the other hand, another tendency in this youth culture is treating the center as the new cutting edge. In other words, certain youth cultures signify their unconventionality through embracing mainstream values and mainstream narratives. Jing Wang suggests that one reason for this phenomenon is that the lonely one-child generation in China is eager to develop social bonds and feel a sense of belonging when they enter the society. While I generally agree with Wang’s analysis, I suggest that such centripetal tendencies in the current youth subculture are more of a reaction towards the unfamiliar than, as Wang here suggests, a generic willingness for social bonds. Cyber nationalism inside the *otaku* community, prominent in the first decade of the 2000s, shows a clear self-alienation from totally identifying with the Japanese text. In other words, an identity creation process with the background of understanding *otaku* as mainly a Japanese-exported phenomenon pushes Chinese *otaku* back to a shared historical narrative.

Be a Dragon

By quoting Elizabeth Bleich, Jenkins suggests that the female fandom of sci-fi narratives is often formed on the tension between admiration for and alienation from the original narrative: women readers are more comfortable with emotional expressions and interpersonal relationship,

while male readers are more attracted to action-centered plots (*Textual Poachers* 108-119).⁵¹ Therefore, fan fiction creation is self-expression from the women readers' perspective, shifting the male-centered original narrative to a female-oriented relationship-centered stories. The alienation-induced-reappropriation mode describes most fans' creative activities, but Jenkins' gendered perspective suggests that such frustration is often felt as a community on a shared and collective psychological experience. The Chinese fandom of *APH* presents a deviation on perspective and identity, originated from the Chinese national identity that the audience embraces, which directly clashes with the Japanese narrative and perspective of *APH*. A similar dynamic is happening in the process: audiences are attracted to a narrative for its setting and mode of narration, yet at the same time, not all stories in this narrative is completely comfortable for audiences to embrace. This tension triggers fan products. What is interesting in the process is that Chinese *APH* fans almost immediately pull back to the most clichéd and heretical historical narrative in China, promoted by the government in "patriotic campaigns" taught in the education system. In other word, it is a supposed shared common narrative for all Chinese—a safe subversion against the Japanese mainstream, and back to the Chinese mainstream. The nationalist sentiments are readily placed in an almost too familiar set of icons, images, and sentences. Such historical narrative, too, is set around a repeatedly told story and a China vs. invasion imperialism structure, so well-known that it seems almost politically neutral for Chinese audiences. Basically, in this sense, *APH* and its fandom play a game of trading clichés and stereotypes. A clichéd Japanese modernization story is replaced only by an all-so-familiar story of Chinese resistance, both with a simplified imagination of a community and a nation.

⁵¹ Though Jenkins quotes Bleich's studies in the classroom, he does not fully agree with Bleich's observations and arguments. He does agree that reading is gendered, therefore, the disjunction between audience's and producers' reading creates tension to trigger fannish reappropriation.

Taking one *dōjinshi* published in 2008, *Be a Dragon*, as an example, below I will examine how Chinese fans shape and redefine the Chinese identity in the fan creation with cultural nationalism, relying especially on the discourse of “one hundred years of humiliation” in a Chinese historical narrative.

This *dōjinshi* has already become a legend in Chinese *otaku* subculture. It is a *dōjinshi* centering on the Chinese character, Wang Yao 王耀, and it consists of about 25 illustrations, several four-grid comics, and several short *manga* stories. Highly well-known in the fandom, its original price was 75 RMB, but the price of a used copy exceeded 500 RMB in less than two years (such speed of price increase is very rare in China). After the release of this *dōjinshi*, a theme song of very high quality was written by fans specifically for it. Its popularity comes from not only the artistic quality (more than ten professional *manga* authors participated), but also the content, which celebrates passionately the glorious long history of China and the strong will that China experienced in the 19th and 20th century to overcome all the difficulties to rise up again from defeat and invasion.

I here quote the last short *manga* story at the end of this *dōjinshi*. This short story, with only seven pages, shows a short conversation between a traditional Chinese mythical animal, the *qilin* 麒麟, and a fatally wounded Wang Yao. The *qilin* comes to encourage disheartened Wang Yao, claiming that he will last as long as the world does, and he will rise again, even if he is currently in a most miserable condition. Short as this *manga* may be, it is the only *manga* story / comic printed in color (the others are printed in white and black), which shows its significance. Also, its position at the end of the *dōjinshi* also signifies its importance. This *manga* is very different in tone and mood from the previous lighthearted ones. It emphasizes the atmosphere and emotion rather than the actual storyline:

Wang Yao: *Qilin*, did you come to take me away?

--No, it is not yet the date for you to go back. You have the destiny from above; you shall last thousands of years and generations to come. You shall live as long as this world will be.

(Betrayed... Hurt... Numerous things bereaved... This world full of wars...)

Wang Yao: Thousands of years and generations to come? No, I am old enough... What is still left for me to do now? I give up...

--No. You were born a dragon. Even if one day, with your teeth broken, your scales plucked out, your eyes blind and your claws severed, with your body dropped from above into a shallow muddied puddle, a dragon is always a dragon.

Wang Yao: What is your wish?

--I wish in the years I can breathe, seeing you ascending to the top of the world.

(Writer: Fengxishenlei, Painter: Yanyi, *Be a Dragon* 83-89)⁵²

⁵² *Be a Dragon*. Pp83-89. The translation is mine. See Appendix 3 for the original Chinese text.



Figure 3-4 Page 84-85 of the *manga Be a Dragon*.

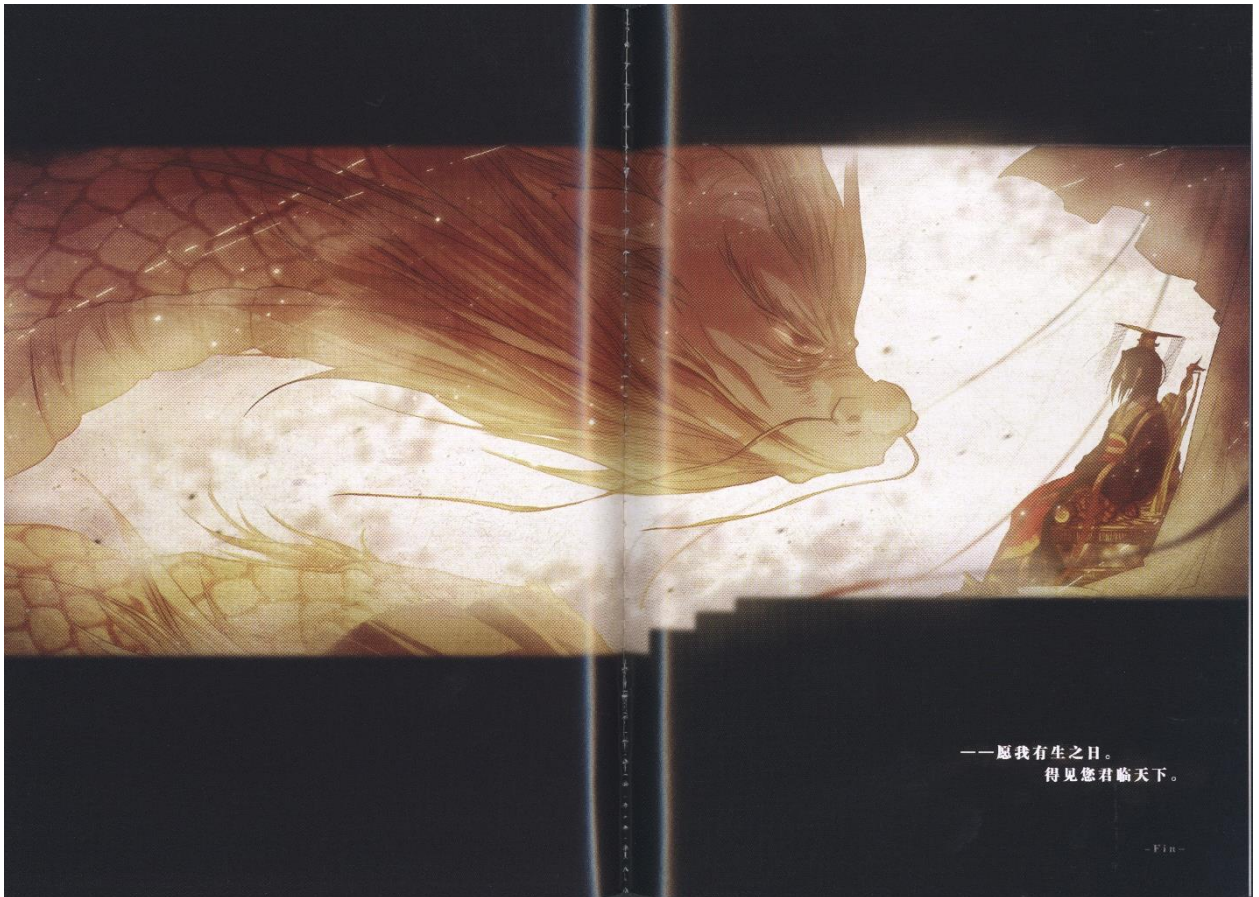


Figure 3-5 Page 88-89 of the *manga Be a Dragon*.

There is no “plot” in a straightforward manner. This short *manga* of only seven pages long is purely an expression of a mood, or an atmosphere. The grids are comparatively large and loosely structured visually, and the logical relationship between consecutive grids is very loose. Conversations are short and scattered. Both Wang Yao’s lament and the *qilin*’s encouragements are written with a stylized form: couplets and repetitions make the language far from quotidian conversation, but closer to dramas and poems.

Visually, with strong contrast between the dark reddish brown background and the lit-up golden faces of the protagonists, the story presents a dramatic atmosphere. As the story progresses, Wang Yao starts from the position of curling on the blood-stained ground, with

blood-soiled clothing, gradually rising up to face the mythical animal *qilin*, whose side is lit by a golden light (Figure 3-4). An interesting visual detail is that because the *qilin* only partially shows its body, the readers cannot tell whether the mythical animal is the *qilin* or the Chinese dragon—here it refers to Wang Yao both metaphorically and visually—because their heads look very similar. With only half the face lit up by light, the mythic animal is never presently fully in this *manga*. The story is told from the perspective of this mythical and mysterious animal. Its mythical and ethereal quality contrasts the seemingly mundane Wang Yao, whose glittering eyes are positioned in the center of the panel various times. In the last panel, we see Wang Yao, dressed in the emperor's dragon robe, face covered by hair, facing a mythic animal: the dragon, with its glistening eyes occupying the center of the panel (Figure 3-5). The dramatization in this story further makes it psychologically and emotionally closer to the Chinese readers.

The narrative of China being in its most dangerous period, close to its death, is central in to the Chinese historical narrative beginning from the late 19th century. With the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, the narrative of “China will die if we do not fight” came to a climax. “A century of Humiliation (*Bainian chiru* 百年耻辱)” in the current Chinese historical narrative refers loosely to a period between 1840 and 1949. The beginning of this century is signified by the First Opium War between China and the British Empire, ending in China's total defeat and the opening of five treaty ports, and followed by many other invasions and unequal treaties between the Manchu Qing government and the colonial powers. The year 1949, of course, refers to the establishment of the People's Republic. As Peter Hays Gries suggests, “The ‘Century of Humiliation’ is neither an objective past that works insidiously in the present nor a mere ‘invention’ of present-day nationalist entrepreneurs. Instead, the ‘Century’ is a continuously reworked narrative about the national past central to the contested and evolving meaning of

being ‘Chinese’ today” (47). In other words, the narrative of this one hundred years closely relates to the nationalist sentiments under current international relationships. As Jing Tzu argues, “victimization does not need to be continually attached to a historically real injury to claim and act on authenticity....It integrates historical humiliations, such as colonial subjugation, into a resilient narrative of self-invention. Rather than glorified sovereignty, the consecration of humiliation is intrinsic to tales of nation building and national identity, especially for those claiming to recover from fallen status” (7). The Chinese national building process coexists with the feeling of defeat and humiliation that, according to Tzu, transformed readily into a mentality of defiance seeking revenge (21-22). The obsession with the “Century of Humiliation” has been a strategic step for Chinese nationalist discourse (both cultural nationalism and state nationalism) for collective identity building and expression. Yet the idea of bringing China back to its past glory is more than sincere in popular nationalism.

Returning to the *manga* on Wang Yao, his suffering and humiliation is presented metaphorically as he lies wounded inside a mud puddle, without any direct reference to the clash between the “bullies” and him. Two thin panels at the top of page 67 present Honda Kiku holding a blade in one panel, and at least two European characters (most likely from Britain and France) wearing a sneer on their faces in the other panel. With very low contrast, these two panels are very hard to clearly discern, conveniently blended in the dark brown background. The cause of Wang Yao’s wound is suggested by a vague silhouette of signature architecture, *Dashuifa* in *Yuanming Yuan*, the old imperial summer palace in Beijing, burned down and looted during the second Opium War of 1860 by the British and French allies, and further pillaged by foreign invasions in 1900, after the Boxer Rebellion (Figure 3-4). The old summer palace holds a significant symbolic meaning in the “Century of Humiliation” narrative. As Robert Weil argues,

the ruin of *Dashuifa* is “the most visible sign anywhere in the country of what it meant for China to be subjected to foreign domination, humiliation and looting by the Western imperialists” (98), because this Western styled architecture is part of the Qianlong Emperor’s attempt to imitate the West in China’s own way, yet it is violently interrupted. Therefore, the metaphoric meaning for the pillage of *Yuanming Yuan* constantly reemerges when the capitalist West breaks the rules that post-socialist China struggles to master (128). However, Haiyan Lee suggests that “The older iconographic image of the park consists solely of the broken but still majestic pillars and arches of the Grand Waterworks (*Dashuifa*) set against a blank background or an azure sky. ... is a perfect example of a logo in Benedict Anderson’s definition: empty (of human figures), contextless, visually memorable, and infinitely reproducible” (171), an image crystalized into reform era public nationalist discourse. *Yuanming Yuan* as a material site is saturated with complicated historical significations and symbolic meanings, yet just as Lee points out, in daily practice of the post-socialist China, its meaning has long settled. Seldom would any average Chinese realize this ruin was supposed to be an imitation of the West. It has served as an icon for a single purpose of retelling the “Century of Humiliation” to anyone with a basic history knowledge about China. To add to this observation, the iconic silhouette of *Dashuifa* in *Be a Dragon* looks almost exactly the same as the picture on the high school history book of modern Chinese history used in the 1990s.

The mythical *qilin* is not a random choice, because it is long believed to be a benevolent animal that only appears when the sages have arrived on the earth. In this way, traditional Chinese icons and values, such as benevolence, represented by mythical beasts such as *qilin*, is treated as an important power for Chinese re-empowerment. Also, Wang Yao himself is linked to the mythical beast of dragon, another clichéd metaphor for the Chinese nation. With the image of

the dragon traditionally linked to an emperor in China, and the sentence “seeing you ascending on to the top of the world” literally meaning “seeing you as an emperor, ascending and watching over from above towards all under heaven,” this connection between the character Wang Yao and an emperor calls back to the long pre-modern Chinese tradition and an explicit longing for power and strength (see Wang Yao in a dragon robe in Figure 3-5). In one word, the Chinese character created in this short *manga* story is perfectly set in the background of an isolated position. This intentionally downplayed confrontation between the Chinese character and the imperialist powers is, from my point of view, a self-censorship in the context of the more or less “happy family” created in the original narrative; therefore we do not see a lengthy depiction of brutal invasion conducted by the supposed cute European country characters. On the other hand, with China alone in the focus, the returning to power process of China seems less aggressive without the presence of other countries, even with an explicit imperialist narrative of being the “emperor of all under the heaven.” Even though the phrase “all under the heaven” traditionally refers to the current Chinese territory, the tribute system and annexation nations (such as Korea, Vietnam, Ryukyu, etc.) make the discourse of “returning to the period before the Western invasion” highly problematic. This narrative accords perfectly with the most straightforward Chinese nationalist narrative, celebrated simultaneously by cultural nationalism and state nationalism.

The following passage is excerpted from the afterword written by the main author of this *dōjinshi*, Fengxishenlei 风息神泪, in which she explains her understanding of Chinese history and the main idea that she wants to express in this *dōjinshi*.⁵³ She expresses clearly her sadness

⁵³ *Fengxishenlei* does not reveal his/her sex online. According to the majority of the information, I use “she” to refer to him/her.

and anger towards the agony that China suffered during the last two centuries, and her strong emotional affiliation towards the Chinese nation.

It is not fun at all.

No matter whether it is the production process of this *dōjinshi*, or is it skimming through modern Chinese history. Tired, troublesome. But most importantly, there is always irresistible fury billowing inside our chests; there is always one voice asking:

Those agonies he suffered, how can they all be redeemed? That wound and the blood, blood, blood, blood he shed, how can they be washed away?

And finally, everything turned to internal eye catches, as lighthearted as possible. Yes, finally.

All ridicules and mockeries are out of our good intention. After all, such manipulations are all that we are good at.

Whether you call us China-centralism, it's all right; whether you call us nationalism, it doesn't matter at all. To mock our foolish actions, the dictionary has provided numerous combinations of words.

Yet I only know, if not for this love from the bottom of our hearts, we would not be here.

I know he has lived too long. Every beauty and ugliness describable in language, he must have already lived through.

Therefore, this boring little pamphlet is the only love letter that we could offer.

And here we pray.

All his hope will come true. All the beauty in the world will be in his hand.

We will fade. Only several decades; for this person, who is more than thousands years of age, we are only evanescent dusts.

Yet, until I fall into eternal peace, I am ready to devote everything that I have for this life to him.

If there is another life, and another, yet another life time, we still wish that we could be born here.

And for uncountable times, when we open the eyes to face this world, with the same language, the same skin color, the same voice, we could still see the sky.

And him, with his never-bending back, standing straight as usual, in between the earth and the sky.⁵⁴

This is a compassionate and well versed essay that easily creates empathy in any Chinese nationalist. According to Fengxishenlei, the *dōjinshi* is a love letter to Wang Yao. She blatantly shows her love and allegiance towards this character, who for her, serves as a representation of the Chinese nation. What is interesting in this afterword is that before the exclamation and enthusiastic wishes, there is a declaration that they “don’t care” whether the readers label them as “China-centric” or “nationalist” or not. The pre-assumption here is that most people generally do not approve of this “nationalist” interpretation of the Chinese character (noting the word “nationalist” is used as a derogatory without definition). Setting up this non-mainstream assumption as the contrast to her mainstream historical narrative of China shows the unconventionality or unique personality of the authors of the *dōjinshi*. Their intention in creating this *dōjinshi* then becomes legitimate, passionate, patriotic, and at the same time, unique. The Wang Yao presented in this *dōjinshi* is not the same as the one in the original narrative of *APH*; with special extra-textual affinity and identification that the fan authors attributed to him, he takes on an added idealness, expressed through the traditional narrative of the past with total

⁵⁴ *Be a Dragon*. P90. The translation is mine. See Appendix 4 for the original Chinese text.

emotional devotion from the Chinese people. The importance here, again, is that such affinity and close identification does not completely result from the characterization done by the original author, but because this Chinese character draws on an identity in the real world. She claims to speak for an identity of “we,” as do all the authors, referring to the imaginary community of Chinese *otaku* and perhaps all Chinese. The familiar story, told with total icons and clichés ready for identification, does not need reason or logic to create empathy, but relies on a common nationalist discourse shared in the contemporary Chinese society.

In this example, *Be a Dragon*, I am not arguing that the Chinese *APH* fandom is solid in this position. In the case I cite at the beginning of this chapter, taking use of the *APH* setting for a patriotic reason does not qualify as legitimate. Many fans choose to stay away from direct discussions about current political situations, and they are especially sensitive to issues between China and Japan, because, of course, *APH* is a Japanese media product and the Sino-Japanese relationship is still the core issue in the popular discourse of Chinese nationalism. Embracing the perspective of the *APH* setting, of a detached position from the most acute international political conflict, they pay specific attention to the history of a more distant era, exploring possible the potential drama that might happen if all nations were human characters, especially those that do not involve China, for example, the UK and US, Prussia and France. In other cases, fans would concentrate on the cultural aspects of a country, and ignoring the military and political aspects completely.

I suggest that the conflict between these two groups of fans comes fundamentally from distinctive modes of acceptance and appropriation of the *APH* narrative. Some fans take the setting (mainly the characters and the way it presents the story) while rejecting the ideological implication traditionally attributed to historical iconic figures and events, imitating the original

author of *APH*, choosing to celebrate an alternative mode of historical narrative without risking any controversial topics; others, meanwhile, choose to concentrate more on the background of the characters and the bottom layer of the historical narrative, asserting their own interpretation and value system over the original narrative of *APH*, ignoring at least partially the attempted neutral stance of the original author of *APH*. The former group does not object to Himaruya's stories and political position; their fannish interest permeates through all three layers of the database I described above. The latter group, in contrast, tends to at least partly get rid of Himaruya's small narrative, paying more attention to the other two layers of information. Both strategies allow fans to express their creativity. However, the degree to which a fan artist or author is allowed to change the setting, mood, and representation of an original narrative relies on self-regulation inside a fan community itself. There is nothing strictly narrated to prohibit the fans from taking use of the original material in a fandom; there is only etiquette and non-specified regulations that some of the fans would not even obey, while the rest would find hard to individually apply on specific violations.

Afterwards...

APH was truly only a beginning for seeing the personification for almost anything in everyday life in ACG culture, such as blood type, food, dogs, and cats. Battleships in WWII, starting with the imperial Japanese navy, recently also followed this trend, however politically ambiguous it may be.⁵⁵ In a way, personification and moe-fication seems a natural way to

⁵⁵ Kantai Collection (*Kantai korekushon* 艦隊これくしょん), is a Japanese web browser game developed by Kadokawa Games. Launched on April 23, 2013, the game has developed into a much larger media franchise including a television *anime* series that began airing its first season in January 2015. Each of the characters is *moe* anthropomorphisms of World War II naval warships (mainly Japanese warships), personalized as cute girls.

neutralize and de-politicize—at least in the eyes of their target audience—removing all ideological and historical icons of their signification. Many succeed. Japanese market profits from this trend, and the international market plays along. At least in China, with a short period of nationalist intervention, the craze upon Wang Yao ebbed quickly. The *APH* fandom once was vast and popular, but it would soon break apart into several interest groups; the overtly nationalistic group was the first to retreat from the fandom.

The *APH* fandom still has a large group of fans and followers, but Wang Yao is much less frequently the only significant character in fannish appropriation. This reception pattern cannot be isolated from the clever usage of *moe* elements, and the manipulation of homoerotic elements, which have become an inseparable pleasure for female fans in recent years. A crucial dilemma in fandoms is that, by taking use of the material of an original narrative, one is theoretically open to do anything with it, without any regulation imposed from the original authors and producers; yet at the same time, there is usually a clearly pronounced or generally agreed regulation of what kind of interpretation and appropriation is permitted. The former aspect is the basic logic for the existence of fandoms, yet the latter also builds and helps maintain the fandom as a community.

In the wake of the vast popularity of the *APH* fandom, other types of national personification also became popular in China, including, for example, Polandball. Some of them are intrinsically made in China, in which the Chinese character is no longer a several-thousand-of-years-old man with a young face, who wears a long-sleeved red coat and a ponytail. One of the most famous set of country personifications, a web-comic, *Year Hare Affairs* (*Nanian natu naxie shi* 那年那兔那些事), which started to serialize in 2011, casts a white rabbit for China, an almost innocuous character, who only shows his teeth of steel when bullies appear. This character, through its interaction with other characters in this comic, presents an obvious political

message of affinity and identification with the Chinese party state. The image of a rabbit is derived from a mockingly derogative nickname for the Chinese Communist Party. It is not a particularly artistic image, but the idea of a rabbit effectively conveys the message that it might seem timid, but it actually has power to back up itself in international conflicts. Therefore, advocates of this narrative and iconic system refuse a claimed politically neutral position assumed by the *APH* fandom. Over time, most fans remaining in the *APH* fandom are those who insist on a supposed neutrality and a certain distance from the real-life politics. *Year Hare Affairs* has its own shortcoming in that it stays too close to the state nationalism, legitimating not only Chinese culture and Chinese nation, but also the Chinese state, which is the fundamental discrepancy between the discourses of the state nationalism and cultural nationalism. To make the scene more complicated, *Year Hare Affairs* has been adapted into *anime*, with support directly from the Chinese government.⁵⁶

The year 2008 is crucial in the history of Chinese cyber nationalism. Several events, including the riot in Tibet, the disrupted Olympic flame relay for the Beijing Olympic, and then the Sichuan Earthquake, repeatedly reminded ordinary Chinese people of the “Century of humiliation,” and grass-root nationalism surged to new heights. Specifically, different from the earlier trends of nationalism, especially online nationalism in China, we could easily find from 2008, the presence of female participation in the nationalist discourse. According to Wu’s survey of frequenters of Chinese cyber nationalist websites in 2007, 92% of the netizens who responded to his questionnaires were male (193). *Be a Dragon* and similar fan products signify the entrance of a female voice into cyber nationalism. Ironically, the two most important quotes celebrated by Xi Jinping’s state nationalism all come from the *otaku* subculture. “Our conquest is the sea of the

⁵⁶ See note 7 for more information and references.

stars.” 我们的征途是星辰大海 is a famous quote from the Japanese space opera, popular among Chinese *otaku* at the beginning of the 21st century, Tanaka Yoshiki's *Legend of Galactic Heroes*. “I wish in the years I can breathe, seeing you ascending to the top of the world,” comes exactly from the *dojinshi Be a Dragon*. The female nationalist discourse, as I have touched upon above through the early nationalist intervention in the *APH* fandom, has its own logic, but still draws from the conventions and clichés of the traditional cultural and state nationalism. Yet increasingly, we observe state nationalism feeding upon the grassroots cyber nationalism, including those expressed in the fan subculture. The dimensional shield, in fact, never exists.

CHAPTER 4.
GLOBAL HOMOROMANCE:
FEMALE EXPERIENCE, FANTASY AND UTOPIA

Danmei, written in Chinese characters 耽美 and pronounced tanbi in Japanese, means immersed in beauty literarily. In current Chinese popular culture, *danmei* refers to a genre that features homoromantic or homoerotic stories between two or more male characters, a genre that is majorly produced and consumed by women—a characteristic that sets it aside from homoerotic stories for gay men audience. Popular *danmei* writings on Chinese internet have been widely noticed both in and out of China, but only tentatively discussed in a scholarly background. This phenomenon has from the beginning been complicated concerning its culturally hybrid identity that follows and echoes similar trends from elsewhere—namely, *yaoi* or shōnen'ai or Boy's Love (BL) in Japan, and slash fiction in the West. *Danmei* is a newcomer in the global popular queer writing trend, sometimes bear the look of an asynchronous counterpart to the early 1970s subversion embodied by amateurish women writers in Japan and in the West. I encounter great difficulty in translation among three sets of terminologies when I tread my path through three languages and three bodies of writings. However, texts produced under these three traditions have more similarities than differences, which come more from social-cultural situations linked with individual audiences, than thematic or character traits that are directly observable in the texts. As a late comer, *danmei*, has been self-aware of its cultural identity, but it is not authentically Chinese; and its presentation and cultural position do not easily establish any simple equivalence with either *yaoi* or slash. Under the current global context, to understand any of the three traditions, we need to at least lay out the transnational and translingual flow of popular media and popular culture as a background and a context.

No matter it is slash or *yaoi* or *danmei*, the seemingly curious and exotic case of male homoerotic writings for female audience trigger discussions. Almost everyone asks this question “Why (heterosexual) women want to read love stories between homosexual men?” when first encountering such writings. The debate on the motivation still goes on after more than thirty years. The answers provided are much identical to one another under different cultural backgrounds, even though these writings are frequently discussed mostly in local contexts—culturally, socially, and politically—a situation I will detail later in this chapter. I will link these phenomena together, discuss them as an internationally connected (female) community, a heterogeneous flowing mediascape. Hereby I tentatively call all female created, female consumed male-male love stories, including but not limited to slash fiction, *yaoi*/BL/*shōnen*’ai, and *danmei*, as “homoromance,” whether they are derivative writings of an existing text or not. Such homoromance should ultimately include similar romantic stories between female characters, but in this chapter, I use it to refer exclusively to those romantic or erotic stories between male characters. Despite their different cultural social background, homoromance all comment on female conditions and experiences. The rhetoric of subversion is pervasive in any discussion on homoromantic writings, but the word “subversion” is overgeneralized; the subtleties and complexity, I argue, comes from the disjunction between the concrete but polysemic story plot and the not-so-direct message carried, which often has a utopian potential, but highly conservative and suppressive at times. Such disjunction and conflicting nature of homoromantic stories largely contribute to its wide and lasting attraction. Besides, male homoromance for women readership is lack of a center or even countable centers. A must-see canon list is impossible for slash and *danmei*, and increasingly so for *yaoi*. Most readers in this genre(s) tend to excavate their own interest. If we cannot decide the materials that readers

encounter, it would be difficult to give an all-inclusive conclusion. However, a general conclusion is hardly necessary, which I am not attempting to make here anyway.

Slash/Yaoi/Danmei

In recent decades, representation of queer population rapidly increases in not only art house cinema but also in mainstream popular media and literary products, as well as popular culture itself. If we go to the recent history, we see that almost simultaneously, in the 1970s, the English speaking *Star Trek* fandom and a group of Japanese amateurish female *manga* artists (known as the Group of Year 24) started exploration on similar topics of homosexual romance between male characters in the realm of popular culture.⁵⁷ Originally marginal and scandalized, both trends have successfully escaped the underground position and now enter the public view. Such phenomenon is closely related to the global civil rights movement concerning queer population, with frequent overlapping and interactions occur, but gay right movement is ultimately another trend (in the Japanese case, BL is often considered totally irrelevant to queer communities in the real life, as presented in the debate on *yaoi* in the 1990s⁵⁸). Mainland China is a late comer in this scene; with the generation growing in a gradually globalizing capitalizing and marketizing China finally reach their late teens, the word “*danmei*” emerged under the influence of imported Japanese *yaoi manga* in the mid-1990s. The *danmei* fandom, resembles the early development of the slash and *yaoi* fandoms, facing a scandalized position locally, but also

⁵⁷ Group of Year 24 (sometimes known as Group of Year 49) consists of a group of young female *manga* artists who were born around the Year 24 of Showa (1949), including primarily Hagio Moto, Takemiya Keiko and Aoike Yasuko, etc. They started to publish around the mid-1970s, entered and revolutionized the genre of girl-oriented *manga*. See Jenkins *Textual Poachers*, Bacon-Smith, Penley for more information about the beginning of slash fiction, and see Welker (“A Brief History”) for information on the history of shōnen’ai/Boys Love/YAOI *manga*.

⁵⁸ See Lunsing, Ishida for more details on the debate on *yaoi* (*Yaoi Ronsō*).

benefit from an increasing leniency towards queer topic world-widely, which was not available for their American and Japanese counterparts back in the 1970s. Similar to many other areas in Chinese culture and society, a highly compressed intensive cultural flow from dominant areas (i.e. developed countries, especially the United States, United Kingdom and Japan), presents in *danmei* writings and communities culturally and ideologically heterogeneous reaction. Such local reaction, emerging in a seemingly homogeneous mode of consumption and self-expression, is often self-contradictory, interlaced with cultural misunderstanding and over-interpretation, which reflects the complicated field intersected by various groups of power relationships.

Homoromance is about texts, but also about the communities that produce and consume them. All grow out of their communities and further nurture their communities. This audience have different names under each cultural background, in the US, they are called slash fans; in Japan, “*fujoshi*,” 腐女子, which literarily means “rotten incorrigible women;” in China, the title is not fixed, traditionally the female fans who participate in creating and reading such material are called “*tongrennü*” 同人女, which literarily means “fangirl,” though it bears a significant different connotation from this word used in the English language; in recently years, the Japanese word *fujoshi* is also widely used in China and is read *funü* in Chinese. Most of people involved are female, and the default sex for a fellow fan online is female in such communities⁵⁹.

Slash fiction was once viewed as a scandalized subgenre of fan fiction in the US, yet ironically it receives disproportionately intensive attention and study. Henry Jenkins, for example, claims that slash fiction “may be fandom’s most original contribution to the field of popular culture” (*Textual Poachers*, 188). Joanna Russ expresses that slash is “it is the only

⁵⁹ Such situation means that even if there are male participants in the community—which is true—they would often assume a female avatar or pseudonym to actively participate in the activities.

sexual fantasy by women for women that's produced without the control or interposition of censorship by commercial booksellers or the interposition of political intent by writers or editors" (94). This genre originated from the sci-fi fandom (and particularly, in the *Star Trek* fandom), and soon developed into other fandoms. The title "slash" means the "/" sign that fans put in between two names, indicating the romantic relationship in between the two characters that fans celebrate in their fan products. English speaking slash fiction fandom is strongly influenced by the old sci-fi fandom, and the most influential fandoms in the English speaking slash fandom are of sci-fi or fantasy genres, including *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Blake's 7* in the 70s, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *X-Files* in the 90s and then *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* in the 2000s.⁶⁰ Slash fiction, as part of fan fiction, belongs what Fiske termed, "shadow economy," that is supposed stay marginal and illegal, inside the fan community ("Cultural Economy," 30). Different from *yaoi*, slash fiction is still a genre struggling with copyrights holders and has to stay away from the traditional printing industry. Even though attempts have been made to facilitate online legal fan fiction publication—some successful, but most of them were not—the financial possibility for fan products is still largely a taboo, which is often considered immoral if fans choose to profit from it. Therefore, fans tend to stay away from problems, which makes slash fiction is now an internet-only phenomenon.

In the recent decades, with the influence of Japanese ACG culture increases, fan fiction (slash fiction included) based on Japanese media products flourishes in other languages, including English. *Yaoi* style and aesthetics is also introduced into English. Most academic writings in English treat *yaoi* separate from the slash fiction tradition, often citing slash fiction as

⁶⁰ See Jenkins *Textual Poachers*, Penley *NASA/Trek*, Busse and Hellekson for detailed history of fan fiction, especially slash fiction in the English speaking region.

the counterpart of *yaoi* in the West (Saito 172). While *yaoi* audience in the West is treated as another completely different community and mentality from slash fiction, the boundary between two communities is not as clear-cut.

Strictly speaking, there are more than just one genre of homoromantic storytelling in Japanese popular culture: usually, the distinction is made between *shōnen'ai* and *yaoi* (In Suzuki's paradigm, there are at least five different genres of male homoromantic writings in Japan, *shōnen'ai*, *tanbi*, *yaoi*, Boy's Love and *JUNE*; except the high literary association of *tanbi*, all the rest refer to certain commercial or amateurish publications of homoromance), it distinguishes between a commercial origin and a fan origin, while both of them come ultimately from amateurish creations. *Shōnen'ai* often refers to specifically eulogized romance between beautiful adolescent boys in a fantasy setting, represented by early works of the Group of Year 24, for example, Hagio Moto 萩尾望都, Takemiya Keiko 竹宮恵子, Aoike Yasuko 青池保子, etc. *Yaoi* is the acronym of a phrase “yama nashi, ochi nashi, imi nashi ヤマなし、オチなし、意味なし (no climax, no development, no meaning),” originally referring exclusively to sexually explicit contents, and often of parodic nature. Later this word widely applies to all male homoromance and homoerotica in both daily and academic vocabulary, encompassing other categories such as *shōnen'ai*, Boys' Love and *JUNE*. BL (boys' love) sometimes serves as an umbrella term for Japanese homoromance, but *yaoi* is a more traditional and widely accepted umbrella term, which I use in my dissertation, if no further distinction is indicated, partly because of its parodic connotation. Similar to the US slash fiction, *yaoi* started from amateurish works, with *shōnen'ai manga* a crucial breakthrough point for the then less privileged female *manga* artists to enter the *manga* industry. For *yaoi*, original creation predated the secondary / transformative creation. *Yaoi* parody (“parody” or “paro”, referring to derivative works in *yaoi*,

roughly equivalent to slash fiction in the English context) is believed to be dated back to the mid-1980s *Captain Tsubasa* fandom, a sports *manga* on soccer (Glasspool, Darlington, Hori). English scholarship pays almost exclusive attention towards the commercial *yaoi* publication and especially *yaoi manga*, the original *yaoi* creation and parody come ultimately from the same community, share the same set of linguistic and visual conventions. In this dissertation, I do not distinguish fan products from commercial *yaoi* publication if not otherwise noted. Original *yaoi* has already become part of the mainstream commercial publication in Japan. Besides *manga*, there are TV *anime*, cartoon films, novels, Drama CDs, illustration books, etc. This still niche market is both standardized and sustainable, operated as a fully developed multimedia franchise, similar to most other Japanese ACG products. Such materials have been translated and imported to other countries, including the US, but the earliest and probably most importantly, East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, including China.

Chinese commercial media culture was interrupted for at least 30 years after the PRC's establishment, and therefore, the contemporary capitalist commercial culture started as late as the late 1980s and early 1990s. The fan culture I examine in this dissertation, started almost exclusively online, and gradually spread outside the internet, rather than the other way around. Directly influenced by the Japanese ACG culture, Chinese fans' consumption mode resembles that of the Japanese fans, male and female. Influence from Japan travels through Taiwan and Hong Kong to the mainland. The Taiwan and Hong Kong translated *manga* and dubbed *anime* has been available in the form of pirated copies on Mainland China from the late 1980s. Mainland China TV stations and publishers also legally import *anime* and *manga*; for a period of time, Japanese *anime* is available in mainstream Chinese TV stations and bookstores until the import fad was stopped by the government in the name of supporting indigenous *anime* in 2006.

Due to the strict control of the import from State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), legally imported ACG products take only a very limited portion of the whole industry exposed on the internet towards the Chinese younger generation. Wang Zheng show in her statistic, the fan fiction online up to the date of her research in 2007, 60% of the Chinese fan fiction available online are based on Japanese ACG culture, while the Euro/American film and TV series fan fiction takes around 10% and the remaining 20% are of the Chinese sources (91). While the statistic is not completely reliable, it is enough to show the predominant presence of Japanese popular material in Chinese fandom in the first decade into the 21st Century.

Similar to the broader category of fan culture, Chinese *danmei* is strongly influenced by Japanese *yaoi anime* and *manga*, imported to China during the 1990s. Besides several mainstream *manga* with implicit reference to homosexual love by Clamp, such as *X, Tokyo Babylon*, a well-received *yaoi manga* among Chinese teenagers in the late 1990s, Ozaki Minami's *Zetsuai 1989* (絶愛-1989), played an important role in shaping the aesthetic taste of fangirls of that particular generation—a belated influence with a time lag of at least five to six years. After that, *danmei* flourishes online. A website called Jinjiang Literature 晋江原创网 is now one of the biggest and the most successful professional female-oriented romance websites in China.⁶¹ Many famous *danmei* (both fan fiction and original stories) and traditional heterosexual romance writers gain their fame there. Because *danmei* almost develops directly online, it has a complicated relationship with the mainstream publishing industry and mainstream media. The aforementioned terminally and spatially compressed international cultural flow makes stage of “taboo” and extreme stigmatization coexists with the already international attempt from the

⁶¹ Jinjiang Literature was established in 2003, and is currently the biggest internet literature website that targets female audience in China. It is famous for (heterosexual) romance and *danmei* writings.

media industry of exploitation and profiting from the homoromance fans and community.

Chinese *danmei* is diversified and chaotic especially because it is simultaneously coping with issues that its Western and Japanese counterparts faced throughout the previous several decades.

Technically speaking, slash, *yaoi* and *danmei* refers to bodies of writings of a similar description but do not exactly equate with one another in details. *Yaoi* and *danmei* are more or less identical, both differing slightly with slash. For one, slash is strictly fan fiction, transformative writings based on existing media or literary works, while *yaoi* and *danmei* can be either original or transformative. Besides, slash fiction involves “female slash,” in which female characters are depicted as homosexual lovers while *yaoi* and *danmei* mean exclusively love stories between male characters. Female homoromance, so-called “lily” (written in Chinese characters: 百合, pronounced *yuri* in Japanese and *baihe* in Chinese), exists both in Japanese and Chinese context. Generally speaking, male homoromance and female homoromance do not cater to the same community in the East Asian context. I will not elaborate this issue due to the space constraint.

The single most discussed difference between *yaoi/danmei* and slash fiction is the *seme/uke* dynamic, a strictly codified representation and expression system of role distinction between *seme* (攻め, literally, to attack) and *uke* (受け, literally, to receive), roughly translated into “the top” and “the bottom,” or “dominant” and “passive.” Yet the *seme* and *uke* dynamic does not only describe a fixed sex position but involves a complete set of character traits and plot conventions. Björn-Ole Kamm points out, that considering that *yaoi* is such a diversified genre, “the diegetic backbone of amateur works and later commercial works have been what is called the *seme-uke* order” (3.3). In other words, *yaoi* is characterized by this fixed characterization between these two roles in a relationship. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto points out the common bias

against *yaoi* in the United States because most people would naturally assume that the fixed *seme-uke* order would lead to a heteronormative narrative, and break the equal utopian envisioned in traditional slash writings. As Mark McLelland explains, because the Japanese language is especially sensitive in the interpersonal hierarchy, especially in conversations, there is often no possibility of achieving a complete equality, since other factors—such as age, or seniority in workplace—kick in when the gender difference is removed (279, “No point”). In other words, total equality is very difficult to achieve in the Japanese language, but not necessarily in between two people. Combined with the *seme-uke* order, such intricate hierarchy creates all types of combination and effects. In other words, these stereotypes are constantly challenged and transgressed. *Seme* can be passive, *uke* can be aggressive; while heteronormative interpretation stands out in *yaoi*, we can at least see the fluid identification possibilities when reading these stories.

Seme and *uke* are strictly settled that sometimes leads to stereotypes in visual traits, which are standardized into a norm and formula. According to Kazuko Suzuki’s interview, this dynamic is clearly spelled out by *yaoi* parody of commercial productions, “What separates these subgenres into the two groups is whether the rigid formality in narrative structure, in particular, the *seme-uke* framework, is adopted or not. This rigidity of the sexual positioning is not conspicuous in any of the early subgenres of male–male romance” (106). This distinction overlooks some tendencies in early Japanese homoromance such as *shōnen’ ai manga* by Group Year 24 artists. Most of these stories—taken place far beyond Japan in the past and in Europe—presents a distinction between a dark character and a pale blond character. In fact, critics tend to push the *seme* and *uke* distinction back to pre-modern Japan, in the form of same-sex love and sex celebrated in Edo period, with the elder of the couple serving the masculine and penetrating

role (Welker “Beautiful, Borrowed” 842, Peper and Cornog 6-12). Of course, recent *yaoi* and BL texts present a much rigid codified relationship. For instance, in Nakamura Shungiku’s 中村春菊 *manga*, including *Junjo Romantiku* 純情ロマンチック, and *Sekai ichi hatsukoi* 世界一初恋 (both works feature multiple male-male couples), a *seme* is always taller, with more adult-like face, narrow eyes and a square chin, while an *uke* is usually shorter, with round doe eyes and a pointed chin. The identities of “up” and “bottom” are codified into a representation system, that the “order” of *seme* and *uke* becomes so crucial that it might seriously affect character descriptions. Even though no obligatory connection is observed between certain types of action, there is still fixed expectation to meet, basing on the formulae that authors follow or revise. Such codified distinction in the English slash fandom is much less observed. The mentality of *seme* and *uke* order is so influential, that frequently do we see Chinese fans complain the lack of awareness of “showing the exact up and bottom relationship” in English fan fiction⁶². Although this order cannot be easily equaled to a heteronormative presentation in homosexual love, it requires further investigation on its dynamic in homoromance—how authors and readers adopt, revise, circumvent, or subvert it in their writing, and how conformity and transgression generate pleasure respectively for readers.

To show how this system works in East Asian fandom, I here raise the specific requirement in Chinese *danmei* forums. According to the social norm and courtesy, Chinese fan forums usually ask a fan writer to clearly mark the “order” of the couple: the order that the two names appear is not random: the one in the front must be the *seme*. Interesting things happen when a fan translates a slash fiction from a foreign language (usually English) and post on the forum to share

⁶² See the blog entry by kacakaca as an example, in which the author gives various criteria to decide the *seme/uke* order when reading fan fiction on an English fan fiction archive website (Archive of Our Own). The author complains that the “foreign girls” do not show the order of the characters clearly.

with other fans: the fan has to go to the sex scenes first, find out the identities of the penetrator and the penetrated, and clearly mark on the title of the story to warn fellow fans. If more than one sexual intercourse is detailed in the story, a responsible translator will have to give an approximation that which partner is majorly the “up” if multiple possibilities occur. For example, this title that I randomly picked from the TV board of a famous Chinese slash fiction site on Euro-American popular content, movietvslash.com, “[Sherlock] 【翻译】 【WH/NC-17/轻微BDSM】 如获至珍/You Told Me I'm Golden (完结),” shows all the tags and warnings at once: it is a story in the *Sherlock* fandom; it is a translated story; the major couple is Watson and Holmes (with Watson acting as the top); the story contains explicit sexual description, so it should be rated NC-17 (because China does not have a rating system, many Chinese fans use the most familiar rating system available to them: MPAA film rating system); the story contains a slight portion of BDSM; and finally the title: 如获至珍, which is the Chinese translation that the translator chooses for the original English title “You Told Me I’m Golden;” then the last word “完结” in the parenthesis indicates the work is completed (refer to Watson’s post for the detailed interactions between the translator and the readers). As we can see here: the order of the two characters indicates the up and bottom relationship between them and the order that a fan indicates a couple shows her attitude and interpretation of their personal relationships. Without further indication, the simple order of two names shows the possible dynamic through a set of predetermined stereotypes, that even without reading the actual story, a reader can basically guess what to expect. The order of the names is so important that it has to be noted in the title—for some readers, it is much more important than warnings on rating and controversial topics such as BDSM.

While scholars have extensively debated on the *seme/uke* dynamic in *yaoi* texts, especially on its strictly codified representation system, it does not mean that slash fiction is completely equal or out of stereotypes. On the contrary, slash fiction is also full of characterization stereotypes, and tends to present a hierarchy between lovers—starting with K/S stories, featuring Spock as an ethnic other, which as Elizabeth Woledge suggests, fits perfectly in the “ethnic sidekick” paradigm, which means an implicit feminization (“Intimatopia” 108). In other words, the lack of a rigidly codified representation does not necessarily guarantee the absence of hierarchy; sometimes it just makes the hierarchy deceptively unobvious.

The word “fandom” needs complication in *yaoi* and *danmei* culture, because they do not only contain transformative writings but also involve a significant portion of original stories. These original stories are sometimes better known, more widely circulated and criticized than *yaoi/danmei* fan fiction. For the organization of original *yaoi* and *danmei*, the readership and the identity linked with it is slightly different from fan fiction readers and writers. The Chinese title for *danmei* readers, so-called “*tongrennü*” or “fangirls” can easily confuse people, for the idea of “fangirls” in China link not primarily with the idea of transformative creation, but with the idea of romance between homosexual male characters. Fandoms for the original *yaoi* fiction and *manga* resembles those of a particular popular literary genre (such as “fantasy fans”), rather than the fandom structured in the fan fiction community in which people gather according to the different original texts that they feel especially attached to. In this case, the activities that fangirls who read original *danmei* story might be very different from fangirls who generally consume fan fiction and therefore usually devote as much time and energy in reading the original text as the fan products. However, these two groups cannot be torn apart easily, considering that a large number of fangirls consume both types actively. The identity of *danmei/yaoi* lover overwhelms

the connection that a fan establishes with certain original texts in the Chinese context. While *danmei* fan fiction explores the possible relationship between two characters that readers already know and love, original *danmei* creates male characters for people to fall in love with, though not without the restriction of generic conventions and expectations. Even though reading experience differs in detailed aspects, readers concern about similar issues: gender role play, ideal masculinity (and femininity), etc. Out of this reason, the word “fandom” is used loosely in this chapter. With this word, I am not emphasizing the emotional attachment that readers establish with one or a group of texts, but rather a community sharing the same type of mentality.

Even though some popular texts have fans in various cultural and linguistic background, such as the global *Sherlock* fandom, intricate differences and cultural powers would still exist in between one another.⁶³ Slash or *yaoi* or *danmei* each situates in a different social and cultural context, serving their own function in different social situations. But at the same time, these trends are not independent of each other to be treated all as a culturally isolated phenomenon. Therefore, popular homoromantic writings for and by female fans can be viewed as an interconnected but still self-sustaining genre in popular writing. While Wood suggests that *yaoi* (and *yaoi* alone) represents a rise of global counter public (396), I tend to understand the collective of homoromance writing as an international collective of majorly female readers and writers, who actively consider and reconsider gender roles, sexual experience and gender representation on a daily basis, using popular media and popular culture as a medium and a basis of discussion. To avoid cultural specificity in my discussion when I discuss this phenomenon as

⁶³ Cultural power, specifically, presents in the linguistic power relationship inside a global fandom: a well-written fan fiction in English is always translated into various other languages, while seldom does the reverse happen. See, for example, coloredink, the author of the *Sherlock* fan fiction “and stand there at the edge of my affection” lists the links to Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, Polish, Japanese, Slovak, Hebrew, Spanish and Italian translations. The direction that cultural products flow directly accords to the power hierarchy in the global culturalscape.

a collective existence, hereby I would use the term “homoromance” to roughly denote this cross-cultural phenomenon, if not otherwise specified.

The Rhetoric of Resistance and Feminine Experience

Slash or *yaoi* or *danmei*, none of them is homogeneous. Considering the fact that there is not a singular set of “canonical texts” or “must-see” for such writings (probably with the already highly commercialized original *yaoi* as an exception), scholarships tend to be either over-generalized or over-representative—not necessarily in a harmful way. With different examples in mind, readers or researchers may even reach conclusions contradictory to one another. Because of the difficulty in quantitative research, it seems almost impossible and unnecessary for any generalized conclusion. However, the rhetoric of resistance seems to apply to all homoromantic writings around the world without an exception. Such rhetoric builds on the assumption that these homoromantic writings ultimately relate back to the real life experience of the women who write and read these stories. Whether homoromantic writings are about rebel against the patriarchal norms in the real life, early assessments of this genre has to be complimented and revised in later writings; but the relationship with the female experience remains the core issue for investigation for scholars.

While *danmei* only entered the scholar interest in both Chinese and in English for less than ten years, slash fiction and *yaoi* has been thoroughly analyzed ever since the 1980s, with very few overlappings or detailed comparisons occurring in between. In most scholarship on slash, *yaoi* and *danmei*, queer-feminist resistance (or hetero-patriarchal lack of resistance) takes a significant presence, even though most admit the complexity of ideological message and fluidity of position in the consumption of male-male romance. The first question raised in all cases is

“Why (heterosexual) women love to read romantic stories about homosexual men?” The heterosexual assumption has been generally overthrown with marginal readers of lesbians and gays come into sight (Wood, 397). But majority of the slash/*yaoi/danmei* fans in discussion are still female, male fans, straight and gay, takes a significantly smaller number and often less noticed, and according to Kazumi Nagaike, “demonstrates the existence of a (subconscious) psychological male desire for self-feminization through male readers’ identification with those images of seemingly gay men that were originally designed by and for women” (190-191). Male-male homoromance, therefore, is often treated as a camouflage for discussion of femininity and female problems. Camille Bacon-Smith, for example, suggests that women writers encounter difficulty in creating believable female heroes, so gay men are their second choice in presenting “oppressed sexuality” (247). Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith suggest that female fans’ ideal love between Kirk and Spock directly solves most problems that they themselves encounter in the real life experience: “they provide a vision of a new way of loving and especially a vision of new possibilities for women. They are about the possibility of joining integrity to the self with fidelity to one’s partner” (114). On the Japanese side, a similar argument is made about female *yaoi* fans, that fascination upon beautiful young boys rooted from the suppressive and restriction of the patriarchal society on their own sex (McLelland, Fujimoto, Welker). James Welker compares Laura Mulvey’s theory on female spectatorship, claiming that in *yaoi* narratives, “the boys’ love narratives suggest that rather than spectators mentally cross-dressing in order to consume texts made by and for males, female writers cross-embody female characters to enable female readers to inhabit liberatory narrative created for them” (“Beautiful, Borrowed” 844). Kumiko Saito concludes, that “[i]t seems most appropriate to hypothesize that BL characters are self-projections of female writers/readers living in the heteronormative world and therefore that

homophobia and misogyny are almost essential narrative devices for constructing ideal romances as envisioned by women” (182). Hence, accompanying the fantasy narratives in *yaoi*, there is always debate upon issues as homophobia and misogyny.

Early critics of slash fiction usually see it as a utopian of feminist agenda. Joanna Russ enthusiastically acclaims slash fiction in her paper title, as “porn by women, for women, with love.” Constance Penley argues that slash fiction allows fluid identification during the reading process, that readers of slash fiction are able to shift among various perspectives in their consumption process of slash fiction. She suggests that women’s relationship to the consumption of popular culture, especially in slash fiction writing and reading, is not a regressive pre-Oedipal identification with mother, but because of “the multiple possibilities of identification and numerous pleasures found there that do not seem to originate in the time and space of the pre-Oedipal” (“Feminsm, Psychoanalysis” 480). In this way, she argues that the fantasy in slash fiction reading and writing comes ultimately from the multiple possibilities of identification provided by this pure male relationship. On the basis of earlier feminist discussion, Jenkins uses Eve Sedgwick’s theory of male homosocial relationship, suggesting that slash fiction is a possible interpretation of the homosocial bonding between male characters in the original texts, not reappropriation (*Textual Poachers* 202-205). Therefore, slash fiction actually participates in redefining and representing male sexuality.

These early critics have a common tendency of romanticizing slash fiction, openly celebrating its utopian possibility of presenting a true equal love relationship available for women under the influence of patriarchal mainstream popular culture. Only one of the three critical tendencies above, Jenkins’s idea of a continuum in between homoerotic and homosocial, involves interpretation of the original story, the rest concern majorly with the textual presentation

of the rewritten texts. While as Jenkins points out twenty years later, that such polemic position in early fan studies is necessary for changing social stereotypes around fan community, later fan scholars complicate the discussion by addressing the less transgressive and utopian aspects of fan culture, or qualities that stands directly contrary to the utopian vision suggested by early fan scholars—not to suggest fan culture is unpleasantly stale and corrupted, but simply complicate the situation and suggests alternative possibilities that homoromantic fictions relate to the mainstream, and to the female condition. Both Catherine Driscoll and Elizabeth Woledge very straightforwardly—but in different ways—argue that slash fiction is not as special and new as many early critics suggest, by convincingly establishing the direct lineage of slash fiction with romance and pornography—two categories that early critics tend to deny either or both. Driscoll argues that “while much fan fiction is explicitly romance and/or porn, all fan fiction is implicitly both” (91).

Male characters in such writings in all cultures are identified as androgynous. For slash fiction, as Lamb and Veith show, Captain Kirk and Spock can both be attributed typical masculine and typical feminine traits in slash fiction writing, displayed in a page-long chart, therefore, allowing readers’ identification without gender distinction. For this issue, Woledge draws a comparison between slash fiction and mainstream commercial sci-fi or fantasy writings, suggesting they both deal with fantasy. For example, James D. Riemer claims that science fiction and fantasy texts traditionally represent homosexuality via “characters who embody both male and female qualities” (159, qtd. in Woledge, 52). She also points out the exact problem in slash fiction: if slash fiction is subversive to disrupt the depiction of masculinity and femininity, the claim still assumes “the persistence of binary thinking that we are able to perceive and describe heroes who can at least combine the binary opposites” (62).

For Japanese *yaoi* culture, nearly all scholar has pointed to the “willowy figure, delicate feature” of the protagonists in *shōnen'ai manga*, which Western readers may or may not be approved of (Zanghellini 289). The figure of “*shōnen*,” adolescent boys in Japanese *shōnenai manga*, signify a presocialized and sexualized identity, neither male nor female, but a third sex. As quoted in Tomoko Aoyama, the famous early *shōnen'ai manga* creator Hagio Moto choose to set her story in a boys’ boarding school instead of a girls’ school just because of the fantasy distance. “I found the plan about the girls' school to be gloomy and disgusting...Take a kissing scene, for instance...as sticky as fermented soybeans” (cited in Aoyama, 1988, p. 189) McLelland suggests that Hagio’s decision might come from her concern of homophobic reaction from her readers, a fear of lesbian sexuality from being repelled from the scene (“The Love” 18). Yet however, from another aspect, the beautiful boys in *shōnen'ai manga* can be read as lesbians, as Welker argues, as “narrative outlaw” (“Beautiful, Borrowed” 865). The young boys in *yaoi* (especially early *shōnen'ai manga*) is supposed to be neither homosexual nor male, but gender-neutral individuals as narrative devices function as female readers and writers’ identification in the fantasized background. These seemingly contradictory theories on beautiful boy’s images in Japanese *yaoi* demonstrate that the unsettled ideological status of the fictional narrative as itself; it needs readers and critics to take in their own position, interpretation and preference to finalize the encoding process.

Under the Chinese circumstances, *danmei* is often interpreted as a generational presentation of subversion and anxiety, nailing down specifically to young women born in the 1980s and the 1990s (so-called post-80 and post-90 generation). The ironic situation, however, is that mainstream media and literary products are taking use of implicit reference to homosexual subtext (sometimes such reference might be unintentional) in recent years while such

exploitative act still it is mostly an unpublishable genre. As a result, although various genres of “internet literature” have grown increasingly popular and lucrative in the traditional print media since the mid-2000s, the majority of *danmei* literature stays at online distribution and online sharing. This condition also makes the original *danmei* stories closer in status to fan fiction. The One Child Policy in China creates only daughters who claim the limited educational resources and parents’ attention that are usually devoted to the male descendants. A whole generation of young women that do not take for granted the belief of male priority and superiority, in any aspects of lives in the child ages and school years, suddenly encounter with the “real world” of sexist bias in both families and in working places. This particular social condition is frequently referenced as an important foundation for the widespread contemporary Chinese youth subculture, especially young women’s subculture (Zhang Bing 172, Zhu Ruichen 114, Ma Zhonghong and Lu Guojing). Yang Ling and Xu Yanrui, with their thorough analysis of a specific subgenre in Chinese *danmei* writing, i.e. father-son incest stories, grounded part of Chinese fangirls’ transgression and subversion towards the particular social condition of current Chinese society, especially the oppressive political structure and the family institution. Their conclusion is highly localized onto the specific Chinese social condition, counting issues as filial piety in traditional Chinese culture as the responsible elements in the stories they discuss.

McLelland argues that studies on *yaoi* has a problematic pathologizing perspective, which “has so far tended to marginalize and pathologize those women who enjoy this genre, suggesting that their interest in homosexual love arises from their failure to satisfactorily engage with romantic relationships between men and women” (288, “No climax”). While he makes a valid observation concerning the heteronormative patriarchal tendency in this almost unnatural attention towards the worldwide homoromance writing community, his approach towards the

issue is counterproductive—we should pathologize the action of heterosexual love stories reading as a response, instead of simply claiming everything to be natural and normal. In fact, while slash fiction reading and writings, or all intimatopia writings, follows a similar narrative and emotional pattern in Woledge's paradigm, I suggest this conclusion can be applied to a larger collection of texts. Non-fan fiction *yaoi* and *danmei* can be both recognized as the mainstream commercial intimatopia writings she identifies in the English-speaking countries. It is also possible to further examine male-female romantic writings under the influence of male-male romance, in all these languages. As Kumiko Saito observes, "Popular *manga* for adult women, on the other hand, are increasingly adapting what BL fans consider being "*yaoi*-like relationships" in heterosexual romance, i.e., the potentially romantic friendship based on matching and competition" (188). In other words, an equal relationship based on professional relationship between companions, instead of direct power relationship is not totally unlikely in the presentation of heterosexual love in popular culture as we see now. The narrative conventions, plotlines and formulae, after being well circulated in homoromantic writings, may probably become a gender-neutral convention for all romantic narratives.

It would be hasty to claim that homoromance has little to do with the male characters' sex, or their sexual orientation, but I do think it is a beneficial move to further retreat from the penis envy rhetoric and see fan fiction as a whole, with its position in traditional heterosexual romance and all kinds of romantic narratives, and mainstream popular literary or media narratives. In fact, in current popular scene, where producers of popular narratives exploit homoromantic narrative strategies to attract potential female followers become default everywhere, including in China, where clear representation of homosexuality is still not clearly proved of, we should consider

mainstream popular narratives and heterosexual romance with the looming shadowy figure of homoromance in the background. And vice versa.

With this lengthy literature review on critiques about worldwide male-male romance, I do not want to reach a simple conclusion that either male-male romance is progressive or regressive, either about women or not. Being a majorly female created and female oriented genre, homoromance in one way or another, address female concerns and conditions. It does open a platform for open discussion on queer topics, including real life gay politics (even though many argues otherwise), but the queer topics are not irrelevant to the female fans, whose sexuality is in a way queer itself. I suggest that male-male romance presents female conditions in a highly contorted way; most homoromances are polysemic enough to guarantee contradictory interpretations. To achieve the utopian vision envisioned by early feminist critics, readers are equally responsible as the writers of homoromance, just as fans' interpretation, often unintended by producers, may determine the potential of a popular text. To examine how female issues and female identities are discussed in fandoms around the world, I am raising two extremely controversial genres in fan fiction writings (strictly speaking, both of them have drifted outside the realm of derivative fan writings), to discuss the ways that fan writings address female condition and issues, and the way that female fans position themselves in such writings.

The Problem with Mary Sue

Mary Sue is an ironic and awkward component of fan fiction. Something that many started their fan writing with, and the exact same thing that most of them soon graduated from, never wanting to admit it again. The irony with Mary Sue is that she is a powerful female character that feminists should have loved to see in the original text, but the fan community does not want her

there. An origin myth keeps reproducing itself each day in Chinese *danmei* fandom; when a fangirl is inquired why she becomes interested in love stories between two men, the most frequent answer she gives is: “We are tired of seeing multiple handsome men fall in love and fight for an idiot girl. We don’t want to see it, instead, we want to see them fall in love with each other” (Wolfeye). If this universal answer is true, then *danmei* should serve for fangirls as a compensation for inadequate romance in traditional heterosexual romance, and especially a failed female protagonist, that no longer meet the female audience’s expectations. A possible solution is to provide a perfect female character to make the infatuation convincing. However, fan fictions with original female characters are now the most controversial and stigmatized type in fan fiction in recent fandoms. The distinction between a story with a character that cannot be found in the original story and a failed story is never consistent or coherent. Slash used to be a taboo, but Mary Sue is always a target of ridicule. Slash has been accepted and celebrated, but Mary Sue has become the teenage self-indulgence that almost all fangirls try to hide in the closet. With such situation, it is not exaggerating to say, stories with original female character is a stigmatized and controversial type of writings in fandoms. Not only so, Mary Sue is now an impossible subgenre in fan fiction to talk about, because the fan community itself is never clear what exactly it is against to bad writing, over identification, or just the existence of an original female character. The three choices concern three different aspects of the subgenre: literary quality, the psychological reaction induced by the stories, and the existence of a character. In many cases, you may find that people are actually debating on completely different issues.

Let’s first go back to another origin myth. The namesake of the subgenre of Mary Sue, written by Paula Smith, which dated back to 1974, is surprisingly short and simple:

"Gee, golly gosh, gloriosky," thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. "Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the Fleet—only 15-1/2 years old."

Captain Kirk came up to her. "Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?"

"Captain! I am not that kind of girl!"

"You're right. And I respect you for it. Here, take over the ship while I go for some coffee for us."

Mr. Spock came onto the bridge. "What are you doing in the Command Seat, Lieutenant?"

"The Captain told me to."

"Flawlessly logical. I admire your mind."

Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott beamed down with Lt. Mary Sue to Rigel XXXVII. They were attacked by green androids and thrown into prison. In a moment of weakness Lt. Mary Sue revealed to Mr. Spock that she, too, was half Vulcan. Recovering quickly, she sprung the lock with her hairpin and they all got away safely back to the ship.

But back on board, Dr. McCoy and Lt. Mary Sue found out that the men who had beamed down were seriously stricken by the jumping cold robbies, Mary Sue less so. While the four officers languished in Sick Bay, Lt. Mary Sue ran the ship, and ran it so well she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood.

However, the disease finally got to her and she fell fatally ill. In the Sick Bay, as she breathed her last, she was surrounded by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy

and Mr. Scott all weeping unashamedly at the loss of her beautiful youth and youthful beauty, intelligence, capability and all around niceness. Even to this day her birthday is a national holiday on the Enterprise. (Paula Smith, [6.1]-[6.12] qtd. in Walker)

This short story is a parody, a spoof towards the bad writings that prevailed fan publications in the 1970s *Star Trek* fandom. A powerful perfect young woman that earns the heart of the well beloved male protagonist(s)—such character is not expected in the original narrative of *Star Trek* back in the 1970s but constantly appears in fan fictions. Therefore this short story of only 300 words captures in a parodic mode of the clichés and conventions in such stories: young, beautiful and smart female original character, a favorite of multiple male characters, who but was also respected for her perfect professional ability, rescues the day miraculously, and dies protecting or for the sake of the male character(s) she loves.

Mary Sue stories, usually written by teenage female fans, are mostly identified as shameless self-projection and self-indulgence. The phrase “Mary Sue” has been from the beginning carrying a negative connotation—the author of the parody, Smith, explaining that this story comes from her attempt to find patterns from craps (2.3). But Smith also admits that seems that “[the] Mary Sue seemed to almost be a necessary stage for a writer” (2.17). Upon the observation that readers are often more lenient to male characters when involving self-projection in fictional creations, Smith also suggests that Mary Sue “represents the teenage girl suddenly finding power. It is the power of her sexual attraction” (2.23). Bacon-Smith also suggests that “For intelligent women struggling with their culturally anomalous identities, Mary Sue combines the characteristics of an active agent with the culturally approved traits of beauty, sacrifice, and self-effacement, which magic recipe wins her the love of the hero” (101). Similar views can also

be found in Chander and Sander, who claim that Mary Sue is “in fact a figure of subaltern critique, challenging the stereotypes of the original” (597). However, people have never reached a consensus on its definition. Originally Smith compares the presence of a Mary Sue character in a story to “a black hole, a neutron star, because it warps everything else out of their normal orbits” (2.19), in other words, a character that steals attention and favors from the beloved characters in the original story, and changes plots and character personalities simply for the sake of this original character. Anupam Chander and Madhavi Sander see Mary Sue as the prototype of all original characters, or even any attempt of fan creation that deviates from the original narrative; they even call slash fiction a type of Mary Sue. Bacon-Smith’s definition of Mary Sue is restricted to the stories with adolescent female characters as protagonists; as a result, she suggests that Mary Sue is an alter ego for female fans to transit from a girl to a woman, and “to make the transition from child to woman, the active agent within her had to die” (102). In her definition, the “lay” subgenre of fan fiction—the fan fiction in which the alter ego for the author have sexual relationship with the male character in the original story—does not belong to Mary Sue because of the prominent sexual desire in lay stories, and the refusal of the superhuman abilities in Mary Sue, purely from instincts. For Smith, Mary Sue is defined by writing quality: bad original female characters that twist personalities of other characters; for Chander and Sander, Mary Sue is defined by her mode of rewriting: she disagrees with the original story and then put her own desire to shift it on a fair use; for Bacon-Smith, Mary Sue is a set of textual traits: a fantasy of perfection for adolescent female readers. These three ideas are closely related but operate on completely distinctive narrative levels.

Giving a full and strict definition for a term like Mary Sue is futile, because even if the criteria could be clearly articulated, they are still subject to readers’ personal understanding in

practical application, especially when this criterion involves statements like “overt self-projection.” Compared to “overt,” even “self-projection” is easy to define. The problem with Mary Sue is, nobody knows exactly where to draw the line between legitimate imagination and shameless self-indulgence. In general, the phrase has been overused; that for some fans, Mary Sue refers to nearly all original female characters in fan fiction. In most cases, Mary Sue is not a homogeneous collection of writings, but instead, a convenient label for “bad writing involving original female characters.” The fussy definition for the word shows the constantly combated ground for its definition, but at the same time, it shows a lack of real effort in excavating the core problem involved in the debate: Why do people love to hate Mary Sue? What do they hate in this subgenre? And how do we define the things they hate? In this chapter, I use its original meaning: fan fictions with original female characters as the protagonists, who are young, beautiful and able, and are usually projections of the authors themselves.

Practically speaking, though many female readers and writers enter the fandoms reading and writing Mary Sue stories, rarely does anyone end up in such genre, a phenomenon that both Smith and Bacon-Smith mention. Guides and tests are provided for fan fiction authors to stay away from writing Mary Sue. There is a guide titled “How should we avoid Mary Sue?” early in the development of Chinese fandom in the 2000s, which is a translation from an English article titled “Mary Sue, how to avoid her?” written by a fan handled “aldowdall.”⁶⁴ The author gives eight suggestions for fan fiction writers to avoid Mary Sue, including describing some faults of your original female character; do not always tell the story through her perspective; do not make her the center of every story; do not give her too many talents, and think twice before making her

⁶⁴ The original English text has been deleted and becomes irretrievable. Therefore, the quotations here are all translated back from the Chinese translation. See Adlo for one of the reposts of the widely circulated translation.

fall in love with a male character. The author presents in this short essay a rather conflicted attitude towards Mary Sue: she starts her guide explaining that she is not against Mary Sue (for her, the alter ego of the author themselves in the story), but bad Mary Sue characters are those perfect individuals that everyone dreams to be but not able to be. The major idea that the author expresses is: “Write it only when you are 100% sure and after you have thorough discussions with your friends. Stop it if anyone tells you that your character is only a daydream.” The oxymoron presents first through this definition of “The Mary Sue that I am against here refers to the bad Mary Sues.” During the interview, Smith expresses that the restriction placed on Mary Sue has already harmed creativities that nearly all original female characters receive criticism of being Mary Sue, but no one is able to clearly delineate the boundary between acceptable fantasy and shameless self-indulgence.

While Mary Sue is already hard enough to define purely in the realm of fan fiction, it has now been widely used outside fan fiction, which makes definition even a harder task. The phrase “Mary Sue” apply also to original stories, sometimes called “Canonsue.” A frequent example is a character, Wesley Crusher in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a widely criticized character in the TV series. Many suggest that he is the alter ego of the producer and writer of the show, Gene Roddenberry, whose middle name is Wesley (adlo). In the Chinese context, even though this phrase has circulated in the fandom for a long time, it enters the mass media only because a certain type of fantasized writings online, usually written by young teenage girls. A prototype of Chinese Mary Sue in the popular media (especially outside the fan community) is a girl with a ridiculously long name consisted of flowery but meaningless combination of characters, such as “冰晶泪蝶 · 恋雪 · R · 殇紫雪丽莎 · 薇雅拉 (pronounced *bingjingleidie lianxue R shangzixuelisha weiyala*, most characters are without substantial meaning, only look cheezily

good, the first part of the name means ‘ice, crystal, tear, butterfly’)” beautiful long hair and eyes (usually with very exotic color such as rainbow color), such as in this description: “Usually her long wavy hair that reaches her knees is purple; when she is angry, it turns red; when she is distressed, it turns white; when she is excited, it turns into the color of rainbow-colored-cherry-blossom, so beautiful and alluring that she can win over people of a whole city” (Zuaimuyu).⁶⁵ These writings are believed to be authored by pre-teen young girls and posted on Baidu Tieba, a public internet forum previously requires no registration to post on. Such writings gain their fame through mockeries that went virus. The problem is we can no longer determine the actual authors of such writings are serious or are they rather writing a parody—and the latter is very possibly the answer. Many point out the real problem with such writings lies in the strange combination of unrealistic characterization and rather immature actions.⁶⁶ What critiques usually accentuate is that the extraordinary or supernatural abilities possessed by Mary Sue are not the problem, if the author succeeds in convincing the readers that they make enough effort for them to deserve their abilities and the attentions from other characters.

With these explanations, the issue in question in plausibility and realism in fan fiction creation. One reason for widespread resentment for Mary Sue characters comes from the uncomfortable psychological intimacy between the readers and a character too unrealistic to be true. If this is the case, Mary Sue stories do not provide a detached point of view but force the female audience to identify with the female character, which then make them realize the highly unrealistic situation that they are put in, and therefore becomes more disillusioned during the

⁶⁵ See Zuaimuyu for one of the many repostings of the story. The original post is already impossible to retrieve now.

⁶⁶ See one of the replies to Elbereth’s blog cited. “I think the most despicable thing about Mary Sue or Jack Sue is the feeling of incongruity that ‘the queen eats dry persimmons.’” “我觉得玛丽苏或杰克苏最让人鄙夷的地方是那股子“皇后娘娘吃柿饼”的违和感啊……” by which the author suggests the problem of Mary Sue lies in its non-realistic descriptions.

reading process. On the other hand, Mary Sue writings sometimes mean total and rivalrous identification, by which I mean the female character in such writings sometimes is the direct self-personification of the female author (a tradition in Mary Sue writings: the Mary Sue character often share the name with the author). Anne Kustritz provides an explanation for the unpopularity of Mary Sue, claiming that a character too perfect forbid the relevance of these characters to the ordinary readers.

Mary Sue's overwhelming perfection is a reproduction of the romance system that is already in place in our culture, namely that a woman deserves the love of a desirable partner for achieving a culturally predetermined ideal of beauty. Mary Sue characters tell readers, the majority of whom are female, that the attainment of the desired partner is to be found only through perfection. She highlights exactly how unattainable the desired partner--or any desired partner--is for an average woman. (Kustritz, 380)

Kustritz's argument is logically sound, yet according to readers' comments to Mary Sue, yet according to fans' own explanations, perfection is not the problem. It is not perfection that suspends the pleasure, but the perfection without plausibility. In other words, most readers tend to ask for a sound reason for the perfection, probably a convincing trajectory of skill perfection to actually believe a female character is able to be perfect on a realistic base. The awkwardness of identification with a character of a teenager dream that one soon realize to be too unrealistic and indulgent, seems to reinforce the failure of the female sex and sexuality even more. In other words, Mary Sue seems to fit in the failure of heterosexual romance perfectly; it does not remedy the problem, but constantly reminds readers of the failure, and the impossibility to change the current situation.

Admit it, are we against female characters, or are we against bad writings? Or neither? The fuzzy boundary of the idea of Mary Sue enlarges during everyday usage and practices. Accept the harsh truth, that readers (no matter male or female) are stricter to female characters than to male characters. We see male characters with the same supernatural power and super sexually appealing power to the female characters—with none of the ability requiring any training and self-cultivation, but readers generally do not have huge problem accepting these characters, even the word “Gary Stu” (or “Jack Sue”) is equally available to describe such phenomenon. Creating a believable and lovable female character is often much difficult than writing a male character. Just as Bacon-Smith’s interviewees point out, Captain Kirk is a typical case of Gary Stu, if we are to scrutinize him with the same closeness that we do to the Mary Sue characters in fan fiction (97).

Women characters generally face more judgment and criticism from the readers, which makes same-sex love stories, love stories without women taking part in, a much more convenient and more logical solution to failed heterosexual romance than creating convincing and good women characters. For many homoromance writers, women characters are only secondary to the story; they enter the romantic relationship with either of the main male characters, only to become the “gunpowder” that suffer the fate of being dumped in the name of true love; some of the female characters become the unhappy but enduring obedient wife for a male character, with almost a masochist attitude; some others, however, died. Female characters also would become antagonists in homoromance here, so negatively portrayed that readers seldom sense any encouragement to identify with them. The complication with women characters marks the moral ambiguity for homoromance because if femininity and women are only indirectly discussed in the interaction between male characters, the seemingly redundant female characters are more

directly about the female authors and audiences themselves; yet they are not often favorably depicted. Just as female characters in homoromance, Mary Sue is an embarrassment for fan community concerning gender equality and stereotype issues. If we understand *danmei* writing purely to that female readers refuse to identify with the traditional female stereotypes, we find that most of the refusal stay at a destructive level, abandoning the stereotypical femininity in traditional heterosexual romance together with the female characters themselves. The resistance that they made towards the stereotypical female characters presents as a total and utter refusal to any representation of the female characters, but not necessarily struggling to better it. On the other hand, however, we find the psychological intimacy does create a problem for female characters. Mary Sue characters are at the same time exclusive—that they sometimes bear the exact same name of the writer, and universal—an unavoidable and embarrassing stage for all newcomers into the fandoms. They are repulsive on both levels and therefore tend to suspend the narrative plausibility. Underlying all of this, is still a distrust and self-doubt towards the female sex—that female characters usually require more evidence to show the possibility of perfection. Until this condition is remedied, Mary Sue would probably remain a stigmatized genre, and further, serve, sometimes unfairly, as the synonym of “bad writings.”

Omegaverse, Porn and Utopia

The kink trope of “Alpha / Beta / Omega Dynamic,” is a further complication of gender issues in the global homoerotic writings. It deviates from most typical homoerotic or homoromantic writings by introducing another set of gender distinction. By analyzing this idiosyncratic trope, its production and reception, again I suggest slash fiction writing is closely related to concerns and anxieties of the female community that produces and consumes these

writings. With the newly added sexual differences in human species, the discussion on masculinity and femininity takes on an exotic but uncannily similar tint to the reality. I argue that the seemingly regressive heteronormative setting does not lead to the celebration of heteronormativity, but provide a hypothetical situation for one to explore the possibility in gender play and the problems that women face as a subordinate sex. Omegaverse is potential of powerful social comment and critique but has an equal potential of staying in a self-secluded universe without any outset reference. The ideological messages in Omegaverses are neither straightforward nor simple; and I do not think it necessary to change the situation because significance often lies in the hesitation and ambiguity inside the texts.

The trope of omegaverse is believed to have popularized by the *Supernatural* fandom in January 2011 through an anonymous kink meme post, though a similar setting is found dated in the 1990s in *X File* fandom.⁶⁷ Alpha, Beta and Omega are terms adopted from ethology, originally describing social hierarchy in social animals, such as canine. This kink trope assumes that human beings too have this hierarchical distinction; the alpha / beta / omega distinction presents on male and female individuals in equal probability and in most stories can only be observed after puberty. This hierarchical distinction is based on biological characteristics: alphas, disregarding their sexes, can impregnate betas (occasionally) and omegas (definitely); omegas can be impregnated by alphas (definitely) and betas (occasionally). Betas are usually imagined almost asexual, with only limited reproductivity; alphas and omegas, in the contrast, have hyper reproductivity, and they would go through physiological cycles of “heat” in which both sides of alpha and omega fall into fanatic craze for mating, induced by pheromones produced by omegas

⁶⁷ See the link below for the original prompt for the omegaverse trope. “!!! - CLOSED TO NEW PROMPTS - !!! J2 Prompting Post // Nov 8th - Nov 22nd.” *Supernatural Kink Community*. 8 Nov 2010. Web. 6 Jun 2012. <<http://spnkink-meme.livejournal.com/32449.html?thread=7639233>>.

in heat. This trope is not the only one that systematically makes possible male pregnancy, which is widely observable in fan writings as well as in mainstream science fiction. This trope, which contains settings of “heat,” “knotting,” and “sex craze,” makes this setting especially suitable for pornography. ABO fictions are usually extremely explicit and lengthy in their descriptions of mating scenes.

In this section, I will mainly examine Archive of Our Own (referred to as AO3 below) as the research object because it is a large and comprehensive fan fiction site, and more tolerant towards sexually explicit descriptions (which is crucial for Omegaverse). AO3 is a fan fiction archive under the Organization of Transformative Works, an NGO established by fans, promoting fan authors rights against copyright laws and commercial exploitation. The other site I examine is *Suiyuanju* 随缘居, a renowned Chinese fan fiction forum (mostly slash fiction, but also accepts non-slash fan fiction) based on Euro-American TV series and films. As a site that requires registration for simple browsing, *Suiyuanju* is also very tolerant to sexually explicit content, contrary to many open *danmei* sites in China, which are constantly exposed to government censorship on pornography.

According to the statistics of a Tumblr blogger, destinationtoast, after 2011, the number of ABO dynamic fictions on AO3 experienced a minor explosion. The percentile of Omegaverse in all fan fiction posted on AO3 went from 0% per month in April 2011 to more than 0.6% in Jul 2013. Until May 2015, fan fictions with the tag “Alpha / Beta / Omega Dynamic” on AO3 reaches 8247 titles. From May 2014 to May 2015, 4811 new titles of Omegaverses were posted out of 566,061 new fan fictions on AO3, taking a percentile of 0.85%, which is a slightly higher percentage than destinationtoast’s statistic in 2013. If we further narrow down our scope to only stories between male characters (which is designated by an M/M tag), the percentage is 1.47%.

As a general observation, this trope has grown rapidly after its introduction to fan fiction since 2011, but still takes less than 1% of total new fan fictions on AO3, and less than 1.5% of total new male/male slash fiction.

Suiyuanju is a much confined and exclusive community. It needs registration to access the fictions posted; besides, *Suiyuanju*, as a Chinese forum, focuses only on slash fiction of Euro-American (practically, read “Anglo-American”) media products, therefore, slash fictions on this forum has an interest much more confined than AO3. Participants started to discuss “ABO dynamic” on *Suiyuanju* around October 2011, based on a translation of an omegaverse based on *Sherlock*. According to my own statistic in May 2015, the figure on *Suiyuanju* is 999 fiction titles with the phrase “ABO” out of 48470 fictions posted on the forum; the percentage is 2.06%.⁶⁸

The Chinese fandom encountered this trope through Chinese translations of English fan fictions; then very rapidly, the trend spread to fandoms irrelevant to Anglo-American media products, into seemingly impossible backgrounds as ancient Chinese settings (see Erquecangku for an example of omegaverses in ancient China). The trope further crosses the boundary of fan fiction, entering original *danmei* creation. While again we see the community of *danmei* fan fiction and original *danmei* are very much inseparable, we may also note, at least for the omegaverses, fan fictions and original stories supposes different readerships and expectations. With fan fiction building on previously existing texts, characters and plots, twisted gender manipulation on previously very masculine character, challenge them with another set of (usually more oppressive and rigid) gender hierarchy, presenting not only fan fiction authors’

⁶⁸ The way that I did my statistic is very straightforward and simple. AO3 has a very complicated tag system, so I only need to record the number of stories that simultaneously carry tags of “Alpha / Beta /Omega Dynamic” and “M/M” or “explicit” to decide the number of omegaverses with explicit rating, etc. The case for *Suiyuanju* is a little more difficult, I searched the titles of all fan fiction for the key word “ABO” and then picked out the titles with the words “about,” “above” etc. to reach an approximate number for omegaverse in *Suiyuanju*.

understanding of certain characters, but also their personal meditations of the real world gender-related debates and problems.

At least in 2013, the ABO dynamic was titled one of the so-called “three clichéd settings in the Euro-American fandoms,” i.e. ABO dynamics, sentinels and guides, and BDSM. Chinese fangirls made this observation according to the fan fictions they are exposed to—possibly only the most famous fan fictions they read on a random basis (see Yanshuo’s discussion thread for typical introduction to these three settings in Chinese fandom). In fact, these three settings are not exactly the most popular or influential settings in a US based fan fiction website as AO3. As in my statistic in May 2015, 53,345 stories on AO3 have the “BDSM” tag, 8,270 stories on AO3 carry the “ABO dynamic” tag, while only less than 500 carry a tag synonymous to “Alternate Universe--Sentinels & Guides.” While BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism) borrows from a real subculture and activity in real life, the other two are based on pure imagination. The Sentinels & Guides AU is another popular trope, originates from the setting of a TV series *The Sentinel* (1996-1999), in which a group of human-being with super-heightened senses, i.e. the sentinels, take use of their ability to do good. “Guides” are introduced as a complimentary figure and almost a soulmate for Sentinels, that for each sentinel there is a perfect guide and that they will imprint on each other.

Except the total coincidence that a significant portion of most popular fan fictions translated into Chinese around 2011 were based on these three tropes, I argue that these three tropes grew popular in Chinese fan community and *danmei* writing for a reason: they are all about roleplaying, with embedded theatrical conflicts that a fan fiction author can directly excavate. In many cases, the roleplaying involved is simply decided by genetic factors and biological functions, and therefore totally forbids the fluidity of androgynous gender

identification and the absolute equality that is supposed to be only permitted in homosexual relationships—both factors argued important for the reception of homoromance in various scholarly discussions (Penley, Russ, McLelland, etc.). BDSM, even though inspired by the real life sexual activities, is often presented as culturally codified practice in fan fiction writing—for instance, that a dom in the relationship would wear in their daily life a ribbon, a collar or some other trinkets to signify their identity of a dom, in fans’ imaginations (see, for instance, etothepii’s story “everything you won’t tell me”). Besides, all three tropes produce predominantly Male/Male coupling on AO3, 74% for BDSM, 88.5% for ABO and 73% for Sentinels & Guides. Considering that AO3 is not a slash only site (different from *Suiyuanju*), generally, stories of Female /Male coupling are almost equal in number with Male / Male coupling, the preference for the three abovementioned tropes in Male/Male coupling shows that the tropes work for Male/Male couplings completely differently from what they would for Female/Male relationships. In such tropes, the dichotomy between male and female are no longer important, the obstacle and barrier between homosocial and homosexual, between the closet and true love, is absent—the bonding between another set of dichotomies prevails. Therefore, what we do see in fan fictions based on these three tropes, is an eager attempt to reintroduce a rigidly defined dichotomy into a homosexual relationship, and therefore starts a distinction, a hierarchy, and another type of barrier to cross.

According to destinationtoast’s statistic in 2013, 55.7% of the Omegaverses are rated “explicit;” my own statistic in 2015 shows a slightly lower but still ridiculously high 51.7%, contrasting to 16.9% for “explicit” in the whole site. Explicit, referring to stories with explicit and lengthy sexual descriptions, is the highest rating on AO3. Fans assume that ABO dynamic exists for porn. As the warning of the first translation of ABO dynamic stories on *Suiyuanju* (“If

you can stand the heat”) says: “This story exists only for the sake of porn, containing also large amount of abnormal unharmonious content. If you are weak in your heart, leave immediately. If you insist in going on, be careful that your liver will be thundered into pieces on the ground; and I will never pick them up for you. 本文为写肉而存在，并有大量反常不和谐内容。心灵脆弱的快快退场，如若一意孤行，小心肝被雷碎成一片片掉落在地，楼主绝不会帮捡。” The translator introduces the story as taboo: explicitly sexual, abnormal, shocking, porn, please read at your own risk. The authors and readers are self-aware that they are dealing with a controversial topic, a highly explicitly sexual topic. With such reputation going on, there has been a common saying in Chinese fandom that “Any ABO story that has no porn is playing the hoodlum 一切不以炖肉为目的的 ABO 都是耍流氓” (see the title of Banlijiangnan’s story to understand how prevalent this saying is in Chinese fandom). Of course the kink meme of ABO started as something for pure sensual reasons, but sex in ABO is very different from regular slash fiction.

While slash fiction is praised as a female pornography back to the earlier fan studies critics (including Joanna Russ, Patricia Lamb and Diana Veith, Constance Penley), because it celebrates female powers over the male bodies as a totally distracted voyeur, and celebrates females’ right to accept, to take pleasure in sensual content, recent discussion by Driscoll and Woledge, do not make an easy equation between porn and beneficial subversiveness. As Driscoll suggests that early critics’ claim on slash fiction as female porn interpret pornography strangely, that “it uses a depth model—uncovering motives and ideologies—this argument insists that the meaning of slash is at the surface: it is porn” (82). Indeed, sex and porn is a crucial component of any homoromance, and such content does challenge some hegemonic sexual presentation in mainstream popular media, yet I agree with Driscoll and Woledge in that genres of pornography

and romance do not guarantee the meaning expression, especially taken into the account of readers' response.

In omegaverse, male-male is not standard gay sex at all. With the existence of six different sexes, writers have 36 types of combinations to explore on. The diagram provided by norabombay, for example, gives all the possibility of interaction between sexes, and also gives the possibility of pregnancy, another unavoidable element in ABO dynamics (see norabombay's post). Such variety of combinations give authors freedom to explore all the possibilities. However, the most commonly seen stories in the trope still happen in between a male Alpha and a male Omega. The phallus presents clearly in the scene and penetration sex is the standard sexual description—everything is back to the heterosexual porn again. In one sense, omegaverse could be conveniently heteronormative: penetration sex takes the predominant majority of the sexual description; pregnancy is not only possible, but also unavoidable without proper contraception—in other words, the characters are still both male, but only nominally. Omegaverses disrupt two major characteristics of sex in slash fiction identified by scholars: both partners are androgynous, and no danger of pregnancy.

Then what is the role of sex in these stories? Woledge's assessment, that in intimatopic writings, which includes a subset of slash fiction, "intimacy is normally established before sexual interaction and is always maintained after it" ("Intimatopia" 106). Sex serves in such writings a way to maintain emotional intimacy. The ABO dynamic, however, complicate the interaction in a significant way. If we take Driscoll's distinction between "plot sex" and "porn sex," in omegaverses, sex is often both and neither. Plot sex makes sexual intercourse a logical component in character development, while porn sex consists of minimal narrative context. The heat scenes in omegaverse usually presuppose a narrative context to ensure a heat takes place.

However, the sex scene in omegaverse is naturally cut off from the rest part of a story, since according to the setting, heat changes both alphas and omegas into sex crazed animals; their mind and psychology is different from before and after the heat. The sex scenes suspend the narrative progression, extending time and rhythm for the sake of physical reaction. In other words, sex scenes and non-sex scenes in omegaverses, in many stories, should respond to two separate sets of representations and affective associations.

A significant portion of omegaverses contains non-consent sex or dubious consent sex. While the idea of consent deserves its own chapter if one writes about slash fiction, fan communities generally agree upon the importance of consent in a truly equal relationship. In omegaverses, however, at least in an alpha-omega sex scene, the pure physical takes the upper hand—no sensible conversation is ever allowed because the animal instinct drives them together, whether they want it or not as sensible human-beings. This issue is often left unexplored, and only used as a plot device for the two protagonists to overcome obstacles, becoming intimate lovers. And yes, no matter how they become associated physically, in most cases, lovers in omegaverses do love each other, and often become happy couples in the end. The animal instinct presents a dark side in omegaverses. But authors put such attention to the porn, going to such details, and giving such a happy blissful ending to the sex that the dystopic premise is often overlooked and dismissed.

Virginia Keft-Kennedy studies the role of BDSM, rape and sexual violence in slash fiction based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, suggesting that contrary to many early feminist critics, slash fiction is constantly breaking from the utopian same-sex romance to constantly challenge the

norm of femininity and masculinity.⁶⁹ Through violence and especially the imaginary vampirism, slash fans express their less accepted erotic imagination, defined more as a performative category (72). While similar to vampire fic, omegaverse also presents a completely imagined and detached social condition in which gender and sexuality are totally disrupted with the second set of standards, and in omegaverse, non-con, or dubious con present frequently. However, the situation in omegaverse is dangerously close to the real life experience and conditions, especially to female's experience in family and in sex, even with knotting and heat and other similar sexual tropes with a clear canine origin, thus total detachment is less possible.

All these issues leave omegaverse controversial: the sex scene is sensual and physically arousing, speaking to women's desire, but often contains non-consent sex, serves little narrative function, and disturbingly similar to heterosexual sex; non-sex scene do not necessarily build up a convincing background for sake of intimacy, while the sex scene usually signals the realization of a relationship. It breaks almost all signs of subversion attributed to slash fiction by earlier critics, but it is porn, that expresses female desires. Besides, the sex, aggressive and solely depends on animal instinct, is physically enjoyable for both participants—sexually, the existence of subordinate sex is not devalued at least. Omegaverses, especially those that dealt with first time sexual encounters, often treat heat as the natural way to break the barrier between two characters, yet the contrast between two physiological states constantly questions and challenges the significance and plausibility of this barrier breaking point.

The ambiguity and dilemma involved in this trope further complicate when social imagination enters the picture. Omegaverse is very clear and specific on human anatomy—all six

⁶⁹ Keft-Kennedy's example, slash fiction based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a special case, that the fantasized male bodies are not completely human, but vampires. Therefore, the violence towards the male bodies is further detached from the real human condition.

sexes—under this trope; it also details the process of sexual intercourses and reproduction. But on the other hand, it does not have a clear description of the social structure under this gender system, save the terminology, alpha, beta and omega, borrowed from ethology. Fan fiction authors have much freedom in imagining and constructing their own world to place the characters. This world then becomes social critique, either explicit or implicit. Fan fiction based on ABO trope would easily back to the track of core family structure: a dominant alpha and a subservient omega getting married (bonded), having not one, but a lot of children just as some clichéd heterosexual romance would depict. Yet besides the porn, a significant portion of omegaverses never resists the attempt to comment on the gender issues, because it is inevitable in a highly hierarchical society that we are uncannily familiar with. Depending on settings and characters, such comments may be mild, but some others are quite detrimental—there is a subdivision of ABO trope fictions, sometimes referred to as Omega-resistance, describing specifically the fight that the subordinate Omega population put on for their own rights in the society, much to the light of the feminist movement in the real world. In stories with dystopian settings, pornographic contents are significantly smaller. How authors imagine this society reflect their understanding of the real society and the gender dynamic here, but these attitudes are not always easy to nail down, with an ambivalence between a critique upon the system, and an almost secret enjoyment for the rigid role play.

Of course, in many cases, ABO trope is just a slightly exotic and unconventional choice for fangirls who are not so comfortable with gay sex, blatantly heteronormative, contradicting the equality homosexual utopia assumed by many early critics on slash fiction. However, just as many other homoerotic writings, omegaverses do not guarantee a rigidly and stably defined ideological presentation packed up in a fictional form. They are polysemic. The morally and

ideologically ambiguous issues show the easy slippage of indulgence in clichés and conventions, and the potential to challenge and debate. Yet the challenge and debate would again be taken by readers for relevant discussion, or a fantasy secondary world without any outside reference.

I want to draw a comparison with *omegaverse* with heritage cinema. Irrelevant as they seem, they both have the problem of ambiguous presentation of a world far from ideal. In his discussion of British heritage cinema in the 1980s, Andrew Higson suggests that these films, which mostly take place in the early 20th Century, set up a style of Britishness for an international consumption (109).⁷⁰ Higson argues that “in this version of history, a critical perspective is displaced by decoration and display, a fascination with surfaces, ‘an obsessive accumulation of comfortably archival detail’ (Wright, 252) in which a fascination with style displaces the material dimensions of historical context” (112). While there is a conflicting view against Heritage Cinema, that “if the films seem at first to attempt to escape from the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Britain by celebrating a class apparently secure in its self-knowledge and self-sufficiency, it is clear that they also dramatize the effort of different social identities to connect with one another across cultural and social boundaries, so reinvoking the liberal consensus,” Higson suggests that “[t]he strength of the pastiche in effect imprisons the qualities of the past, holding them in place as something to be gazed at from a reverential distance, and refusing the possibility of a dialogue or confrontation with the present” (119).

While I agree with his observation, I personally do not see a conflict in this case. Higson emphasizes the image presentation as betrayal of the critique to the society in the story, but the liberal consensus invoked in Heritage Cinema is dubious and irrelevant for another reason: the

⁷⁰ Typical examples of British heritage cinema are those literary adaptations from novels that take place in the early 1900s, in a high society environment, including *A Room with a View* (1985), *Another Country* (1984), *Maurice* (1987), *Howards End* (1992), etc.

liberal minded people in the stories struggle against a social tradition much rigid and homogeneous that the current society, which not only makes the critique irrelevant to the present, but also glorifies the present, making the present the ideal future of the past presented in the films.

While differs in medium and social background, omegaverse presents a conflicted position towards the heteronormative and patriarchal system very similar to heritage cinema towards the rigid social and class structure back in the Edwardian age. Similar to them, the characters involved in the story are usually the rebels, if not revolutioners. Omegaverse often lingers affectively upon the hierarchical relationship among the characters and create enjoyable porn upon it, which, according to fans' expectation, its major function.

Let's look at the first fiction with ABO dynamics that is translated into Chinese here, a story in *Sherlock* fandom, pairing Sherlock and John. In this story, Sherlock Holmes is an arrogant and workaholic alpha that never wants to tie himself with another. While thanks to medication that inhibits "heat" and camouflage his natural scent, John is an independent and professionally successful omega. They become roommates under the condition that neither seeks for sex. But John goes into heat accidentally because of failed hormone suppressing pills. Then the story goes to a lengthy and detailed description of sexual intercourse between a male alpha and a male omega, which leads to an unplanned pregnancy. The two, upon realizing what they had done after they recover from the heat, have to face the pregnancy that they might not want before the medication went wrong. Then the author discontinued to update the story; it is only half a story I am discussing here, but we already have what we need.

The story "If You Can't Stand the Heat" presents the scene of intercourse totally under the natural biological power—John as an Omega goes into heat, and Sherlock as an Alpha goes back

to their apartment to prevent him to mate with any other people; they are not to have any sensible conversation before the bonding process is over and they are not able to go back to. Yet at the same time, both partners seem to be willing and happy about this decision, though not without doubt and wavering, that their life is changed by this accident forever. Of course, in fandom, these two characters always belong to each other, whatever obstacle is there in front of them; it is more of a convention, almost a rule. Inside the diegesis, however, the utopia of intimacy is based on a less smooth and natural way.

The world with ABO dynamic in this story is not completely unknown—the biological function of reproduction shaped the social expectation, professions and even personalities of each individual, much the same as gender stereotypes work in our own society. Only the focus on male-female dichotomy is shifted to the imagined, and more rigidly defined alpha-beta-omega dynamic, and with the added biological complication of going into heat and inevitable pregnancy (without protection). Many issues that John encounters in this story should sound familiar to female readers. For example, when he first goes into heat in school, he is almost immediately mocked and bullied. He is disgusted by the thought that his life is to be controlled by an alpha and he is destined to have babies continuously. He has to fight people's discriminations against his effort in pursuing high education and a career, has to get rid of his omega scent to go to college and serve in army without sexual harassment, and is afraid of losing his job utterly after he gets pregnant. We see the society from his conflict, a society and a social position that he eventually decides to go back to, a patriarchal heteronormative society.

Romance books were full of omegas finding bliss in the protective arms of their Alphas and happily dreaming of all the children they'd birth. The telly was full of wise and loving omegas being the heart of the family that everyone adored and

catered to. Pregnant omegas glowed with happiness in advertisements touting everything from sofas to toilet tissue. (VelvetMace, Chapter 7)

As the paragraph above indicates, this society, is marketing and profiting from gender stereotypes; the images involved clearly imitate and exaggerate the real world, since the function for each sex is more defined in the ABO trope. John still has a free choice of abortion and can have a job even in the army. Much similar to many women in the real world, or at least in contemporary American society, the choice between family and profession, between one's desire of being a mother and realize one's own dream, is tangible and significant to him. And yet, this story fails to answer the question—not that the question is easily answerable, and takes the traditional cliché choice made by most young women who is accidentally pregnant in a Hollywood film—he keeps the child. Not that it is definitely reactionary, such situation, especially in fan communities that envisions an ideal future together for the two male protagonists, is prone to ignore the existence of the other choice. In this way, the story envisions a world that swings between utopia and dystopia, on gender terms—an omega has the choice of career and family, but not on sex; and on sex terms too—the sex is extremely blissful, but also not fully consent.

Interestingly enough, the stricter the hierarchy is between sexes, the more likely the author of the omegaverse make social discussion. The story titled “Gilded Cage,” written by BeautifulFiction, features a society with a gender hierarchy so strict that the omega is almost sexual slaves for their alphas and their families. This story tags almost every sensitive issues in omegaverse, or slash fiction in all, and clearly shows the authors own attitude and judgments. The author imagines a society that largely resembles contemporary Western society, but the vestige of slavery still lingers in the upper class. Because only unions between an alpha and an

omega can produce omega descents, after the long history of omega trading, only upper class families have omega children. They are recognized at an early age, home educated by their parents, and then “traded” into another upper-class family to produce heirs. They have no legal rights of any kind, no freedom, and no choices of their own. In this story, Sherlock Holmes is a runaway omega of an aristocracy family, who resides in London alone, John Watson is an alpha born in a civilian family. They are at dichotomy in class hierarchy and sex hierarchy: aristocracy and civilian, omega and alpha. Yet they are best friends and working partners. They cooperate and solve Sherlock’s problem, and achieved a civilian and sexual union during the process. They represent the ideal love envisioned by the author: love based on full-scaled companionship and trust of all aspects of life. In this way, they transcend the strictest barrier, become lovers and live happily ever after. They enjoy sex, but sex is only a small section of their lives.

“Gilded Cage” is a peculiar rare case, in that the two main male characters discuss their relationship with medication that suspend their animal instinct before they carry it out in reality. The animal instinct, the absolute attraction between an Alpha and an Omega during a heat cannot be overcome by sensible reasons that they are capable in regular time. Even during sex intercourse, when the sensible self is overwhelmed by the physical, John still remembers to check with Sherlock about his feeling and willingness. Within such an unequal society and with such power difference, the couple is, almost miraculously, able to achieve an almost equal and mutually respectful relationship. We have to see, however, this relationship is achieved only through individual choices, a loving and nurturing partner from the dominant sex, not guaranteed by any system or law. The story, however, successfully suggests the possibility of social change and through the involvement of the main characters.

When this story is translated into Chinese and posted on *Suiyuanju*, it ignites debates and reactions from Chinese female readers in such emotional intensity that show the story is closely relevant to the real life experience of Chinese women on the issue of gender politics.⁷¹ Many replies to the story relate to their own observation and understanding on gender issues. For example, a reader with the handle “maizi0522” writes:

This story makes me feel really depressed. I saw you had just posted, so I read on--and felt suffocated, probably it is empathy as being the "second sex" in a patriarchal society... But this world is more pathetic; this sex is not even treated as human. The outside world is ignorant of the actual situation under the intentionally mis-presentation from the powerful people. Everyone assumes that it is protection, but in fact, it is house arrest--you don't have any choice for your life; the path is decided by others; you don't even have a driver's license. Actually, it is very pathetic that many women now envy such life, even if they have choices. Yet this result is also intentionally induced by the dominant sex, then women would feel that their best and most valuable quality is gentle, subservient, raising a family and having children. I suddenly feel so suffocated. Sigh.⁷²

The reaction this story enlisted from her is not only intellectual, but also physical. While identifying herself with Sherlock, identifying women in Chinese society with the omega in the diegesis, she empathizes with the oppressed, sympathized with them to an extent that she feels “suffocated.” She sees the society in the story as a reasonable exaggeration and allegory for the contemporary society, and in her case, Chinese society, in which gender equality has not yet

⁷¹ See the translation thread started by Buildmode on *Suiyuanju* for fans’ responses.

⁷² See Appendix 5 for the original Chinese text.

been achieved. Another reply, by a reader handled “bellovin,” on the other hand, represents an attitude that I just identified in Heritage Cinema:

This story makes me think about this equality (at least legally) now--how hard-earned it is! So much things to think about!...The choice you make in life is personal, but the right to choose is so valuable!⁷³

She is comparatively satisfied with her current condition, seeing our society not a less exaggerated version of the society in the story, but completely different one. Our society, with at least equality on the legal level, is much better and at least in this case, the ultimate object of social change. Words such as “hard-earned,” “valuable” all suggest that the freedom of choices is archived. Therefore, the critiques in the story are only confirmed in that particular world and circumstances. A sense of the end of history is conveyed through such attitude.

Ambitious as the author may be, the story is still polysemic in the case of social critique and relevance towards the gender politics in the actual world. Similar to many observers in the earlier stage of development of slash fiction, including Jenkins and Penley, within the fan community, the debates is only relevant when it is relevant to the story and characters while any attempt for connection with the real politics is avoided (*Textual Poachers*, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis”). In both the US and Japan, female fans often refuse the identity of “feminists,” even though their writings may present serious critiques based on gender standards. For such an ambiguous genre, claiming in a nutshell, of whether it is progressive or subversive is of little use; a more approachable object, is to discuss all the subtleties and ambiguities in the ways that the writers and readers present and reflect on their own problems and experience in the writings.

⁷³ See Appendix 6 for the original Chinese text.

CHAPTER 5.
ELITISM AND FANTASY:
MAINSTREAM VERSUS SUBCULTURAL *DANMEI* WRITING

So-called “internet literature,” a term that triggers much debate in Chinese media and in the field of literary studies, is undergoing a dramatic shift during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Because the commodification process of literary production goes hand in hand with the accessibility of internet technology, internet literature actually takes a repressed role in commercial genre literature and new media production. That is to say, the relationship between paper media and internet media does not guarantee continuity or conflict between the two media forms, but results in uncharged growth of textual production, fulfilling the desire of the internet population. Genre literature, largely suppressed before the internet age, has become the most prominent mass of new literary production in the internet age due to both mass literature production (digital) and the dysfunction of high literary production (print) from the 1990s onward.⁷⁴ *Danmei* is a new genre that has emerged online without any precedence in previous paper media.

Danmei, which resembles Japanese BL or *yaoi* culture—now largely commercialized, standardized and developed into a lucrative niche market—does not naturally carry the strict identity of “fan culture” as I described in the previous chapters, nor is it a collection of enthusiastic readers of a literary genre in a traditional sense. Nevertheless, the reasons that I will discuss it in the category of fan culture, are threefold. Firstly, historically, Chinese *danmei* writing started with fan fiction creation rather than original stories; the Chinese *danmei* community was and is derivative more of mainstream Japanese *manga* and *anime* (especially

⁷⁴ See Shao Yanjun’s discussion for more details on the dysfunctional high literary production.

traditional *shōnen manga* such as *Slam Dunk*) than hardcore *yaoi manga* and *anime*. Secondly, the *danmei* community is never clearly divided into two sections of fan fiction and original fiction; readers and writers migrate freely among interests and imaginings. Culturally and psychologically, because the *danmei* community is doomed to be marginal due to its themes, the *danmei* community resembles a fan community whose writings are traditionally subject to stay underground because of copyright (and normative morality) issues. Yet on the point of copyright, thirdly, the distinction between fan writings and original writings is irrelevant. Although several texts that I examine below are not transforming previously existing text, I still examine the *danmei* community as a “fan” community, one that can be understood as of a very special genre of Chinese internet literature that has a close relationship with transformative writings in media/literary fan culture.

Because *danmei* texts are numerous and almost impossible to completely locate, my interpretation may not be applicable to all the *danmei* writings produced in China, nor even to the majority of them. In this chapter, I address a central question when considering *danmei* writing, that is, what is the relationship between the *danmei* fan community and mainstream literary value? Directly relevant to this issue is the dualism of mainstream and subculture: how and where might one put *danmei* writings in the general cultural scene in China? Is the distinction between “mainstream” and “subculture” still relevant today? What problems of simplification exist for majority female-oriented homoerotica about gay men? The above representative questions are often posed against *danmei* communities and writings, but the question of the cultural position and cultural esteem still needs further development for the Chinese case, even as earlier discussions in Japan and in US are helpful to parallel. I suggest that the traditional assessment of homoromantic writings in the US and in Japan—that the female

fans writings are sometimes automatically assumed to be lacking in literary value—serve to disrupt existing cultural hierarchies of heterosexist patriarchy, does not explain the complete dynamic between these writing women and the assumed “mainstream” in the Chinese context. The “high literature” and “mainstream” exist in a dynamic that the assumed outsider is an “other” who seldom talks back, or talks back in an appropriate way, which is true considering the ignorance of the outsiders towards this genre. However, I also suggest that for *danmei*, the conventional literary value system and canon lists are crucial for the *danmei* community’s self-imagination and self-defense. Heavily relying on the literary and cultural hierarchy and order, the *danmei* community argues for an elite position; and, during the process the community freely translates the cultural capital of the mainstream into subcultural capital and into symbolic capital in the community. I don’t aim for a conclusive statement of whether Chinese *danmei* stories have high literary value or not, or what outside influence Chinese *danmei* receives to substantiate such value. Rather, the complicated relationship between *danmei* and the mainstream does not lead to an easy conclusion—for example, *danmei* as the epitome of female subversion is sometimes considered to collaborate with its archenemy, heterosexist patriarchy—but, likely, *danmei* challenges moral dualisms that shadow discussions of “subversion” for *danmei* literature.

I use the example of an original *danmei* story titled *Favilla Mundi*, to demonstrate how cultural capital in the mainstream society exchange into subcultural capital and further into symbolic capital in the *danmei* fan community. For the sake of self-defense and self-celebration, the *danmei* fan community tends to relying on more than subverting against the mainstream literary value system. The retrospectively created lineage for the genre epitomizes the tendency. While the mainstream literary canon is a typical connection for construction of an elite lineage, mainstream queer cinema is another story. By examining three texts, *Beijing Stories*, *Lan Yu* and

Diverged Roads, I argue that the often deliberately separated genres of *danmei* and *tongzhi* intrinsically share similar narrative modes and a desire for realism. Mainstream Chinese-language queer cinema and *danmei* often share a similar audience. The criteria of realism and representation do not necessarily distinguish a gay-male audience and a female audience, or a mainstream and a subculture.

Discursive Mantras

Fan-talk cannot be accepted merely as evidence of fan knowledge. It must also be interpreted and analysed in order to focus upon its gaps and dislocations, its moments of failure within narratives of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, and its repetitions or privileged narrative constructions which are concerned with communal (or subcultural) justification in the face of 'external' hostility. (Hills Fan Cultures 66, original italics)

Contrary to many of his previous fan scholars, especially those who assume the “aca-fan” identity and conduct ethnography (and autoethnography) in the fan community, Matt Hills is careful not to take fans’ self-reflection and interviews literally. Fans’ words sometimes do not really state fact, but serve as a defense against animosities from the outside. For a group of people notoriously resistant towards psychoanalytical methodology, how to interpret fan interviewees can become problematic. As a scholar who studies from the inside of the community, Hills also urges his fellow scholars and himself to be highly conscious of their own position inside the fan community and academia, in order to find when they stop asking self-reflexive questions about the fan subject and the fan community, therefore better understand ‘knowledge’ and ‘justification.’ Hills suggests that there is a “*discursive mantra*,” or a “relatively stable discursive resource which is circulated within niche media and fanzines and used (by way

of communal rationalization) to ward off the sense that the fan is ‘irrational’” (67). The phrase “discursive mantra” vividly presents the ways that such discourse circulates in the fan community. The mantras are collectively adopted, constantly used under circumstances when a fan needs to speak as a representative towards the outsiders defensively, and thus the mantras should not be taken on face value.

To raise a couple of examples of *danmei* “discursive mantras,” two founding myths circulating in Chinese *danmei* fandom come to mind. They are constantly retold by generations of fangirls in China. One myth concerns the psychological origin for female readers to choose *danmei* as a genre of writing; another myth concerns the literary origin for the *danmei* genre as in Japan.

When asked why one (usually assumed heterosexual woman) would read romantic love stories between two male characters, an often told story is that the fangirl is interested in love stories between men because she is tired of the stereotypical female characters in traditional heterosexual romance, as being both incapable and stupid, and does not deserve the love from the male characters.⁷⁵ Therefore, she would rather see the handsome and caring male characters fall for each other rather than with the female character.

Taking failed heterosexual romance as the main reason for homoromantic writings is not a rare explanation. Actually from early on, both slash fiction and *yaoi* studies concentrate on the gender equality connotation for male homoerotica. Both slash and *yaoi* are considered as a feminist project proclaiming total equality in a love relationship, and requiring fluidity of gender representation in body and practices (see Russ, Lamb and Veith, Welker, Saito, etc.). In other words, they do what heterosexual love stories fail or refuse to do: totally change the gendered

⁷⁵ See Wolfeyeselse’s discussion for this common saying.

representation of romantic relationships. Chinese researchers of *danmei* agree with this assessment and constantly make a contrast between *danmei* and the early heterosexual romance that *danmei* fans claim that they grow tired of, especially those by the Taiwan and Hong Kong popular romance writers such as Qiong Yao 琼瑶, Xi Juan 席绢, widely popular during the 1980s and 1990s in mainland China. However, the widespread discourse of failed heterosexual romance is so ubiquitous that it has become a collective manifesto against heterosexual romance. If considering how the presentation of gay love that resembles the conventional heterosexual romance, the *uke* (the penetrated partner) of the gay couple is depicted almost exactly like a woman according to the social stereotypes, this manifesto becomes questionable. Such characters, named vividly as “*uke* with a flat breast” 平胸受, are widely criticized, but still constantly produced in the *danmei* community. In fact, heterosexual romance, even the most conservative ones, survive in part in *danmei* writings. Thus, what do *danmei* lovers really grow tired of? Are they for gender equality? Or is the gender changed but not quite the “gender roles?” In any event, the claim that *danmei* readers all are tired of the unsuccessful heterosexual romance is a typical discursive mantra.

The second mantra, concerning the “origin”: Mori Mari is a huge name in the Chinese *danmei* community, especially for those who take *danmei* seriously and aim to discuss *danmei* in a serious/academic manner. She is widely known as the ancestor of *danmei* literature. When I was doing my research in 2012, I tried to find Mori Mari’s writings in Chinese translation to understand her influence in China, but was surprised to find that she only has one book officially translated into Chinese: *Sweet Room* (*Amai mitsu no heya* 甘い蜜の部屋) (1975). The translated

book was published in Taiwan in 2006, and it is not about male homoeroticism.⁷⁶ With many enquires online for her writings left unanswered, her self-proclaimed disciples and followers do not seem to have read her books. Yisinaqi 羿思纳祈, for example, posted on Baidu Zhidao, asking for Mori's two books *Beds of the Dead Leaves* and *Lovers' Forest*, but for eight years, there is no positive answer from anyone. Various Chinese essays online seem to be more interested in Mori Mari's biographic information than what exactly she has written: she was the most beloved daughter of Mori Ōgai 森鷗外, one of the key figures in early 20th century Japanese literature. According to these articles, she was raised with all the care and luxuries that her father could afford and was left with a mentality of "daddy's little girl" for all her life.⁷⁷ After age 50, she started to publish. She has a collection of essays on her memory about her father, and her most famous novel (the only one translated into Chinese) describes a romantic relationship between a father and a teenage daughter. She was also famous for novels between two male lovers, one of them significantly older than the other. This brief introduction shows that her novels deal with similar themes with contemporary *yaoi* writings, including the love relationship between an older man and a younger one. The above is about all one can find about Mori in the Chinese language before 2012. A widely circulated biography presents Mori's life in a manner that reminds of Japanese aestheticism literature. The anonymous author is obsessed with the details of her rather abnormal life and state of mind, including the details such as, that she never cleans her room or collects garbage because her father never let her do housework. As a result, garbage such as takeout boxes are piled high in her room for years. The dreamy

⁷⁶ A translation, titled "甜蜜的房间" was translated by Wang Yunjie 王蕴洁, and was published in 2006 in Taiwan by Maitian 麦田. In 2016, Yilin Press published the Mainland Chinese version of the book.

⁷⁷ I failed to retrieve the earliest and authored original article with, so I can only leave it unauthored. These online articles' wordings are very similar to one another, and make Mori's biographic information almost an urban legend in fangirls' community. Refer to *Banjisanfanjie*'s blog for one version.

experience of a doted upon young girl, the twistedly beautiful feeling of staying in the father's love forever, adds to Mori's personal charisma and creates a sense of aestheticism by way of her biographic information—even without any knowledge of her writings.

Why is Mori Mari significant as a discursive mantra to “save face” for *danmei* fans? Whereas Japanese homoromance is often discussed under the umbrella term of “BL,” or more traditionally, “*yaoi*,” Kazuko Suzuki's interviews show, Japanese homoromance has a far more complicated genre division. *Shonen'ai*, *yaoi*, Boys Love, JUNE, and *tanbi* each refers to a type of publication with detailed textual traits for Japanese *yaoi* lovers.⁷⁸ According to Suzuki's interviewees, *tanbi* is set apart from all others because of its connection to high literature. The typical example for *tanbi* is Mori Mari's work, novels constantly describing a romantic relationship between a young boy and an older man. Suzuki's interviewees emphasize the distinction between more commercialized BL publications and *tanbi*, the latter often considered as part of high literary tradition, though now less relevant to the standardized and commercialized BL *manga* and novel publication. While the connection between *tanbi* and BL lies namely on the thematic level in Japan, the Chinese generic term for the homoromantic writings is *danmei*, which is the Chinese reading of what in Japanese is read as *tanbi* 耽美, so the “high literary” connection is arbitrarily intensified. As a *tanbi* writer, Mori Mari is celebrated in China as the “real ancestor” of all *danmei* literature in the community self-narrative. Consider, for example, an academic paper on *danmei*'s textual features, in which Zhang Bing juxtaposes Mori Mari's biographic information with a Japanese *yaoi manga*—Osaki Minami's *Zetsuai 1989* 絶愛-1989-, two original Chinese *danmei* stories *Favilla Mundi* (*Shijie zhi hui* 世界之灰) and

⁷⁸ See Chapter 4 for the detailed distinctions among all these genres.

Dim Light (*Fu guang* 浮光), and a piece of *danmei* fan fiction based on a Chinese vernacular novel *The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants* (*Qi xia wu yi* 七侠五义) and TV series adapted from it. While failing to offer a precise definition for *danmei* that distinguishes it from the related writings, by treating these heterogeneous texts as part of the *danmei* genre, Zhang actually repeats a common fan-based discourse of literary lineage for *danmei*, by connecting contemporary Chinese online *danmei* writings back to Japanese *tanbi* literature and sometimes, canonical pre-modern and modern Chinese literature. This literary lineage is highly constructed, arguably a defensive strategy towards unfriendly outsiders. Zhang's argument in this paper, that *danmei* literature presents beauty and love between two beautiful young men, but their beauty will fade, their love eternally hidden, also shows a direct relationship that she wants to achieve between the *danmei* writings in her definition and an idea of beauty. While it might be hasty to infer that Zhang is a member of the *danmei* fan community, her discussion perfectly echoes the discursive mantra, that *danmei* comes from, learns from European and Japanese aestheticism, a canonized high literary tradition, and keeps a perpetual goal of finding and sustaining beauty in literary practice.

***Danmei* and Subcultural Capital**

What do these two founding myths, or discursive mantras, tell us? How are they defensive against possible animosity from outsiders? I suggest the stress on “love” instead of “pornography,” “artistic or literary beauty” instead of “entertainment” borrows directly from mainstream discourse in canonized high literature, attributing the highly standardized and conventional generic writing of *danmei* a sublime value. Through celebration of the sublime and

transcendental value, these discursive mantras successfully construct an ideal for the community of love, equality, and beauty. Such a tendency, after my personal discussions with fellow fans, is epitomized in a *danmei* forum *Lucifer*, which was one of the most important such forums in the early 2000s. There is a famous saying circulated as the motto, slogan and manifestation for the fangirl community in China: “A fangirl has the responsibility to be more civilized than others” (*Tongrennü you yiwu bi bieren geng you wenhua*. 同人女有义务比别人更有文化.) While such an extreme elite stance is now less celebrated because of the enormous popularity of *danmei* writing, which pushes *danmei* to a much larger population than who might share this ideal, the transcendental value of “beauty” still emerges from time to time. During the “Internet Purge” Movement started by the Chinese government in 2014, when all pornographic materials needed to be censored or self-censored to avoid further punishment from the state, Jinjiang Literature, the most important *danmei* literature website (in fact, the most important literature website for women-oriented genre literature in general) changed its “*danmei* channel” into “pure love channel (*Chun'ai pingdao* 纯爱频道).” The interesting word choice reminds of the strong relationship between the beautiful pure love and *danmei*, which, according to the discursive mantras, is the ultimate value of such writings.

The intricate relationship that the *danmei* community has with mainstream canonical literature is typical for many internet literature writers in China. What *danmei* fans strive to achieve is a lineage directed to already canonized literature, be it the high literary tradition since the May Fourth era, or premodern Chinese literature, or an imported foreign literary tradition. The lattermost might be surprising for outsiders, but since the word “*danmei*” itself has a complicated foreign origin, its connotation varies from person to person. Some *danmei* fans, for example, tend to understand everything with a homoerotic theme as *danmei*. As a popular

miniblog on Weibo claims, many netizens raise stories by some of the most famous writers of the May Fourth tradition, including Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, Lao She, Bai Xianyong, etc., as *danmei*-themed stories; a phenomenon that I find both absurd and intriguing (See the Weibo post of Yun'oubajiadegoushiMshuxing for one of the many Weibo posts that solicits “danmei” and “tongzhi” literature written by the canonical high literary writers). These netizens participated in finding examples of stories with homosexual themes from canonical literature to compensate the “missing” history of the popular genre is itself a daring action, for they trespass the strict division between the popular and the canonical. Yet, many of their examples are far from appropriate, and it would be very problematic to call everything where two men fall in love with each other as *danmei*.

The division between the popular and the canonical, the mass and the elite is the first and foremost question for *danmei* culture, and for fan culture in general. Chinese fan culture, as Yang Ling suggests in her discussion, is constantly examined and discussed under a conservative assumption of a direct and complete dualism between “the mass” and “the elite,” “the fanatic, embodied, superficial fan” and “the collected, distanced, profound scholar.” However, such distinction is challenged constantly by the convergence of various forms of cultural and art products. As Yang observes in her discussion, fans of a singer Shang Wenjie, a winner of a reality show “Super girl,” often known as the Chinese version of “American Idol,” constantly migrate between the cultural conduct of activities coded as high culture and those coded popular and grassroots. In a concert, these fans would wear suits and ties, would stubbornly stay away from their glow sticks and streaming, politely sit through the singing and applaud only to show their approval of the performance (264). While Yang’s criticism towards the strict binary between high culture and popular culture throughout her book is more oriented to conservative

scholars who still assume that they monopolize cultural production and value judgments, I would suggest that the example of Shang Wenjie's fans, rather similar to my example of the *danmei* fans in their discursive mantras, present through their words and action, a heavy reliance on the high culture / popular culture moral dualism for self-defense, even much more than their opponents (those disparaging *danmei*) do. While in the action, they boldly transgress the cultural products and activities from the ends of the traditional cultural aesthetic hierarchy, but the self-assumption of the high culture sometimes serves exactly as a performance of obtaining the social capital required by the social elite.

Pierre Bourdieu's economic metaphor for the cultural paradigm is widely utilized in the area of cultural studies, including fan studies. He suggests that besides economic capital, there are other forms of capital, including social and cultural capital in a social cultural network. Cultural capital refers to elements such as knowledge, education, and the artistic activities a certain class faction is interested in, is accumulated through upbringing and education. Such capital, setting a cultural hierarchy based on taste, is correlated to social hierarchy and creates distinctions in social class. In his comparatively strict paradigm, dominating bourgeoisies would never participate in fan culture, because it is a sign of bad taste. Within Bourdieu's paradigm, something like fan culture falls in the aesthetic and cultural activities of the working class.

Henry Jenkins' account on fandom suggests that the taste is guarded by the institutionalized cultural hierarchy that would do anything to avoid high and low convergence. Therefore, only the institutional sanctioned taste is appropriate and morally good. "The fans' transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards (even by those who may share similar taste but express them in fundamentally

different ways)” (*Textual Poachers* 17). Interestingly, while Jenkins deconstructs the seemingly natural dominant bourgeois taste by separating aesthetic judgments and morality, he does not support the strict division of taste, sees fan culture and mentality as bourgeoisie disrupting the cultural hierarchy, rather than working class celebrating their own cultural standards, which, sets his position apart from two other scholars, John Fiske and Sarah Thornton.

Bourdieu’s economic metaphor has largely been revised by fan studies scholars, who have coined another subdivision of cultural capital. Fiske calls it “popular cultural capital” (“Cultural Economy” 33), and Thornton names it “subcultural capital” (25). Fiske criticizes Bourdieu’s failure in making a similar cultural distinction in the proletariat culture (i.e., the illicit popular culture within the official cultural hierarchy); the popular cultural capital rather serves as an alternative social distinction inside the working class division, giving individual fans unofficial social capital for self-esteem in peer groups. Moreover, Fiske suggests that Bourdieu’s paradigm only emphasizes the co-relation between social capital and economic capital, and other aspects, such as age, gender and race ought to be added to the paradigm (“Cultural Economy”). Thornton’s “subcultural capital,” by which she describes the elements of “hipness” in club culture, also serves as an alternative cultural capital in the terrain of youth culture (26). Suggesting that this idea is compatible to Bourdieu’s paradigm, Thornton also claims that subcultural capital can also convert into economic capital, but not with the same ease as cultural capital. The only distinction between cultural capital and subcultural capital, she argues, is that subcultural capital is not strictly class bound. “Subcultural capital fuels rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of parental class. The assertion of subcultural distinction relies, in part, on a fantasy of classlessness” (28). Similar to Jenkins, Thornton does not place the alternative form of cultural hierarchy only inside the proletariat class, but puts it alongside the

mainstream institutionalized dominant cultural capital, which is closer to the reality than Fiske's assessment.

Matt Hills is against any moral dualism in fan culture studies, including the tendency of distinction between a "good subculture" and a "bad mainstream," or "the good academic" and "the bad academic," or "the good knowledge" and "the bad aesthetic." Opposing the early tendency in fan studies in portraying fan communities as classless utopias, he points out that fandom is "not simply as a community, but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status" (*Fan Cultures* 46). He suggests that Bourdieu's argument has a central logic: "the economic metaphor assumes a type of calculating subject, intent on maximizing the return of their investment in forms of capital" (*Fan Cultures* 55). Hills suggests that the attention towards Bourdieu's work so far has overemphasized the role of cultural capital, seemingly accentuating the role of knowledge, while sidelining other types of capital, including social capital, and particularly, symbolic capital. The mechanism for a fan community is, for example, based on the recognition of symbolic capital.

Of course, most of the discussions above around all types of capital are based on European societies, which are significantly different from contemporary Chinese society, a post-socialist society, in which an old dominating bourgeoisie class with unquestionable substantial economic, social and cultural capital is absent. What we do have is a cultural hierarchy sustained by institutions and education, and a long literary cultural tradition. The alternative mode of cultural capital in the fan community—let's follow Thornton's example and call it "subcultural capital"—operates less in terms of social class, but more in terms of age and gender. While economic capital does not have as significant a role in deciding social division, economic capital

is still positively relevant with mainstream cultural and social capital in post-socialist China. However, cultural capital (as well as the social and economic capital) in the mainstream society could be brought and converted into subcultural capital, while the subcultural capital naturally converts freely into symbolic capital, and social capital is crucial in the process as well. The convertible cultural capital between the mainstream and the subculture is usually the defensive discourse utilized by the subculture to claim for recognition from the mainstream.

Danmei is not alone in its lengthy and ongoing negotiation with the mainstream, but its struggle with the mainstream could be the most difficult and ambivalent. *Danmei* longs for mainstream recognition, but due to the homosexual topic, it cannot gain full-hearted recognition for a while, even as mainstream awards, institutes, and officials are embracing internet literature as a whole, and beginning to celebrate internet authors in traditional literary media circuits.

In her discussion of current internet literature, Shao Yanjun suggests that internet literature flourishes in China and China alone for several significant reasons (“传统文学生产机制的危机”). She claims that the current literary scene in China results from a highly dysfunctional mechanism of literary production. The institutionalized literary production and state-hired writers was functional in the Maoist era and in the 1980s, when amateurish writers with avid literature dreams served as the pool of candidates in official state-run literary production. However, this system became a closed circle in the 1990s and therefore became detached from the most robust literary production scene. Therefore, when the comparatively open and free new media of the internet offered opportunity for the new generation, the suppressed creativity and enthusiasm, not able to fall within traditional nationalized literary institutions, immediately found convenient ways for self-realization.

Besides, Shao suggests that genre literature produced online is reader-oriented and functional. They are substitutions for the bankrupted enlightenment project. The flood of genre literature writings online, including fantasy, time-travel and *danmei*, all represents an old need and sublime construction *before* the post-socialist age. She suggests that *danmei* is the substitution of the banal and disillusioned heterosexual love in traditional heterosexual romance; it fulfills fangirls' desire for representations of idealized pure love—the same as the *danmei* community discursive mantra. The confrontation between the internet literature and the institutionally produced “high literature” is generational, between a generation growing under the influence of the internet media and a generation that feels particularly nostalgic towards the centered communication mode of the age of paper media. But at the same time, such conflict presents totally different attitudes towards literature and texts; for texts produced on the internet are intrinsically flat, decentered, non-hierarchical, instantly responsive, and clustered around similar interests instead of traditional social relationships, much contrary to the institutionalized state-run literary production system. The vision, however, is only an ideal as evidenced by the current literary scene online that includes its own hierarchies. Shao mentions especially the residuals of paper media, those slightly older internet writers, most of whom did not succeed in getting into the traditional literary production system. Such dynamics makes Chinese internet literature a highly heterogeneous collection of texts, people and visions.

While I agree with most of Shao's assessment of the current internet literature and its relationship with the mainstream literature and culture, I question the plausibility that the internet literature is completely severed from the mainstream literary production system; or we should at least define the “mainstream” in further detail. Internet literature grows from younger generations' urge toward artistic creation, yet they might not totally abandon the sublime course

and ideal of a more traditional literary dream. While it is possible that the enlightenment project is abandoned—even by the state-run literary institution, which grows gradually trivialized and vulgarized—it still stays as a crucial part of cultural capital of the intellectual world.

Intrinsically, many internet literature authors, whatever themes or genres they are writing in, identify with the cultural hierarchy, therefore their cultural capital can easily convert into subcultural capital and then into symbolic capital. These genre literature sometimes go much further than mere transformed substitution of a sublime course. As in the case of *danmei*, the fan community intentionally attempts to self-identify with this older grand enlightenment project, even if such attempts lie only in the discursive mantra. With the ongoing attempt to connect with the canonized literary tradition, this situation is especially true for the genre of *danmei*. And that is what I call a self-elitism of the *danmei* community.

Another less obvious aspect of the cultural capital comes in the form of what might be called an international mainstream cultural capital. The foreign origin of the *danmei* literature puts the genre naturally in the power dynamics between national cultures. Mori Mari, Group Year 24, 1980s and 1990s Japanese BL *manga* and *anime*, mainstream Japanese *anime* on which Chinese *danmei* fan fiction are based—all of these are the standard components for Chinese fangirls' daily entertainment experience. And all of them are foreign. Such origin simultaneously offers Chinese *danmei* writing legitimacy and gives it a dubious lineage. It explains the reason that Chinese *danmei* fans are so eager to find a *danmei* lineage inside premodern and modern Chinese literature that they can claim.

Jenkins describes the phenomenon whereby fans embrace foreign popular culture as a means of self-declaration as “pop cosmopolitanism” (“Pop Cosmopolitanism”). By consuming these foreign media products, young people set themselves apart from domestic popular culture

such as domestic television series with less production value, and foreign ones that have less subcultural capital such as—in China specifically—Korean dramas. The condition is of course straightforward in Jenkins' example of the American audience for Japanese *anime*; the situation is far more complicated in the case of China. The translation trend in China since the late nineteenth-century makes foreign products, those from the developed “advanced” countries especially, higher on the cultural hierarchy, a hierarchy based on the international political and economic order. One can observe such phenomenon on the academic and social level, and in canonical mainstream literature, but in the realm of popular culture, we can also see hierarchies based on national origins. Alan Williams accurately grabs such a dynamic for *yaoi*'s reception in Asia. He observes that *yaoi* has participated in what Koichi Iwabuchi calls “Brand Nationalism,” a term that Iwabuchi describes as the international competition for soft power by cultural and media products. Williams suggests that readers read homoromantic texts from foreign countries not only for the presentation of the homosexual relationship, but also an imagination of heteropatriarchies, under the global liberal discourse of equality for women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities. By using Jaspir Puar's term “homonationalism,” Williams suggests the close relationship between LGBT discourse and the US state, demonstrates that “nation-states do not need to necessarily adopt the logic of rights to prove their modern status, so much as provide social and commercial space for queer and feminist stylization” (4). The “conflation of the nation's mediascape with its ideoscape among overseas consumers” naturally connects more liberal queer discourse with their national origin. As a matter of fact, a hierarchy of state power connects the cultural hierarchy through the media products, present, especially on the issue of LGBTQ discourse, a subcultural hierarchy in the *danmei* community. In other words, the *danmei* community in China, while appropriating LGBTQ discourse, gains international mainstream

cultural capital (though the extent to which this capital is then “exported” outside China is less clear).

Besides, as Hills acutely reminds us, fan studies have ignored other aspects of Bourdieu’s economic metaphor: besides cultural capital, we should also examine the social, economic and symbolic capital in fan culture. Indeed, contrary to Fiske’s suggestion that fan culture is part of popular cultural capital of the working class, if we analyze the Chinese *danmei* community, one thing is obvious: overall, the word grassroots is not appropriate to describe such writings globally and locally. In the case of American slash fiction, from the beginning it belongs to well-educated middle classed women.⁷⁹ Because the severe urban-rural differences in China, fangirls, who are usually city dwellers from comparatively well-off families, are well educated and well informed comparatively. As early as 2007, Wang Zheng provides a rough demographic description of the fangirl community (which is roughly equivalent to the *danmei* community in her discussion), that compared to general netizens, the fangirl community has a much higher portion of population with college education and above (125). Interestingly enough, to ward off the stereotypes supposed by outsiders of the fan community, many scholars start off by giving a demographic information for the community, claiming that they are not truly “uneducated lower class,” (from Jenkins in his Cambridge fan community to Yang Ling’s popular singer fans who, according statistics, are women of all ages, better educated with higher incomes than other celebrity fan communities in China (2-4)). While such information shows that a great portion of fans are from upper-level economic and social capital, such discourse itself, as a defense towards the outsiders, presents a tendency to convert the economic and social capital into a substitution of the cultural capital. Being economically well-off and leading a normal middle class life becomes

⁷⁹ See Jenkins’s Introduction in *Textual Poachers*.

an argument for legitimacy for such cultural activity; and then, obtaining social capital in the mainstream cultural hierarchy further facilitates such self-defense.

Favilla Mundi

A novel titled *Favilla Mundi* epitomizes the delicate textual negotiation between the so-called canonical literary mainstream and *danmei*. The title *Favilla Mundi* is written in Latin, which literally means “ashes of the world.” The story written by an author with the pseudonym “dome,” was serialized from 2004 to 2006 on several *danmei* forums. This story is set completely outside the bounds of common knowledge of the average Chinese fan: in 16th century Germany during the Protestant Reformation, and between two priests: one of them, Werner Reiner, a steadfast supporter of the Roman Catholic Church, the other, Arthur Karlov, a reform leader. The novel is one of my favorite *danmei*, and is often praised by its fans as a *danmei* novel with the tone of a “world classic.” Reiner and Karlov are soul mates, but cannot accede to each other’s faith and life choices. The two protagonists start as classmates in Heidelberg. After Arthur instigates a rebellion in the students and local civilians, he flees, leaving most of his classmates to be executed for the new faith of which he had convinced them. Werner, being his best friend, soul mate and secret lover, is rescued from the death prison by an official, aiming to trade freedom for sex with this beautiful young man. After Arthur escapes from the prison, Werner starts to hunt him down. Arthur, however, continues to instigate rebellions among ordinary peasants and royals, while he also finds that his dream and vision about an ideal future is contaminated with sinister followers. Finally, during a battle which the peasants win, he barely escapes from the assassins in his own camp and reconciles with Werner, who just surrendered to the peasants’ army as the representative of the Catholic Church. After a plague breaks out in the

city, the two lovers decide to abandon all their hatred and differences, leave the chaotic political struggle and wander the world. In the end, after both of them losing hope and faith in their former dreams, are back with each other and only each other.

While the author's personal background bespeaks cultural prestige and cultural capital in the traditional sense (she is an alumna of a prestigious university in Beijing, and she is now studying in France for her doctorate degree in Catholic Literature), the story itself speaks a cultural hybridity in the sense of national origin, cultural capital and subcultural capital. The story, while the author herself denies direct influence from the *manga* of Year 24 Group in Japan,⁸⁰ sets in a collection of texts that search for the homosocial/homosexual desire between teenagers or young adults in the setting of European boys' boarding school (in her case, a Renaissance university). Some major examples of early Japanese *shonen'ai manga*, including especially Hagio Moto's *Thomas's Heart*, and Takemiya Keiko's *Song of Wind and Trees*, are set in a European boarding school for boys. Even the character setting is the iconic "blonde vs. dark" pair in early *shonen'ai manga* by the Year 24 Group artists. While such similarities do not guarantee any direct influence, fangirls would much rather read *Favilla Mundi* as resembling a "world classics" than a Japanese *shojo manga*.

The so-called "world classics" is an interesting phenomenon in modern and contemporary Chinese translation and publication, that foreign literary works, especially novels are translated and published under the collective category (or, we can safely call it a marketed "genre"). Considering the cultural hegemony of Europe and America in the 20th Century, most of the

⁸⁰ During a personal conversation, dome told me that she is a fan of Hagio Moto, but she wrote *Favilla Mundi* before she encountered Hagio's works. While she also agreed that her story is thematically and visually close to Group Year 24's style, the influence she received might come from elsewhere.

“world classics” are from European languages and the Christian world.⁸¹ While the list of “canon” presents translators’ taste in literature and presents a politicalized bias during the first 30 years of the People’s Republic, this list generally looks similar to the list in the Western academy. Typical examples of “world classics” will be English, French, German or Russian novels written in the 19th century. Therefore topics as priests, Christian practices, frequent reference to the Holy Bible, etc., is not familiar on a daily basis to general Chinese readers—most of whom are far from any Christian practice; but for frequent readers of “world classics,” churches and priests are quite familiar to them textually. As a result, a familiarity with such a history and vocabulary is not only rare, but also draws the story closer to a high literary canon, even only thematically.

Dome does not expect that all readers would grab her heavy references to the real history, so she adds notes for her readers, written in a much more casual tone to explain the real world history and the references. For example, in one note, she complained that she had to change the date of an actual letter, from Albrecht von Brandenburg to Martin Luther, to make it work in the story. It is very possible that without her note, most her readers would never know that she has altered the historical record to fit her story.⁸² Such notes could alienate a readership with complicated and obtuse historical references, but in this case construct a casual and intimate reading experience. This is exactly how a *danmei* canon works in a community: the author

⁸¹ To understand the general idea of how average Chinese understand the idea “World Classics,” one could see the (not so ideal) entry of the word “名著” in Wikipedia, in which European and American writings have taken up more than 75% of the non-Chinese titles. “Mingzhu” 名著. Wikipedia. n.d. Web. 6 Jun 2016. <<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%90%8D%E8%91%97>>.

⁸² See the author’s note at the end of Chapter 25 of *Favilla Mundi*. Dome explains that Martin Luther wrote a letter to Albrecht in the story, in the history it took place on Oct 31, but the story takes place in the summer. So there is a minor error in history background.

herself is part of the community, an average fangirl, but her writing is far beyond much people's knowledge on the axis of cultural capital.

In the cited paragraphs below, dome describes a desperate moment of both characters, especially Arthur Karlov, who shows his agony in finding that his idealist dream is not achievable, while Werner Reiner observes the whole process and tries his best to comfort his friend and lover. Karlov comes back from a revolution that goes far more violently than his imagination and finds Reiner on the burial ground of their former classmates, who were all executed because they chose to believe in Karlov's belief of a new world.

The outside wall of the Notre Dame church is in a disastrous state. All carvings with the suspicion of idolatry were cut away, like a face covered with scars, no feature distinguishable any more. He stumbles through the jungle of tombstones, until at the end of it, where he instantly catches the sight of the person standing there. Yes, he always stands there, standing there always, just like a statue, with snow covering his shoulder, standing with the dead; no, when he stands there, there is no more distinction between life and death. Unfading condemnation, infliction, longing, ecstasy; they are all the same everywhere, springing out eternally like lava. He almost exhausts all his energy to reach out to him.

Reiner turns around; his face haggard. But when he sees him, he panics. When Karlov approaches, he steps back involuntarily, raising his hands to his face, as if he is expecting a severe slap on the face. Karlov has not realized that his reaction was because he saw his appearance. He looks almost exactly like a lunatic.

"You—" He is only able to utter one word before he is pushed onto the stone wall. Withered vines crackle in small noises, scape them on their faces and hair. His arms strangle him; he tries to move but cannot. "Even you are going to leave me this

time?” Karlov shouts desperately, “Kiss me, I am dying!” (dome, *Favilla Mundi*, Chapter 37)⁸³

I have to apologize that I am not able to fully show the language and atmosphere in the original Chinese text from my translation. What I am especially lack of ability to translate is how Europeanized her sentences are, from wording to syntax to idioms. Such stylistic language, sometimes debased as “translation tone” is grammatically correct, but idiomatically, it is elegant language, but not entirely indigenous. Such language, heavily influenced by European language, is another similarity that it shares with the translated “world classics.” Concerning the details of the quoted paragraph, it presents an emotionally intense moment with metaphors and iconographies of Catholicism. With such language, this intense moment combines Karlov’s personal romantic emotion with his theological beliefs in a direct confrontation with his failed project. But at the same time, this short sequence is a typical hurt/comfort moment in fan fiction, in which a partner of a couple is badly hurt emotionally and/or physically, and the other partner comes to comfort him/her. In a word, this story can be read in both contexts: a bookshelf full of world classics that target similar thoughts and beliefs in history, or various traditions of popular cultural texts, including fan fiction, and *shōjo manga*.

As what I have analyzed above about the discursive mantra, it is the first resemblance that *danmei* fans tend to emphasize. Here are several example criticisms of this story:

In general, *Favilla Mundi* goes far beyond telling a love hate struggle between two protagonists (like most *danmei* fiction, backgrounds are just backgrounds). It vividly depicts a 16th Century Germany, at the eve of the Protestant Reformation. We see

⁸³ The translation is mine. See Appendix 7 for the original Chinese text.

priests, nobles, reformers and common people, all their anxiety, trouble, hope and doubt. (Nianguren)⁸⁴

The author is a Catholic herself; her familiarity with the Catholic Church enables her to construct an alluring world of the Church. The simple dialogs between the *seme* and the *uke* are decorated with Christian terminology, and therefore creates a special beauty in the language. It makes readers think calmly through the truth in the words. (Yubidanqing)⁸⁵

Dome's readers more or less read her novel in the perspective of *danmei* readers: they judge her for her depiction of *seme* and *uke*, for her ability to tell a love and hate story between two beautiful young men. But they also immediately point to her "vivid" and "alluring" depiction of the whole society and the church. What is important here, is that the context that the readers put it is not always the case with other *danmei* writings; the theological theme and the epic scope often becomes a major concern. Of course we cannot clearly separate the reading experience into the pleasure comes from relationship description and the sense of fulfillment from the background description. But this indistinguishability also suggests that *danmei* is not a separate body of works that is read with a completely different sense of literary judgment. It is not outside the mainstream reading experience. Yet at the same time, we may notice that many readers prioritize the background information, and the content besides the romantic relationship depiction. In many ways, such cultural capital has converted into subcultural capital smoothly and then into symbolic capital.

⁸⁴ This piece of criticism is posted on the *Favilla Mundi* page on *Douban*, an SNS site based on reading and film watching. The translation is mine. See Appendix 8 for the original Chinese text.

⁸⁵ This piece of criticism is posted on a personal blog. The translation is mine. See Appendix 9 for the original Chinese text.

While the urge for self-defense towards a sometimes imaginary outsider seems to have diminished in recent years, the cultural capital of the mainstream still seems to play a significant role in Chinese *danmei* community. Besides the obvious existence of the cultural hierarchy based on knowledge and education, another issue that links to the cultural capital, what I called “international mainstream cultural capital,” in this case the neoliberal discourse of LGBTQ equality, becomes a significant sign for “cultural advancement” and “modernization” in international or intranational comparisons. The conflation of the mediascape and the ideoscape therefore legitimize a linear evolutionary imagination of modernization in this area for “late comers” such as mainland China despite their each complicated discourse on sex and sexuality in the pre-modern era. Just as the odd rhetoric in Gina Marchetti’s analysis of *Hold You Tight* (1998) by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan suggests, the lack of public support for LGBTQ population, is a sign of backwardness: “As the sex-gender gap widens with the class divide, the PRC lags behind the rest of the Chinese world” (212). While the criticism towards the mainland Chinese government is valid and legitimized, the linear progression term “lags” simply ignores the interactions among mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, interregional dynamics, and mainstream and subcultural fissures. *Danmei* is an interesting and representative case in such interactions.

***Danmei* literature, *Tongzhi* literature, Queer Cinema**

Probably seen as a sign of so-called “backwardness,” it has been a tradition for most original Chinese *danmei* writings, that if a *danmei* author wants to publish, she has to publish outside Mainland China, in, for example, the easy suspect, Taiwan. However, while scholars claim that the homosexual theme makes *danmei* an unpublishable genre in China (Feng

“Addicted to Beauty” 6), many *danmei* stories are published legally through standard official publishers. For example, two original *danmei* novels written by the author named Momo 脉脉, *Dim Light* and *Diverged Roads* (*Qi lu* 歧路) have been published through legal publishers in mainland China. *Dim Light* was published in 2009 by Yunnan Renmin, while *Diverged Roads* was published in 2012 by Gansu Renmin Meishu. Due to the opaque censorship system, publishers (or rather censors) in mainland China are very unpredictable; severe control on homosexual and pornographic content is often interrupted by sporadic alleviation of content control. The “publishability” for books with controversial topics depends not on a strict guideline that cannot be transgressed, but a vaguely defined boundary easily intruded. We can only vaguely guess the reason that these books were able to pass censors. One possible reason is that the stories are fantasies. Most of the published *danmei* stories belong to the so-called “clear water” type, i.e., those with no explicit sexual description (implicit reference to sexual activity is possible). Recently, we see trends in which explicit sexual descriptions are removed for the purpose of legal publication and then only released in other venue, including online, or through amateurish publications—*dōjinshi*. *Danmei* writers such as Feitianyexiang 非天夜翔, for example, have published several “cleaned” versions of his homoerotic writings, leaving explicit homoerotic writings for amateurish publication.⁸⁶ When “pornography” does not posit a serious problem for publication, the former strict control on “homosexuality” in popular literary publication sees some alleviation (the issue is slightly different with high literature, with literary

⁸⁶ One of Feitianyexiang’s novel, *2013* (二零一三), serialized on Jinjiang Literature from August to October 2011. When it was finished, Jinjiang Literature made a simple amateurish publication of the novel, with all the descriptions of sexual relationship involved. This service by Jinjiang is close to the amateurish fanzine publication, and is no longer available now because of the tightened censorship on pornography. But the novel was renamed as *Twilight of the Domsday* (*Mori shuguang* 末日曙光) and was published by Hunan Renmin in 2013. The legally published version does not contain any description of homosexual relationships.

products referring directly to homosexuality much less of a taboo). However, even though *danmei* now is far from an exploitative genre as the fully commercialized merchandize as Japanese BL, which has already developed into a lucrative industry line and niche market in Japan, the mainland Chinese *danmei* publication is sporadic and unpredictable.

Does this set of conditions suggest more tolerance towards queer expression and the queer population in China? In Chinese history, homosexuality is not a horrendous taboo in publication anyway. Homosexual content can be found in pre-modern vernacular novels, such as *Dream of the Red Mansions*, less well-known late-Qing vernacular fiction as *Pin hua bao jian* 品花宝鉴 and in May Fourth literature by the now canonical writers such as Shen Congwen, Yu Dafu and Ling Shuhua.⁸⁷ Yet just as I've argued, *danmei* has a very ambiguous relationship with mainstream canonical literature, for which homosexual sentiments are rendered more as artistic instead of pornographic, a notion closely linked to less prestigious writings as exploitative genre literature. The criteria of "artistic necessity" determines a cultural capital for queer-themed narratives, while the relationship that the narratives hold with the social and political problems of the queer population, however, determines another cultural capital, an international mainstream cultural capital. The applicability, use, and practical meanings for queer writings have long defined *danmei* as a secluded imaginary world only accessible to female spectators. Yet I would argue, that *danmei* is not necessarily more secluded, formulaic or unrealistic. I want to first investigate these questions: How "real" is *danmei* literature? How does it relate to the current condition of the LGBTQ population? What is the relationship between *danmei* and the queer representation in mainstream literature, cinema and culture? Just as the necessity of homosexual

⁸⁷ The writers mentioned above all deal with the homosexual / homoerotic themes in their writings. Because traditionally Chinese did not link the identity of LGBTQ with sexual actions and desires, these writings were never considered different from the other writings that deal with sex and sexual desire until recently.

description is determined by censors' assessment of the literary value, information such as genre and target audience is most often decided by the readers and the community, not necessarily by the author, or certain textual traits. In fact, the arbitrary distinction between a (mostly straight) female-oriented *danmei* writing tradition, a wider audience targeted by queer cinema and a gay population-oriented *tongzhi* writing is largely a fabrication on the textual level. The acceptance of queer texts is much more complicated than a simple segregation among genders and sexual orientations. Besides, the claim that *danmei* and *yaoi* are completely female fantasy has nothing to do with queer experience in the real life needs further consideration due to the often unexpected diversity inside the genre, if not by the vague idea of "reality" and "fantasy" themselves.

A widely circulated legend in the Chinese *danmei* community tells the animosity that the gay population holds towards *danmei* writings and the girls who consume them. For fangirls and gay men, at least a significant portion of both sides express open and strong animosity towards one another. Gay communities accuse fangirls of abusing the subculture and spreading erroneous ideas of them; fangirls, on the other hand, clearly state that they are disgusted by real gay men, which are so different from the delicate beautiful boys of BL *manga*.⁸⁸ Such animosity—true to an extent, but not necessary representative—has never really escalated into a full-scaled social debate on Chinese internet. Similar discussion, the so-called *yaoi ronsō*, the debate on *yaoi*, took place in early 1990s Japan, also between *yaoi* community and gay men community.⁸⁹ Fantasy has been the keyword for *yaoi* studies, often suggesting that actual agency in the genre has only a

⁸⁸ I raise two examples here to show the conflict and mutual relationship between the fangirls and gay men. Shuning's post shows a gay man's displeasure with the stereotypical *seme* and *uke* relationship imagination by the *danmei* lovers, and further challenges the sexist tendency in the *danmei* community. Shadainan's writing, however, directly tells a story of a gay man being discriminated by *fujoshi* because he is not physically appealing enough.

⁸⁹ See Lunsing, Ishida for more details on the debate on *yaoi* (*Yaoi Ronsō*).

very weak relationship with the real condition faced by the LGBTQ community. James Welker, for example, shows that the early *shonen'ai* publications did have a close relationship with the LGBTQ community, and that *shonen'ai* can be and was read as lesbian by lesbian communities (“Flower Tribes”). In fan studies in the United States, Anne Kusritz also suggests that it is unfair to ask slash fiction to directly address the contemporary gay rights issue, since the history of slash fiction has nothing to do with the current political situation: for *Star Trek* slash fiction writers, since they are dealing with an imaginary society, they have no responsibility to address gay men’s social conditions.

Representation is always a serious problem for queer-themed fictional narratives. As what I have discussed in the previous chapter, female-oriented male homoerotica is generally viewed as irrelevant to the gay community, or even real masculinity. While this homoerotica has never assumed the position of political conscious defense of the contemporary gay man’s life choices in any cultural background, however, it would be a mistake to separate queer writings into several categories based on target audiences’ gender and sexuality, because there could be a significant discrepancy between the target audience group and the actual audience. In this section, I will examine three examples from three seemingly distinctive types of fictional narrative, focusing on their presentation of historical authenticity and narrative realism, to investigate the issue of queer representation in popular culture in Chinese language. In many ways, *danmei* literature, no less than the assumed more realistic gay literature or cinema, show the burden of history and representation when to approach the issue of realism. Compared to queer cinema, either commercial or independent, *danmei* seems to be a secluded subculture, serving only the fantasy of female fans, yet queer-cinema shares similarities with *danmei* in so many aspects, which challenge the often taken-for-granted division between *danmei* and *tongzhi*.

As a separate but not completely unrelated phenomenon, before *danmei* writings started in Mainland China en masse, during the 1990s, a significant number of queer-themed Chinese-language films emerged in the whole Sinophone area, including mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They involved top-tier directors and producers, attracted world-wide attention and became the favorites of film festivals. To raise several most famous examples, Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993), Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet* (1993), Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997)—all of them mainstream productions. There were also independent productions such as Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (2001) and experimental films, such as *Old Testament* (2002), *Aiyaya*, *Go Feed Boys* (2003) etc. by the first openly gay director in Mainland China, Cui Zi'en. These films, all produced in the 1990s and early 2000s, with part of them literary adaptations, constitute another layer of cultural background for online queer writings (including *danmei*). Because film productions are bigger budget and commercialized, they seldom cross the road of amateurish writings online, targeting niche audiences. However, these commercial (or independent) film productions are sometimes received as a compliment of *danmei* writings for fangirls. Fran Martin notes that Stanley Kwan's *Lan Yu* attracted a majority female audience in Taiwan, suggesting a direct connection with the widespread readership of Japanese BL *manga*. Chris Berry shows the “other side of the mountain” of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) lies partly in the widespread *danmei* phenomenon in the whole Sinophone area. The young handsome cast of *Brokeback Mountain* also ensures that the target audience of the film is identical in demographic description as *danmei* fans.

The relationship between *danmei* culture and the mainstream film industry in the East Asia is quite ambiguous. Andrew Grossman argues that queer cinema usually falls into two categories: “a propagandistic search for bourgeois acceptance or a radical challenge to sexual

hegemony,” and in terms of queer Asian cinema, which have appeared “more radical and less apologetic than their mainstream Western counterparts” in recent years, they are often “intended to be popular yet still unapologetically political films about queerness, per se” (1-2). In other words, he suggests that Asian queer cinema, which presents normal lives of the queer population, disregarding any attempt in making direct political statements in gay right issues, is more radical. Just as Williams suggests, some of the mainstream films featuring homosexual young men’s romance is very identical to *yaoi* writings. His example, *Formula 17* (2004, Chen Yin-jung), featuring a society that is totally consisted of homosexual males, is often considered and consumed as a BL text. The “light” “bubbly” queer comedy is a fantasy that happens on real location. “In essence, *Brokeback Mountain* and *Lan Yu* provide ample affective space for heteronormative kinship to remain a cherished norm, whereas *Formula 17* completely sidesteps it in favour of speculative queer kinship” (30). He suggests that stories such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Lan Yu*, which deal with traditional Asian family values, is different, and is labeled somewhat less “modernized” than those light queer comedies in an international context. Yet at the same time, Chris Berry has concluded in multiple writings about the importance of the family value in Chinese queer cinema. “What was also true earlier this decade is that almost all the larger budget features being made for a general (i.e., not specifically gay, lesbian and queer) audience came from East Asia and they dealt with the contemporary emergence of gay identity as a family matter (“Happy Alone” 189).” Therefore, the conflict between the neo-Confucius family value and individualism celebrated by gay characters becomes the central conflict of the queer melodrama, which makes these queer young men as “sad young men.” These less celebratory depictions of gay lives then, are often decided as less radical and avant-garde under the current international hierarchy. All three scholars above suggest that being relative to real

gay issues in the society is important in making distinctions in queer texts. It would be counterproductive for me to linger on the criteria of subversiveness and avant-garde values in queer texts in the Sinophone area. However, my examples in this section show instead how “real” is received, understood and interpreted in particular queer texts. And I argue it has nothing to do with, from my point of view, an imaginary boundary drawn between the female-oriented *danmei* and the gay male-oriented *tongzhi*. It would be most beneficial to put *danmei* back to the social and cultural situation where it is produced and consumed.

The so-called “*tongzhi* literature” 同志文学, literarily meaning “comrade literature,” compared to other queer texts including *danmei* literature, is the most straightforward gay literature in China. “*Tongzhi* 同志,” which literarily means “same goal,” was originally a translation for the Soviet expression “comrade.” The word was reappropriated by the Hong Kong gay community as a self-referent in the late 1980s. Now widely adopted in the whole Sinophile world as an informal title for homosexuals, its meaning of “homosexuality” is still not officially accepted in mainland China (at least, it has not yet made its way into the dictionary). There is not a casual word (without insult) for either gay or lesbian in standard modern Chinese; while slang is abound, the only formal Chinese term for this community (save some poetic euphemism in literary Chinese with allusions to famous pre-modern gay people, e.g. cut the sleeves 断袖, part the peach 分桃, etc.⁹⁰) is “homosexual”/ *tongxinglian* 同性恋, which is a medical and psychological term. As Wah-Shan Chou points out, traditionally, “the traditional Chinese world did not dichotomize sexual desire into a gender binarism of same-sex desire and opposite-sex

⁹⁰ “Cut the sleeves” refers to a story of Emperor Ai of Han Dynasty (27-1 CE), who took a nap with his male lover Dong Xian. When he had to get up, he cut his sleeves instead of waking up Dong Xian, who was sleeping on his sleeves. “Part the peach” refers to a story of Duke Ling of Wei (534-492 BC) in the Spring and Autumn Period, who accepted a delicious peach that his male lover, Mi Zixia had just taken a bite.

desire,” and “same-sex activities are portrayed in predominantly social, rather than sexual terms” (29). The identity of “gay,” the idea of “coming out of the closet” are predominantly the result of Westernization. The word “*tongzhi*,” while bearing the heavy historical memory of the Maoist and communist age, has become a widely accepted casual term for the queer community, with a very twisted irony and dilemma simply through the juxtaposed premodern, modern and postmodern discourse about Chinese sexuality.

In fact, if we disregard the representative burden carried by gay-oriented literary and cinema productions in China, the textual differences between so-called *tongzhi* and *danmei* do not seem to be self-evident. Both of them embody a strange internal conflict between traditional and modern, and between China and the West. Both present such conflict in their treatment of realism and authenticity. Several generally agreed-upon criteria circulate in the fangirl community for distinction between *danmei* and “comrade” literature: “comrade” literature is more “ying” 硬 (hard) and more realistic, while *danmei* stories are more “ruan” 软 (soft) and imaginary. A question on Zhihu asks repliers to explain major differences between *tongzhi* literature and *danmei* literature, the most often given answer is that *danmei* is romantic and sensual, while *tongzhi* literature invites identification, and is more realistic (see “Tongzhi xiaoshuo he danmei xiaoshuo you shenme qubie?”). However, there is no exact explanation of the feeling of “hard” and “soft.” The similarities between the two seemingly distinctive genres actually might be overestimated in the community.

***Beijing Story*, *Lan Yu* and Two Modes of Melodrama**

The two related texts, *Beijing Story* and its film adaptation, *Lan Yu*, are the most typical and one of the earliest examples of *tongzhi* texts. But just as Fran Martin and Chris Berry

suggest, the reception of this film in the whole Sinophone area is significantly affected by the *danmei* /BL subculture. On the mainland, *Beijing Story* is on the must-read list for *danmei* fans, even though this story is almost the first internet *tongzhi* literature, a legendary one.

Lan Yu 蓝宇 (2001), directed by the famous Hong Kong director, Stanley Kwan, is well received both among audiences and critics. The film was selected as the best-welcomed film of the year by the Taiwan Golden Horse film awards and one of the leading actor, Liu Ye 刘烨 (aka Lan Yu) was awarded the best actor award. It was adapted from the internet novel, *Beijing Story* (*Beijing Story* 北京故事), circulated online around the earliest years of Chinese language internet literature, by an author with a pseudonym of “*Beijing tongzhi* (Beijing comrade 北京同志).” Plenty of rumors around *Beijing Story* circulate online ever since it was posted, including that the characters each has a counterpart in real life, and that the story is actually written by a woman instead of a gay man (which makes it more of a *danmei* text instead of a *tongzhi* text, if we take the gender of the author as a determining criterion).⁹¹ None of the rumors was confirmed, yet the mysteries around the identities of either the characters or the author make the story only more ambiguous in its own position in the current literary and cultural field.

The film *Lan Yu*, however, though it is adapted from the famous *tongzhi* text, also holds an immense influence upon the *danmei* community. Even though it was never officially screened on the mainland due to serious content censorship, the film is widely circulated through underground venues—similar to all media products that were not legally distributed—through

⁹¹ The real identity of *Beijing Story*'s author is still a mystery. Rumors online tend to believe that the author is a woman, and the novel is adapted from a real story. There is even a photography of the alleged “real Lan Yu” circulated online. However, none of the rumors is confirmed. See “Beijing gushi Lan Yu Handong zhenyou qiren.” <<北京故事>> 蓝宇 捍东 真有其人 (*Beijing Story*, there really are Lan Yu and Handong in real life) for more information.

online video sharing and pirated DVDs. Gossip around this film even started a Real Person Slash fandom upon the two main actors that is sustained even now.⁹²

The novel *Beijing Story* resembles a memoir; it intertwines the political events and social changes and the romantic relationship between two characters during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The political events, such as the Tian'anmen incident in 1989, lends the story authenticity, making it more identifiable, and at the same time serves as important points in the development of the relationships between the protagonists. The story starts with a young architecture student in a renowned university, Lan Yu, in an urgent need of money, choosing to sell his body to a successful businessman Chen Handong 陈捍东, who has some "special interest" in men. Lan Yu is a struggling new comer to the metropolitan Beijing, while Chen was born in a high-ranked cadre family in Beijing. Though their first encounter is obviously a commercial trade, with the development of their relationship, Lan Yu becomes more and more committed to the socially forbidden homosexual love. Chen has always treated this relationship as a game and abruptly leaves Lan Yu to marry a woman. Only after Handong's short unsuccessful marriage does he finally realize his love for Lan Yu. But shortly after the two lovers' reunion, Chen is imprisoned because of illegal management in his business. He escapes serious penalty only with Lan Yu's help: Lan Yu sells the villa that Handong gave him and bribes a critical figure in the government, buying him out of the prison. Just before a seemingly promised happy life is realized, Lan Yu dies from a sudden accident and leaves Handong in sadness and regret forever.

⁹² The two main actors, Hu Jun and Liu Ye are a typical real person slash shipping, very popular in fangirls' gossips. Many believe that they grew in love with each other when shooting *Lan Yu*. See the discussion thread started by 93sj on Tianya forum for an example.

David Eng reads the story as a political and cultural allegory, reading the complicated relationship between Handong and Lan Yu as a representation of the conflict between the Maoist communist modernization and the neoliberal capitalist modernization under the specific historical moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The repeating motif in the film, asymmetrically positioned reflected images in a mirror, frames by windows and doors (again, asymmetrical), in Eng's perspective, divide and connect two impossible spaces, signifying "an alternate historical awareness, a different historical tempo and beat, a queer space and time" (462). More specifically, he suggests the queerness in this film "function[s] as a critical tool for organizing and evaluating not just the contemporary emergence of non-normative sexualities and desires in (post-)socialist China, but also, and more urgently, historical continuities and ruptures among China's (semi)colonial past, its revolutionary aspirations for a socialist modernity, and its contemporary investments in a neoliberal capitalist world order" (462). Interestingly, though he discusses the film, not the original story, his analysis reveals some significant adaptation strategies between the original story and the film. *Lan Yu* is actually a structurally simplified version of *Beijing Story*. Eng accurately points out several pink elephants in the film plot, never clearly spelled out either in conversation or in the plotline. The identity of Handong as a son of a powerful CCP cadre and his illegal business basically sustained by his father's influence in the party, for one thing, is mentioned and implied in the original novel, yet never in the film. Lan Yu's identity as an active participant of a student democratic movement, and his later conduct of bribing a powerful political figure for Handong's life—the moral irony created from these two incidents (also only very lightly touched upon in the film) also leads to an ambivalent subtext for the complicated characters. The visibility and invisibility are kept in such an intricate balance that it sets a knowledge barrier for the audience: ordinary audiences see a very simple love story

(see those Rotten Tomato critiques of how simplistic the story is, that it never suits the delicate cinematic techniques);⁹³ only those acquainted with Chinese society then are able to point to the specificities that either solicit nostalgia, or thoughts. The presentation and signification of the complicated modern Chinese history in this story, becomes the background of this gay love story. Disjunctions between the two characters, with each of their backgrounds and family's signification in Chinese society, for Eng, represents ultimately a clash between two modes of modernity in the 1980s and 1990s China. I would suggest, however, these deeply imbedded social significations has a direct contrast with the almost minimal style of the film techniques. Both of which contribute to create a realistic narrative, the social context works on a material aspect, aiming for an authentic and typical situation for similar characters; the minimal cinematic style, however, works on an emotional way for a subtle emotional expression, avoiding melodramatic hyperbole.

In an interview, the director Stanley Kwan expresses that the first time he read the original novel, he thought that this story is full of cliché. But after he read it for a second time, he started to realize that all those two protagonists go through in the story had actually happened to him as well. He recalls his experience that his boyfriend for twelve years left him and married a woman (Michael Berry, 453). In this way, he can totally project himself onto the character Lan Yu. Although Beijing is a city rather foreign to him, he still manages to tell this story in his comfortable way. He transforms the story into an abstract celebration of eternal and universal love, focusing less on the outside social environment than on the interpersonal reactions and conflicts. In other words, he wants to demystify gay love by presenting the love story without

⁹³ See the review page of *Lan Yu* on Rotten Tomatoes. Many critics express their impression of simplistic plot and flat characters that “seems like something American and European gay movies were doing 20 years ago” (Sean P. Means). “Lan Yu Reviews.” Rotten Tomatoes. n.d. Web. 6 Jun 2016. <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lan_yu/reviews/>.

paying major emphasis on the unequal treatment that gay men would expect in a homophobic society. Chan points out the irony in Kwan's ideal of "ordinary," that he "betrays an anxiety of queerness, in that Kwan's attempt to 'erase' queerness serves ultimately to reassert it" (155-156). Such irony is presented fully in the delicate interaction between realistic and melodramatic on the level of romantic love, family and politics.

In both *Lan Yu* and its original story *Beijing Story*, there is a strong obsession in presenting background social details. As Eng analyzes, this story is structured around social changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chen's business is but a background of the years-long relationship between the two protagonists, yet unnecessary details on business, including the names (only mentioned in pseudonyms in the story) are elaborated to an extent of showing-off—showing off his social connection and power. However, almost every action with lasting effect happens in daily interpersonal interactions among friends and relations; the sociopolitical background remains the background. Excessive details and information seem only to represent a desire for a realistic depiction of the social condition, in order to sustain the authentic feeling, considering especially Handong's special social status, as well as the extreme private and wealthy living condition enjoyed by the two main characters, which, according to Li Yinhe's study, is very exceptional in 1980s China for ordinary gay men.⁹⁴ The film adaptation, *Lan Yu*, just as Kwan explains, comparatively downplays the information directly related to a specific time and location for a more abstract celebration for love. However, the Tiananmen incident becomes the crucial exception in Kwan's version of this story; it is emphasized to such a high degree, that it serves a crucial turning point in the plot.

⁹⁴ Li Yinhe's sociological studies on the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s China reveal the living condition of the ordinary gay people, who would live a doubled hidden life and search for comfort from fellow gay people in public toilets, parks, and bathing houses. The living condition of Chen Handong and Lan Yu in the novel and the film is beyond exceptional.

In the novel, Lan Yu is not an overtly enthusiastic student activist, but he still goes to the square on the June 4th during the government crackdown. The author describes in detail the immediate aftermath of the incident, when Lan Yu is finally back from the Square to face his lover, Handong:

His white shirt was full of blood. So was his face. I could not utter a word at the sight.

“Fascist! Bastard!” He cursed.

“What happened to you?” I was completely at loss as to what to ask.

“I was not hurt.” He looked at his shirt and said. “It was all others’ blood.”

Hearing this I got a swirling feeling already...

He walked all the way home from “The North River”. He kept telling me everything he saw.

“When the first shot was fired, everyone was running backward. I crawled onto the ground too. After the gunshots, I noticed someone in front of me was not moving at all. I reached out to grab him but got a handful of blood...There was a girl beside me. I wanted to take her away from the scene. But she was too scared to move. All of a sudden, the gun shots restarted. I jumped on top of her and protected her underneath...

Pictures of the bloody scenes scanned through my brain as I was listening to Lan Yu's account of the story. I stared at him ... I could hardly believe someone as obedient, graceful and sentimental as him could reach out to protect others under gunfire.

Although we did not sleep at all the night before, we were still excited and sleepless. He was in my embrace.

“I thought I was going to die. I was afraid I was not going to see you again.” He said.

“You selfish boy! I almost made my way to the Square. I might have died too!”

“Are you so ... fond of me?” He uttered ‘fond’ so lightly as if he was shy of saying it.

“I hated you! I wanted to kill you!” (Beijing Comrade, *Beijing Story*, Chapter 9)⁹⁵

The interesting thing about this quote is not that the story puts much emphasis depicting Lan Yu as a hero, but how the story of the political turmoil suddenly shifts to a completely different, somewhat cheesy narrative of “love.” The comparatively disinterested and self-centered narrative tone of this whole novel remains the same albeit a horrible and significant historical event has just occurred and mentioned in the conversation. The incident lends historical authenticity to the plot, and the character, especially Lan Yu, as a typical but also heroic above-average young man. Yet its significance never manifests itself in the tone nor the structure of the story. However influential the political event may be, the two protagonists always find the way to keep a considerable distance from it.

The film adaptation, however, treats the incident in a completely different way: Lan Yu and Handong were on the verge of breakup when the incident happened, so Handong sees Lan Yu the first time for months after he waited anxiously for him to come back. Their reconciliation, which happens much earlier in the novel than in the film adaptation, attributes further significance to this incident in the film adaptation, as it does not only serve as a historical marker, a significant date that everyone would remember exactly what they are doing, but also serves as the turning point of the relationship. The film also depicts this scene beautifully

⁹⁵ The translation is what can be found on Nifty Archive. See Appendix 10 for the original Chinese text.

through cinematic techniques: starting with Handong's brother-in-law coming to tell him inside news that "They are going to clear the Square tonight" to the diegetic sound from the radio at the end of the night, we never see exactly what happens on the Square, nor on the street directly. Bicycle bells, flashlights, and gunshots intersperse the process for Handong's aimless search on the street, but there is never a direct shot of the politically significant event. Lan Yu's long story is also missing in the film. We see him stumble back to Handong's car, waiting outside his university dormitory, see him tap at the car window, and a belated reconciling embrace between the lovers, to finally, a long shot of the two of them embracing each other naked on a bed, with Lan Yu loudly sobbing, without any intervention from non-diegetic music. As both Eng and Kenneth Chan note, the political and the public is absent in this scene. "A problematic political history of Tiananmen becomes inscribed as a relation between the affective and the spatial" (Eng 464), and therefore, "Kwan's truncation of melodramatic sequencing ultimately brings to focus the significance of the personal — gay sexuality — in the unfolding political drama of the national" (Chan 146). In other words, the adaptation transforms a political melodrama into a queer melodrama, a love story. Intimacy and tears in this particular sequence suggest not only a cathexis after a tragic historical event, but most importantly, highlights a metaphorical lament for the gay men's situation in a neoliberal Chinese society (which partly coincide with the student protestors on the Square).

If we see this story as a typical queer melodrama, then we should note other two closely intertwined symbolic and representational structures in the story: a political melodrama, and a family melodrama, both of which are crucial to the story. A significantly downplayed political melodrama transforms and projects the public to the private, and therefore the love story (or a queer melodrama) closely connects to the political one. However, the family melodrama, also

closely relates to the love story, presenting another dimension of the story: the family melodrama tradition in Chinese cinema, and especially Chinese queer cinema. In both versions of this story, the protagonists lack parents, or any parental figures. In the original novel, Handong has a normal family in Beijing, though he is alienated from nearly all his family members, except his mother. With his father death at the beginning of the story, the much less powerful representation of the traditional familial system, the mother, is presented as a somewhat sympathetic character. Meanwhile Lan Yu has an impoverished family with an evil step-mother: a home that one cannot return to. In the film, their familial relationships are much less sophisticated: Handong's brother and sister (including his brother-in-law, who is played by the film producer, Liu Yongning himself), participate in the story; his mother is no longer the only important family member for Handong. Lan Yu's family is in this version, just an ordinary poor peasant family that he seldom returns to. In both cases, the protagonists are removed from the normal familial relationships and obligations, which are traditionally crucial for Chinese people's identity, and on which essential conflicts of most Chinese family melodrama are staged. Therefore, the clichéd debate of gay people's choice between traditional filial piety and their love towards a homosexual lover is largely simplified. However, the protagonists' complicated familial relationships in the original novel are largely simplified in the film adaptation. While in the novel, the characters are completely alienated from their families of origin and therefore do not have to face a family burden, the film changes such relationships into an almost utopian situation, that the family of origin accepts the gay lovers as their family members, that they even start to lead a life similar to heterosexual couples before Lan Yu's sudden death.

Chris Berry links Asian queer melodrama with Chinese "family ethnic drama," arguing both genres (with obvious overlapping) emphasize social and family obligations, elaborating

conflicts between individual happiness and the family, instead of a story of individual struggles in the society, which is the typical narrative of Western gay identity. When analyzing Ang Lee's film *Wedding Banquet* (1994), he suggests that the foundation of Chinese queer melodrama: the conflict between the obligatory roles in a family with personal desires dominates this gay son's "coming-out" story. The deep moral ambivalence, which is usually seen in both Chinese and Western melodrama, is shown by encouraging audiences to identify with not one specific character only, but the whole family, including the homophobic parents. The problem with *Wedding Banquet*, as Song Hwee Lim points out, lies also in the representative burden of being the "first" queer film of various population groups, including the first Chinese-language commercial film on the gay issue, which forces the film in depicting the characters in even more stereotyped ways, and therefore, a formulaic family melodrama. Chris Berry also suggests, that in Chinese melodrama, though it shares with the European and American melodrama the "dramaturgical characteristics such as: highly schematic characters, plots punctuated by fortuities and coincidences, extreme emotions and conflicts", the selfhood in Chinese family melodrama is based on ethically defined social and kinship roles, while the European family melodrama has a subjectivity based on psychology and its expression. These two value systems have a crucial conflict in the film *Wedding Banquet*, and the moral ambivalence lay in the compromise of the two value systems at the end of the film, in which the goal of the family, i.e. having a grandchild, and the personal happiness of the two gay men are at the same time kept.

Diverged Roads: Danmei as Family Melodrama

As Alan Williams accurately notices, once Chinese-language cinema is free of the representation burden carried by *The Wedding Banquet*, "unapologetic queer" stories such as

Formula 17 would easily emerge, as a case of more radical cases of queer cinema for Grossman. Yet we still need to notice the universal existence of the family melodrama formula, not only in queer cinema, but also in other fictional queer narratives, such as *danmei*. The “queerness per se” attitude is definitely not the distinction between *tongzhi* literature and *danmei* literature, as *danmei* literature in China sometimes also pursue a sense of realism through incorporating the family melodrama, the tension between personal happiness and family obligation in the story.

With *Beijing Story* and *Lan Yu* in mind, I provide the third example in this section: an original *danmei* story, Momo’s *Diverged Roads*. This story, popular since it was first published on *Jinjiang Literature*, tells a simple love story between two childhood friends, Gu Yunsheng and Jiang Tian, in contemporary urban China. The two protagonists grew up together as best friends, but develop into homosexual lovers when Gu finds Jiang on his field trip in a remote countryside temple. Due to social and family pressure, the lovers break up for more than ten years before they meet again and decide to settle down together as a family. The author crosscuts between the past and the present, until finally the story from the past is clearly explained, then in the present, they reunite and start a new life.

This story is simple, but full of daily life details of contemporary intellectuals that betray the realism ambition of the author. In particular, Momo pays close attention towards the dishes the characters eat, especially the Chinese New Year’s dinner, which is considered to be the most important dinner in China during the year. Of course, the characters in this story are childhood friends who grew up together; they do not have too much to confirm each other’s viewpoints on various personal values, nor do they have the necessity, as with other lovers, to share with each other childhood memories. What is left for them are daily trifles. This novel structures around the framework of crosscutting between the present and the past, from the more realistic now to

the more idealized and nostalgic childhood. The differences between the past and the present are clear, yet there is no specific mark to link the story to any specific time and location in the real world. Readers often mention in their comments that characters in the story eat typical dishes in South China. Besides, lifestyle changes and certain social phenomena (such as large-scale demolition and relocation in urban areas, old dormitory housing in a working unit, indicate vaguely that this story starts in the 1980s, when the socialist regime was starting to make way to the neoliberal market economy, and that the “present” in the story refers more or less to late 2000s China). The signification of the Tian’anmen incident, which we observe in both *Beijing Story* and *Lan Yu*, is completely lacking. Far from Handong and Lan Yu, who share a space almost detached from social surveillance, the public and the society intrudes the lovers’ life as it does any ordinary modern middleclass Chinese man: through their school and their job, their friends and family, and through their daily interactions with the people around them. They lead mundane lives.

The realist aspect of the story comes directly from their daily trifles. The major turning points in plot development often happen during daily routines, for example, meals. In a comment, the author personally points out that the dinner that Jiang Tian makes for Gu Yunsheng in their second meeting after ten years, are all homely dishes—not something remarkably difficult or visually spectacular, but requires attention during the cooking process (see Momo’s reply in a discussion thread on Jinjiang Literature, “Qilu tiesan”). These details attribute significance towards the story, and encourage readers in reading the story through their knowledge acquired in daily trifles and chores. The food becomes somewhat an obsession for the characters and for the author, which represents not only the signification for trivial life details, but also the familiarity and closeness of the two characters. The direct sensation of daily lives

authenticates the experience in the story. Interestingly, just like *Lan Yu*, the queerness of the story is largely reduced in such obsession in the daily trifles; the author does not glorify the gay experience. The food, and the life style that the author describes with so much passion and affection, clearly presents a deep nostalgia, belonging to a childhood that everyone dreams of but is never able to go back to, and to people who personally experienced the historical transition, not directly relevant to queer experience necessarily. As in the paragraphs below shows, Gu Yunsheng, reluctant to face his estranged parents, chooses to go to the seaside for the Chinese New Year. At this crucial date of the year, his childhood memory about food comes so vividly to show the miserable situation he is currently in:

He watches the TV while thinking about the years when he was very young, that he went with his parents to his grandparents' home for the Chinese New Year. It was a small city not far away from his own home. Grandmother was very capable; she could cook a whole table of dishes all by herself, and she would serve him with a bowl of rice cakes cooked in sweet fermented rice, with an egg with double yolks lying on the top, only medium well. When he was young, he would add a lot of sugar in the soup, break the egg and eat only the egg white.

The sweetness suddenly comes to life on his tongue. Gu Yunsheng thinks about the kiss and hug Jiang Tian gave him not long ago. He looks at the rings: they are still on his finger, intimately sticking to each other.

He calls the front desk for a meal, asking whether they have rice cakes cooked in sweet fermented rice. The restaurant waiter hesitates for a long time and says time and again: We have ice-cream imported from Italy. We have fresh made tiramisu. We

have tropical fruits, and we have mango pudding, blueberry pies, apple tarts and chocolate mousse. Do any of these whet your appetite? (*Diverged Roads*, 184)⁹⁶

The time and location is hidden in the details, the lifestyle and the choices of food. The nostalgia is presented through a contrast between the lifestyle of a traditional Chinese family (a glorified idea of family) and the now standardized and Westernized desserts made in a hotel—a place for the protagonist to escape from home. A changed lifestyle, from a more traditional and humane environment of extended family to the Westernized atomized society, is presented clearly in the food that one consumes during the Chinese New Year. And such nostalgia makes the “traditional” and the “Chinese” seem especially alluring and full of affection, which largely obscuring the conflicts that the protagonists have against the traditional heteropatriarchal society.

The major conflict in this story is, from the beginning to the end, the conflict between personal happiness and traditional family value, including the obligation of filial piety one should perform to the elders. The traditional patriarchal family structure is quite ambiguous in this story: Jiang Tian is an orphan grown up in an extended family; the closest family member to a paternal figure is his maternal grandfather, an amicable old man. Gu Yunsheng comes from an ordinary nuclear family, with ordinary loving parents from whom he later estranges from because of his sexuality. In other words, the supposed “antagonists” of the story never appear as true villains, but closely relate to an ideal of loving family, and a happy childhood memory. The childhood memory is further attached to the location of their small hometown instead of the large “T city” that they later reside in, where they have an active gay community and relatively open attitude towards alternative sexualities. Therefore the idea of “home” bears a paradoxical

⁹⁶ The translation is mine. See Appendix 11 for the original Chinese text.

signification in the story, a symbol for a standard heteropatriarchal happiness that nurtures the protagonists, but repels them after they enter sexualized adulthood.

The diverged roads in the beginning of the story display the two young men, separated by their different career paths and plans for the future, but in the end, the diverged roads become the choices between a life set for the average heterosexual person—family, dinner on New Year’s Eve, children’s laughter—and the life destined for gay people, who will only have the company of each other. The social pressure is never directly articulated, but is omnipresent. After the two protagonists reunite after ten years’ separation, they come out to all their friends, but not Jiang Tian’s family. The story is close to a come-out family melodrama, much in the same plot convention of many other contemporary Chinese writings around the gay community.

Then if we use Chris Berry’s argument on the two texts that I am examining here, *Beijing Story* and *Diverged Road*, we may find that plot-wise, neither cares much about the historical changes in the background of the story. *Lan Yu* tunes down the political background to such a degree that it makes the story a puzzle about dilemmas between two different modernities in contemporary Chinese society, yet it still majorly celebrates a love story. *Diverged Roads* is consisted of two stories: one of them a coming-of-age story, the other a failed coming-out queer melodrama taken place in a traditional family setting. The story ends with Jiang Tian insisting to send Gu Yunsheng back home and Gu reestablishing a relationship with his parents. But after that, the author writes several “spin-off” stories, as a result of unsatisfied readers who demand to see more of this story. Yet the author says in one of the spin-off story she writes, in which happens the year the two protagonists turn forty, that she does not want to continue the story any more since the happiness found in such a split doubled life is getting more and more difficult each year, and the fairytale-liked ending for the story might have to end in reality. At the end of

the main story, both protagonists come out of Jiang Tian's home after a New Year's dinner. Facing the warmth in the large extended family, Gu Yunsheng feels painful to "betray" Jiang's grandfather, and comes to the internal conflict again.

Gu Yunsheng's chest tightens; he almost says in the next moment, "Just do me a favor, go back to your grandpa's side, marry and have children." But there is a shimmering light in Jiang Tian's eyes. This tip of light, just like an arrow, pierces him through the chest and pins him down so fast that he is willing to entangle himself into this relationship forever and ever, without turning back.

He closes his eyes willfully. The car starts again. Vaguely, Gu Yunsheng thinks about the big laughter-filled family that he has just come out from, the warmth between cups and dishes, smiling faces of old people, the soft bodies of children, the happy times without an end. But the scene changes in a blink of an eye; it changes into the first time when he goes to T city to find Jiang Tian. That afternoon on the Route 11 bus, the crystal blue sky, the snow white clouds, the golden light sifting through dense tree shadows shining on the asphalt road, the soundly sleeping person beside him, and the lifelong promise that went through his mind for the first time ever.

So this is the road for them two, even though when they end up living happily ever after, they would only have each other by their side. (*Diverged Roads*, 201)⁹⁷

As I have pointed out above, the conflicts between the two diverged roads does not end with demonization of one of the road, but presents a constant conflict between two lifestyles: one is homosexual but personal and lonely, the other is heterosexual but warm. Neither is negatively

⁹⁷ The translation is mine. See Appendix 12 for the original Chinese text.

portrayed—which is very different from the case in *Beijing Story*—but the protagonists of the story have to choose between the two. Such a moral and identification ambiguity is similar in Berry’s discussion about the coming out gay melodrama in Chinese language films, especially Ang Lee’s *Wedding Banquet*. The moral ambiguity is further complicated by the imbedded nostalgia for childhood, with specific emphasis of the warmth from family, especially extended family.

The three texts I analyze in this section are definitely different in their appearance and mode of presentation, yet their treatment of time and space, shows an interesting pattern in presenting the “real” and “authentic.” *Beijing Story* borrows from political melodrama, the significant historical events, to authenticate the time and space of the story, and therefore lends realism to the story. *Lan Yu* largely tuned down such political melodrama, aiming for a balance between the visible and invisible. Through a semi-minimalist style, the film tells a story that is one step short of melodramatic excess, making the story “ordinary” and therefore realistic. *Diverged Roads*, however, is the closest one to the Chinese queer melodrama pattern identified by Chris Berry. Through obsession towards the mundane daily life, it tells a warmhearted, but deeply conflicting situation faced by the contemporary gay population, ending in a failed coming-out melodrama. These differences, however, show exactly how similar the narrative pattern is, and how the meaning production process works in queer texts of any genre. In the case of these three examples, the generic difference between *tongzhi* and *danmei*, between so-called “hard” and “soft” is almost impossible to tell from a reader’s perspective. From the perspective of realism and fantasy, all three texts utilize melodramatic patterns, yet they each take a method in authenticating themselves.

As a personal friend, Momo once discussed with me the issue of realism and target audience in *Diverged Roads*. Admitting that she has received gay readers' acclaim, she said, "This story may sound especially realistic to people like you and me—the only children born in the 80s in cities in intellectual families. Gu's father is an editor, so are many friends of my family. Jiang works in the academy—just like you and me. So you may find this story particularly real and empathetic, but it may not be the same with the others" (personal conversation). It might explain why *Beijing Story* and *Lan Yu* are both consumed as *danmei* literature by young female audiences—it might come from the fact that they are too young to have any personal memory and identification towards the late 1980s Chinese history. Once the social background (with some important signs) is no longer familiar, it no longer lends authenticity towards the story. However, as Freud once put the origin of nationalism, "narcissism of minor differences," the very detailed definition of queer genres might be misleading. I am here not to pigeonhole definitions for *danmei*, *tongzhi*, mainstream canonical, mainstream commercial, etc., but to suggest a possible way to view the relationship between the subculture and the mainstream: between the mainstream and the subculture, there is a large grey area easily penetrated and transgressed, and all essentialized myths of independent, totally fantasized, detached subculture needs a closer look.

CHAPTER 6.

FANSUB: AMATEURS VS. PROFESSIONALS

In spring 2013, the director of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* film trilogy, Peter Jackson held an online Q&A event to celebrate the release of the Blu-ray discs of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. The producers asked for questions submitted through video uploads on YouTube and tweets. The videos were randomly selected and answered in the live Q&A session streamed online; the tweets were shown at the bottom of the screen. A Chinese fan, nimloth, complained on Twitter: “I watch AUJ in cinema eight times, and can’t watch the sneak just because Blu-ray is not released in China yet, is that fair?... And WB (Warner Bro, the distributor of *The Hobbit*) call it a WORLDWIDE LIVE EVENT! That’s ridiculous!” (Nimloth). Sadly, this twitter never appeared on the live event screen. It shows the ironic truth for oversea fandoms: they are part of the industry, economically and culturally, but participation is only unilateral. In this Q&A session, a video from two Chinese fans was selected, partly to show the “worldwide-ness” of the event, the fandom and the influence, although Chinese fans were not able to watch the Live broadcast of the session. They are both inside and outside the industry or franchise, and they have to labor to access the fan events through the same entrance with the domestic fans, which is theoretically open but practically inaccessible to them because of the language barrier or governmental internet censorship. The oversea fandoms (especially those who do not speak the same language) are almost invisible in the media industry of the original country. Either they do not emerge beneath the language and legal import barrier, or they are simply treated as a homogeneous portion of the domestic fandom. While oversea fandoms have a close connection to the domestic fandom of a media product, they do function differently.

The global flow of popular media is not a simple process. There are at least three barriers that media products encounter: a concrete political national boundary, an abstract cultural boundary for understanding, and the most important: an unavoidable language barrier. The first barrier can be conquered by legal redistribution of commercial media companies, or by an illegal online file sharing and streaming. The second boundary needs mutual understanding between the audience and the producers to conquer. The third looks like the easiest to solve: literary translation seems to be the most effortless and transparent process in media products' transnational trips. Nevertheless, it could be the most complicated one. Sometimes, literal translation of media products simultaneously crosses the first two barriers and serve the role of curators, intercultural negotiators and (illegal) distributors. We must notice, much of the foreign media products that Chinese fandoms (and many other developing countries) consume do not encounter their audience through a legal venue. Under such circumstance, fansubbers usually are the crucial, if not the only, cultural mediators between the producers and their foreign (sometimes unexpected) audience.

If fandom is to be studied only in English-speaking countries, translation is seldom taken into consideration (with a rare exception of Japanese *anime*), because most texts that fans consume are domestic. Under such condition, a simplified model of a fandom consists of three major players: fan text (the media product/literary text/celebrity/sports team/etc.), producers and the fans. New modes of participation such as Web 2.0 has complicated the scene, but for fan studies scholars working in the English language, fans and producers are mutually understandable. In the age of Web 2.0, some of them actually speak in the same online forum, or they follow each other on twitter. Because of the language and the national barrier between the media producers and the fans, Chinese fandom is comparatively more complicated than either

the English speaking world or Japan. Even though as early as 1992, Jenkins already noticed the existence of British and Japanese media fans in the United States, the issue of translation and cross-cultural acceptance is rarely touched upon by fan studies. On the one hand, there is the strong Anglo-American centric tendency in fan studies; on the other hand, English is indeed a privileged language in popular culture. But for Chinese fandoms, in which people largely consume media and literary products from a foreign language, translation can be a significant issue. Venuti points out accurately the asymmetrical translation situation in the globalizing world, with “Here (in “developing” countries) translation is a cultural practice that is deeply implicated in relations of domination and dependence, equally capable of maintaining or disrupting them.” (*The Scandals* 158)

Translation is not neutral. The translator is always present in the resulting text, even though readers do not feel them. I am studying fansub because it is not only a fan product, but also a typical nontraditional non-official window to peek into the fan community and their interactions with a foreign language product. In this chapter, I examine fansub in Chinese fandom, especially its significant role in presenting fans not as the silent and subservient receiving end, but a community gradually grows into an authority, which not only holds the right of interpretation, but also the right of presentation and pronunciation. Here, I use the term “fansub” loosely to describe all translation activities conducted by fans, including translation of original media products, spin-off materials, relevant media coverage and fan productions, or in other words, a network of texts with constant intertextual reference surrounding an original media product. I suggest the absence of the real cultural authority—authors, directors—makes the fans with foreign language proficiency the authority in oversea fandoms. This situation is

often not alleviated with commercial legal import. Instead, media products with legal import are the most typical examples in such situation.

I conduct three case studies in this chapter, illustrating three modes of representation in translation, presented explicitly and implicitly, in and out of the text. Through the case of “Academic *Otaku*,” I show the dynamics of group working process. With the debate on mode, tone and accuracy of translation by a certain style frequently seen in fansub and fan translation, I discuss further how the (usually considered) non-profit oriented and voluntary products compete and work in the fan community. Sometimes named “down to earth,” these somewhat intentional mistranslations question not only the visibility of translators’ personal voices in fansubs, but also the varying expectations between fansubs and professional “official” subtitles. Scholars have mentioned the footnotes and other non-translation material that mixed with the subtitles as a type of “abusive translation,” yet I want to examine how such abusiveness invade and steep deep into even the seemingly neutral content of fan translation through stylized word choice and intention mistranslation. With the example of “Red Book of Middle Earth” and the Chinese fandom on Tolkien’s works, I point to the distinction between amateurs and professionals, between “love” and “commercial benefit.” Using all these examples, I will also try to examine how symbolic capital accumulates, and pushes fansubbers to the authority position in an oversea fandom, usually over the oversea legal commercial representation of the media product.

Fansub, A Brief Introduction

Fansub refers to the subtitles produced by fans of certain media products in a foreign language. Sometimes, this word also refers to all types of translations done by fans. Fansubbers are usually people with adequate listening and reading knowledge in the foreign

language needed. They translate voluntarily, based on interest, often to circulate and advocate a media production.

Before the internet age, fansubbing on VHS tapes was the only choice. In the internet age, with the advancement of related technology, the entrance barrier of fansub rapidly declines. Currently, fansubbers do not need to master computer technology to participate: in fact, fansub groups usually only need a couple of technology people for the job of time-coding, special effects, etc.

As a widespread practice around the world, fansubbing is most frequently used in translating the media products that do not have official local distribution, but media products that have official subtitles and dubbed dialogues are also fansubbed.⁹⁸ In the United States, the public and academia mainly get to know fansub through fans of East Asian popular media, including Japanese animation and Korean drama (Nornes, Condry *The Soul of Anime*, Ito). In China, fansubs cover a tremendously wide range and quantity, from Japanese animation, American TV series, to foreign art house films, cult media, and fan products. As a crucial “middlemen” between producers and the audience of a non-native origin, fansub groups provide quick and comparatively high-quality translation for media products. In China, it has become the norm that in less than 24 hours after a new episode of a popular show is aired in its original country, the Chinese subtitled version will be available for download or appear on video streaming websites⁹⁹. However, though fansubbers’ rapid responding speed cannot be overstated, rapidly

⁹⁸ Whether a media product that has legal distributors can be fansubbed, is involved in ethical debates in fandoms. In the United States, fans tend to view it a moral obligation to delete fansubbed media products from their websites when the products have legal distributions. They boast that it shows how moral and disciplined the *anime* fan community in the United States it. The situation is very different in China, which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

⁹⁹ This situation is at least true for the best known foreign languages in China: English, Japanese and Korean. I do not have enough information for fandoms of, for example, German, French, Russian, Thai or Hindi language fandom.

produced fansubs usually lack in their quality, comparing to those have a longer period of time to carefully proofread and polish their translations.

Though it is still arguable that whether fansub for American TV shows is the most influential in China, it is the first Chinese fansub production (or the first Chinese online fan activity) that attracted mainstream news media. Chinese governmental television station CCTV and several print media reported around 2006 about the “underground” wide circulation of the American TV show *Prison Break* and revealed Chinese subtitle groups working diligently behind it (Chen Sai and Liu Yu). Chinese internet subtitle groups are also covered by mainstream English media such as *New York Times*, which pushed these subtitle groups to the risk of being sued by the US TV producers because of copyright infringement (French). The main reason for such an unusual attention is, *Prison Break*, as well as many fansubbed media products, do not belong to so-called “geek canon” that only caters to a niche market. We need to note that many foreign media products can only circulate in the form of non-copyrighted pirated versions in China, for reasons including but not limited to import restrictions on foreign media products. Some of them have Chinese subtitles, translated by TV stations or DVD makers in Taiwan or Hong Kong, but most of them rely heavily on fansub to widely circulate.

Fansubbers are curators for ordinary fans. They are insiders, experts and cultural mediators for their audience. Voluntary translation and information sharing are not only limited to videos but all types of media forms. Knowledge and information in a fandom is a network; news, gossips, interviews, and fan communications (including fan gossip, critics and analysis) are interconnected despite language differences, with each original media product as a node. In the ocean-like information overflow online, the choice of fan translation largely determines the importance of information when that info is not available in the target language. For instance, if a

diehard Tolkien geek is interested in the panel in San Diego's Comic-Con but does not possess enough English skill, they have little choice but to rely on fan translation. Fan products are also part of the transnational translingual fan network. The translated pieces directly reflect the translator's taste and preference, definitely not universal, yet such taste determines the works that their fan readers have access to, and sometimes help to build the taste and preference of the local fandom.

Most fansub groups are started by people sharing the same interest in particular media contents, an interest varying from general "all the new episodes of Japanese animation" to "*Big Bang Theory* only." Some of the fansub groups form only temporarily and dismiss shortly after the subtitles are made. Some persist for years. Certain subbers stay in a group forever, but the general situation is that people come and go as they wish and as their time allows. Subbers also migrate around groups, only accept the jobs most relevant to their interest and stop working if the interest no longer fits; only a few translators persist in a group long enough to start a fame as the "trademark" translators of a fansub group. Analysis of fansub groups' behaviors is hard because people migrate in this underground industry in a stunning speed; they are never a fixed group of people. Most personal characteristics dilute in group work. Fansub presents the style of a community instead of any particular individual.

Fansub making is commonly divided into several jobs as stated in below: "*pianyuan*" (original source 片源), "*fanyi*" (translation 翻译), "*jiaodui*" (proofreading 校对), "*shijianzhou*" (Time-coding 时间轴) and "*yazhi*" (compressing 压制). "Original Source" finds videos to be translated (either totally unsubtitled or subtitled another language, including the original language, usually produced for the benefit of hearing impairing people). "Time-coding" synchronizes the translated subtitles to the conversations in the video. "Compressing" merges the

video and subtitles together into a new video and compresses it into a desired size and format. Some fansub groups circulate their subtitles independent from the original videos, leaving the pairing work to the audience, and therefore do not hold the position of “Compressing.” Some large subtitle groups may have other positions, such as “*texiao*” (Special Effect 特效), referring to people making special effects such as stylized fonts and credits. The job division is not strict; one position often has multiple people, and some capable participants do several jobs simultaneously.

There are usually two types of translation in fansub: text to text and sound to text. The difference exists because there are subtitles of good quality in the original language for some media products, but for others, translators have to work on the original sound, dictate and translate. Most English language films, for example, are translated text to text, while many Japanese *anime* new episodes are translated sound to text.

A common misconception is that each media product has only one translation. In fact, the workload of each fansub group overlaps significantly with one another. Fansub is already in a grey zone of copyright law, and it needs no restriction to decide who has the privilege to translate. Fansub groups are then in serious competition with one another, not only for speed and easy access but also for quality and range of coverage. Subtitle groups build up fame with their constant effort of translation and sharing. The audience will know where the translation of their favorite shows is after spending time watching them. Such fame accompanies fansub groups, builds into their images, and finally transforms into the cultural capital in the fandom.

Encoding, Decoding

Screen translation, or media translation, or language versioning, or audiovisual translation is never a central concern of translation studies. If any code or ethics for translation is debated, most likely it happens in the area of high literary translation, or more specifically, poetry, where literary translation is treated as a special type of translation outside other translational activities (Hermans, 77). Situated mostly in the popular culture, subtitle translation more often intrigue debates on an industrial and technical aspect. That is not what I aim to do in this chapter.

Subtitle translation concerns something crucially different from textual translation, because it is constrained in both space and time. Basil Hatim and Ian Mason thoroughly discuss the tendency for subtitle translation in removing politeness from the original texts, through the English subtitle of a French film, *Un Cœur en hiver* (Claude Sautet, 1992) (435). They suggest that translators put the film audience, the eavesdroppers ahead of the fictional characters inside the diegesis for coherent connectivity and understanding, and therefore the politeness, reserved only for the characters are in a general case dropped. The overriding assumption here is the strict limit on translated sentences.

I did not anticipate the cultural specificity comes in this fashion, but Chinese fansubs are generally much less keen to space and time restrictions, because Chinese, written in characters, takes very little space compared to alphabetical languages, scriptural-wisely. As a fansubber myself, the necessity to cut down a sentence never occur to me for space is always enough—16 Chinese characters can be a complicated sentence, or two; while a 33 character sentence in English clearly cannot compare. While Chinese fansubs are complicated and diversified for many reasons, the ultimate lack of spatial limitation is a blessing for freedom in stylistic experiments, in attempts of expressing the nuance, including politeness in the original sentence,

and in the cases I discuss in this chapter, stylized or whimsical translation. And perhaps for the same reason, the importance of being a “professional,” well trained in norms and restrictions in audiovisual translation seems to be only superficially relevant to the quality. As a result, the technical difficulties with subtitle would not be addressed in my discussion. My major concern is linguistics and communicational; I assume that fansubbers in my investigation are not significantly affected by time and space restriction.

Various scholars note specifically the stylized font and special effects of fansub (Condry “Dark Energy,” Ito), but visual appearance is hardly fansub’s only prominent characteristics. At least in Chinese fansubs, the most crucial trading card and trademark for fansub group is a collective self-identity and personality constructed through translation. Stylistic fonts and stunning special effects are the superficial presentations of the translators’ collective identity and activity, the most emphasized and debated part is from the beginning, the content, and the actual words that express information towards the target audience.

Abé Mark Nornes is keen to notice the work of fansub in his distinction between “corrupt” and “abusive” screen translation. In his vision, a subtitle that attempts to be translucent is corrupt. He celebrates “the abusive translator,” who “attempts to locate his or her subtitles in the place of the other,” instead of smothering the foreignness and intranslatability with feigned completeness (32). The distinction he draws is not the ancient “word-for-word” vs “sense-for-sense” dichotomy, but instead, a mentality, a respect towards the original text and culture, apart from a violent denial of the foreign or a self-centered visioning of the world. He uses fansub as a good example for an instinctive abusive translation, with fansubbers’ choice in subverting the norms of professional subtitles, with subtitles of various colors, fonts, and styles, with subtitles thrown all over the place on the screen, with footnotes on the screen—so many that no one is

able to read at a glance. All these suggest that “rather than smoothing the rough edges of foreignness, rather than converting everything into easily consumable meaning, the abusive subtitles always direct spectators back to the original text” (32).

For Nornes, adequate screen translation lies in a respective attitude, presented through forms that resist smooth and complete acceptance of the translated text. Similar arguments are made in general translation as well. Throughout the past several decades, scholars tend to believe good translation maintains the cultural and linguistic differences, showing respect especially to the margin and the minority during translation. They encourage translators (most scholars are translators themselves) to make visible the action of translation, showing the cultural negotiation during the translation. Lawrence Venuti, on a linguistic and discursive level, for example, describes in detail his attempt of a “minoritizing project” when translating an Italian author, I. U. Tarchetti into English. Using heterogeneous lexicons and discourse to evoke the alienated effect of the original text, he deviates his translation “not only from the standard dialect of English, but from the realism that has long dominated Anglo-American fiction” (*The Scandal*, 18). While style is a choice, the most obvious and straightforward presentation for translators’ inability is footnotes. Vladimir Nabokov, after his detailed analysis of how Pushkin cannot be adequately translated into English, exclaims, “I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity” (83).

Is it safe to claim that translations that respect the original culture and literature should intentionally break the norms and become visible to the audience? The answer, however, still depends on the audience and the norms, both of them contingent to time and culture. In Chinese fansub culture, as I will discuss in further details below, sometimes it is a domesticating

translation, intentionally bending the expression through Chinese idioms that makes translators visible, because the generally agreed norms see it a responsibility for translators to show the cultural specificities of the original text. Nornes, on the other hand, majorly reach his conclusion through his detailed analysis of translation between Japanese and English, when several cases of notorious domesticating translation exactly happened when Japanese media products are translated into English.¹⁰⁰ As Gideon Toury suggests, all evaluation upon “acceptable” translations are subjected to a set of constantly shifting norms, majorly work in the target language.

Stuart Hall’s model of encoding and decoding suggests four different and comparatively autonomous stages in contemporary mass communication: production, circulation, distribution and reproduction. The process of coding and decoding may not be subjected to the similar meaning structure. Therefore, messages are comparatively open on the connotative level. Audience has three possible decoding positions: dominate-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional (478-84). Jenkins adds to this theory that these three positions are not fixed, but can be fluid and conditional (*Textual Poachers*, 33). Hereby I suggest, with the process of translation a natural coding process, the cross-border transmission of media materials involves even more possibilities of decoding. Translation, if considered as mere linguistic transcription, only takes place in the “circulation” level of a media message. However, it also involves a process of decoding and encoding in its own term. William Frawley argues that the translation process is a linguistic performance that creates a new semiotic unit, a “third code,” instead of a simple process for messages carried in between two set of linguistic orders without alteration. He

¹⁰⁰ By this, I am referring to *anime* translation done by American distributors that insist domesticating anything Japanese into American, for the sake of children’s understanding. For example, 4Kid’s Entertainment constantly translated *onigiri* (rice balls) into snacks more frequently seen in the United States.

questions the equivalence as an “identity” and suggests that “translation is a secondary semiotic process and presupposes the original human capacity to code” (160). In other words, translation is “a bilateral accommodation of a matrix and target code” (167), and it is uniquely reproduced, with the negotiation and choices made by the translator. In Hall’s paradigm, a media message travels across a linguistic border results almost naturally in a different message meaning system, but with Frawley’s contribution, we know that even the material embodiment of the message itself has altered during the traveling process, if the message is received in a translated form.

Complication happens under such circumstance, because fansubbers are intrinsically audience themselves, acting outside the message production institute, but they are also translators, whose translations become the ultimate message for other fans without linguistic specialties. Fans, on the other hand, usually do not only receive the fansub translation as the only message to eschew—they may know enough original language to compare the two messages presented to them, or they at least are able to compare two translations. On top of that, we need to add the social cultural and historical condition for each fan.

With all the complication, however, Hall also suggests that each stage of communication has a determinate moment, still relying on the form of appearance of the messages. Therefore, we need to be careful not to overemphasize the autonomy of either audience or translator, because they still rely heavily on the institutionally produced media messages. Such attachment is manifested through the act of viewing and translating.

Academic *Otaku*: Collective Intelligence and Translational Voice

About three years ago, I came across the fansub group “Academic *Otaku*” by coincidence. I talked with a friend about my project in fansub, and he immediately told me that he was a

fansubber of a small group of one TV show: *The Big Bang Theory*. When I was conducting my interviews, this fansub group was still active. Yet because many participants graduated and could no longer work intensively on subtitles after my interview, the subtitle group is no longer in operation. This situation presents a typical life cycle of a small fansub group with limited and fixed members in the cyberspace: they form voluntarily; they work actively; they attract an audience and they stop functioning once participants are no longer available to work. Through a close examination of their working process, I show some of the standard textual editing procedure for fansubbing. The special and typical aspect of fansub lies in its free form and style of addressing—fansubbers speak not only through translating the original text but also through the new text they add on to it and the authority they assume in being able to add onto it.

The members of “Academic *Otaku*” were all students or alumni of Peking University and frequent visitors of the “TV” board of Peking University official BBS BDWM. One group member, Bobby, tells me their incentive in forming this group as, “We see many subtitles made by others, and we felt that we could do a better job. So we started our own subtitle” (personal conversation). This TV show contains academic jargons of various academic disciplines and frequent references to geek culture, and therefore ideal for university students to translate. More than half of them are science majored while nobody majors in English. They were not the oldest or the quickest fansubber of this show, yet they successfully established some influence with their creative translation, extensive interesting footnotes and to-the-point *tuciao* (I will explain the conception of *tuciao* later in the chapter). At the same time, it is clear that the participants of this fansub group do care about their reputation, yet not necessarily only with the speed, or that they are the only translators of a foreign media product. Reputation, rather than direct financial revenue, is the currency that circulates in the cultural scene of fansubbing.

AO group usually started with English subtitles available online (various English websites offer downloads for original English subtitles) to do their own translation. A couple of participants told me that the subtitles for the first season were very difficult to find then, so several episodes were translated sound to text (personal conversation). For the majority of the episodes, they downloaded the English subtitles, put it on an online document platform (such as Google Document), accessible to all group participants. I asked for the permission to access a random working document of the AO subtitle group, so Gerald gave me the access to Episode 15 of Season 2 of *TBBT*. Through my observation, I notice that the translators were free to edit the document whenever they have spare time and inserted the Chinese translation of each English line under it. Other translators were also free to edit, gave explanations on cultural specific details and (for the TV series *TBBT* especially) scientific jargons. If anyone was unsatisfied with others' translation, he/she would put an alternative translation and his/her name below, and explain the reason for the change. They also tried to put in some mockery words and comments in the translation, usually called “*tucao* 吐槽,” which I will explain later. The fansubbers were friends, and the group was small enough to ensure effective communication among one another, therefore the translation process was very collaborative and collective. Now I will introduce their three major jobs when they make subtitles: literal translation, footnoting and *tucao*.

Literal Translation

One of my interviewees, Gerald, has English ability good enough to serve as a fansubber and coordinator in AO, but only has minimum knowledge in Japanese. He is a devoted fan for Japanese *anime*. So I asked him when it was impossible to judge the quality of the translation by his language ability, how he chose among various versions of fansubs for the *anime* he loved. He

replied that he had very basic knowledge in some daily conversations in Japanese, but he basically relied on the fluency of Chinese lines to decide on a preferable translation. Such tendency is clearly presented in his own translation practice. In the working document of “Academic *Otaku*,” there are plenty of examples. For instance, for the translation for the line “Oh, you're a hand-shaker,” a translator changes the original translation “哟，你是个喜欢握手的人” to “哟，原来你喜欢握手啊。” The former translation is grammatically correct and identical with the original English line, but the latter sounds more natural in Chinese syntax. In their translation, most alternative translations are raised to smooth Chinese sentences rather than to correct misunderstandings and other factual mistakes.

Fansub is not broadcasted through any official venue, thus usually much more casual and creative. Because the original text is also in casual spoken language, fansubbers in AO sometimes would make use of the casual tone, and translate the original lines into popular expressions on the internet and fan jargons. The strategy was taken by most fansubbers for granted. For example, “Oh, my God” is translated as “额滴神呐” in this episode, instead of a literal “哦，我的上帝。” On the level of domestication, Chinese people do not often mention the Christian God in daily conversation, and therefore as a neutral word for all gods, “神” sounds natural. With these changes, this sentence should be written in standard Chinese as “我的神哪，” the first two characters used here are slightly mispronounced phonetic transcription (and closer to Northwestern Chinese dialect, which many find comical) of the plain “我的。” Translators compromise the meaning to achieve certain vividness, but not necessarily a similar effect as the original line. The audience does not always welcome such manipulation. I will discuss specifically this issue later in this chapter in the so-called “down-to-earth” translation.

Footnoting

Footnotes in fansubs give background information that does not appear in the dialogue, but according to the fansubbers, are necessary for the audience to understand the show. Usually, such information is given at the top of the screen, or at the bottom with a different color, or at the bottom in parenthesis, to tell itself apart from the regular subtitles (that usually stay at the bottom of the screen). Footnotes, the typical abusive subtitles according to Nornes, are standard components of a fansub. For foreign media products, certain background information needs further explanation to become accessible to the audience. Keeping the cultural information intact and provide a detailed explanation, according to Nornes, shows respect to the original text and culture (31-32). Ian Condry, however, in his discussion of *anime* fansubbers in the United States, suggests that fansubs reveal “a logic of transnational desire bound up with the motivation to educate a curious audience of fellow *anime* fans” (“Dark Energy” 203). In other words, the detailed footnoting system serves the function of education as a network of texts and human efforts. In the case of *The Big Bang Theory*, that I study here, more than half of the jokes in the show would lose if the audience is not acquainted with certain academic jargons and cultural specific phenomena. It is a standard for fansubs, and that is what fansubs do: compared to official subtitles, they serve fans to an extreme.

In this working document of “Academic *Otaku*,” there are several cases that terms need further explanation. For example, what we see here is a translation, then a brief explanation of the term “phallic stage,” “Freud divides people’s sexual psychological development into five stages, and the phallic stage is the last one,” with the footnote in brackets.

87

00:03:40,830 --> 00:03:43,030

Oh, well, at that age,
he was well enmeshed

哦，在五岁的时候，这孩子完全符合弗洛伊德的性心理学说当中生殖期的特点

【弗洛伊德将人的性心理发展分为五个阶段，生殖期是最后一个阶段

88

00:03:43,100 --> 00:03:45,000

in what Freud would call

the phallic stage

89

00:03:45,060 --> 00:03:46,800

of psychosexual development.¹⁰¹

With this explanation on Freudian psychoanalysis, audiences who are not familiar with his theory will be able to understand the joke in this context. Moreover, they will be aware of the nerdiness of the speaker in using psychological jargons in the daily conversation, and understand the show better.

The straightforward example above contains a hidden question: How do the fansubbers know what information the audience needs? Translation itself is an audience-oriented activity, with translators making choices based on their judgments of audiences' requirements and expectations. Footnotes are created based on assumptions on audiences' needs, fansubbers' authority/status, and common knowledge background shared by fansubbers and fan audience (so that fansubbers are able to make accurate judgments). In the example above, the target audience is not demographically identical compared to the audience when it's broadcasted in the United States and after it is translated by our fansubbers. Our fansubbers assume an audience without enough knowledge in academic jargon while the original show does not contain any of these footnotes or explanation. In other words, the show originally targets the so-called "geek" or "nerd" audience, who should get the most fun from the jargon-loaded conversation. This fansub lowers the entry level for the audience and resembles more of an intralingual translation between two different code systems (geeks and the rest). On the one hand, the footnotes offered by

¹⁰¹ I kept the format of the original working document to show the exact appearance of the document the fansub group works on.

fansubbers significantly promote such texts towards the potential audience (therefore, can be seen as a preaching action by the Euro-American hardcore fans), yet on the other hand, they significantly reduce the fun for the audience if they would love to find the allusions by themselves.

Another type of footnotes occurs when an unfamiliar aspect of American culture turns up in the show. Chinese audience is very familiar with American culture, comparatively, but there is always something to explain. One example here is the reference to the ritual of drinking Tequila, a translator adds this explanation: “Drinking tequila with salt and lime is a common way. Lime is able to reduce the astringent taste of the wine while salt enhances the taste.”

351

00:15:52,500 --> 00:15:54,730

you're gonna lick the salt...

你得从我的脖子上把盐舔下来

352

00:15:55,730 --> 00:15:57,100

off my neck...

353

00:15:59,160 --> 00:16:00,460

...do the shot...

一口干了这酒

354

00:16:02,600 --> 00:16:05,400

...and then bite the lime.

然后吃一片青柠

【搭配盐和青柠是龙舌兰酒的常见喝法，青柠可以削减酒本身的涩味，而加盐则可以增加口感纯度

The footnote explaining tequila drinking is necessary because it is not part of the common knowledge for the Chinese audience, but audience has to learn this information to understand the joke of “lick the salt of my neck.” This footnote is a typical abusive translation according to Nornes, for this cultural explanation that enables ordinary audiences to understand the joke, and the foreign cultural detail related. Commenting on American fansubs for Japanese *anime*, Condry also suggests that footnotes “construct ideas of Japaneseness through attention to language,

cultural references, and even history, sometimes implying a greater level of authenticity than even the creators would claim” (“Dark Energy” 202). Aside from the issue of authenticity, both Nornes and Condry suggest footnotes are crucial for constructing an image for foreign cultures, and for respecting the untranslatable between languages. We have to note that though cultural specific details need explanation, they do not necessarily enhance mutual cultural understanding. Even fansubbers do not see them as their top priority. Bobby, another fansubber of AO, was already a Ph.D. student in an American institute when the fansub group was “in business.” When I asked Bobby that whether his experience in the US had helped his translation and footnoting, he replied, “I think yes, but very limited. For example, after spending some time in the US you will know something like shops’ names, fast food restaurants’ names... you know, like Macy’s, Radio Shack, etc. But I think that’s all” (personal conversation). Gerald also said, “Yes, we are lucky to have some members studying abroad. But usually, we pay much more attention to academic jargons than these culture details” (personal conversation). For our fansubbers here, footnotes act as a facilitator to understand the context and meaning of dialogues in the show much more than a brief introduction to American culture. They value their ability in intralingual footnotes, which also involve two codes and meaning systems, but the meaning systems do not manifest as two entities inside two nations and cultures. The role of “cultural mediator” that researchers immediately assume for the fansubbers is very possibly overemphasized in the cases I study. As I have pointed out above, fansubbers’ mediation functions to build a common knowledge background for all potential audience assumed by the fansubbers. The distinction between just sufficient and excessive is hardly discernable if it ever exists. For these fansubbers, at least, cultural details, while less connected with plot understanding, are most likely the excessive part.

I suggest the overall familiarity with the foreign cultures presented in the media product may lead to a downplay of footnotes' cultural significance. As a developing country, China translates and consumes vast quantities of literary and media products from developed countries, e.g. European, American, and Japanese. Most Chinese fans are already familiar with the life style of a developed country before encountering these media products. For fansubbers, especially, their target audience are young netizens, growing up watching American sitcoms and Japanese *anime*. What type of footnote is needed if only a Japanese snack as a riceball—which, 4childs channel even repaint into a sandwich—appears on screen?¹⁰² Therefore, the attention turns to subcultural, or subdivisions of interests, including geek jargons, sci-fi allusions, academic jargons, etc.

I want to specifically point out the power relationship between the subbers and the ordinary audience concerning the footnotes here. Usually, the footnotes are put in to ensure accurate understanding for the media products without a barrier. For such necessity, trust and authority are involved. Even before the most personalized and idiosyncratic element of fansub—*tuciao*—is introduced, fansubbers have already imposed content, forcing notice from the audience. This trust relationship remains only when the authority of fansubbers is not challenged, or else, the kind footnotes would then become annoying and accessive information.

¹⁰² Refer to these two webpages for more details, especially the latter, with two frames: one with character holding an *onigiri*, the second one with the *onigiri* already repainted as a sandwich. “Pokemon Anime Censorship.” “Rice ball.”

Tucao

One crucial element that differs fansubs from official subtitles is “*tucao*.” A difficult word to translate into both Mandarin Chinese and English. *Tucao* 吐槽 is originally an expression in Minnan 闽南 dialect. It refers to a good-intentioned action that one intentionally dismays a familiar person to his/her face during a conversation by saying something true but embarrassing. Firstly a popular word in Taiwan, it expands its influence rapidly and widely in ACG circle of Greater China, and now it is part of the basic vocabulary for Chinese netizens.

Fansubbers enjoy placing well-intentioned (perhaps not always) and hilarious comments to make fun of the characters. They step out of their job of a simple linguistic and cultural expert, and take the position of an ordinary fan, commenting on their own watching experience. The problem here is that fansubbers, once typing down their *tucao* in their translations, they are no longer in the position of ordinary fans who would discuss their experience on an online forum, instead, they assume a higher and more authoritative position. Here is an example from the CAMEO subtitle group’s (*Huameng zimuzu* 华盟字幕组) translation of Episode 10 of the Japanese anime “*The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi* (*Suzumiya Haruhi no yuutsu* 涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱, 2006) (See Figure 6-1).¹⁰³

¹⁰³ The complete fansubbed video could be found on Bilibili. See Chihuodashi.



Figure 6-1 Frame from Episode 10 of *The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi*, fansubbed by CAMEO.

In this scene, a male high school student, Taniguchi, enters the classroom to find his friend, Kyon, sitting on the ground holding a girl student, Nagato Yūki. The subtitle line below in this screen reads “Please Enjoy Yourself!!! (*Qing manman xiangshou!* 请慢慢享受——!)—what Taniguchi says—while the line at the top of the screen is a piece of *tucào* from the subtitle group, which reads “I think he feels more sense of defeat than surprise...(*Wo jue de ta shou daji de chengfen duoyu chijing...*我觉得他受打击的成分多于吃惊...) In this *anime*, Taniguchi always sees Kyon as someone dumb at hitting on girls; so this comment is a joke for fans,

commenting Taniguchi's exaggerated reaction, and probably creating empathy among the translators and the audience who do not have a girlfriend / boyfriend, and humorously and implicitly referring to the cultural stereotype for *otaku* as someone bad at real life heterosexual relationship. For good or bad, the direct presence of the translators' voice enables a metaphorically face-to-face conversation between translators and the audience.

I define *tuciao* as the non-diegetic elements in fansub that usually considered irrelevant to audience's overall understanding of the plot, which is different from the commonly supposed crucial footnotes. This inserted content connects closely with the plot, but in most cases it is excessive and personal, i.e. not part of the general knowledge background that fansub needs to build. Instead of helping the audience to understand, *tuciao* serves to construct a casual conversational environment.

Here is a typical *tuciao* that I find in "Academic *Otaku*'s" translation. A translator openly points out the contradictory logic in the nerdy joke in the show, then pushes the character in the show into embarrassment (at least in the eyes of the audience). A character in this scene uses brain's functions to joke about his friend's phone call: He is using his left ear – ears do not cross hemispheres – he is using his left brain – left brain is analytical – he is talking analytically – this person he talks to cannot be somebody intimate. The translator of "Academic *Otaku*" footnotes that left hemisphere controls language and analysis, while the right hemisphere controls emotion. But immediately after the footnote, the translator points out that actually left ear is controlled by the right hemisphere of the brain, so the joke has a problem.

23
 00:00:57,100 --> 00:00:59,230
 He's holding the phone
 to his left ear.
 他拿左耳听电话
 24

00:00:59,300 --> 00:01:02,130

Ears do not cross hemispheres,
so he's using the analytical

耳朵是不连通大脑的两个半球的

25

00:01:02,200 --> 00:01:04,200

rather than the emotional side
of the brain, suggesting that

因此他在使用理智的那半边而不是情感的那半边

【大脑半球分工考据希望】

[左脑负责语言理智功能，右脑负责形象情感功能

[但是问题在于，左耳是右脑控制的，所以 Shelly 你囿了

26

00:01:04,260 --> 00:01:05,860

he has no personal
relationship with the caller.

这说明他和来电者并无私人的关系

This *tucão* is different from the one I quoted above, mainly because the former one only comments and mocks, the latter corrects certain information mentioned in the show. But the two *tucaos* construct a similar space of nondiegetic voices on the screen that enable a connection between the fansubbers and the audience, beyond the control of the producers of the media products. At the same time, in both cases, the commentators (or subbers) position themselves higher than the text itself. What they do here is not to provide more information to help people approach the text, but to provide excessive information or emotional comments to draw audience closer to them.

“I think our subtitle is welcomed by many because it is translated accurately; there are very detailed footnotes and there are plenty of hilarious *tucão*.” Gerald said. He contributes their success partly to good *tucão*. “I think good *tucão* is a little similar to director’s commentary track in DVDs; if kept in good control, it will definitely provide much fun to audiences” (personal conversation). Another fansubber I interviewed, Kakayige, on the other hand, is a typical *tucão* hater. She said, “I think if a fansubber includes *tucão* in his/her subtitles, it’s nothing but a show-off like ‘hahaha, I found the funny part earlier than you do’ (personal conversation).” She clearly

rejects this “showing off” position, and insists on translating literally without interfering with audiences’ watching experience.

Despite their distinctive attitude towards *tucão* in subtitles, both Gerald and Kakayige imply that fansubbers possess a superior position than the audience, because they have the privilege to put whatever they want to say in the subtitle. If the audience are not satisfied with what the fansubbers are doing, there are only two choices left, choose another (fan)subtitle or learn the language. If one is ambitious enough, one may start fansubbing, just as how the participants of “Academic *Otaku*” started their career. Gerald’s words also suggest that fansubbers, at least in the process of making subtitles, do not simply self-identify as an ordinary viewer, but a figure that has somewhat control upon the texts, just as a director looking back at the products she has produced. This comparison also suggests that an ideal fansub would approach, imitate, and project oneself into the “true” author/authority, the director and the text. Without such intimacy and love with the text, fansubbers’ *tucão* would not be “good.” Is *tucão* abusive translation? It is abusive, of course, making subtitles even difficult to read, but is it part of translation? I suggest not. Just as footnotes, *tucão* is extradiegetic, but in most cases, more personal, more casual and therefore, has less legitimacy in a seemingly neutral production. Audience has different attitude and expectation for how much a fansub should directly come into a communication with them, but fansubbers, through their products, are self-selecting audience and followers. Once subbers sidestep from their career as linguistic and cultural code makers, they actually choose to define and narrow down their perspective audience through their expectation, presented in the extra-diegetic voice they add to the original text. The freedom to add more, in fact, is a voluntary choice of reach fewer. But it doesn’t hurt the audience, because there are always more subtitles available, from other fansubbers.

Before I shift to another issue, I need to point out that the subtitle group I introduced is small: it only translates one show and consists of a very limited number of friends. Therefore, their working style differs tremendously from large subtitle groups. A larger subtitle group, for example, YYets or YDY, has too many translators to cooperate in such intimacy.¹⁰⁴ The general procedure is that a person or a couple of them take charge of the production process of a subtitle, then a small number of group members (not all of them, as in the case of AO) would form a group to work on the subtitle. Each takes the responsibility of one's own, sometimes even without knowing one's coworkers. Yet the idea of cooperation is the same, even though may not be as clear as the example shown here. Organized and collectively, the fansubbers working on one specific subtitle become a singular voice, transcending all participants, and above the ordinary audience.

“Down to Earth” and Expectation of “Good”

Just as Nornes complains, “All of us have, at one time or another, left a movie theater wanting to kill the translator” (17). It happens frequently in China. In 2012, when the film *Man in Black 3* was released in China, fans almost immediately started their complaint online. A fan, handled “*Yi da bo biaojie meng de* 一大波表姐猛地” (referred to as 6water6 below and in reference)¹⁰⁵ posted a very long film review on the SNS site *douban*, titled “We Are Just Here

¹⁰⁴ YYets and YDY are both large fansub groups. Because translators do not usually officially affiliate with one group, it is impossible to tell the exact size of such large fansub groups. But basing on the subtitles that such groups work on, there are at least several hundred of active subbers in the largest fansub groups. (YYets is a controversial fansub group because it is profiting from the subtitles, but most subbers are still volunteers.)

¹⁰⁵ The handle on *Douban* can be changed once per month. So the author asks me to refer to her as 6water6 for convenience.

Handpicking the Bugs,”¹⁰⁶ in which she called for all fans to handpick translation mistakes in the theatrical version of *MIB 3*. Four fans participated and found roughly 80 mistakes. Although some mistakes are more of personal linguistic preferences, most are indeed mistranslation. This post soon became a topic both in and outside the *douban* site, and it has received 1552 replies when I am writing this chapter. In China, theatrically screened imported films have two types of translation: subbed, or dubbed. Many young audiences, and especially fans prefer subbed version for its comparative authenticity. In the case of *MIB 3*, the film was translated by a young translator from August First Film Studio, named Jia Xiuyan 贾秀琰. While many theatrical official subtitles receive critical responses, the Jia Xiuyan case stands out, not only because her English (and Chinese) is particularly bad, but also because she does not apologize. She blatantly flaunts her superior position of an “official” translator, self-celebrates as a diligent and smart translator (both online in her miniblog, and in news interviews), and declares that she would never change her style (and mistakes) in her other translations.¹⁰⁷ Nearly all films she translated, including *Men in Black III* (2012), *Pacific Rim* (2013), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) etc., were severely criticized, even boycotted.¹⁰⁸ But to many people’s dismay, she remains in the industry and well. According to Lu Shu, theatrically released films are distributed by China Film Group Corporation to four state-owned film studios (August First being one of them) to translate. The bureaucratized procedure is strictly operated inside the state institution, which seemingly resists any feedback loop. But the problems here are much more complicated.

¹⁰⁶ “Bugs” here refer to mistakes, with nothing to do with the computer codes. The post is well-known as “Bug-picking post” 捉虫帖, so I translate literally.

¹⁰⁷ Refer to Lu Shu’s interview for more details.

¹⁰⁸ See the link below for a long and detailed criticism of Jia Xiuyan’s translation of the theatrical version of the film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014).

The poor quality of some “official” translation is not a piece of news. Another related issue that dragged fans, cinephilia, casual film audience and media into debate is Jia Xiuyan’s translation style. Some mistranslations result from her deliberate choice of stylistically domesticating translation. Translating a joke with popular expressions in Chinese, she blatantly shifts the literal meaning of the lines, hoping to achieve similar hilarious effect from the audience. While some news reports on this translation praise her for being “down to the earth,” fans, however, despise them. But all audience are fully aware that Jia does not translate word-for-word. Interestingly enough, such mistranslations are most commonly seen in fansubs. Although from time to time, a collection of such “impossible” “fantastic” translations done by fansub groups would be posted for a laugh, for admiration and sometimes for sarcasm, most people agree: such deliberate domesticated (mis-)translation is idiosyncratic and informal, and should never become the norm of translation.

Here I cite the most heatedly debated translation in Jia’s translation:

J: Seriously, I'm not even sure it's meat

影片字幕：我说过几遍了 别随便吃路边摊

*意见：以下对影片字幕无言以对的。。。我就干脆直接放原文意思吧

*原文意思：说真的 我都不确定这是不是肉

J: I think I just saw a tooth in that thing, or claw, a hoof

影片字幕：我真怀疑他们用的是地沟油 瘦肉精

*原文意思：我好像看到里边有颗牙 还是爪子 蹄子什么的 ¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ The exact translation for the Chinese lines:

Theatrical subtitle: How many times have I told you? Don’t just eat the food sold from the stools beside the road!

These two English lines are translated with the popular terms, referring to the most discussed social phenomena in China when the film was screened. The first line “Seriously, I’m not even sure it’s meat” is translated into “How many times have I told you? Don’t just eat the food sold from the stools beside the road!” and the second line “I think I just saw a tooth in that thing, or claw, a hoof” is translated into “I really doubt that they used ditch oil and ractopamine.” Ditch oil and ractopamine, these two phrases each refer to a series of scandals in Chinese food industry. “Ditch oil” refers to the dirty and poisonous but cheap oil recycled from food waste. News reports show that such oil enters the informal food stools beside the road and even into some formal restaurants. Ractopamine, a chemical fed to pigs for more lean meat, legal in the US, is illegal in China. Therefore, another scandal when producers were discovered to feed it to pigs. The translator chooses local phenomena to translate lines nothing to do with those local phenomena, and interestingly, does not even refer to American culture, which should have been the main motivation for a translator to make such domesticated translation. Criticizers accuse that she “is writing the script herself,” “is telling the story based only on the images,” while some others praise her of being “down-to-earth” (*jie diqi* 接地气). People who tend to enjoy her style of translation often at the same time self-claimed as not particularly good at English, and therefore criticize the criticizers of the translator as “too picky” and fastidious.

“Down-to-earth” translation refers to a special style in my discussion, which is not exactly the same as the “domesticating translation” in Venuti’s analysis.¹¹⁰ For Venuti, domesticating

Note: I am completely speechless at this subtitle...I will give the literal translation of the line below.

Literal Meaning: Seriously, I’m not even sure it’s meat.

Theatrical Subtitle: I really doubt that they used ditch oil and ractopamine.

Literal Meaning: I think I just saw a tooth in that thing, or claw, a hoof.

¹¹⁰ See Venuti’s *Translator’s Invisibility*.

translation is a strategy encouraged by an obsession on fluency in the British-American translation tradition. A strategy that domesticates the foreignness in translations, and feigns a completeness tangible by British-American readers. However, the “down-to-earth” translations in Chinese subtitle production do not follow this logic. Localization attempts do not always guarantee invisibility. Sometimes it is the opposite. On the one hand, “down-to-earth” translation is almost a textbook example that recent translation scholars strongly discourage. Such translation makes foreign local, hides the cultural details behind the local references, and shows violent transgression towards the original texts, both on the meaning and the contextual environments. On the other hand, however, “down-to-earth” translation does not hide its translators, but blatantly exhibits the work of translators by a contorted translation that contributes neither in mutual cultural understanding nor in audiences’ complete experience inside the translated text. Not indicating the “untranslatability” between languages, nor defamiliarizing to show the foreign origin of the text, such translation only loosely connects to and reflects on the original text, and completely depends on an extratextual group knowledge and expectation to achieve its effect. In short, communication-wisely, “down-to-earth” translation’s effects and meaning does lie in textual meaning.

Why does it differ so significantly from Venuti’s analysis? I suggest we need to view this situation in a cultural background. Most contemporary Chinese media translation aims for a safe word-for-word translation approach, and most audiences are fine with it. Foreign cultural details usually are left translated and unexplained, instead of a domesticating attempt. Audience are fine and satisfied with the situation, especially when they are still struggling with whether a translator understands English well enough. The situation is very different in the case of US media translation. A famous anecdote shared by Japanese *anime* lovers in the United States, rice balls,

tells us how the official commercial forces shape the foreign media products in translation. *Pokémon*, probably the single most influential Japanese *anime* imported into the United States in the early 2000s, was seriously censored by 4kids Entertainment, a children's entertainment company that imported and dubbed Japanese *anime* into the American market. While *onigiri* (or rice balls), the common Japanese snack, appear in the *anime* frequently, the dubbed dialogues refer to them as sandwiches, cookies, onions, jelly donuts and popcorn balls, Eclairs, donuts, ice cream sandwiches, etc. For *Pokemon Advanced Battle*, 4kids even paints away rice balls as sandwiches or other Western foods. Therefore, in defense of fansubs in the US, such censorship is the evidence of the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the official translations. The overall cultural expectation is built on all these translated media texts available in each country. Up until very recently, domesticating translation, even if comparatively rarely used in Chinese media translations, is coherent and invisible inside the text. Then comes the trend of “down-to-earth” translation.

Here is an example of down-to-earth translation, taken from Episode 12 of Season 2 of *Nikita*, translated by YYets fansub group:¹¹¹ the original English line “Relax. This place has more jamming than a Santana concert;” and the Chinese translation is “别怕，这里的信号屏蔽比四六级考场都好。” The Chinese translation literally means “Don't be afraid, the signal blocking (system) here is better than the CET-4 and CET-6 examination halls.” Santana is an American Latin rock band, which was founded in San Francisco in late 1960s and became hits in the 1970s and the early 2000s. The reference of “Santana concert” would cost a long and complicated explanation in a footnote, so our translator here avoids it completely. Every Chinese college student knows what a CET 4 or CET 6 test is: College English Test, held nation-widely

¹¹¹ The subtitle was downloaded from shooter.cn, and is available elsewhere.

in China twice a year. Everyone needs to pass CET-4 to obtain a bachelor's degree and CET-6 to obtain a master's degree. Because they are extremely important, these tests see many plagiarism cases, strict rules and technical anti-plagiarism strategies are enforced, including cellphone signal blockage. The cultural detail in the original line is trivial and obscure, not likely beneficial for the audience (who cares about an old foreign band anyway), and not likely to appear again. In this case, such “down-to-earth” treatment is significantly more efficient than a long footnote. We may argue that after such translation, the pun of “jamming”—referring both to a type of music performance and signal interference—is lost, but another disadvantage is more obvious: while substituting the cultural detail in the original narrative with something close to a Chinese counterpart is an effective way to avoid too much direct involvement from the translators, the culturally displaced Chinese phenomenon would look highly incompatible in the original media product. Instead of hiding the translators' personal voice, such manipulation lets the translational voice stand out.

All translations are created with a target audience in mind. Translators make choices based on their judgment of their future audience. Would domesticated translation be necessary? Would “down-to-earth” style be appreciated? How casual and how serious do the translator have to be? These are all questions to answer. For example, the Santana example I raised above has some assumptions about its audience: they do not speak English well enough; they have never lived in the United States or immersed in the media culture there; they are familiar with Chinese college life and feel attached to it, they will not benefit from reading a long explanation of a not-so-famous American rock band. This translation is inaccurate but is welcomed by many, because the expectation meets its audience.

Let's come back to Jia Xiuyan's *MIB 3*. Many take for granted that the target audience for these down-to-earth jokes is old people who are less familiar with the US culture and English language. Some replies to the review I just cited, point out that their parents (supposed to be less familiar with American culture) can enjoy the jokes created by the translators even though they do not have the same abundant information about American culture, so such translation is good. Ironically, the jokes I cited above have little to do with American culture, you do not need to learn English to find tooth, claws and hoofs inside your lunch disgusting. Such redundant domestication is questionable: if the original line is not related to any cultural specific content, how can these culturally misplaced jokes be necessary? What type of audience does such translation assume? If we trace the history of such "down-to-earth" translation, something far from "common people" and the less educated majorities come into view: online fansubbers. "Down-to-earth" translation is often associated with online fansubbers. Their target audience is not the less educated population, but hardcore lovers of foreign TV series. They are comparatively young, well-educated people, enjoying easy access to the internet—some of whom even do not need Chinese subtitles to understand a show in English. The fun involved in such "down-to-earth" translation comes not necessarily from being able to understand a previously untranslatable cultural phenomenon, but rather from the juxtaposition and contrast between the sound and the text, between a clearly understood English sentence and a Chinese sentence that is far more complicated than the original sentence.

The so-called "Down to Earth" style, playful, hilarious, and sometimes irresponsible mistranslations, has been in practice for quite a few years. Some fansub groups—for example, YYets 人人影视, the translator for the Santana sentence above—are famous for such style. Sometimes netizens call this style "fantastic translation (*shen fanyi* 神翻译)," and enjoy it very

much. However, many others do not hold a positive view towards it, because such translation easily go over the top. Both the term “fantastic translation” and “down to earth translation” have gradually gained a negative connotation. Under such circumstances, down-to-earth translation may even lose its basic function of translation. A shockingly absurd example that I encountered is: translating the original English line “Wait!” into “*Qiao dou ma dai!* 桥豆麻袋!”¹¹² While the Chinese translation for “Wait!” can be as simple as “*Dengdeng* 等等!”, this translator chooses to use the phonetic imitation written in Chinese characters, of the Japanese sentence “*Chyotto matte!* ちょっと待って!” which also means “Wait!” A comment to this translation is: “So how many languages on earth do you have to speak if you want to understand this subtitle?” The question here goes here from “Does down-to-earth translation better express the meaning and cultural connotation of a particular sentence?” to “What exactly is the purpose for such labored and contorted translation?” I can easily give more examples of down-to-earth translation that are harder to understand than the original English sentences for an audience with a basic English education. Then rather than using the Chinese subtitles to help the audience to understand the English dialogue, it is the reverse: the English dialogue translates the sometimes obscure Chinese subtitles to the audience. The subtitles serve the function of another layer of text, a layer of cultural and stylish meaning that do not accord to the original text. In this logic, the common suspects for down-to-earth translation are those do not need translation, such as “My God,” “Wait,” and “Thank you.” The example I raised in AO group’s translation of “My God” is also of this style. Some other fansubbers labor to translate lines with ancient Chinese poems, or self-composed poems in traditional Chinese regulated verse (usually not well

¹¹² See Lengtong’s post for the image. The picture attached in the thread is the screenshot of the fansubbed video. This thread is a repost; the original poster deleted the post, so original comments are not retrievable now.

composed). Such translation can only serve the function of a juxtaposed layer of text, the connection between two layers highly dubious. Down-to-earth translation codes the message in the original language and narrative into an unexpected set of codes in the intertextual networks shared by its audience. Such encoded message, while barely keeps the original literal meaning, carries unintended meanings of another semiotic system, in which a translucent connection between subtitle translation and the original text no longer matters.

For quite a long time, such phenomenon was viewed as fansub-only practice. Only recently did it enter the “official” subtitle translation. Then what is the difference between YYets and Jia Xiuyan? Why does YYets never receive such denunciation? In fact, the most important difference between the two is that Jia Xiuyan’s English proficiency does not even meet the average entrance level of most fansub groups online. Besides that, I suggest that it involves three factors: audience expectation, translator’s visibility and power relationship.

First, audience expectation. Fansub and official sub are very different, because fansubs are less bound to the obligation of being word-for-word truthful to the original text, and they are voluntarily produced and therefore theoretically, they are bound to their own standard, and their own understanding of professionalism. The recreational (mis)translation can be seen as an attempt of building a certain viewing convention for the non-official translation. Therefore, YYets meets the standard of fansubs, but Jia does not meet the standard of official subs. However, this is not the major concern. The author of the “bug-picking” thread emphasizes that style is not the issue; they don’t criticize merely because of the “down-to-earth” style. Of course, it is not about style, it is about expectation. The target audience group for YYets is well educated, understand at least basic English and fluent in internet jargons. They are young netizens themselves. When we come to Jia Xiuyan’s case, things get interesting. Theoretically,

her target audience is “the public,” which Jia herself interprets as any average citizen.¹¹³ The internet jargons are shifted to keywords in news reports—they are easier to understand for general Chinese citizens, but for young netizens, vulgar and outdated. But does this cater to Jia’s audience? According to statistics provided by Chinese Film Circulation and Projection Association in 2013, the average age for moviegoers in China was 21.5 years old, and another source show that more than 80% of Chinese moviegoers have at least attended the college (Yu). Even though these statistics are not totally reliable, they show that the actual moviegoers significantly overlap with young netizens, and a significant part of these picky audience probably will not buy her clumsy jokes. More importantly, she fails them with her bad English comprehension. There must be audience who enjoy Jia’s translation, but the scenario that aged audience members thank Jia’s translation for her down-to-earth-ness because otherwise they would not be able to enjoy the film, is quite a fantasy.

The second factor is translators’ visibility, tied with which is the different cultural capital that works in fan community and the commercial world. The requirement of visibility differs from Venuti’s requirements for ideal translators, for such attention links less to better understanding the original text, than to accumulating cultural capitals for the subbers themselves. These two requirements do not contradict to each other, but they are based on two different aims. Fansubbers demand attention. Most fansubbers work for interest and love, not financial benefits, therefore, the best reward to them is a better influence (both of their translation and the original work). And as Condry suggests, it does involve achieving status on the scene, and a desire to educate for fansubbers to keep this voluntary work going (“Dark Energy” 202). Fansub relies mainly on fame and an audience to continue its operation, so competition based on fame is

¹¹³ See Lu’s interview, in which Jia claims that she faces a “general public” instead of “elite.”

intense. YYets has a large fan followers, who praise them for the down-to-earth translations, but it also has severe criticizers. Ideally, the balance between idiosyncrasy and correctness should be kept very intricately. But where is the separation between “just alright” and “too much?”

Everybody has their own preference. The “personal trademark” carried by fansubs present the most clearly when the personal style (here, the “personal” refers to the abstract telling voice behind the translation, not necessarily a singular person) is visible inside the translation text. For good or bad, YYets is known for such “down-to-earth” manipulation: it has a trademark. It sells the fansub group, and selects audience with such preference. For official subtitles, however, people usually demand translators with lower profile, because there is usually only one official translation, no other choice. It has to be as universally applicable as possible, or people will complain. The more visible the translator is, the worse. And Jia Xiuyan not only makes herself visible in the subtitle, she also makes herself famous through self-celebrating. That was not a clever move.

Three, power relationship. In the previous discussion, I have pointed out the power hierarchy between the subbers and the audience: subbers stand one level higher over the audience by having the freedom of adding whatever they want into the subtitle. But no fansub assumes a higher position than an official subtitle. Because there are usually multiple fansubs for one original text, the power relationship is obscured with comparatively free choices. Various fansubs available constitute an intertextual network of multiple translations for a media text. Willful and erroneous translations can be mitigated by multiple voices. Besides, no matter how willfully fansubbers act, they are subject to two things: the implicit requirement of the fan community, and audience’s feedback. Intrinsicly, fansubbers and fan audience are still in one community and have equal status, they are free to challenge and raise questions to each other.

The power relationship in fansub is not permanent, but in a dynamic shifting process. As a direct contrast, the power hierarchy between the official subtitle and the general audience is strict and solid. Not only the shift between audience and subbers is unthinkable, but any feedback to the official subtitle translator is also illusory. A strong threshold stand in between the industrial official and the fans, and the threshold is constantly self-celebrating by using high-profile poor translators as Jia Xiuyan again and again. This makes “official translators” the target of audience’s criticism, but such criticism by now only vents audience’s anger, it never really changes the preference of the decision makers. Such condition makes the power hierarchy more obvious, and official translation more inadequate.

Red Book of Middle Earth: Armatures surpassing professionals?

Those who make decision seldom care about those who care about the media texts. This is the universal situation faced by fans, and is addressed repeated by fan studies scholars.¹¹⁴ The complication in an oversea fandom is the role of translator, when some of them belong to the “evil” producers in the industry, some of them belong to fans themselves. This distinction leads to the divide of translations—those of the industry and those of the fans, those of financial benefits and those of interest, and finally, those of (maybe accurate, maybe not) literal transcription, and those of the soul of the original text, linking “official translators” to the international corporation power and fansubbers to the media text itself. The distinction between the official and the fan does not necessarily accord to the stereotypes, yet such stereotypes are constantly self-reproducing. As in the case of bug-pickers for *MIB 3*, all four bug-pickers are

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 4 of Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers*, Chapter 4 of Sandvoss, for discussion of conflicts between audience and producers.

fansubbers and fans for this text, they clearly stand opposite the official translation, and defend the original text that they love (6water6, personal conversation). Yet *MIB* does not have an organized fan community as some fandoms with higher cultural status (traditionally, or fandom-wisely), in which debates on translation becomes a war of representation between local commercial agencies and fans. In this section, I deal with the issues of how fan organizations work to assume the position of authority in a fandom based on a foreign text, how the authority is accumulated through translation and explanation, and how the fans from the organization negotiate with the nominal “official” agency in the local market.

With the boundary between the two forces grow blurry with the development of the web 2.0, fans have much an easier access to communicate with media and literary producers; moreover, they have much a larger opportunity to participate in the “official” production process as well. As Jenkins claims, the early 21st century observes two simultaneous trends in media industry, that the ordinary fans has convenient access towards the production of media texts, and that major producers are taking control of more resources (*Convergence Culture* 18). Yet the main issue involved under such condition is that the fans and the commercial producers function in distinctive logics—while producers are strongly restricted to the commercial profit-oriented logic, fans theoretically are bound to a very different dynamic based on non-profit-oriented, voluntary work and gift economy. Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott argue that during the age of Web 2.0, the issue of fans’ work being used by the platform websites for the economic reasons, at the same time, the “officials” have profited from fans’ works (xxii). None of these current conditions are compatible with the ethics in traditional fan culture. Yet the way that fans compromise with the “officials” under such condition represent the new type of popular involvement, and shows how fans negotiate between the two economic logics: the capitalist

commercialism with the assistance of the new media technology, and the gift economy, the labor based on enjoyment and sharing instead of profit.

“Red Book of Middle Earth” (referred to as “Red Book” below) is a small website linked to the Chinese SNS site *douban*, run by a group of active fans of Tolkien’s works. The host site, *Douban* is a peculiar SNS site, because it is constructed based on reading, film watching and activities, therefore caters more to cinephilia and (usually self-supposed) intellectuals than general netizens. The major task of Red Book is posting news, information, review and comments related to J. R. R. Tolkien’s works and adaptations. Many postings are collected and translated from English websites, including reports and interviews by entertainment magazines, news circulated through major commercial websites, pictures and videos posted by the director and actors of the films, rumors shared by fans in English-spoken countries through fan websites such as *theonering.net*, or sometimes, reviews written by critics and fans. Even though Red Book writes its own comments, reviews, posts fan art done by Chinese fans, and organizes fan activities both online and offline, translation composes a majority of its postings. In other words, this small and comprehensive site combines the function of spreading the materials produced in foreign language, and the material developed by the organizers themselves.

The original establishers of this site were all active participants on a fan forum for *Lord of the Rings*, a forum established in 2003, at the wave of extreme popularity of Peter Jackson’s film trilogy swept through Chinese audience. With more and more people migrating away from the medium of online forums into SNS websites, the small group of the forum frequenters decided to establish such a small site on *douban* in 2011, when the film *The Hobbit* was in the shooting process, to share news, information, and comments to entertain fans. This site was supported by fans and maintained by fans that do not assume any direct connection with the official promotion

advertisement companies, and from the beginning, they clearly show a distance from any commercial promotion for the media products, and directly insist an unofficial fan status. With *The Hobbit* became a high grossing movie trilogy, regular netizens show interest in Tolkien's world are beginning to see "The Red Book of Middle Earth" as a fast and accurate source site, much more accurately and rapid than the real official Chinese distributors of Warner Brothers.

When *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* was screened in Japan, according to O'Hagan, its Japanese translation enraged the fan communities that they petitioned against the distributors in favor of another translator. The petition was so influential that it ultimately was sent to the film director, Peter Jackson (1-2). A case that O'Connell suggests at least the film industry "has learnt the lesson that more time plus expert subject knowledge input is necessary for some cult films to pass muster, when subtitled, in these days of globalization" (128-29). As Hills suggests, *The Lord of the Rings* fandom is a blockbuster cult fandom, a cult fandom built upon a mainstream commercial cinema, that the cultish identity comes from the modes of consumption, rather than the popularity of the media texts ("Realizing the Cult Blockbuster"). The seeming oxymoron of blockbuster cult puts the transnational media industry in an awkward position, because fans and the ordinary audience clearly require different modes of attention towards translation and promotion.

One difficulty with many media products, especially with cult fandom and geek canon such as *Lord of the Rings*, is the overt complexity of the world setting, and the comparative difficulty in grasping all the details in the story. Lack of cultural background, widespread misinterpretation, and the immense popularity of Western fantasy coexist in the Chinese market of Western fantasy. This market started almost simultaneously with the online fandom, and develops in a much slower pace than the latter. While fans consume and digest the media and

literary products repeatedly with full nerdy enthusiasm, local commercial advertisers and agencies for Newline Cinema (and later Warner Bros., etc.) do not have the same incentive to acquire the huge amount of background knowledge in the fictional Middle Earth. At the same time, these agencies, functioning in the Chinese market with domestic marketing strategies and in Chinese language, can never use the same material used in the English-speaking market. It is quite expected that under such condition, all process taken by the domestic “official” merchants for films, books and other products is under strict surveillance and critique of the fan community, who judges the quality of translation and specificity of knowledge from their own understanding and familiarity of the original product.

This situation does not only happen in the fantasy genre, other genres and fandoms suffer the same problem of “inadequacy” from the official domestic merchants and advertisers. To raise another example here, the *Star Trek* fandom in China. The major voice that serves as the representative of the ultimate authority is knowledgeable fans that run fan websites. A common advertisement strategy on SNS websites recently is intentionally “slashing” the male characters in a media texts. When *Star Trek: Into Darkness* was screened in China, many Weibo accounts of theatres and less professional film periodicals categorize it as a “gay film,” by which they did not only refer to the more traditional coupling of Captain Kirk and Spock (who are actually the ancestors of American slash fiction), but also takes in the extra-textual information about the other male actor in the film, Benedict Cumberbatch, a star in the popular British TV series *Sherlock*, which is very explicit in its homoerotic subtext.¹¹⁵ When such advertisement is used for promoting a supposed mainstream media text, many fans feel offended. It obviously only tags

¹¹⁵ See Dianyinghuoban’s weibo as an example, which directly titles *Star Trek: Into Darkness* as “the best gay film of the year.”

on the homoerotic subtext of the film, while ignoring the other messages and especially the core meaning of humanity, a spirit of adventure and cooperation between people, that is held dear by Trekkies. What is worse, the advertisement tags on the wrong homoerotic subtext, not the more traditional Kirk/Spock relationship, but the new unconvincing character and someone from a totally different media text. In this way, the “official” advertisers are considered incapable, uncreative, and lazy for its easy ride of slash fiction to pleasure those who buy this strategy. Ironically, more seasoned fangirls do not approve of public celebration of homoerotic interpretation of mainstream literary and media texts. Even though the number of hardcore Trekkies in China is comparatively small, and they fail to assume a similar position that “Red Book” does in the *Lord of the Rings* audience, they still self-consider as the true Trekkies in China, who have the same authority inherited from their familiarity with the original TV series and the same spirit they share with the US Trekkies.

The participants of the power dynamic in the Chinese reception of *Star Treks* are: the text (or the meta-text as envisioned by the fans); the “true” producers (usually refers to Gene Roddenberry and those who truly represent the ideal for the series and the films); the “real” producers including the director J. J. Abrams, the film studio, the screenwriters etc.; the domestic (or official, or commercial) representative of the producers is the film company that imports the film, the theatres that screen it, and the people who do the translation and the promotional activities; Trekkies in US and other English speaking countries, who are large in number, and assume the position of authority from their celebration of the original creator of *Star Treks*, Gene Roddenberry, and the “spirit” they get from the original series; Trekkies in China, who are in spirit the true companion to the US Trekkies; and the average moviegoers who have little idea of either *Star Trek* universe or the original series. We see two lines drawn here: one is between the

“official” and the text/fans, one is between English and Chinese. The first is easily discerned: for fans, original texts belong to them; foreign fans are their allies; the “true” producer and his spirit are always on their side (he is dead, anyway); the “real” producers, in this case, are not; the domestic representatives are worse. The second one is interesting, because, on the commercial side, there are authorities in both Chinese and English environment, but on the textual side, two figures are able to assume the role that mediates between Chinese and English: Chinese fansubbers and domestic official representatives. They represent two types of translation and inter-cultural negotiation, one of the fans, one of the commercial. The official commercial representatives are usually not trusted, not only because of their often poor translation but also because of their lack of knowledge. Chinese Trekkies become the one with the most authority in the fandom; they interact with the original text directly, just as the US Trekkies do, but without a reliable agency from the producers presented in China, they are, for the great part, the most trustworthy representative of the original text if a new Trekkie in China wants to find more information.

The case with *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* films is slightly different, because the director and screenwriters are flaunted fanboy (and fangirl) auteurs. Peter Jackson and his screenwriters are famous Tolkien fans themselves, therefore most dissatisfaction with adaptation goes directly to the film company, in this case, Warner Bro. As an example, nimloth, the Chinese netizen I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, clearly showed his dissatisfaction and upset towards Warner Bro., but not Peter Jackson himself. Fans like nimloth separate Jackson and other actual creators of the film from the evil capital, Warner Bro., and identify with him. However, both J.R.R. Tolkien (dead also) and the fanboy auteur film director, Peter Jackson are absent in the Chinese context. There is not a natural official voice representing either the film

producers or the writer of the books. Hardcore fans are the default choice for many. The distributors, and worse, advertisers, and sometimes the widely-identified irresponsible new directors and producers (for instance, J. J. Abrams for *Star Trek*) are nothing but parasites that see nothing but money in the media products. The local agencies of the Hollywood companies usually have an even worse reputation. The local distributor for the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, had an official Weibo account that constantly copy the news and pictures from fan websites and therefore is widely refused as the true “official.” Even though Warner Bro. gradually realized this situation, and set up an account for Peter Jackson in Chinese on Weibo, the seldom maintained miniblog still cannot replace active fan sites.

How do fans assume such authority position, culturally and psychologically? This authority is closely linked with knowledge. To assume mastery over a text, one has to grab all the possible information and knowledge connected to the text in order to obtain a more reliable summary and overall evaluation upon a text and accurately pick the most interesting aspect in promoting the texts. The professionalism and the self-assumed cultural authority makes the fans concern closely with the issue of accuracy and representation. However, I want to further argue, that both the cultural authority and the urge to defend and improve translated texts comes ultimately from identification with the original text of fannish interest, which, according to Sandvoss, already becomes an extension of self.

Hills introduces C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby’s work, who uses Donald Woods Winnicott’s psychoanalytical theory on “transitional object” to describe soap fans’ pleasure in viewing. “Transitional object” refers to a “third area” in a child’s experience, “belonging neither in the realm of inner and outer reality but being instead a ‘resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated’.

(qtd. in *Fan Cultures* 104)” Hills builds on Harrington and Bielby’s theoretical frame, suggesting that a “transitional object-proper (an actual physical object which the child both finds and creates, originally through fantasies of destruction) and the cultural field which is said to displace the transitional object through the natural decathexis of the object-proper” should be clearly differentiated (*Fan Cultures* 106). He suggests to label the retained proper transitional objects in the adult life as “secondary transitional object,” which “must negotiate its intensely subjective significance with its intersubjective cultural status” (*Fan Cultures* 108). Therefore, fannish interest, as a secondary transitional object always resides in Winnicott’s “third area.” Sandvoss, based on the previous scholars’ work on the dual function of the object of fandom as part of the self and an external object, suggests that the object of fandom “forms part of the self, and hence functions as its extension” (*Fans* 100). As a result, the interaction between fans and their objects of fandom is based on a process of narcissistic self-reflection, not even a sense of possession. The relationship between self and extension works in a way that makes the latter assume the appropriative power over the self, taking privilege (*Fans* 112). In other words, the image of self that fans recognize in the object of fandom is an ideal image projected by fans themselves. Fans identify with not the fannish object itself, but the imagined idealized authentic integrity of it, not the appearance, but the abstract “essence,” “soul” of it.

Building on Sandvoss, I suggest the activities of fan translation comes from this narcissist self-reflection with fan objects. It is possible that fans accept their foreign fan object already translated in their own language and stay happy with the translation (in fact the fan object such fans adopt are the translated text, not the original). But for people with enough linguistic knowledge, they crave for the authenticity provided by the original text, and therefore adopt the original text in its original form. Translation then functions as a bodily activity, a mode of

performative consumption in which fan translators impersonate the voice of the text, in a different language. Translation is not mere transcription in another language, but a series of choices based on one's understanding of the original text and the target audience. That is to say, for fan translators, their own performative consumption (translation) at least partially presents their self-reflection on the extension of their own self (fan text in the original language).

Although a fan translator may not have a linguistic ability good enough to carry out the ideal self-reflection, the translating practice is still a physical embodiment of the original text, and self-expression. Other translators' mediation among two languages may deviate from the ideal image of individual fans, not to mention translation with poor linguistic skill. Therefore the feeling that "the translation kills the story" and the urge that "I can do a better job" becomes immediately and personally applicable to fans of a certain media text.

Condry, while points out the "dark energy" that sustains the voluntary enthusiasm in translating Japanese *anime*, underground the legal distributors in the United States, never quite explain where such energy comes from, except a brief reference to cultural status, the urge for education and desire of self-demonstration ("Dark Energy" 203). All of these are true, but we have to note that not all fansubs have a large following, some do not even search for an audience; fansub is also a self-fulfilling activity, because it is a bodily pronunciation of a favorite text. This also refers back to the first section of Academic *Otaku* fansub group on *The Big Bang Theory*. The fansub group values less of their ability to introduce American culture to their audience, which can be done by many, because they value their expertise in jargons of academia and geek canon, that is what they take pride in and where their self-identification lies.

In Chinese fandom, fansubbers lack the incentive to remove their own translations from the internet after the product is officially imported from official venues, which shows a direct

contrast from the US fansubbers of Japanese *anime*. As in the description from Condry, most US fansubbers swear not to rob profits from the original producers by timely removing fan products after the media products have a legal import venue (“Dark Energy” 203). One may argue that such lack of self-discipline represent the lack of respect towards intellectual property in China, but such view does not get the main scene, at least very partial. As a fansubber myself, I observe that hardcore fans (who usually participate in fansubbing) are usually heavy consumers and supporters of official spin-off products. Chinese “Ringers” go to movie theatres multiple times to show their support for Peter Jackson’s films and spend fortunes buying spin-off products from New Zealand websites.¹¹⁶ The only exception is the right to subtitle the original media texts, and this represents rather deep distrust that fans hold towards the “official” distributors. Self-supposed to be true holder of the original texts, fans link themselves to cultural products in their original languages, instead through the mediation of the “greedy” evil companies. Therefore, they would rather do the translation by themselves to insure the quality, and show respect to the original text.

One interesting phenomenon that I noticed is the close attention that readers started to pay on the “official” translation of a literary products started, curiously but not surprisingly, from the geek canon such as Tolkien’s works on his fictional Middle Earth. After the publication of *The Silmarillion* (2004), Yilin Press, the lucky publisher that gained the copyright of Chinese translation in Mainland China for Tolkien’s works from 2001 to 2012, was serious criticized. Actually, the translation of Tolkien’s works is not so outrageously bad, but fans’ reaction makes it sound like a total catastrophe (see ulia’s discussion thread on Douban for example). Fans base

¹¹⁶ See the webpage ““Bling Bling shai piaogen” for the pictures of film tickets for *The Hobbit* films uploaded by Chinese “Ringers.”

their own authority on their familiarity with the text in the original language and their close identification with this text, and by this authority criticize the “official” translation. At the same time, the most disputed cases in translation and distribution occur in cultish writings with comparatively high cultural prestige, which also presents some kind of cultural hierarchy inside the fan community. Tolkien’s work is the most extreme and famous case in Chinese fandoms. Literary figures that have a cultish following in China, for example, the Japanese writer Murakami Haruki, may trigger debates of similar intensity. Nuange’s discussion thread on Douban, for instance, uses extensive examples and comparisons to criticize one of the most prolific Murakami translator in Chinese, Lin Shaohua 林少华. But for the cultural products that have not gained such literary prestige, the debate on translation is significantly smaller and more scattered. American comics, for example, have the same translation quality issue, but this issue never escalates into a phenomenal debate.

As the entrance level lowers, fan translators started to thrive online, implicitly challenging the authority of the “officials.” The advantage and disadvantage for fan translation are obvious: there are many versions to pick from, but there is not a standard version, not a fixed translation to stick to. For this reason, even though the two powers do not work under the same economic environment, nor do they work in the same logic for pleasure, we see cooperation between the “official power” and fans through (quasi) crowdsourcing. In the year 2012, Yilin Press publicly asked fans to participate in editing the translation of *The Silmarillion* by a Taiwan translator named Deng Jiawan, after the failure of the severely criticized translation version (2005) by Li Yao. The goal, as is claimed by the translator and the publisher, is to remit the mistakes and achieve the best translation ever in the Chinese language. In Chinese translations of Tolkien’s works, it was not the first attempt ever to involve fans’ labor in revision and edit. Yet it has been

one of the rare successful cases, as the newly edited version soon becomes the best claimed Chinese translation for the book and a success in the book market. However, the fame for this version also comes from the participation of fans, especially those Tolkien fans who have already established their reputation in various fields, including literary creation and translation. In this way, this editing process may not be a strict crowdsourcing process, with famous fans lending their cultural capital to the translation.¹¹⁷ One of the major fan editors, Ecthelion, published her own translation of Tolkien's texts (with copyright disclaimers) online for years. The editing process was time consuming, and in the end, went far beyond simple language editing. It is true that fans (I myself participated in the process, though only briefly) did the job with full consent that they would never have the name printed in the slot of "translators," and they would only receive thanks--printed in the afterword written by the translator (but readers would never know how much help is involved in the process). This working process turned out to be so successful that Yilin Press soon decided to repeat it with the older version of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Of course, fans all know that they would never be acknowledged as the real translator or editor for the book, but the significance of the translation activity itself, articulating the original text in their own language and own voice, supersede the desire for acknowledgement. It also shows their deep attraction and sense of responsibility for the text, which is part of their self-identities. Although some of the fans are professional writers, translators or editors in the real world, most of the people involved have no connection with the publication industry and probably will never publish any writings ever. In one way it is a win-win solution for these amateur translators and the publishers at the same time—with fan translators defending their

¹¹⁷ See the discussion thread started by Ecthelion for the working process of collective fan editing.

beloved text and publishers get responsible editors without any payment, but if we look at this issue from another perspective, clearly the translator and the publisher are exploiting fans' voluntary labor, though fans volunteered to do so. The situation at least shows the fans/amateur and the official/commercial/professional still have a ground to cooperate and achieve a result generally accepted by all the people involved. Yet they do not operate under the same logic and level.

Conclusion

Whatever translation does has its reason. Fan translation has its own benefits: it is decentered; it is voluntary and free; it does not restrict in one form; it has various versions to choose from. But it is not official, not formal, and not able to enter a theatre / publication. This voluntary labor represent not only the love fans have for the texts they translate, but also fans' enthusiasm in building a community based on interest. A different set of rules and value judgments run in fan translation: it is not necessarily about accuracy, but what is expected from the audience and what translators expect the translation to present. In other words, fans naturally would trust and feel closer to fan translation, because fansubbers are also fans.

Fan translation involves two process: translators translate according to their expectation of audience; audience choose translators according to their style. These two processes seem to be a close circuit, but the actual process is very random and contingent to the actual cultural environment. Intrinsically fan products do not operate in a top-down mode, the possibility to choose and to criticize guarantees the variety of fan translation and interpretations. As what we can see from all examples above, fan translation sincerely honors the original text, and for many fansubbers, the ultimate goal is to represent the original text truthfully in one's own mother

tongue. It does create a center in the process, but this center varies according to different translators' imagination. However, fans' judgment is not necessarily the most accurate and reasonable, nor does opposition towards the media industry naturally progressive. Fan translation is heavily coded with fansubbers' imagination of the original text. Same as the "official" translation, it is not neutral. Fans are pushed to the authority position in an oversea fandom, but it does not mean that fans are always right. Same as many other popular cultural phenomena: it is complicated.

Fansub and fan translation is an interesting topic to further. I am not able to address the issue of copyright here, because of time and space constraint, and because of the lack of knowledge in copyright laws in both China and the United States. Yet ultimately, the debate always comes back to copyright. Because for a fansubber or fan translator to truly make a sustainable and influential voice in the society, he/she has no choice but to come to the "official" venue, work for the greedy producers, removing the amateur fan identity, becoming a professional. Different from many other fan products, fan translation can serve a practice location where people can use to enter the professional, because anyhow, translation is different from fan fiction creation, official translation is needed. However, this path is not reserved for any average fan producers, but the ones with more cultural capital and resources. Fans really can do nothing with the horrible translation of *MIB3* or *Pacific Rim* by Jia Xiuyan, even though they can produce fansubs of their own, the original media product is closely connected with the official translation; to support the former by going to the cinema, one has to simultaneously adopt the latter. It is not inaccurate to claim that oversea fans now enjoy high cultural prestige in the local cultural scene, but still are lack of real cultural influence, especially the entrance into the production decisions. While fans are free to participate in interaction with producers, fans of

other language have to participate through the mediation of a translator. Thus, for them, the difficulty of entrance largely increases. Fansubbers are the most important factor in cross-cultural and cross-lingual acceptance of popular media and literary products, but they are still vulnerable in many aspects. The only benefit of being a fan in a different language from the producer is perhaps less surveillance on the copyright issue, which is again, a double-edged sword for fan practice.

CHAPTER 7.

CHEERS! LONELY *OTAKUS*

BILIBILI, THE BARRAGE SUBTITLES SYSTEM AND FANDOM AS PERFORMANCE

In the Western academia, when people speak about their experience in watching video online through video streaming websites, most often, they think of YouTube. However, YouTube is far from the only or the singular important video-streaming website, and in many countries and regions, not even the most important video-streaming website. In China, the indigenous video websites such as Youku and Tudou were already extremely popular before YouTube was blocked by the Chinese “Great Fire Wall” (Tudou was established earlier than YouTube) in 2008. That is to say, their popularity in China now is not necessarily the result of removed competitors. Because Chinese internet culture has a long tradition of domestic self-generated video products, and because the lingua franca on YouTube is still English, fads on YouTube do not usually generate a significant impact on the Chinese internet culture unless mediated by fan translation (which is constantly happening). Domestic Chinese video websites have significant advantages in language, and thus, have a more comfortable environment for communication and sharing, even though they do not significantly differ from their foreign counterparts in their design and structure. Mainstream websites are indispensable in this internet age primarily as an easily accessible platform for all, a resource for immediate assistant in finding certain materials of their interest. When preliminary interest-based communities form around certain nodes inside the vast network of video producers, recorders, archivers and viewers, they would, of course, stay on the website out of the user stickiness, or, they would migrate elsewhere, where their specific interest would be better catered and thoroughly excavated with peers. With the fan community as the major topic of this dissertation, I would focus on such a website, a hub of

Chinese *otaku* population of all ages and interests, Bilibili, to show a specific case of how an interest-based community forms, and how it develops its own culture, with special attention towards the barrage subtitle system, and the nonsensical memes on these websites. Through a thorough examination of the barrage subtitle system, I suggest that the *otaku* community on Bilibili is created based on a collective performance of a stylized and ritualized communication. With the characters crowdedly filling the screen, audiences experience a clear sense of community, (pseudo)synchronicity, and communication. The barrage subtitle system is a virtual simulation of communication during video screenings in a theatrical experience, but instead of aiming for a pure immersive appreciation of the images and sounds, such system creates a community of viewers with the ability to read, write, reread, and communicate in a stylized mode during the previously simple task of watching—literarily “write on the margin of televisions,” something decided as impossible by de Certeau, and only partly justified by Jenkins on the metaphoric level.

Bilibili is an online video-streaming website based on the barrage subtitle system, a system that would look odd to the unaccustomed viewers, but become highly addictive if one devote enough time and attention to it. This system, originally started by the Japanese website Nico Nico (see detailed introduction below)—a site for *otaku* community—is employed by two *otaku*-oriented video streaming sites in China, AcFun and Bilibili, so-called “Site A” and “Site B” for community insiders. The comments on a barrage subtitle online streaming website, instead of appearing under the video in a special “comment” section, appear directly on the video screen. Synced with the video, the comments would appear at certain playback time when the video is played. The default setting makes the comments displayed in black font and white color, flying over the video from the right to the left at a random height; but fonts and special effects can be

specified in advanced settings, to decide how the comments appear on the screen. After the success of Bilibili, the barrage subtitle system became known to the mainstream. Many Chinese online streaming websites, including the mainstream Tudou, Tencent and the online TV watching program iQiYi, now support barrage subtitles, yet “Site A” and “Site B” remain the most important websites for the *otaku* community. According to an interview, Chen Rui the manager of Bilibili says, that he is not worried about the mainstream websites adopting the barrage subtitle feature at all, because what matters is not the configuration, but the content.¹¹⁸ The content does not only refers to those videos uploaded, but also the interactive barrage subtitles posted by the viewers. The chemistry of these *otaku*-oriented sites comes from the videos, the viewers, and most importantly, the interaction between the websites and the users. With the configuration, video sharing and watching experience display a strong sense of pseudo-synchronicity that transforms the online interaction into a visible and direct confrontation among individuals’ words. The term “pseudo-synchronicity,” coined by Hamada, is according to him, the crucial temporal experience for viewers on Niconico, which creates a false sensation of collective watching. The comments, typed by the solitary viewers sitting in front of their computers, gradually layered onto the video, gains intertextual interaction when they are displayed simultaneously on the screen, whether they intended a conversation or not. With the conversing viewers also participating in determining the “visible” when the videos are played, the videos present a multilayered discourse, with the original video serving only as the background, with the foreground layered with various ritual performance, comments, and

¹¹⁸ Chen’s speech in Fudan University, Oct 27, 2015. He expressed similar idea in the interview “Dongman wangzhan Bilibili zhan jiang dazao er ciyuan wei zhuliu wenhua.” 动漫网站 Bilibili 站将打造 “二次元” 为 主流文化, saying that he is not afraid of competition, because what matters for Bilibili is the (sub)culture and the community.

spontaneous exclamations, all coded in the grammar, customs and curtesy of the community. The configuration enables a unique mode of conversation, so close to a normal face-to-face conversation among faceless and nameless (literarily nameless, as barrage subtitles do not present the commentators' pseudonyms) strangers, but of the same interest, from the same virtual community. Therefore makes the ritual of viewing nostalgically reminiscent with a pseudo-theatric collective viewing process—without the respect usually required for the completeness of the image and sound integrity, of course—a nameless collective conversation, ritual and performance.

The barrage subtitle system is a perfect presentation and embodiment of *otaku's* desire in community and companions. This system, if not intentionally disabled, does not only make communication possible when people watch videos, it makes communication obligatory—which would definitely annoy certain audience, especially if they saw fans watching art house films with words flying through the screen, invading the integrity of the cinematic images, commenting lightheartedly the plot or the performance. Once it is sacrilege to interrupt the flow of image and time on the film screen, now it is the urge to communicate over the image that draw the audience together at these websites. It is not exaggerating to claim, that barrage subtitle system creates a new mode of watching, as well as a new mentality and meaning of being audience. Activities on the barrage subtitle websites have constituted an effective social ritual, performance and interaction in a virtual space; the video watching experience is itself a performance that confirms the social identity of being an *otaku*. The nonsensical *kichiku* videos with viral memes, a subculture almost exclusive to *otaku* oriented websites as Site A and Site B, also suggests (pseudo)collective watching, speaking and laughing (or knowing when and why to laugh) is a community ritual. Far from being void, boring and nonsense, these performances

build up an alternative community in the virtual space. Such communications are observable in every aspect of the internet culture, yet it is extremely important for online *otaku* culture because it is—at least in China—a youth subculture that still yearns for collectivity and identification. For a virtual community consisting of people with their own interests in front of their own small screens, the importance of instant communication in multiple voices can never be underestimated. In other words, barrage subtitle system is extremely compatible with the *otaku* culture.

Otaku, as it is currently used in daily practice, refers to lovers and heavy consumers of Japanese *manga*, *anime*, games, and light novels. The word *otaku* is an honorarium word for “your house,” and thus “you,” was used by a group of Japanese sci-fi fans in the 1960s for addressing each other inside the community.¹¹⁹ The word gained wide public attention when a critic, Akio Nakamori, ridicules these heavy consumers of totally unrealistic and childish media products, with the word “*otaku*.” While the title *otaku* was under severe attack from the mainstream media during especially the 1980s and 90s, the MAG (or in Chinese, ACGN) industry has now grown into a major cultural capital for Japan.

I have constantly referred to this community and subculture in the previous chapters, but the fan community in a general sense only partly overlaps with this community, mostly because that *otaku* community, in most cases, is in default, male; while the fan community, is often in default, female. The dichotomy between male and female, between masculine obsession in heterosexual erotica and female interest in male homosexual romance, between male *otaku* and female *fujoshi*, are partly the condition in Chinese online popular culture (which mirrors the Japanese condition), while on the other hand, arbitrary and unnecessary, at least in the case of

¹¹⁹ See Ito’s Introduction and Azuma for introduction of the history of the word “otaku.”

Bilibili. This gender code generally accords with the Japanese definition of the word “*otaku*,” a word that many critics take for granted as a male community. The problem is that many of the phenomena in male *otaku* culture are also applicable in female *otaku* culture. “*Fujoshi*,” or “rotten women,” or those who love homoromantic materials is sometimes used to denote a counterpart of the male *otaku* community in Japan. The ambiguous usage of this word shows mainstream’s misunderstanding and arbitrary gender coding for the male and female *otaku* culture—for them, there should be no women interested in what the male *otaku* loves, which is not true. While gender does play a significant role in determining the consumption modes and materials, the collective identity of *otaku* itself might, as I will show in the discussion below, encompass such distinction. As a result, except in the case that I am discussing gender-specific issues, the word “*otaku*” is for me, gender neutral.

The *otaku* culture came to Chinese mainland together with the Japanese *manga*, *anime* and game, as early as in the 1980s. For a certain period of time, Japanese *anime* obtained a position close to mainstream children’s entertainment until in the mid-2000s, when the government shut down the legal broadcast of Japanese *anime* in children’s programs around the country. In other words, the boundary between the mainstream and the *otaku* culture is blurry and flimsy in China, yet still tangible. Obsessive consumers of Japanese ACGN products may trigger empathy from their not so feverish friends, who may also enjoy comparatively mainstream ACGN products with different intensity. Heavy consumers of Japanese ACGN would migrate from the easily accessible mainstream ACGN products, searching for more obscure ones, or those catering to a niche market. Those less mainstream ACGN products first came to China in the form of pirated copies of Chinese translations legally produced in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Then online fansubs and fan translators become the major cultural mediators, who translate almost everything in this

area. Only recently that the Japanese *anime* are again screened legally in China, with more and more online video streaming websites purchasing legal rights from the Japanese *anime* producers. It is not difficult to imagine that most Chinese young people are more or less familiar with the Japanese ACGN culture. Naturally, most of the earliest Chinese fandoms are built on Japanese ACGN culture, even the fandom structures and activities are imitated from Japan through Taiwan's mediation. With such a heavy influence from Japan, the "popular culture" understood and accepted by young generations in China then automatically involves Japanese ACGN culture. Therefore, the community of ACGN fans in China is not as clearly defined as it is in English speaking countries, where Japanese media traditionally lies in a comparatively marginal and subcultural realm.

While Japanese ACGN culture had been influential, the title of *otaku* is not widely adopted until about a decade ago. Most early Chinese fan websites and forums are female oriented, partly because the text-based fan fictions play a much important role in women's fandom experience than for men (as fan fictions are predominantly written by women). Until around 2005, the internet is much friendlier to text than to other forms such as picture and videos. This could be an important reason that in China, male fan culture, which heavily relies on visual elements, becomes observable much later than the female fan culture, which is sustainable on texts. With the entry of the male fan culture, the *otaku* community gradually evolves into an interest-based community that loosely develops around a certain set of original media products (typically Japanese ACGN culture, but has certain deviation), a community that is inherently heterogeneous but also share a similar set of vocabulary, logic and virtual space for residing. Currently, the *otaku* community in the Chinese-speaking world relies on several central websites for information and interaction. Barrage subtitle websites are of the most important components

of their lives. Gender matters in this community, as the dualism between *otaku* male and *fujoshi* female is always present in the daily conversation, but mostly, they coexist comfortably in the same space with their shared interest.

Site A and Site B: Cheers! Welcome to Chinese *Otaku's* World!

The Japanese site Niconico douga ニコニコ動画 (referred to as “Niconico” in my discussion below), according to the statistic, is already the ninth most visited website in Japan in the year 2016.¹²⁰ This website was launched in the year 2006, managed by Niwango, a subsidiary of Dwango. Niconico, with its most standard Romanization being “nikoniko,” is a Japanese ideophone for “smiley.” Niconico started the barrage subtitle system, the name of which comes from misuse and misinterpretation. The phrase “barrage” is popularized by several *anime* directed by Yoshiyuki Tomino 富野由悠季, including *Mobile Suit Z Gundam* (機動戦士Zガンダム *Kidō Senshi Z Gandamu* 1985-1986) and *Aura Battler Dunbine* (聖戦士ダンバイン *Seisenshi Danbain*, 1983-1984), in which a line “The barrage on the port side is too thin! What should we do?” grew viral in the *otaku* community. Besides, Toho project, a phenomenally popular shooter game since the late 1990s allows bullets to form complicated patterns—a barrage so complicated that it later becomes a spectacle in the gaming community (see Lin and Gao for more information). With such background, netizens on Niconico chose this word to describe heavily commented scenes on a Niconico video as “barrage,” that resembles a scene with flying bullets across the screen in video games. Later this name is given to all the comments on the screen. While still primarily caters to the *otaku* community, Niconico has

¹²⁰ See Alexa <<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/JP>> for the top visited websites in Japan.

included many other heated topics, including Japanese elections—now even Chinese people’s congress has a live streaming on Niconico. Niconico has become a platform for cultural interaction and participation saturated with logic and language of the *otaku* community.

Chinese *otaku* established several video sharing sites, directly imitating Niconico; the most influential ones are AcFun and Bilibili. These two websites are slightly different in their demographic constitutions, that Site A’s major users are generally older and have more male population. In this dissertation, I will primarily use Bilibili as an example. While often satirized as part of so-called “*shanzhai* (山寨) products,” or counterfeit consumer goods, which refer to low-end Chinese imitations of foreign products, the Chinese barrage subtitle websites have their own innovation and special contribution to the barrage subtitle culture.

Bilibili was founded in the year 2009 by an old administrator of AcFun. Originally named “MikuFans,” its title was changed into “Bilibili” in early 2010. AcFun was the first *otaku* oriented barrage subtitle website established in Mainland China and started several meme fads in China around 2008 and 2009. But Bilibili is now the most influential and popular barrage subtitle website in China, so popular that some *otaku* now claim that it has lost its special subcultural taste. With the original name of “MikuFans” refers to a popular virtual idol in Japan (an idol that established her fame on Niconico), Hatsune Miku 初音ミク, “Bilibili” is the nickname for a popular female character Misaka Mikoto 御坂美琴 in the light novel and *anime*, *A Certain Scientific Railgun* (*To Aru Kagaku no Reirugan* とある科学の超電子砲, 2009-2010, 2013). Both names show the clear relationship of this website with the Japanese ACGN culture. AcFun has developed into a more generalized website, including discussion boards, with video-streaming serving only as one of its many functions. Bilibili, on the other hand, still serves only for video-streaming. Since it was originally designed to be majorly catering to the Japanese

ACGN *otaku*, Bilibili has a specific section for all new Japanese animations. Besides, it provides sections for the DIY fans to showcase their talent in singing, dancing, music performance, painting, fan video editing, video game playing, etc., all in the realm of Japanese ACGN culture. Because of Bilibili's growing popularity, it is no longer an ACGN only site, but reserves sections for all types of popular culture, including, for example, American TV series, films, talk shows, Chinese TV dramas, variety shows, even Indian dramas—the contents incorporated into the website actually reflect the diverse interest and versatile talents of the community.

All these materials were once totally non-copyrighted; all foreign materials were translated by fansub groups. After Chinese video sharing websites regularly buy screening rights from foreign right owners (Youku, for example, bought the rights to stream most of the new mainstream Japanese *anime* in summer season 2013)¹²¹, Bilibili is now significantly restricted in its right of video posting if it does not have the right of screening. Old non-copyrighted videos are being deleted, enforced by copyright owners, especially film studios in the United States.¹²² In response to this recent trend, Bilibili just puts on the material streamed elsewhere, but layering on it barrage subtitles (though some websites, such as iQiYi now forbid Bilibili from doing so). People still come to Bilibili to watch new episodes of animation and television shows, but the legal implication has completely shifted compared to its earlier years. Generally, the copyright on Chinese video streaming sites is experiencing a stricter control, with gaps and leniencies still exist. It is part of the process of international media corporation globalization and entering the Chinese market, enforcing copyright. The copyright issue is further complicated by government censorship, which makes the legalization process an economic, a political and an ideological

¹²¹ See the comic page of Youku at <<http://comic.youku.com/>>. Now the videos on this page are all legally bought.

¹²² For example most films of the Warner Bro. have been deleted from Bilibili because of copyright enforcement.

process at the same time. I will not address this issue in details in this chapter, but it is worth noting that the video sharing websites are far from unchanging or predictable in the light of copyright law or Chinese governmental control (especially those actions in the names of anti-porn).

Videos on Bilibili are accessible to all browsers, but commentable only by registered members. Most people understand it as a “primary school student proof” strategy, or “troll-free” strategy. Bilibili currently holds a very difficult entrance exam for registration. Most questions are based on the common knowledge shared by Chinese *otaku* subculture.¹²³ An anecdote online is that Japanese *otaku* are drawn by the high definition videos on this site. For this reason, there are people on Twitter that specifically offer services of taking the quizzes for those who do not understand Chinese. This anecdote for sure created a commotion in Chinese *otaku* community, since Japanese coming to a Chinese website for *otaku* related material is definitely a reverse flow of popular media contents. It also shows that the *otaku* community based on Bilibili is loosely becoming a virtual interest-based community, with a same language/logic/knowledge base in popular consumption.

Pseudo-synchronicity, Instant Communication and the Politics of Language

What does a barrage subtitled video look like? How does the viewing experience differ from, say, the viewing experience on YouTube? What do people say in barrage subtitles? Why do they say it? These are some of the questions I discuss in this chapter. Ultimately, barrage subtitle websites deeply integrate users’ input for the final view of each video uploaded, much

¹²³ The exam has been changed into a 20 question test on barrage subtitle etiquette, including questions as how should one respond to a rude barrage subtitle, etc. But still there are services online for taking quizzes on Bilibili.

more than websites without such a system. Viewing experience then becomes literarily a process of inserting oneself into the streamed material and the audience community, rather than a silent voyeur in the darkness. In many ways, barrage subtitles convey comparatively little (if any) content that would add on to viewers' knowledge. Explanation and "encyclopedia" subtitles and translation subtitles also exist, but compared to the tons of seemingly meaningless and senseless subtitles, they only exist as a background.

Most straightforwardly, barrage subtitle system creates a distinctive mode of commenting and a unique temporal experience. People comment after they have finished watching the whole video on YouTube while people type simultaneously while they are watching a video on NicoNico. The comments on YouTube do not directly interfere with the videos' content and serve more as an overall evaluation than an instant reaction. Generally speaking, viewers /commentators are in conversation with the poster of the video, and the video's content as a whole. As a contrast, barrage subtitles respond immediately to anything happened on screen or in the soundtrack. They are in conversation with the producers of the video, the whole video, the content of the video at a specific point and other commentators at the same time. In this way, the barrage subtitle system creates a sense of simultaneity through watching the video and other viewers' comments at the same time, while on YouTube, we see comments arranged in a chronological order, written by audiences after they have watched the video. While barrage subtitles also accumulate by time in a linear progress, but their order and position are determined by the time code of the original video. Such commenting system shifted the terminal structure for the comments, wrapping them into a closed time circle that exists independent of the outside linear time. Comments on YouTube all have authors (and with the YouTube accounts now bonded with Google account, the authors often show their real name and identity), while barrage

subtitles are anonymous; viewers only see the content, not the identity (or even a pseudonym) of the comments. This anonymousness helps to create an illusion of an equal conversation among the audience, so equal that even the uploader is not able to show his/her identity in any non-verbal way in barrage subtitles.¹²⁴ Besides, the barrage subtitle system holds a maximum limit for the number of barrage subtitles for each video (usually the number is one thousand). Once the limit is exceeded, earlier comments will automatically be deleted, in order to make sure that the video is not too large or difficult to load. Except for special comments (including subtitles that translate or transcribe the dialogue or lyrics in the video, and other types of information that the uploaders consider important), designed to be marked out by the uploaders, words posted on the video are presumably only temporary, just like the words in a daily conversation: the words are uttered, and they disappear. These characteristics make viewing experience on barrage subtitle website resembles collective watching experience before the internet age in a form only achievable digitally, in an interest-based community, also only achievable on a flat internet.

I have here an example, a fan video originally posted on Niconico, and then reposted on YouTube: 【手書き】ハレ晴レヘタリア【会議は踊る】 (see Tamahiko and Deviant Otaku for these two videos). This video is a short fan *anime* completely drawn and animated by the video poster, so it is not a remix on the traditional sense, but still follows all the aesthetic and patterns of fan remix. Taking characters from the web-comic/web-*anime* *Axis Power: Hetalia* (2008), the author puts them into the place of the main characters of another *anime*: *Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi* 涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱 (2005), and makes them dance and act the same way as the ending sequence of the *MoSH*. On both sites commentators universally express their love or

¹²⁴ The most extreme case is that none of the audience, including the uploader, is able to delete one barrage subtitle. On Bilibili, one has to report the subtitle as an offense towards the website to delete it.

emotional affiliation towards one or several particular character(s), whoever they feel most connected with. Neither side of the comments says anything with particular information not directly linked with the characters. The YouTube comments have many Q&A going on about who is who in the video, which can be easily done in the barrage subtitle system. An obvious difference between the comments on two sites is that the comments on Niconico show excitement directly with words like “おおおお” (Oh oh oh oh), or “キタ” (Here it comes!) or the name of the particular characters when their beloved character appears on the screen. These direct and immediate reactions come from the support of the website configuration, which makes direct comments possible. As Hamano observes, many barrage subtitles on Niconico come not from reason, but direct affect, which is partly the situation. Since the configuration of barrage subtitle system ensures a direct link between the comment and the commented, commentators need not elaborate their feelings into a long sentence, but only need to type out their immediate reactions and feelings. Hamano Satoshi suggests that such comments represent a fragmented, or in his words, modular mode of consumption (5). However, judging from many activities taken by commentators on Bilibili, direct expressions of instant affect is far from the only reaction enabled by the pseudo-synchronicity of barrage subtitle system. Moreover, I suggest that the fragmented comments towards the specific details inside the videos are far from a systematic shift, but the visualization of immediate reactions and close reading, usually hidden when viewers are supposed to give generalized impressions and evaluations of a video. In other words, the consumption process does not become fragmented because the barrage subtitle system, it is fully articulated and presented in a directly visible way, something repressed in a traditional video streaming websites as YouTube. The fully presented consumption process therefore easily take the reading strategies and community conventions, constructing a space of discussion for

close reading details that the *otaku* community relies upon in reaching consensus for further elaboration. In many ways, once the hidden and repressed process of close reading visualizes, it could be the most representative narrative that generates pleasure and intensifies allegiance.

Netizens have jokingly compared the form of barrage subtitles with comments that literati make in the pre-modern time for the popular fiction (as I have discussed in Chapter 1), a tradition that ultimately comes from the notes and comments that literati made in between the lines of Confucian canon and other classical texts, such as historical records. The comparison looks ridiculously farfetched but is paradoxically appropriate if we understand the commented texts as a chronologically disrupted space, in which words are placed inside the commented text as its own temporal order. In a Chinese book of a traditional binding, comments would appear in smaller fonts and be placed exactly after the words or sentences they intend to comment on. When a book is published together with multiple commentators' comments (usually called "collection of comments" 集注, a well-commented sentence will be followed by words of various commentators, and some of the commentators would be directly in conversation)¹²⁵. Even though it may be arbitrary to draw a direct connection between the two, we may claim that the comments of Confucius canons or for pre-modern Chinese vernacular novels are also cases in which audience read the same material at the different time and location while sharing the same experience of pseudo-synchronicity. Such pseudo-synchronicity also creates a sense of community and interconnection among readers, even though only for academic purpose inside the literati community.

¹²⁵ See Hanhua's post on Douban for an example. The author of this short annotation compares comments on Li Shangyin's poems as "barrage subtitles."

While acknowledging that a chronologically disrupted collective viewing experience is also possible in another medium, I still insist that the online streaming websites allow a presentation of collective conversation and identity creation in the most visible way. With the development of the new media, especially the internet, we as the audience are encountering screens with videos on a daily basis. While David Lynch violently denies the plausibility of full experience when one watches film on cellphone screens, we do start to encounter films in smaller screens instead of sitting in a cinema (Odin 156). Of course, people now are encountering videos everywhere—anywhere, anything with a screen, and therefore the previous experience of going to a cinema, buying a ticket and sitting in the dark for a couple of hours are no longer the norm of the viewing experience. Theatrical experience these days becomes somewhat a nostalgic ritual for cinephilia, or a bait of spectacle, designed specifically the high-grossing, visual and audio effect laden blockbusters. The idea of an authentic experience of time is one of the core definitions for films, but such quality seems to be disrupted by the fragmented viewing experiences with screens everywhere. While barrage subtitle websites, just as other types of online video-streaming websites, belong to the multiple screen culture in the contemporary daily life experience, barrage subtitle system revokes the collective aspect of theatrical film viewing in an unexpected way.

Comparing to the huge amount of studies done on YouTube, barrage subtitle websites, represented by the famous Niconico seem to be outside the major scope of English language new media studies, attracting only Japan Studies scholars. In the limited papers on Niconico, scholars note the barrage subtitle system that plays such a tremendous role in viewers' experience. The word "pseudo-synchronicity" accurately grabs the artificial sensation that all the audience for the same video are able to see the comments made by other viewers as if all these people are viewing

the same material together. The experience on barrage subtitle websites challenges the iconic image of a contemporary viewer sitting lonely in front of a computer screen. However, the watching experience on barrage subtitle websites is still drastically different from the experience of watching films in an old fashioned movie theater, because the general silence and awing respect for the material on the screen totally disappears. The shared experience of watching, and especially the sharing synchronicity is expressed not through the shared silence and more permissible reactions such as laughing, but rather through actions that deem very impolite in a film theatre experience: speaking (or typing), which means uttering something significant to one's point of view at the specific moment of the media material. The sense of shared interest and community comes from uttering comments that would trigger other people's reaction or add on to someone else's reaction. The viewing experience on barrage subtitle website is intrinsically multitasking, because with the barrage subtitle flying over the video, one not only response to the video itself but also the comments made by other viewers. The amount of reading required on a barrage subtitle website is almost a blasphemy for the streaming content, especially for the heavily commented videos (for Chinese barrage subtitle websites at least, there are many films, i.e. works of art, on the website).

Multitasking distracts viewers from a "pure" appreciation experience, but at the same time, it enables another layer of activity in the viewing experience. Beyond direct expressions of immediate affective responses such as "ohhhhhhhhhhh, here it comes!!!" or "lol," it is possible for viewers to actually criticize and comment upon the content they are watching. The criticism might not be intellectual, or thoughtful, or serious, but they are the significant players that draw people into the experience of barrage subtitle system. Generally, the tone of the comments are less serious and often tends to satirize or parody, or *tuciao* on the materials on the screen. When

Gao Hanning introduces in her definition of the word “barrage subtitle,” she raises several common types of barrage subtitles most popular in Bilibili, for example, “tucao,” “kong’er,” “wan geng,” counting, among others (185-187). Different from my discussion on fansub groups in the next chapter, that *tucao* comments made by the fansubbers create a hierarchy between the subbers and the general audience group, because the latter have to accept what is offered (or rather what is thrust) to them in the video, barrage subtitle *tucao* is casual, and involves people on a more equal base in making voices and interacting with each other. “Kong’er” is the Japanese word for “audial hallucination,” generally refers to hilarious (and sometimes vulgar) transcriptions of dialogues or lyrics in a foreign language. “Wan geng” means playing with popular allusions, referring directly to a large intertextual network of the ACGN culture and a collective memory for the community. “Counting,” on the other hand, simply means counting an activity or an object that appears repeatedly on the screen. Easy to understand, such nonsensical, seemingly only a kill-time activity, directly turns the space of barrage subtitle into a collective game. In sum, all the iconographic activities in barrage subtitles are highly communication oriented and community oriented. They all have a target audience in mind, and are fully aware that their barrage subtitles must be and will be seen by others. The target audience belongs to a community that shares the same semiotic system and intertextual network.

I personally encountered many instances that people will wait until there are enough barrage subtitles on a video to go to see the video simply because there will be more fun.¹²⁶ The media of barrage subtitles is especially suitable for the media products that invite comments and criticism, especially playful comments, including materials with heavy allusions and references

¹²⁶ See Wochong’s article for the some users of Bilibili for their experience on the website. The manager of Bilibili Chen Rui says in the article, that “Fundamentally, the barrage subtitles are the people who comment through barrage subtitles.” And that “people do not come to Bilibili to watch videos, but to get together and share.”

to other media materials. Those particularly bad films nowadays often receive comments like “This film is only watchable with the barrage subtitles on,” meaning that the film itself is not worth watching, but the comments making fun of the film are valuable in themselves.

When I talk about the conversational experience in barrage subtitles, it does not mean that the comments necessarily correspond to one another logically. Sometimes the content of comments is insignificant compared to its visual existence. What matters is that there are people who also watched the video and feel also the urge to express themselves at a particular point in time. When it comes to the moment that excites people, or significant moments, viewers would collectively post comments, stylized or randomly, to enhance the emotional intensity of the particular moment, be it humorous, sadness, or passionate. Sometimes the barrage subtitles will be so many that the whole screen is covered up by texts of all different styles and colors. I will raise two examples below to analyze how barrage subtitles create a sense of community through ritual comments.

A fan remixed video of the domestic Chinese animation film, *Monkey King: The Hero Is back* (2015), combined with a song titled “Wu Kong” by Dai Quan, is so popular that it has been played for about 2.7 million times in less than one year after it was posted in June 2015.¹²⁷ As I examine the video in May 2016, during the three minutes playback time, one sentence keeps appearing in the barrage subtitles, “*Qitian dasheng Su Wukong, shen ru xuantie, huoyan jinjing, changsheng bulao, haiyou qishi'er bian* 齐天大圣孙悟空，身如玄铁，火眼金睛，长生不老，还有七十二变,” which means “Great sage Sun Wukong, Equal of Heaven, with a body like

¹²⁷ The animation film *Monkey King: The Hero Is back* was a phenomenal film in summer 2015. As a well-made film that lacked money to publicize, it attracted a large crowd of fans who publicized the film voluntarily, urged their local cinema to add show times, and attended screenings for multiple times. The desire to see a good indigenous animation, and the strong sentiment for the childhood hero Monkey King, made this film a particularly emotional intense object to celebrate and socialize. It also makes the remix video that I discuss a very special experience for fans of the film.

black iron, golden-gaze fiery eyes, immortal, and seventy-two transformations.” Numerous barrage subtitles containing this sentence scroll across the screen, or appear in a vibrant color at the center of the screen, or form a colorful screen of texts over the screen (Figure 7-1). Typing this sentence in barrage subtitles have become the ritual for its audience following the example of earlier commentators. This line is one of the most famous in the animation film, that a little fan of Sun Wukong, a little monk keeps repeating his own legend to the depressed Monkey King. The collective repetition of an iconic line directly refers to the high-grossing animation film, and towards the intertextual network consisting of numerous texts derivative from the ultimate source of the story, the vernacular novel *Journey to the West*, a book often dated back to mid-Ming Dynasty around the 16th century. In the animation film, the little monk and fan of Monkey King recites fluently this line, celebrating his personal hero in a mode that many Chinese children do. By repeating this line, the audiences are reprising the iconic scene of the film, referring to a similar childhood experience and impersonating the little monk in the film. The intertextual network that the fan video relies on goes far beyond the animation film, but to a collective childhood experience in reading the original novel and watching television adaptations of *Journey to the West*. Moreover, Monkey King is the all-time popular hero for Chinese children. Through several fandoms and fads since the late-1990s, including Stephen Chow’s *The Chinese Odyssey* (1995) and Jin Hezai’s *Biography of Wukong*, Monkey King himself through various metamorphosis, becomes a national hero that refers nostalgically to an almost nationally shared childhood as well as a national past and legacy. The reference towards the intertextual network is a typical example of cultural nationalism that I have introduced in Chapter 3. The target audience of the video and the community built up by the barrage subtitles are those who identify with this

cultural nationalistic narrative told in the remix of the domestic animation and a song that borrows tunes from Peking Opera.

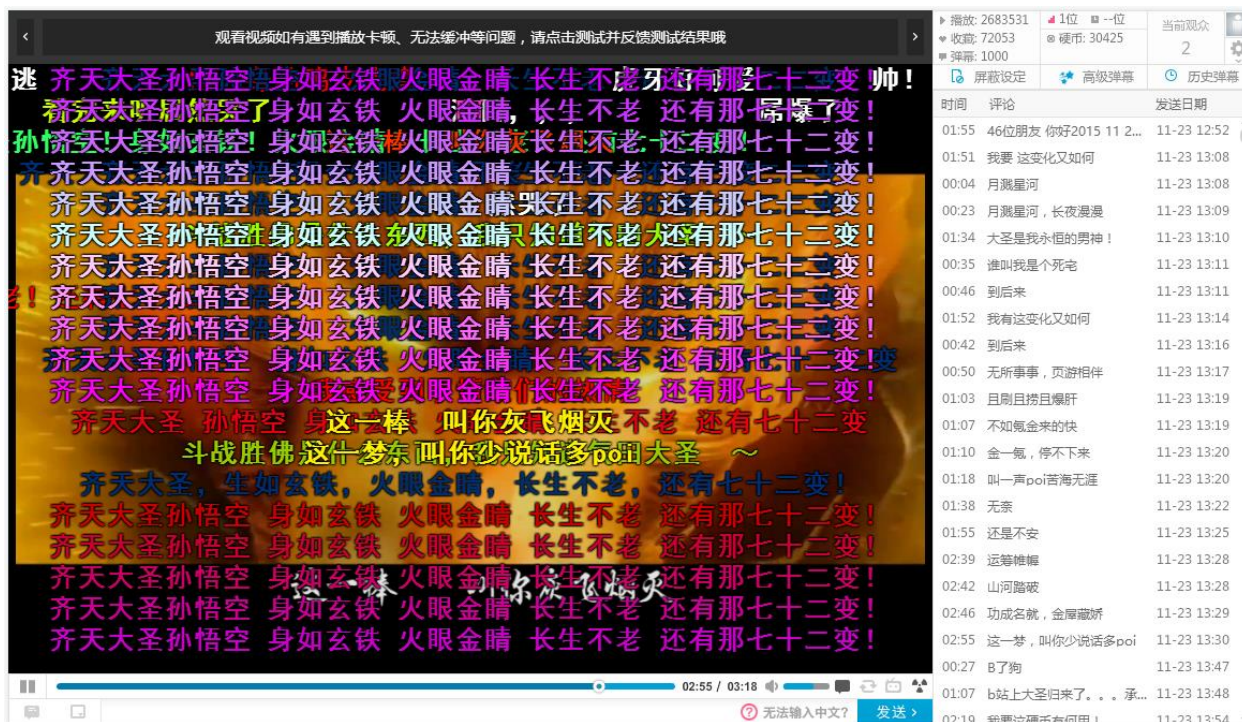


Figure 7-1 Screenshot on May 6, 2016 of the *Monkey King* remix by Miaoxingrentingge at 02:56 as appeared on Bilibili

Another example displays the ritual for commentators directly through the pictorial quality of barrage subtitles. There is a transformation process, which is ridiculously long, but is presented exactly the same way in every episode, in the *anime Penguindrum* 輪るピングドラム (2011).¹²⁸ From a certain episode on, whenever this transformation process begins in the video, viewers start posting ASCII art of little rockets in the barrage subtitle in various colors. The screen will be covered by flying little rockets rapidly scrolling from the right to the left of the

¹²⁸ *Penguindrum* is a TV *anime* which broadcasted from July to December 2011. New episodes were translated by the fansub groups and uploaded onto Bilibili, usually in 24 hours after they were broadcasted in Japan. As a result, fans that watched this *anime* on Bilibili soon developed a habit and ritual in celebrating their collective identity, of watching the same *anime* together on Bilibili.

screen during the whole process of character transformation (Figure 7-2). Frequent viewers of a particular series of *anime* build up ritualistic conventions in barrage subtitles showing a sense of community and collectivity, or more straightforwardly, the ability to type exactly the coded language agreed by the fans of this *anime* and by the *otaku* community.



Figure 7-2 Screenshot made on May 6, 2016, of Ep 03 of *Penguindrum* at 04:47, uploaded by 96 Mao@141.2cm as appeared on Bilibili.

In both aforementioned examples, barrage subtitles have transcended the function of verbal communication, turning into a collective performance and spectacle. Daniel Johnson suggests that these comments are “counter-transparent writings,” by which he describes the heavily coded language that “disrupt the viewer’s ability to understand what is being written through their use of wordplay and movement between linguistic and pictorial registers of communication” (306). Barrage subtitles, according to him, are often written in the subcultural dialect indecipherable for outsiders. As a result, such writings play two roles simultaneously, one

is linguistic communication, and the other is pictorial registration. Both functions lead to communication that is partly exclusive towards the language community. The comments in the *Monkey King* fan video show their direct registration towards the insiders of the fan community. Through the continuous repetition of one sentence, the barrage subtitles create a space of common knowledge and a visual spectacle. As Johnson also suggest, that “[a]s swarms of comments pass over the screen, it can be difficult to focus on a single line of text or area of the screen. To try and take in the screen as a whole renders the experience not as one of legibility of reading by rather a kind of visual sensation of movement and energy that gestures toward the digital materiality of the comment feed” (308). In other words, the general pictorial aspect of barrage subtitles is significant in the audience’s visual experience in video watching.

Different from Niconico, which is a Japanese website under the strict copyright control, and similar to many Chinese online video screening websites, Bilibili depends less on user-generated content; it attracts audience for its legal or illegal screening space of copyrighted media materials, including but not limited to Japanese *anime*, TV dramas and films from all over the world. In this way, fans do not necessarily come to the website for the fan-generated videos including MAD videos, or amateurish songs /music performance etc., they come to the website to see the media products that are only available to them through the internet. In this way, the function of giving fan video producers specific feedback on a specific place is no longer the primary or even relevant aspect of the comments. Such condition further emphasizes the experience of viewing media products together with people of the same community in a pseudo-theatrical mode. The reaction for the media products is less of commenting or encouraging the fans who made the videos (since viewers clearly know that they are no longer at the same

cultural hierarchy with the producers), but more of conversation inside the viewer community itself.

Although scholars have linked the protocol of Niconico to a Japanese cultural specificity, the system has worked very well in China. This system is particularly suitable for community building online, especially for a subculture community that relies on styles to make differences from the mainstream culture. The system caters to *otaku* culture and fannish experience, rather than a national identity. Shunsuke Nozawa uses the videos on Niconico as an example to show Japanese netizens' preference for "pure anonymity." Amateur performers on Niconico hide their profile images; a face shown without a mask is scandalized. By this characteristic, he suggests that the Japanese netizens tend to create an alternative identity unrecognizable from their real identity, a disposable mask to ensure "self-expression with strong self-effacement." In one way, they treat their images online as the identities taken by voice actors in performance. Tadamasa Kimura discusses the issue of "reading the atmosphere" during internet communication in Japan. He makes the connection between the barrage subtitle system and the Japanese netizens' tendency to clearly understand the discussion atmosphere before speaking. Because existing comments have already established an atmosphere for later commentators to comfortably blend in, while not risk being the one that breaks the agreed decorum, the barrage subtitle system creates a collective voice. Both Nozawa and Kimura's arguments support the feel of community constructed by barrage subtitles through collective ritualized performance. Only an anonymous collection of stylized texts required for the certain circumstance is able to form a visual spectacle. Under such circumstance, viewers are less concerned with expressing their own perspective upon the video's content, but more about the atmosphere of conversation as a preexisting discourse that exists before they watch the video.

The Japanese social context in these discussions is inspiring and interesting, yet I question the inevitability between the anonymity on which the barrage subtitle system and Japanese national characters. Instead, I link the anonymous and collective ritual performance in barrage subtitle websites with the *otaku* identity. I suggest the possible reason may lie in the general equal relationship among participants in the fan community. Nozawa's opinion shows yet another difference between Niconico and YouTube, or at least many of the academic studies done on these two websites: while critics based on YouTube stress the "real" "authentic" aspect of the videos, especially considering the large number of people who keeps "vlog" on it, critics of Niconico concern most and foremost its connection with subculture. While the most observed identity performance on YouTube is linked to the "authentic" body of the participants for the sense of realism in a virtual environment, the identity performance on Niconico is much more hidden behind individuals' connection with the ACGN materials.

While I treat the barrage subtitle system as a usual practice and sense of identity in *otaku* culture, just as I have pointed out in Chapter 3, nationality and cultural identification is still a significant character of the sense of community and identity in a fan community. Discordance and disputes based on national identities happen all the time on video streaming websites. Even for contents less related to the political issues and situations in the real life, national affiliation does play an important role in the online conflicts. The issue of "universal," "global" vs. one specific country or culture in the internet age is highly problematic. While YouTube is striving to become a multinational and globalized platform for video sharing, the issue of language and racial representation is still severe even with multiple language choices. Burgess and Green point out the dual strategy of globalization and localization taken by YouTube. While metaphorically, users cross borders when accessing the contents shared on the website, US centrality still

displays through, for example, that most “popular material” is always something in English, from the US, and targets on the American population. The opposition for the “local” is “global,” which means the content designed to be targeting the US audience (Burgess and Green, 83-87). While Burgess and Green accurately point out that “language” and “localization” are two separate issues (84), claiming that “the apparent ‘dominance’ of English is probably not as important as questions about the extent to which YouTube’s ‘common culture’ exhibits and supports genuine cultural diversity” (85), I still claim that language is a crucial political problem on the internet.

Even though fans are crossing the national and linguistic borders, these people still are very limited. Ordinary fans usually lack the language ability to cross the language borders, and their behaviors on a website dominated by a foreign language are also largely limited. The language politics of video sharing website, just as all other websites, have the problem of self-expression and representation in different languages. While YouTube is more or less aimed as a globalized information platform by providing various language versions, many other video streaming websites bear clearly a cultural or national hallmark. For example, the Japanese Niconico is also promoting an English version, showing its attempt in “globalization,” but at the same time, this globalization process involves inviting the English language speakers (whether native or not) and accustoming them with a Japanese-styled communication method.¹²⁹ Niconico is a center for Japanese ACG culture, especially fan video production and circulation, and therefore, Japanese is the lingua franca on this website. With also the national identification of Japan clearly acknowledged by most participants, barrage subtitles in non-Japanese language are

¹²⁹ Niconico has a specific English version (previously a separate site, but is now incorporated into the Japanese site), which translate the video description and title from Japanese into English. This move invited English-speaking *otaku* to participate in a Japanese site.

often despised as trolling, even though there is no rule in any written form saying that only one language is acceptable on the website. The sense of pseudo-synchronicity lies in viewing experience when viewers are able to see other people's reaction towards a certain video at a specific time, the short span of time left for reading determines that barrage subtitles have to be in the viewers' native language. As communication and participation increase in barrage subtitle websites, the international fan community tends to disintegrate according to the languages. Typing Chinese on Nico Nico is not a recommended behavior by the Chinese *otaku* community, and Japanese fans often directly express their annoyance of another language in barrage subtitles in response. If people comment in another language on Chinese barrage subtitle websites, other comments often immediately scold them and tell them to “*Zizhong*” (自重)—roughly meaning “Behave yourself.” Such behavior cannot be understood simply as xenophobia. Barrage subtitles differ from video comments placed below the video on the webpage in several significant ways: first, most people will not go to the list of comments to read every comment after the video ends, they usually see the comments for the brief several seconds when they fly over the screen when the video is played. Second and probably more important here is, that most of the comments do not make sense without a context to understand, or in other words, they can only be viewed together with the context, and the specific context at the particular moment of the video. Because of the sense of immediate conversation created between the video and the barrage subtitles, communication is the single most important element in such system. One barrage subtitle in any foreign language that needs a second look appears jarring on the screen while too many subtitles in a foreign language totally destroy the sense of communication in this system.

This case actually links to the issue of the politics of language in internet usage in the current global culture. What language should we use on the internet? Is English the legal “global

official language” that we should stick to if we are to post certain issues on a globally accessible website? Sometimes people publicly announce that postings in other languages besides English are annoying. Moreover, Chinese netizens have used the strategy of spamming comments in Chinese on a non-Chinese website for multiple times to express their dissatisfaction or protest. But generally, the issue is not about the language used, but more about the target audience, concerning majorly the population one attempt to communicate with, and the identity one presents through such communication.

***Jinkela*: Nonsensical Internet Memes and Identity Performance**

The idea “meme” comes from Richard Dawkins’ 1975 book *The Selfish Gene*. He suggests that memes facilitate the transmission of information and idea. Just as Dawkins suggests, memes are easily reproduced and circulated demonstrate the categories of fidelity, fecundity and longevity of memes. On the basis of Dawkins and other later critics’ discussion, Lewis points to the specific participatory internet memes, that “they both reify identity and construct authorship at the same moment” (108). She argues that internet memes are a mode of identity creation and recognition through repeated performance. The aspect of identity creation and performance included in online memes, which are usually deemed nonsensical and lack of certain cultural / political significance. Such nonsensical knowledge and information has less to do with the specific Chinese cultural-political situation, but more with the general entertainment mode in the age of flattening internet culture. In this chapter, I perceive internet memes are cultural signifiers for identity performance. I define the textual, visual and narrative elements that circulate virally on the internet as internet memes. In Fiske’s categorization, fans’ productivity can be divided into three deepening levels: semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity and textual

productivity (“Cultural Economy,” 36-39). Internet memes often simultaneously participate in all three levels of productivity, but the ultimate meaning for memes fall on the semiotic level. In other words, memes function similarly to the language patterns exclusive inside the community, constitute a special “counter-transparent language” that display a stylized performance that distinguishes the community insiders from the outsiders.

There is a general problem with studies on Chinese internet culture that the political aspects of the internet (or should I rather say, the idea that the internet is a location of political public platform reserved for the participation of dissidence and resistance simply towards the government) is often over-emphasized. The mainstream media often notice internet memes only when they are used for criticizing the government. For example, the song “Ievan Polka,” retitled as “Leek Waving Song” after being appropriated by Hatsune Miku fandom, has applied to various lyrics, but only one version that criticizes and satirizes the political news of the year calls the attention from the mainstream. The first one, uploaded on Bilibili by Meng Chacha on 2011, which satirizes many cultural and political phenomena in 2010 became a hit when it was posted. The famous “*The Downfall* / Hitler” parody meme, which is called “Fury of the Führer” 元首的愤怒 on Chinese websites, also entered the mainstream media when the netizens use it to express political opinions on domestic or international hot topics, for instance, the 2010 Wenzhou bullet train accident in China that killed 11 people (see Baisenianchouyeti’s video on Bilibili as one of the many examples. Michael Strangelove, in his ethnographical study on YouTube, also mentions this meme, using it as an example for political intervention by regular netizens to show their opinions on politicians. However, in China, this meme, with its extreme longevity, survives in Chinese *otaku* community and barrage subtitle websites, not for its convenience in political expressions. The most famous aspect about this meme in China is a line by Hitler, “Und doch

habe ich allein,” which is transcribed phonetically into a Chinese sentence “I come to Hebei Province 我到河北省来.”¹³⁰ At the same time, the most manipulation that is done on his words has less to do with the actual content of the dialogue, but with the dramatic facial expressions and tones. The added elements of this accidental information “Hebei Province” brings more fun into the manipulation and reappropriation of the video. Even though virtual community uses the subcultural content to express their political positions and opinions, I have to point out that the nonsensical contents still largely override in both their longevity and in number. The case with the Hitler meme comes exactly in the sense of identity performance. These nonsensical materials and punch lines become *otaku* knowledge and vocabulary. The phenomenon of such intentional phonetic transcription, “空耳” *kong'er*, which literally means “empty ears,” come ultimately from the Japanese word written with the same Chinese characters, meaning “auditory hallucination.” While such transcript written with auditory hallucination sometimes still carries logical literal meanings, the ritual identity performance often overwhelms such literal meanings. The original meaning of the texts has nothing to do with the popularity of these internet memes, the fun is the accidental coincidence, and the way people are connected to it.

Research on internet fads and memes seem to imply that these popular expressions can only be meaningful when they involve in political debates. Previous studies on the online spoof videos in China, including Hu Ge’s phenomenal parody “A Blood Crime Caused by a Steam Bun,” though often acknowledge its value in communication, are reluctant to comment on its cultural value. While we have to understand that on the linguistic level, most memes, just as the majority of barrage subtitles, have no concrete meanings to communicate, it is still a mistake to

¹³⁰ See Aiermeiyoyuwancumian’s video below for an example of remix that take use the meme, and especially the phonetic transcription.

deny that such enunciation has any cultural signification. In fact, the insider knowledge sustained by the memes and the way that people manipulates the memes is much more important.

Strictly speaking, circulation and recreation of internet memes is not the same as fan culture. Memes are constructed on simple ideas and words, reproduced in a viral way. They usually apply to a larger community than a fan community, and easily transcend the gender barrier and fandom barrier. Those barriers are not impenetrable but still would restrict certain types of entertainment, communications and conventions. Memes resemble those fan products that travel from a niche audience community to the mainstream, losing any deeper intertextual connections. But internet meme reproduction is surely a form of participatory culture, in which people participate in the process of circulation in the mode of reproduction. As Lewis also points out, the “nerd,” “geek” identity is the most common identity celebrated and constructed in internet memes. The same situation happens in the East Asian countries that many memes directly link to the *otaku* identity inside ACG fandoms and a barrage subtitle websites’ frequenter. Therefore, though memes are distinctive from fan culture and fan product, fan communities share an exclusive set of memes, which help to construct the identity and experience of fandoms and *otaku* community. Because internet memes would easily travel to the mainstream, the mainstream population are more probable in taking notice in these often nonsensical but hilarious products. However, they are used in a different style in the subculture and usually sustain much longer in the subculture, where internet memes become a subcultural dialect.

In this section, I am not going to restrict my observations on Bilibili, for several reasons: Bilibili is actually younger than most of the memes I will discuss here; besides, the memes would never stay only on one website; they travel everywhere, carried by people who use them.

Chinese barrage subtitle websites are of the most important locations for internet memes to emerge, spread, thrive, and travel, much more than in the mainstream video sharing websites. Several special types of video production are iconic of the barrage subtitle websites, including especially so-called *kichiku* video remix, and they epitomize the community aspect of the seemingly nonsensical memes.

The meme of “Jinkela” 金坷垃, one of the most famous and long-lasting internet meme started arguably in AcFun with a fan video “American Japanese African Golden Songs” made by Tutuwan 荼荼丸 (usually referred to as “221” on the internet) (see the video posted on Bilibili by Tutuwan). The meme originally comes from a set of advertisements of a fertilizer supplement with the brand of “Jinkela,” literally meaning “golden soil crunches.” This set of advertisements is so exaggerating that they are comical. The most representative and the most widely reappropriated advertisement is a short episode in which a Japanese and an African trying to snatch bags of “Jinkela” from a white American (this product is advertised as American, produced in San Diego—wrongly spelled as “Shengdiyage,” which is the pinyin Romanization of Chinese phonetic transcription of the city’s name). In this episode, the American asks the Japanese and the African to accurately name the benefits of this product. After the Japanese claims that once Japan has this product, Japan needs not to import grains from the US, the American becomes worried about the commercial benefits and decides to give the products to the African. The actors—supposed to be foreigners—all speak Chinese, but in a strange and stereotypical foreign accent, with wrong intonations. Besides, their exaggerated acting style also makes the advertisement less genuine, but more comical. Their hyperbolic and rhythmic lines such as “if you put Jinkela into the fertilizer, you can harvest 1800 *jin* wheat from one *mu*!” (*Feiliao chan le jin kela, xiaomai muchan yiqian ba* 肥料掺了金坷垃, 小麦亩产一千八), also

become the target of mockery, imitation and spoof. But through the power of the spoof videos, this set of advertisements, which bear all the characteristics of cheesy advertisements broadcasted in small provincial or even county level television stations become so widely known that these lines are already in the “public domain” of Chinese *otaku* community. For example, in the entrance exam of Bilibili that I mentioned above, there is a question “If you put Jinkela into the fertilizer, how much wheat you can harvest from one *mu*?” For the insiders of the *otaku* community, the answer is beyond obvious. What Tutuwan does is that he/she uses the melody of a couple of *anime* theme songs and put in the words taken out from the advertisement into a parody. The most famous song is “Only My Rail Gun,” sung by Level 5 for the *anime To Aru Kagaku no Reiru Gan*. Moreover, Tutuwan uses the sound of the actors in the advertisement directly, then manipulate the sounds into different pitches to go with the melody with computer applications. His/her technical perfection is another reason for the popularity of the video and the meme, many viewers after watching this video exclaim that this appropriated song are so well manipulated that it sounds like the original version instead of a reworking. There is little logical connection between the original advertisement and its combination with *anime* theme songs, but the exaggerated words and performing style add a special comical effect. After this, people use the same idea, taking a popular piece of music and lines from the Jinkela advertisements, remixing them together. Such logic for internet memes in Chinese online video streaming websites then became a norm.

The *jinkela* remix videos belong to the *kichiku* 鬼畜 tradition, by which I refer to a certain tradition of video manipulations that would break down the source sound materials into syllables, and combine these syllables into new sentences or sound effects that have little relationship with

the original materials.¹³¹ *Kichiku* remixes are famous for quick-paced editing and absurdly long or frequent sound repetitions to create a comical effect. Because the sounds in *kichiku* videos usually repeat for numerous times, they are often catchy and would leave an impression so compelling that it almost feels like brainwashing. The *kichiku* tradition on Bilibili arguably comes from the *kichiku* tradition on the Japanese online video streaming website, Niconico. One of the most famous *kichiku* remix videos is a comical manipulation of a MacDonald commercial in Japan, *Saishū Kichiku Doukeshi Donaldoru M 最終鬼畜道化師ドナルドール・M*.¹³² At the first glance of these *jinkela* videos, we may easily confuse internet memes with another similar but still distinctive tradition on the internet: spoof videos. Both *kichiku* videos and spoof videos are comical and lack significant messages. But spoof videos, with their usually technical and narrative sophistication, usually clearly have a center and authoritative voice in the production and circulation. While scholars as Tang claims that it is nonsensical and lack meaning, spoof videos still have a relatively legible message and purpose. While for *kichiku* videos, the original initiator of a meme is usually unknown or insignificant; in spoof videos, we see clearly the presence of an author, in responding to the original media product. Fan videos created in female fandoms is yet another tradition. Female fan videos usually require more affective investment into the plot and characters. They also require an audience group with knowledge in the fan video production tradition as a prerequisite. Of course, historically speaking, fan videos most often fall into the category of female-oriented sentimental secondary creations that stress the attachment that fans feel towards the original media product, or the interpersonal relationship

¹³¹ *Kichiku* 鬼畜 is originally a term in Buddhism, later refers to brutal conducts, inflictions and tortures. It also refers to sexual kinkism. The trope of video manipulation is not directly relevant to the two meanings above.

¹³² See the original video posted on Niconico by Mikuru. It has been played for more than 13 million times when I am writing this dissertation.

between characters (some of them already presented in the original product, some of them are created by fans' interpretation). For *kichiku* videos, spoof videos and fan videos, the targeted audience is fixed on a group of netizens with similar taste and cultural preference.

The phenomenal Chinese spoof video, Hu Ge's 胡戈 spoof "A Blood Crime Caused by a Steamed Bun (*Yige mantou yinfa de xue'an* 一个馒头引发的血案)" (referred to as "The Bun" in the discussion below) was the first amateurishly produced video to achieve such a wide circulation online and acknowledgement. The spoof video of "The Bun" was produced singlehandedly by a netizen and grass-root video producer Hu Ge, who decided to spoof on Chen Kaige's 2005 film *The Promise* 无极, out of his strong disappointment from this highly advertised fantasy blockbuster. He uses the video ripped from a pirated DVD and reedits it along with materials captured from a CCTV program, and makes a remixed video as a mockery to both Chen Kaige's film and the TV show. Hu Ge's videos were extremely popular around the year 2006 when the techniques of "The Bun" was so sophisticated that they were unachievable for average Chinese netizens. Fan videos in the form of flash files are comparatively easy to make with less reliance on sound editing. The spoof videos, on the other hand, rely on higher technical expertise, such as redubbing and special sound effects. The 2002 spoof remix video produced by Tsinghua University students, "The Revival of the Electronic Engineering Department" (*Dianzi de fuxing* 电子的复兴), for example, was produced in the Electronic Engineering Department of the most prestigious engineer university in China with cooperation (see the description of the department, "Dianzi xi xuesheng jie yuanchuang wanhui" for more information). From this fact, we may understand the difficulty in amateurish video remixing and reproduction prior to the time when authorial computer applications are finally available to the average netizens. And this condition arguably makes Hu Ge's case no longer possible in today's condition.

The videos produced with internet memes are similar to fan videos for several reasons: the sense of targeted community is more clearly presented in such production. *Jinkela* lies in the ACG subculture, with clear reference to famous *anime* songs and other materials circulated in the *otaku* subculture, without the knowledge of the original song the appreciation and the fun will largely decline. But for the spoof videos, the target audience does not have a specific identity, except probably the Chinese urbanites that have seen CCTV and Chen Kaige's film. On the other hand, *jinkela* is reproducible, repeatable, but "The Bun" is not; it relies on personal talents—both creative talent and technical talent—to produce, and it does not contain a simple repeatable piece of information as the meme.

Lihong Tang uses the word "nonsensical" to translate the Cantonese word "*wulitou*" 无厘头, a word come to the public usage through the slapstick comedy films by Stephen Chow from the late 1990s. One of his film, *A Chinese Odyssey* 大话西游 (1995), is the first film that achieved unexpected cult status in the internet age in Mainland China, especially on university campuses. Lines from the film are frequently recited, reappropriated to fit in all kinds of circumstances, almost ritually by the general public for several years. The stylistic phrases and sentence structure are memes at that time, even though the internet was still out of the reach from most ordinary people. In her dissertation, Tang situates the fad of *The Chinese Odyssey*, and the parody video "The Blood Case Caused by a Steam Bun" in a series of Chinese films and stage performances after the establishment of the People's Republic. She argues that "[i]f one is to give a reasonable account for the flourish of nonsense, the easiest argument is that the slogan-shouting past of the Chinese political history has to re-emerge in the censorship-controlled present," and "nonsense as a speech act combats the philistine aspect of practical life by re-introducing the art of language to the everyday" (3). She positions the two texts at the end of the

history: the post-socialist as a response to the socialist regime, its propaganda which grows increasingly incompatible with the current social condition, and the didactic language that speaks the socialist subjects. Tang suggests that speaking nonsense constitutes a powerful revolt against the socialist party slogans and empty set phrases, and further against knowledge, language, elitism and elegance.

While Tang's argument fits perfectly throughout her examples that spread out through the decades, her analysis is flawed by her obvious moral dichotomy between the elite intellectual productions (however popular they might be) and the popular culture, especially youth culture after the 1990s, which she outright denounces as "outrageous," "vulgar," "blind," "ignorant" and aimless. While tacitly defining the grass-root powers in the popular youth culture in China—represented by Hu Ge and the fans of the reality show, "Super Girls"—as the opposite of intellectual and knowledge, she holds a strong bias against the youth subculture without displaying any intention in learning basic knowledge of the subculture in the first place. To be exact, when she denies the seemingly democratic votes in "Super Girls" competitions of any possibility of reaching an adequate political democracy in China, she also claims that "[t]he playfulness of the Chinese fans lies precisely in their unwillingness to commit themselves to a certain course" (229). To raise a simple counter-argument, the "Super Girls" fad in China (especially the competition in 2005) is a significant watershed for Chinese idol fan culture that set up much activity patterns and fan organization patterns in China. The 2005 competition also started a social debate on female sexuality and the social display of femininity, because several most beloved female competitors refuse traditional feminine clothing and display androgynous images on television. The most tomboyish singer in the 2005 competition, Li Yuchun, was especially favored by women fans. Her female fans, far from being speechless, were very

articulate in explaining their love for her and her androgynous image (see Yang Ling's study for further details). Through voting for Li Yuchun, the embodiment of such ideal female sexuality, women fans successfully defend their choice in challenging the social expectations for women. Tang seems to understand "meaning" and "subversion" only through the most traditional definition of "politics," implying that anything that does not lead to a democratic revolution is non-commitment, "a democracy where nobody knows where to go" (213), while failing to acknowledge some of the most powerful and constructive aspects of fan culture, including fans' new perception of gender and sexuality.

Tang's discussion and conclusion about the grass-root youth popular culture are then colored by her bias and ignorance of this culture. She does not even have a clear image of the demographic constitution of these fads (what she at times defines as "uneducated" and "anti-intellectual"), because in the period that she examines, i.e. the early 2000s, fan communities and cultish followers of Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey* were elite communities consisted of intellectuals with high education. However, her discussion in speech performance is helpful in defining fannish activities online as a community building process that intentionally hides from a more traditional political domain through collective speech or speechless.

I suggest that the identity performance in reproductions of internet memes is exactly a speech performance devoid of significant linguistic connotation. Signifying one's difference from the other, or proclaiming an identity is not subversive in itself. Subculture means non-mainstream, but not necessarily mean subversive, and especially does not mean progressive. Tang Lihong specifically discusses the issue with "The Bun," seeing this video as a video that does "nothing" but deconstruct the original film by Chen Kaige. She describes this incident in an exotic tone, treating such phenomena (which is common in the internet age) as an abnormality.

However, such personal heroism is intrinsically incompatible with the online performance in the subculture, which links rather to a collective performance for a sense of community, not for the identification for a singular hero. At the same time, Hu Ge is just a representation of a collective point of view, held by film fans towards the Chinese film producers. He is a representation, but not a hero without precedence or companions. After all these years, “The Bun” and Hu Ge remains a legend in the internet community, but just one of the many legends. Although many internet memes target the general public, part of the memes, including the two memes I mentioned above, strictly circulate in the *otaku* community, and especially Chinese barrage subtitle websites, including AcFun and Bilibili. *Jinkela* is the most representative case, that no outsiders can understand why it has been popular for such a long time (at least seven years when I am writing my dissertation). The message carried in this utterance based on memes is the nonsensical aspect of the messages itself. The memes and the individual videos produced with reference to them are taken as the signs without significations. Their own existence in the cultural background signifies their importance to the community, but not the content, nor the producers of the memes. The fad of *The Chinese Odyssey*, as I mentioned in Chapter One, directly inspires many online writings, imitations on Tang Sanzang’s words in this film was a fashionable meme that even spread out of the internet.

Repeated verbatim numerous times among the mainland Chinese audience, the famous lie is a quintessential passion performative that enraptures the reading and appreciation process of the film. Rendering the proclamation of love as an aesthetic performance, the ingenious lie born in the cradle of the Hong Kong “nonsensical” *wulitou* culture shows the power of language to purely act, working its way to the audience’s heart in spite of its exposure to blatant admittance that it is a lie. (201-202)

The famous speech by the Monkey King in the story, described by Tang as “a hollow, void, insincere but ingenious performance” (202), was one of the most popular declaration of love for young netizens to their lovers for a while. From the perspective of the community, this speech, disregarding how it functions in the original film, is a polysemic sign that could serve different purposes, including expressing real love instead of a lie. And that has been the mainstream usage for the speech.

Different from those ordinary Chinese people in the Cultural Revolution, who were forced to adopt a rhetoric and style borrowed from the Maoist propaganda, young netizens voluntarily utilize the memes for ritual performance, actively to build identification with a virtual community online that speaks the same language as themselves. Easy as it is to claim that nonsensical humor is achieving nothing and belittling knowledge, such claim has overlooked the most important issue in the fact that they produce meaning in the speech itself. Not necessarily passive as a substitute for something silenced by the governmental censorship, but aggressive as an alternative mode of social and cultural building. Tang also denounces that fans are participating in a clumsy and false imitation of the real society, by quoting Fredrick Jameson, that “[t]he fans purchase their identity in their ‘narcissistic’ rituals invested on fictional characters whereas there is a ‘real’ and ‘original’ existence for ‘the people’” (238). The blurry barrier between the virtual and the reality, between the imagined and the actual, is itself a problem in the internet age when various forms of social culture converge. This significant flaw of Tang’s argument and a pitfall in fan communities’ self-definition is exactly what I want to argue against in this dissertation. However hard that a subculture attempts to draw a line between the subculture and the mainstream, ultimately, the line is often trespassed, infiltrated and blurred. While Tang and scholars who still believe that contemporary fan culture or popular culture has

the ability to completely evade politics and everything significant, aiming for laugh and entertainment only, fan culture is actually a perfect representation and reflection of the general society, with all of its banality and subversions.

Bilibili, Cheers!

As Abigail De Kosnik and Francesca Coppa both notice, fan culture studies have incorporated performance theory for an obvious reason of the new internet media, which invites participants of online subculture to interact and play with the hardware and the software. De Kosnik points out, that “[n]umerous new media theorists after McLuhan (though none cite him) have argued that all human-computer interaction, and not only computer-based art making, is most fruitfully conceptualized as a form of interactive performance” (1.9). Online practices then could be understood as a theatrical experience with or without physical body involvement in a virtual space. Following these theorists’ discussion, we can view online fandom practices as an identity performance (with or without a mask in front of one’s real identity), from which fan communities establish. Coppa defines fan fiction as performative storytelling. “Fan fiction’s concern with bodies is often perceived as a problem or flaw, but performance is predicated on the idea of bodies, rather than words, as the storytelling medium” (229). She suggests that fan fiction is essentially teleplay script for characters to play, even if “it’s not overtly written in theatrical form” (235). Readers (or audience) come to see the play with the extratextual knowledge of the voice and the appearance of the characters. The repetitive storylines is another theatrical production of a “sacred script.” Fan studies scholars emphasize the body aspect of identity performance in fan culture, especially the fan culture on the internet in the virtual space, because such performance involves interaction with the technology, the screen and the electronic

appliance.

The slogan for Bilibili is “Bilibili, cheers!” The festive feeling brought by the slogan is embodied in the daily online activities on this video-streaming website. A video called “乾杯 - (°- °)っ口” creates such strong emotional attachment and nostalgia towards the website itself, constantly referring to the popular videos and memes on the website since its establishment in 2009 (Figure 7-3). With barrage subtitles of “bilibili - (°- °)っ口 乾杯” flying over the screen, the song sings the end of loneliness and a family of *otaku*, some other barrage subtitles express their love and identification with this website. Barrage subtitle websites including Niconico and Bilibili are a space of affection for *otaku* audience, who constantly experience a sense of community through pseudo-synchronicity and through a subcultural dialect consisting of counter-transparent language and memes. The videos streamed online could be understood metaphorically as a theatrical play that constantly invites, or even forces the participation from the audience. The audience’s performance in this play then add into the play, turning a play without the fourth wall into a carnival. Not to suggest that the community on barrage subtitle websites is a utopia outside the commercialized and globalized world, I only suggests that barrage subtitles have the potential for alternative socializing and communication. It is a new media and form; only the technophobia would read the doom for meaning from it.



Figure 7-3 Screenshot of “bilibili - (° - °) つ口 乾杯,” uploaded by H.K.Jun. at 01:43 as appeared on Bilibili.¹³³

¹³³ Screenshot made on May 9, 2016. The screen shows a cartoon image of Hitler and Stalin cheering and drinking together, referring to the Downfall meme, which is still popular on Bilibili.

CONCLUSION

The fan activities that I described and analyzed above mostly take place in a virtual space and a virtual community. It was the usual appearance of fan activities in China at least in the first several years of development, as a virtual community, a truly “imagined” community through online interaction. But during these years, this community is coming to the three dimensional world, not only through simple personal connections, but also through an arranged space that in the most direct way of showing people of a similar taste and interest. Fan conventions of the internet age is no longer a place where fans search for a community and people “similar to me,” but a place where fans materialize in the real life a virtual community in the cyberspace, a special space in which the most surreal and unconventional dreams come to life. There are more than one hundred fan conventions held in China every year. Most of them are based on Japanese media products, but other media and literary products are also involved in the conventions. The photos for cosplay shows and simply cosplay photography are very easy to find on the internet—there are even professional cosplay photographers. Similar activities that involve actual human bodies and living identities to cooperate and gather become a norm outside the net. Communities based on the virtual identities and activities are emerging rapidly offline. The circulation of materialized fan products both online and offline is tremendous in scale. Most fan writers or fan artists would post advertisement online—especially through the venue of SNS websites—calling for statistics of demands and then put their fanzines in to print and sell. There is also a website specifically set for all fanzines and fan art products, named *Tianchuang lianmeng* 天窗联盟,¹³⁴ which is now the largest search engine for all fanzines in Chinese language—not restricted to

¹³⁴ See the link below for the website <<http://doujin.bangumi.tv/>>.

Chinese mainland, but also include information from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The development for platform websites such as *taobao* 淘宝¹³⁵ makes individual to individual online transaction possible and easy, while the rapidly developing private delivery services make the online merchandize even more convenient. With the prosperous scene in fan products market, there are further problems such as pirated version for fanzines, or the some products that fall into debate of copyright infringement. In such a chaotic but highly vibrant scene, Chinese fan culture has now stepped out of the internet and has started to develop relationship in the “three dimensional world.” Again, this scene questions us the nature of fan culture: is it a space of affect, largely decided by interpersonal connections and shared interest? Or is it ultimately a space influenced or invaded by the logic of commercial culture?

The interesting thing about Chinese fan market is that it develops somewhat later than the online fandom, or at least it was not prosperous until the online fandom develops into a large scale as it is now. People started to print fanzines, books and spin-off products through various venues, including family workshops, but also through certain people with access to the traditional printing and publication companies. But fan products take many years of development to grow into such a large scale as they are today. The first large fan convention in North China was held not until the year 2008 according to Wang Zheng (275). The process is a reversal of the cases in other countries in my study: both Japan and US have a fan convention tradition; fan markets in the materiel world has been there in the pre-internet age. For Japan, for example, the *dojinshi* market actually was historically the place for some amateurish and revolutionary works in the ACG world to break through, including the *yaoi* tradition. This condition is largely determined by the lateness for Chinese fan communities’ development, but at the same time, the

¹³⁵ Taobao is a Chinese online consumer to consumer shopping website that have more than 4000 million users.

rapid development of Chinese economy and consumption unprecedented in the recent century has largely pushed this trend. At least on the level of consumption ability for smaller objects that are less relevant to life necessities, such as spin-off products of geek oriented cult media products. The quantity, the diversity and the convenience of access to the “official” producers and market has largely increased during these two decades, since the full commercialization of Chinese society at the early 1990s, when many source materials of fandoms first came into the Chinese market in legal or illegal venues.

The fan market in China resembles more with the Japanese *dojin* market, in which all amateurish printing and publication are sold, not restricting to fan products that developed based on an existing literary or media product, including, for example, semi-commercially produced prints of self-created art books and original *danmei* stories by non-professional authors. In other words, the amateurish products are supposed to be shared and enjoyed by all insiders of the culture and the community may not necessarily establish simply because of their interest in one particular media or literary product. The importance of fan culture and fan community lies sometimes outside the connection that one has with a product or a person, but lies in the shared experience of a community, and the shared love for a fan text is only part of them.

How do we interpret the trend of fan production in China? In what way does it represent an over-commercialization of postmodern capitalism? And in what way does it exemplify a special mode of gift economy slowly eroded by financial profits?

While the issue between the gift economy and commercial logic is of the center in the debate in fan studies, most fans do not really care about the distinction among the two. Or rather, under the current condition, the distinction between the two of them is growing more and more ambiguous. In the age of web 2.0, we face the condition that producers are taking advantages of

fan's voluntary labors for their own profit, or incorporating fans' activities into the larger commercial scheme.¹³⁶ Such situation is growing increasingly true with fan activities relying more and more on the platform websites (such as video sharing websites, or SNS websites) to sustain. The independency of fandoms, however, is never possible considering their dependency to commercially produced media products, yet this new trend has in a way shifted the cultural scene of the fan culture in a global scale. Fans do have a better access to the production level right now, and the platform of participation does look much more equal than before the internet age, or even before the web 2.0 age.

In China specifically, we come to see how the economic profits come in as the formerly internet only phenomenon goes offline and materialized. Even though the fan fiction posted online are usually available for download and share without restriction, fanzines (or amateurish printing produced only for sharing with people of the same community) are often not so cheap. The ethic of non-profit oriented production does not seem to be universally accepted in Chinese fandoms. Contrary to the trend of general digitalization of fanzines, fan arts and other fan products in the US, what we see in China is a reversed trend of digitized products going into print and materialization through various ways, with the benefit of online person to person merchandize, and through the access to the professional or at least semi-professional printing companies. The internet and digital media does not make materialized fan products unnecessary. On the contrary, most fan products have gained certain reputation before they are materialized in the three dimensional world. The distinction between sharing and profiting is so close that very few people come to question it when the products are materialized. In many people's point of

¹³⁶ See Jenkins and Scott's conversation in *Textual Poachers*.

view, materialization—especially materialization through a professional or semi-professional venue—almost equals to commercialization for fan products.

While materialization is often one phenomenon of “commercialization,” the truth is, staying online does not prevent the trend of commercialization for online reading and writing. As professional internet literary websites such as *Jinjiang* and *Qidian* all started a “pay to read” system, stories no longer need to be printed on the paper to have the privilege of commercialization. Even though the commercialization for fan fiction is still in the grey zone both in the legal and in the moral sense, there are cases that authors ask for a VIP status (which requires monthly purchase or quantitative purchase according to word count of readings) to read their fan fiction. It was also a taboo in Chinese fandoms that a fan fiction cannot be “originalized” but changing the name and background of some characters and therefore legitimate for publication. Same as the taboo of changing the sex of a male character to straighten some of the *danmei* writings to pass the publication censor. These regulations are not specified nor written down, but both can be seen as a restriction for the internet only texts go to the commercial print medium, to avoid trouble and attention. The same thing is happening in the English language fan fiction website, with some fan fiction authors now sell the digital copies of their writings through platform websites such as Amazon. Writings such as *Fifty Shades of Gray*, originally a piece of fan fiction of *Twilight*, is not only published, but also becomes a best seller. Even though this trend is not widespread either in China or in the US, ultimately it will come to the definition of creativity and the status of fan culture economically and legally. Amazon has already started an attempt to buy the legal rights of writing fan fiction for certain media products, while making fans also benefit economically, but we need time to see whether this trend does make any difference for the fan creation or will it fail as many of its predecessors.

While many Japanese *otaku* studies scholars identify the phenomenon of *otaku* culture is a representation of the post-modern society and post-modern mode of consumption, we have to first understand the definition of the word “postmodern” under this condition. It was a key word in Japan studies back in the 1980s before Japan entered the so-called “lost 20 years,” and grew out of fashion soon in the 1990s. Yet it is still playing an important role in discussions about fan cultures. How do we define the word “postmodern” in such discussion? Postmodern has several different aspects. The first layer of meaning is economical, it generally means a post-industrial and post-Fordism mode of production, which emphasize the informational and more personalized, more decentered, and freer mode of production and consumption. Alvin Toffler’s proposition of a “prosumer” economy, in which consumers are at the same time producers, provides us an interesting connection with the mode of production in fan culture, in a sense the products consumed in the community are produced inside the community by the same group of people. Fan culture as a culture of prosumer is an interesting and useful mode of understanding the mode of production, but we still have to consider how and in what degree that the commercial culture is getting involved in this culture.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapters, Chinese fan culture is less fully commercialized because the difficulties for the fans to access the fan products produced in the original countries of the source materials. In other words, it is forced outside the commercial environment, refused the right of entry. The trend changes with the development of Chinese market and with the communication of the media companies inside and outside China. As a result, Chinese fandom, in its first several years’ development, was in a forced condition of non-commercialization and non-profit oriented route, but with the entering of the commercial force, and especially the legal spin-off products for the source materials, the condition is getting more

and more complicated. Because Chinese fan culture was completely out of the reach from the media products' producers, the recent shift has also developed a necessity for more internet etiquettes, and more awareness on the international debate on copyright issues in fandom appropriation. Even though Chinese fandom seems to be a special case outside the influence of international media corporations, the situation is rapidly changing. Regulation, legalization, commercialization is still the main trend. The idea of active consumer and voluntary work is being constantly challenged in the fully commercialized and materialized fandoms as they are in most countries. Any further implication is still yet to be decided with time.

At the same time, however, postmodern society is also interpreted as a society that over produces, over consumes, according to theorists as David Harvey, and often in a decentered and superficial mode according to theorists such as Fredrick Jameson. The implication of postmodern theory often differs from country to country, from culture to culture, but one aspect of the question keeps constant: postmodern society has always been described as a society with the tendency of over consumption and high commodification, no matter what cultural historical background might be. Japanese society and *otaku* culture alike has been described as postmodern for this reason: an obsession with collection and with consumption, and on the other hand, they are thus presented as infantilized and flattened, holding an undistinguishing desire of consuming. The undistinguishing desire of consumption plays an important role in my discussion of fandom, too. In my discussion of Chinese fan fiction, I note the boundary breaking tendency in Chinese fans, particularly in their embrace of all types of texts, including texts that are usually outside the realm of fan culture and popular culture discussion. In one way it shows the diversified reading choices for Chinese fans, on the other hand, it presents rather the all-devouring tendency in the fan community. In other words, the texts are the same for the consumers, even though they show

very different characteristics in the eyes of critics. Such lack of distinction can be explained by the decentered and flattened mode of consumption appreciated by the postmodern society, but at the same time, this is the consumption mode and basic cultural logic in fandoms. We have to notice that the flattening tendency for fans' consumption should not be treated as a truly non-distinguishing action, but a selective process based on a different set of value system from the traditional institutional criteria.

Pierre Lévy has his own perspective in discussions on the society of "collective intelligence." While holding an overtly utopian view towards the technology usage in the future, Lévy's envision is very different from the postmodern theorists a couple of decades before him. While in his imagination, a good space of collective intelligence is a stage that comes after the commodity space. While the most important currency in the commodity space is information, the currency in a knowledge space is signification and freedom. Lévy understands the knowledge space as a decentralized, and a space with non-hierarchical communication, which is brought to existence with the new communication technology. In a sense, he is revising the postmodernity in other theorists' vision with technical utopianism, while still carrying the significant characteristics of decentered fragmentation. Even though he is not specifically targeting on specific communities such as fandoms, his envision is often appropriated by fan culture studies.

The postmodern debate in China has always been entangled with the issue of post-socialism, which also largely presents the trait of commercialization and consumerism. Fan culture shares many of the characteristics identified by theorists, including specifically the decline of the elite culture and the raise of the popular / commercial culture. Of course, the overall cultural trend shifted in the late 1980s and early 1990s in China, signified by the start of total marketization and commercialization, and by the shattering state ideology of socialism,

which no longer is the core of social life in the so-called “post new era.” The issue with the current fan culture in China is, even the first generation of Chinese fans in today’s fandom were born in the late 1970s; none of them experienced the Cultural Revolution, and many of them are even too young to experience the Tiananmen Incident. Therefore this generation has never experienced the so-called “high cultural fever” in the 1980s, and it differs significantly from both sides of the highly politicalized discussion between the so-called “New Left” and the “Liberal” in the cultural field. The representative commercial literature and culture, Wang Shuo, is no longer the representative of commercial literature any more, and putting in the current cultural scene, his now partly canonized writings can even be viewed in the high literary tradition. Most of the fans are at least from families economically well enough to be familiar with the fannish materials (most of them are imported) during their childhood, and have the access to the internet at a comparatively early date. That also makes fan culture an urban-centered subculture. The special historical and social condition for the majority of fans in Chinese mainland determines that Chinese fan culture is very different from the cases in the other two areas that I study, especially through its complicated relationship with the high art and with the elite culture.

Another issue that often accompanies fan identity is that fan culture is up to now a youth subculture in China, very different from the case in both Japan and US. This, of course, ultimately comes from the lateness for the culture to develop. I have by far drawn a picture of fan culture related to the generation born and raised in the age of commercialism and marketization. However, whether fan culture has a specific relationship with the cultural and social condition for this generation is still a question for us to see in the future, because according to the case in other cultures, fan identity does not have a direct relationship with age and generation, but

constitutes as a special community on its own. Fandoms that started from foreign media product might be a coincidence, and is still very understandable considering the global scaled popular cultural movement, but we still do not know the logical connection between this and the fandom. Does the turning point of early 1990s so significant that it changes the whole cultural taste and mode of consumption in China? Should the fandom mode ultimately link with the postmodern social condition, especially over consumption or decentered cultural taste? Moreover, does the internet necessary and irreplaceable for the rapid development of fan culture? All these questions will be valuable for our future studies, but we have to see the culture of participation and the connection that people establish with a fictional narrative is not new.

Fan culture, in my perspective, cannot be only seen as a phenomenon of the contemporary society, or only people's engagement and entertainment in the age of commercially produced media and literary products. The earlier forms of participation, for example, sequel creations to pre-modern Chinese vernacular novels, can be viewed as some kind of earlier incarnation of fan activity and involvement for personal expressions in one's favorite fan texts. However different the pre-modern practice was from the contemporary cultural phenomena, we cannot claim participation culture is simply a postmodern phenomenon. There are many characteristics in fan culture that meets the description of postmodernity, and the participatory culture in fandoms have clearly emblematic characters of a commodity society. But at the same time, fan culture shows the characteristics of folk culture and folklore prior to the modern society that emphasizes the individual authors' value. In other word, such presentations in fandoms can simultaneously treated as some vestige of the pre-modern society, of collective and amateurish creation, of community identity, and of a grass-root mode of circulation.

Again, the largest issue with fan culture is that it is never possible to analyze comprehensively; even for an issue less concerned with the technical details, it is still difficult to generalize the situation. Even though I have restricted my discussion in Chinese fan culture specifically, the scene is still too vast for me to grab as a whole. Therefore this dissertation is only a set of preliminary cases and topics that I personally developed enough interest to discuss. My major perspective in this study is still the connection between this productive fan culture and other social phenomena as well as cultural traditions. There are more issues to discover and to understand. With the influence of popular media seeping deeply into people's everyday life, fan culture will become more representative of people's cultural life. The fan culture discussed in my dissertation does not cover all the fan identity and fan activities, for example, sports fans and music fans may present a different vision from the media and literary fans based on narratives. Theorists such as Hills and Sandvoss, tend to treat all fan identities as falling into the same category, though they have internal distinctions. Sandvoss, for example, argues that fans of all kinds of media products, celebrity and type of entertainment attach themselves to a "fan text," no matter whether it is a narrative, or a person, or a sports team (*Fans*). But from an ethnographic perspective, the same conclusion may be difficult to make.

One reason that I stay away from the topic of copyright issues is that I do not have enough knowledge and training in the realm of copyright law per se, and my observation on the topics is very sporadic and nonsystematic. But in the end, fans have to deal with the issue of copyrights, in various forms and in various occasions no matter whether they want to or not. Some etiquette codes in the fandom are related to a degree with the copyright issue, in the reason of staying away from trouble, including for example: stay low profile, stay away from the traditional print media, do not adapt a piece of fan fiction into original story with simply a name replacement,

avoid to show fan fiction to the producers or other people involved, etc. Another difficulty in discussion of copyright issues is that the detailed law and regulations are very different from country to country, from case to case. The special rule in China of communication and practice does give a special leeway to fansub groups and this rule does not seem to apply elsewhere. At the same time, not only the mediasphere that we are facing is rapidly shifting and changing, the legal response is also changing to quickly suit the changed condition. But we have to note an important aspect of the copyright issue: fans are not always the ones that break the copyright law, their ideas and inspirations are sometimes under a more severe possibility of appropriation and recycling for commercial benefit since their activities fall under a less legally sound position to fight back. The restrictions and regulations in the fandom are for the insiders only, with some of them even stricter than the copyright law operated outside the fandom. For example, Chinese fandom has a rule that all reposted stories need to have the permission from the original author, and this permission should be posted together with the reposted story. The author of the story has the ultimate right to call back all reposts if s/he is no longer satisfied with the quality of the story or for any other reasons. These restrictions, in some way, prevent foremost the fan products from going too public. But they can never prevent the fans' right being infringed once insiders or outsiders infringe the etiquette.

Both the legal debate and the cultural debate of Chinese fandom is still lacking in academia, even though people are starting to notice these issues in the public. At least in the fandom, fan art producers are constantly facing the challenge that their art works are used outside the original context, without their permissions, for commercial profits in other realms, including, for example, that a piece of fan art is used without notification for a totally irrelevant paperback romance. How should such cases be solved and how should the law protect the creativity in the

grey zone remains a question for the law makers and for the critics. We are also facing the cases, such as the notorious YYets fansub groups selling portable hard disks online, with all of them full of film copies that are subbed by them. Such action definitely breaks the ethical code for fansubs and all fan products. But it further breaks the copyright law, only that the YYets fansub group, like all of them, has never worked in a clearly legal realm. We still need to deal with the issue of fan activities, not only because it is problematic legally, but because it is so important and central to people's daily experience right now. After all, fan culture is, in a sense, the intertextual network itself.

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<<http://bbs.tianya.cn/m/post-funinfo-3249601-1.shtml>>.

APPENDIX

Due to the instability of online postings, and for the convenience of my audience, for the bulk quotations translated from Chinese, I provide the original texts in Chinese below. I number the quotations according to the order that they appear in the dissertation. Following the brief information (name of the author and the title of the quoted paragraph, if it has a title) about the quotations, I give the page number and the footnote number of the quoted paragraphs in this dissertation.

1. Shi Zhecun 施蛰存. “Shi Xiu” 石秀.

P 25. Footnote 10.

石秀定睛对她望着。唔，真不愧是个美人。但不知道从你肌肤的裂缝里，冒射出鲜血来，究竟奇丽到如何程度呢。你说我调戏你，其实还不止是调戏你，我简直是超于海和尚以上的爱恋着你呢。对于这样热爱着你的人，你难道还吝啬着性命，不显呈你的最最艳丽的色相给我看看么？

……杨雄一步向前，把尖刀只一旋，先拉出了一个舌头。鲜血从两片薄薄的嘴唇间直洒出来……石秀一一的看着，每剜一刀，只觉得一阵爽快。

2. Alanruojia 阿兰若伽. “Thousands of Mountain Passes” 千山渡.

Pp 25-26. Footnote 11.

刀锋刺入人身体时的感觉，原来与屠猪宰羊并没有什么两样。

鲜血自颈动脉急喷而出，海和尚的躯体慢慢软瘫下来，渐渐地没了气息。

石秀把短刀丢在一边，动手剥去两个和尚的衣服。

此时的他，已不再是杨家肉铺里逢人三分笑和气生财的小伙计，更不是蓟州街头路见不平拔刀相助的拼命三郎，石秀只觉得自己的灵魂已经彻底沦陷，化身成了一名凶残暴戾的杀人凶手。

这些年来漂泊江湖，架是没少打，但若说动刀杀人，还是破天荒头一遭，就像那晚与杨雄的亲密接触，此前再无经验可供参照应对。

杀人偿命，欠债还钱，何况还是处心积虑的谋杀，若是被人发现扭送到官府，自己定无生还之理。

哥哥身为府衙节级兼行刑刽子，若是由他来送自己最后一程，也该是件有趣的事吧。

3. Written by Fengxishenlei 风息神泪, Painted by Yanyi 言一. “Be a Dragon” 为龙.

P 147. Footnote 52.

王耀：麒麟，你是来带我走的吗？

——尚不是你归去的时候。你有天命在身，自当千秋万代，你会活得跟这世界一样长久。

（被背叛，被伤害，被夺去无数东西……这满是战争的世界……）

王耀：千秋万代？不，我活得很久了……眼下我还能做什么。我放弃了……

——不行。你生而为龙，即使一朝折断掌牙，拔裂鳞片，瞎目断爪，坠入浅滩，龙依然是龙。

王耀：你的愿望？

——愿我有生之日，得见您君临天下。

4. Fengxishenlei 风息神泪. “Afterword” 卷末.

Pp 154-155. Footnote 54.

一点都不愉快，无论是做这个本子的过程，还是翻阅近代史的时候。累，麻烦事一堆。而且更重要的，总有不可抑的愤恨在胸中翻滚，总有一句话在问。

那些他遭受的苦难要如何讨还，那些他受伤的血，血，血，血，要怎样洗刷。

最终还是都化成了笔下尽量轻描淡写的过场。嗯。最终。

画面上的调侃和嘲笑都是出于善意，我们只擅长这种方式而已。

被说成大中华思想也没关系，被当作民族主义也没所谓，对于我们这种愚蠢行为的嘲弄，字典里有无数语言组合可以为你们提供。

但我只知道，若不是由着心底这份爱意，我们不会出现在这里。

我知道他活得太久，所有语言可描绘的美丽与丑恶，他都必已经历过。

所以，这本无趣的短页，是我们唯一可以致他的情书。

并在此祈望着。

属于他的一切希望终如所愿，世间一切美好终归他手。

我们必将消散，区区几十年的时间，在这个人几千年甚至更长的生命里，只是尘微。

但是，直到闭眼永眠的那天，我愿为他此生骨血肝脑涂地。

若有下一次转世，以及再次的，再再次的，重生的时间里，依旧希望着，能生于此处。

并且无数次的，睁开眼初次面对这世间时，还是可以看到同样的语言，同样的肤色，音律依旧的夜空。

而他依然挺直了脊梁，伫立于此天地之间。

5. maizi0522.

P 208. Footnote 72.

这篇文让人看的异常沉重，看到楼主发的文继续往下看了，有一种透不过气的感觉，大概是作为在男权社会的第二性别的感同身受（别给我提男女平等，等女性能占领一半的高阶政府部门再说平等），但这个世界更可悲，完全不被当成人类的一个性别，外界因为那些有权利的人的刻意诱导对实际状况一无所知，别人以为是保护，其实是隔离软禁，人生没有选择，道路注定，连驾照都不允许有，其实更让人悲哀的是现在很多女人羡慕这种生活，在有选择的情况下，不过这也是在掌权性别的刻意诱导下女性觉得自己最应该最美好的品质是温柔顺从家庭生儿育女，突然觉得胸很闷，哎

6. bellovin.

P 209. Footnote 73.

这篇文让人不禁思考现在的平等至少法律上的平等是多么的得来不易！能思考的地方太多了！……选择什么样的生活关乎个人，但选择的权利是如此珍贵！

7. dome. *Favilla Mundi* 世界之灰.

Pp 232-233. Footnote 83.

圣母教堂的外墙千疮百孔，所有偶像崇拜嫌疑的的雕饰全被切削下来，像一张满是疤痕的脸，五官都残缺不全。他在墓碑的丛林间磕磕绊绊地走着，直到尽头，一下子就看见了那里站着的人。是的，他总是站在那里，一直站在那里，像一个雕像，肩上落满了雪，和死者站在一起；不，当他站在那儿的时候，这个地方就再也没有生或死的界限了。不可消灭的谴责，折磨，渴求，狂喜，在哪里都一样，像岩浆一样永远地喷涌着。他几乎是用尽了最后的力气向他伸出手去。

莱涅转过头，脸孔显得很憔悴，而看到他时就更加惊恐。卡尔洛夫走近时，他禁不住向后退，举起手挡在面前，觉得自己会被他狠狠甩一耳光。卡尔洛夫还没意识到，那是他看见自己的模样所致。那简直完全是个疯子。

“你——”他刚吐出一个字，就被卡尔洛夫掀在石墙上，藤蔓的枯枝发出簇簇断裂的声音，刮刺着他们的脸和头发。他的胳膊勒着他，他想挪动身体但是动弹不得。“这回连你也要抛弃我吗？”卡尔洛夫绝望地吼道，“吻我吧，我快要死了！”

8. Nianguren 念故人.

Pp 233-234. Footnote 84.

概括说来，世界之灰远不只是讲述了两主角的深刻的爱恨纠缠（像绝大多数耽美小说，背景什么的都是陪衬），而是生动展示了16世纪的德意志，在宗教改革一触即发的前夕和当中，教士、世俗贵族、改革者们和普通百姓等各个阶层所持有的忧虑、困顿、希望、痛苦和疑虑。两位主角作为旧秩序的捍卫者与新世界的缔造者，站在了这个暗潮汹涌的年代的对立面。

9. Yubidanqing 御笔丹青.

P 234. Footnote 85.

作者本身是信奉天主教的，她对于教会历史的了解给我们构造了一个充满魅力的教会世界，小攻与小受之间简单对话加上教会语言的点缀，给人一种特有的语言美感，让人能不由自主地静下心来揣摩这些话语里的所包含的真谛。

10. Beijing Comrade 北京同志. *Beijing Story* 北京故事.

Pp 249-250. Footnote 95.

他白色的衣服上蘸满了血迹，连脸上都斑斑血痕。我惊得一句话也说不出……

“简直是法西斯，是畜生！”他愤愤然地骂着。

“你怎么了？”我已经傻了。

“我没事的。”他边看看自己的衣服边说：“都是别人的血！”

听到这话，我感觉自己已是头晕目眩……

他是从“北河”走回来的，他不停地向我讲述所发生的一切：

“第一次打枪的时候，所有人都往后跑，我也趴在地上，枪停了以后，我看见前门一个人没有动，就去拽他，可我抓了一手的血……我身边有个女孩，我想拉她走，可她吓得呆在那里不动，这时又打枪了，我扑到她身上，将她压在下面……”

随着蓝宇的讲述，我的脑子里也随之是一幅幅血淋淋的画面。我看著他……我真难以想像，顺从、文雅、多情的他居然在枪林弹雨中去保护别人。

虽然紧张了一夜，可我们仍兴奋地睡不著。他躺在我怀里：

“我还想我会死呢，见不到你了。”他说。

“哼！你也真够自私的，我差点就去了‘大前门’，就是你不死恐怕我也得死了！”

“你真的这么……喜欢我？”他的‘喜欢’二字说得很轻，象是羞于出口的样子。

“我恨你！想杀了你！”……

11. Momo 脉脉. *Diverged Roads* 歧路.

Pp 256-257. Footnote 96.

他一边看，想的是很小的时候跟着父母回祖父家过年。那是在离家不远的一个小城市，祖母很能干，一个人张罗一桌子菜，然后会在饭后喂自己吃一碗酒酿年糕，上面卧着一个双黄糖心蛋。他小时候一定要加很多很多的糖，把那个鸡蛋挑破，只吃蛋白。

那股甜味忽然在口舌间活了过来，顾云声又想起不久前江天留下来的那个亲吻和拥抱，看了看戒指，还是在手边的，依然亲密地挨在一起。

他打电话叫送餐，问有没有酒酿年糕，餐厅的服务生为难半天，直说，我们这里有意大利进口的冰淇淋和新鲜的提拉米苏，热带水果拼盘，还有芒果布丁蓝莓派，苹果塔和巧克力慕斯，您看有没有想吃的。

12. Momo 脉脉. Diverged Roads 歧路.

P 259. Footnote 97.

顾云声觉得堵得难过，说不出话来，又几乎在下一刻说“求求你还是回你外公身边结婚生子吧”，但是夜色下江天的眼睛里有水光，这点光又像一支箭，当胸穿过，把他钉牢了，心甘情愿就此再不回头永不脱身。

他索性闭上眼睛，车子又开动了，模模糊糊地，顾云声想起才过去不久的这个笑语满堂的大家庭，觥筹交错之中的温暖，老人的笑脸，孩子软绵绵的身体，永不到头的幸福时光；而这些景象又在瞬间改变了，变成了第一次跑去 T 市找江天的那次，那个在 11 路公交车上的下午，那瓦蓝的天空，雪白的云，浓郁的树影疾速划过泛着点点金光的柏油马路，身边安然熟睡的人，最初在脑海中闪现的一生一世。

原来这就是他们两个人的路，尽管幸福走到头之后，可能只剩下彼此。

VITA

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