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Time Travel (*chuanyue*) Romances in Chinese Cyberspace



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Abstract

The recent few decades have witnessed a boom of online literature in mainland China. This thesis explores the subgenre of time travel (*chuanyue*) romance, a most celebrated category of Chinese online fiction that emerged in the mid-2000s. By analysing a selected corpus of time travel romances and the internet-based fan communities developed around them, this thesis probes how the desires and anxieties of their predominantly female readership find expressions in these works and how a microcosm of contemporary Chinese society unfolds in these worlds of fantasy. While the (female) protagonists may time travel to China's imperial past, to the Sino-Japanese war, to a dystopia future, or to an imaginary Otherland, the stories are deeply anchored in the complex political and social landscapes of contemporary China. Taking the dual role of what Henry Jenkins called "aca-fan" (both an academic and a fan), I inquire into this rich archive of imaginations, uncovering the themes of feminist consciousness, queerness, social mobility, nationalism, developmentalism, and posthumanism. My central argument is that web time travel romances make "hidden" aspects of contemporary Chinese society visible. The "hidden" refers not only to "serious" social issues which are often neglected in presumably "frivolous" romantic tales, but also to realms beyond ordinary perceptions, such as online games and imagined books. The time travel genre permits female netizens to transcend their real-life experiences, posing serious challenges to social norms, discipline, and hegemonic power. By constructing emancipatory female subjects, fans have also created and advanced their desired and idealized selves, traversing heteropatriarchy, the western-centric global order, and the anthropocentric framework.

Lay Summary

This thesis offers an interdisciplinary investigation into one of the most popular genres of contemporary Chinese online literature—time travel romance novels. I select the cases from Jinjiang Literary City (晋江文学城), the largest literary website for female-oriented online literature, and most of them are published between the mid-2000s to the present period. This thesis examines not only the online texts, but also readers' comments and opinions from other digital platforms, connecting them with the broader socio-political context. The genre is analyzed through four major thematic lenses, namely (female) body constructions reflecting an emerging feminist consciousness, social mobility and middle-class women, developmentalism, and nationalism.

This thesis argues that time travel romances shed light on “hidden” aspects of contemporary Chinese society. The term “hidden” is used metaphorically with various meanings. Firstly, it refers to the marginalized or invisible female-focused expressions that were treated as trivial romantic tales and disregarded in serious discussions. Secondly, it encompasses realms beyond the real-life experiences of ordinary people, such as venturing into ten subworlds with different bodies and identities. These narratives are often perceived as apolitical. By bringing these hidden aspects to the forefront, this thesis directs our attention to not only the individual desires of the netizens, but also the socio-political significance of the genre.

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Introduction

The last few decades have witnessed a boom of online literature in mainland China. By the mid of 2022, the total size of China's internet users was 1,051 million, while the number of readers of Chinese online literature reached 493 million, taking up almost half of the whole netizens.¹ Notably, *wangluo xiaoshuo* (web novels) dominate the online literary sphere.² Among numerous genres of web novels, *chuanyue* (time travel) romance stands out as one of the most celebrated categories in this burgeoning area. Featuring travels to the past, future, or a parallel universe, online time travel romances transcend boundaries of linear timelines and physical spaces and enrich the repertoire of time-honoured fantastic fiction in China's literary history. More significantly, time travellers have modern knowledge, memories, and sometimes "golden fingers" like *kongjian* (extra spaces for storage) and *lingquan* (water that can cure diseases), endowing them with extreme powers to become brilliant in different space-times, which hits the readers' most direct point of enjoyment.³ As a popular trope, time travel (romance) thus functions as a useful and commonly-used instrument for the fans to fulfil their desires for both individual improvements such as body perfection and climbing the social ladder, and more broad aspirations like national development. This thesis will explore the genre of time travel romance in a thorough way.

¹ CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Centre), *The 50th Statistic Report on China's Internet Development*, <https://www.cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/202212/P020221209344717199824.pdf>, 2022.

² Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, *Wangluo wenxue xinyufa* 网络文学新语法 [New grammars of internet literature] (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chubanshe, 2021), 96.

³ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Wang Yusu 王玉王 eds. *Pobishu: Wangluo wenhua guanjianci* 破壁书: 网络文化关键词 [A book to break down barriers: Keywords of Chinese internet culture] (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2018), 263.

Research Background and Purpose

Time travel as a genre has a long history both in and outside China. In China, time travel stories date back to the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) and often depict two types of experiences. One type mainly deals with time, while the other concerns traveling through different spaces.⁴ A typical example of the former is the story of a woodcutter named Wang Zhi 王质. He is fascinated by two fairies playing chess when he goes to the mountains to cut firewood. When the two fairies finish their chess game, Wang finds that his axe has already rotted. The sharp contrast between real time and mendacious time, as Pan Hao argues, expresses the intellectuals' lament over the transience of life and time.⁵ Tao Yuanming's 陶渊明 (352 or 365–427) *Taohua Yuanji* 桃花源记 (The Peach Blossom Spring) exemplifies the second type. It tells a story in which a fisherman from Wuling 武陵, after walking across a peach grove, suddenly travels to a heaven-like place. However, when the fisherman tries to find the place for the second time, he gets lost and can never find it. As Li Yuping comments, this type often suggests the authors' discontent with reality and their desire for a peaceful and joyful life.⁶

In English literature, time travel narratives start from travelling through spaces. It starts with utopian narratives, among which H.G Well's *The Time Machine* (1895) stands as a monumental piece. David Wittenberg argues that time travel is often featured as a complementary tool in the age of utopia (around 1880s to early 1900s), meeting certain aesthetic and theoretical requirements that correspond to the evolutionary theory of Darwinism.⁷ Since Einstein's theory of

⁴ Li Yuping 李玉萍, *Wangluo chuanyue xiaoshuo gailun* 网络穿越小说概论 [An introduction of online time travel novels] (Tianjin: Nankai university press, 2011), 17-18.

⁵ Pan Hao 潘皓, "Wenxue zuopin zhong de 'chuanyue shikong' muti," 文学作品中的“穿越时空”母题 [The motif of time-travel in literary works], *Qingnian wenxue* 青年文学 2010 no.14: 121.

⁶ Li, *Wangluo chuanyue xiaoshuo gailun*, 18.

⁷ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel : The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), 30.

relativity gained popularity in the 1920s, time travel fictions have developed a penchant for “the multiplication or recombination of narrative lines and worlds.”⁸ The relativity of physics gave rise to new plots in time travel literature, such as temporal displacement or cancelation, physical return to one’s past or future, and simultaneous travel through parallel worlds.

In the field of Chinese popular literature, time travel romances began to gain their currency around the early 1990s. The forerunners include Xi Juan’s 席绢 *Jiaocuo Shiguang de Ailian* 交错时光的爱恋 (Love that Crosses the Time, 1993) and Huang Yi’s 黄易 *Xun Qin Ji* 寻秦记 (Discover the Qin Dynasty, 1997). With the development of internet, the genre began to boost in online platforms.

This thesis focuses on the genre of online time travel romances, which rose to fame between 2004 and 2006, with the wide popularity of *qingchuanwen* (stories in which the female protagonist travels back to the Qing dynasty).⁹ After 2007, following the remarkable success of *Chongsheng zhi Mingliu Juxing* 重生之名流巨星 (To Become a Superstar after Rebirth, 2009), the subgenre of *chongsheng* (rebirth) took the place of *qingchuanwen* and embarked on a journey to prosperity for years.¹⁰ After the “Cleaning the Internet 2014 Movement”¹¹ that claims to prohibit any pornographic contents and “messages that distort party and national history,” subgenres with newly invented forms and structures such as *chuanshu* (travel to books)¹² and *kuaichuan* (quick time travel)¹³ started to prevail. Online literature also sees synthesis between time travel and other subgenres like

⁸ Wittenberg, *Time Travel*, 31.

⁹ There are three pioneering novels in *qingchuanwen* and they are called three mountains in the genre: Jinzi’s 金子 *Menghui daqing* 梦回大清 [Go back to the Qing Dynasty in dreams, 2004], Tonghua’s 桐华 *Bubu jingxin* 步步惊心 [Step by step, 2006], and Wanqing Fengjing’s 晚晴风景 *Yaohua* 瑶华 [Yaohua, 2006].

¹⁰ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Wang Yusu 王玉王 eds. *Pobishu: Wangluo wenhua guanjianci* 破壁书：网络文化关键词 [A book to break down barriers: Keywords of Chinese internet culture] (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2018), 269.

¹¹ See <https://www.shdf.gov.cn/shdf/contents/4483/200186.html>.

¹² Stories in which the protagonist travels to a novel/book.

¹³ Stories in which the protagonist travels to a series of different time-spaces. Chapter 1 will offer a more detailed analysis of this subgenre.

zhaidou (domestic fights) and *zhongtian* (farming), creating a more complex picture of the field.¹⁴ Moreover, time travel romances benefit from the multi-media environment of contemporary China. With the phenomenal success of several TV drama adaptations, “time travel” or “time travel romance” came to stand symptomatically for online literature.¹⁵

The immense popularity of time travel romances begs questions concerning both literature and contemporary Chinese society: How do the netizens (mostly females) express their desires, anxieties, and ideals through time travel stories? In what ways does online literature reflect the social, political, and cultural landscapes of contemporary China? To be specific, how do these works convey new ideas about the construction of (female) subjectivities, the relationships between individual agents and institutionalized powers, global politics and cyber-based patriotism, and new relationships between human and non-human? Moreover, does time travel permit imaginations that surpass our daily life experiences and perceptions? Finally, how do the thriving cyberspace, expanding commercialization, and state censorship shape the production, consumption, and circulation of online cultural products?

In answering these questions, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary analysis of online time travel romances. It inquiries into not only online texts, but also internet-based fan communities constructed around them, as well as their relations to the broader sociocultural context. A growing literature has discussed how technology and media innovation have propelled a paradigm shift in web fiction. The formation of online literary communities based on shared interests and desires also spurs relatively formulaic patterns .¹⁶ Nevertheless, this thesis

¹⁴ Stories that usually focuses on the family issues and the mundane life of ordinary peoples.

¹⁵ Gao Hanning 高寒凝, *Romandike 2.0: “Nǚxingxiang” wangluo wenhuazhong de qinmi guanxi* 罗曼蒂克 2.0: “女性向”网络文化中的亲密关系 [Romantic 2.0: Intimate relationships in “female-oriented” internet cultures], (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenlian Chubanshe, 2022), 104, footnote 2.

¹⁶ For example, the formulaic pattern of *qingchuan wen* usually sees a modern woman travels back to the Qing dynasty (usually during the Kangxi period) and falls in love with several noble males (usually emperor Kangxi’s sons).

intends to focus on what are hidden behind the established patterns, since when looking at the novels and readers' comments, fans still prioritize the works' contents and their social implications over experimentation with internet-inspired new forms, structures, and languages.

By analysing a selected corpus of time travel romances and fan communities, I argue that web time travel romances make hidden aspects of contemporary Chinese society visible. As a symbolic metaphor, I use the term in a broad sense. Basically, the hidden first refers to the female-focused voices, feelings, and imaginations that were marginalized or even invisible in the public discourse surrounding social-political events. Their expressions were often dismissed as “frivolous” romantic tales and excluded from serious debates. Secondly, it points to realms beyond netizens' real-life experiences, such as travelling to ten sub-worlds with different bodies and identities,¹⁷ and fighting with zombies affected by alien virus.¹⁸ They are also always perceived as lacking political intentions. However, by revealing the hidden aspects, this thesis orients our focus on the socio-political potency of the genre.

Deeply anchored in the complex political and social landscapes of contemporary China, the genre tackles multifarious social concerns, ranging from the individual body to the grand-sounding China dream. Uncovering the themes of feminist consciousness, queerness, social mobility, nationalism, developmentalism and posthumanism, this thesis on the one hand explores issues in relation to an ever-growing consciousness of “individualism” and “an obsession with China.” On the other hand, the time travel genre permits female netizens to expand their imaginations, posing serious challenges to social norms, discipline, and hegemonic power. By constructing emancipatory female subjects like “women with no fixed natural bodies,” “self-enterprising middle-class

¹⁷ Please see later in Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Please see later in Chapter 3.

women,” “female instructors of aborigines in a barbarian land,” and “a nationalist witness of the Sino-Japanese War,” fans have also created and advanced their desired and idealized selves, traversing heteropatriarchy, the western-centric global order, and the anthropocentric framework.

This introduction first looks at how previous studies have approached contemporary Chinese online literature and the genre of time travel romances. It then introduces the methodology of the thesis and explain the reasons for my selection of primary sources. The last part of this chapter introduces the structure of the thesis.

Review of Literature

Recent years witness a boom in studies on online literature. Some of the studies underline its shared traits and potentials, concentrating on the major trends within the entire field. Some others pay attention to certain genres or certain group of participants, offering more in-depth readings. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of online time travel romances, I will first review how recent scholarship discusses contemporary Chinese online literature and how my thesis will shed some new light on this vibrant field. Then, I will examine existing studies on this particular genre and identifies gaps my study will fill.

Recent Scholarship on Online Literature

Chinese online literature is neither a simple continuation of popular literature circulated around 1990s and early 2000s, nor does it focus merely on technical experiments of hypertexts and multi-media texts.¹⁹ As mentioned above, its predominant form is commercialized genre fiction. To be specific, the production

¹⁹ Li Yangquan 黎扬全, *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yu xūnǐ shēngcún tīyàn* 中国网络文学与虚拟生存体验 [Chinese internet literature and virtual living experience] (Beijing: China social sciences press, 2021), 3.

mechanism of online literature is the so-called “VIP pay-per-view reading system,” in which readers pay to become VIPs to have access to the latest updates of a serialized novel.²⁰ This mechanism applies the logic of both consumer economy and the internet as a form of media, creating a profitable commercial and literary model. Chinese internet literature fits into the economic pattern of UGC (User Generated Content), or a “fan economy”²¹ in which the fans are integral in the process of production, consumption, and dissemination of literary works. That is to say, the fans can also be labelled as “prosumers” in this literary field. Moreover, online genre fictions are desire-oriented, and the fans consume these novels mainly for *shuang* (pleasure or enjoyment). These works thus follow the pattern of *shuangwen* (works for pleasure).²² This reading of Chinese online literature wins broad recognition not only within academia, but also among the founders of major literary websites.²³

Based on this understanding, it is agreed that media innovation plays a decisive role in shaping today’s online literature. As McLuhan’s famed saying goes, “Media is the message.”²⁴ This section will firstly examine the recent scholarship, focusing on the determining influences of media innovation. It will then underline how this thesis brings new light to the field of online literature.

Michel Hockx’s *Internet Literature in China* (2015) is one of the pioneering book-length studies on how internet traverses boundaries in post socialist China.

²⁰ This VIP pay-per-view reading system was firstly introduced by the online literary website “Qidian” 起点 (Starting Point) in 2003. It became extremely successful and was later adopted by other major literary websites like “Jinjiang Wenxuecheng” 晋江文学城 (Jinjiang Literary City) and “Xiaoxiang” 潇湘. Most of the online fictions are serialized, and usually the first few chapters of a fiction are free, and after around 20 free chapters, the readers need to pay to become VIPs before they can be accessed to the later chapters of the novel.

²¹ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, *Wangluo shidai de wenxue yindu* 网络时代的文学引渡 [Literary extradition in the age of internet] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 127.

²² Shao, *Wangluo wenxue xinyufa* 网络文学新语法 [New grammar of internet literature], 96.

²³ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱 eds, *Chuangshizhe shuo: Wangluo wenxue wangzhan chuangshiren fangtanlu* 创始者说：网络文学网站创始人访谈录 [What the founders say: Interviews of founders of literary websites] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2020). <https://d.dedao.cn/EhYbaEeOkasb33NG>.

²⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2013 firstly published in 1964), 6.

He aims to “tell its readers what Chinese internet literature is, how it challenges literary conventions and hierarchies, and how it operates within the specific context of the PRC’s publishing system.”²⁵ By offering a detailed exploration of internet literature in China, Hockx’s book emphasizes literary innovation generated by the development of new media technologies, and how internet literature challenges the established publishing system and literary consensus.

While Hockx’s book offers a detailed research on how internet literature influences the print publishing industry, Jin Feng’s study of web romances is an “in-depth research on the effects of technology and new media on literature and culture.”²⁶ Emphasizing the profound influence of media innovation, Feng adopts an audience-focused approach, with an aim to “examine both the narrative patterns and ideologies of Chinese popular literature” in the multi-media environment, as well as “the social power that the Internet engenders in contemporary China.”²⁷

Echoing Feng in exploring the multi-media context around online literature, Heather Inwood considers the genre of *wangyou xiaoshuo* (web-game fiction) “on the level of the medium rather than a specific text.”²⁸ As she explains, the genre can be interpreted as an example of transmedia storytelling by incorporating the experience of game-playing into “the medium of narrative fiction” and “remediating the interactive, player-controlled medium of games into the non-interactive medium of author-controlled linear text.”²⁹ According to Inwoods’ observation, most of web-game fictions feature upgrades of the hero in improvements of power and accumulation of wealth and weapons, portraying the hero as the ultimate champion of the game. In this sense, web game fictions share

²⁵ Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

²⁶ Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ Heather Inwood, “What’s in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web-Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction,” *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 2014, no.11: 11. 6-30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

an important structure with the MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) in “linear ascent through increasingly difficult levels of experience or gameplay.”³⁰ In doing so, web-game fiction represents the desires of netizens who are willing to control their own stories while in reality rules and parameters are beyond the control of any individual.³¹

Inwood’s reading of the transmedia nature of web-game fictions is reasserted in Chinese-language scholarship. Wang Yusu also underlines the close liaison between online literature and web games, as the readership of internet literature, growing up with the expansion of ACG (short for animations, comics, and games) culture, overlap to a large extent with web gamers.³² Consequently, Chinese online literature involves many elements and narrative structures introduced by web games. As Wang summarizes, linear advancement of the main protagonist, as mentioned by Inwood, is one of the most prominent features of early popular genre fictions. Yet a recent trend in internet literature is to design game-like worlds based on specific numbers and characters with “moe” elements.³³

Wang’s discovery is accompanied by a crucial paradigm shift around 2015, when Chinese online literature experienced a transformation from the so-called *chuantong wangwen* (traditional internet literature) to *erciyuan wangwen* (nijigen internet literature).³⁴ As Shao explains, the traditional internet literature bears obvious resemblances to the print popular literature around the 1990s and early

³⁰ Inwood, “What’s in a Game?,” 15.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

³² Inwood, “What’s in a Game?,” 8.

³³ Wang, *Bianma xinshijie* 编码新世界 [Coding the new world], 8. Here “moe” usually refers to fans’ strong affections toward characters and the characters’ alluring characteristics. See Azuma, *Otaku*, 36. This new style of internet literature follows the Japanese otaku culture since 1990s, whose participants develop a different consumption model from the past story lovers, and Azuma Hiroki names it as “database model.”³³ After decades’ development, the ACG culture has formed a large database composed of variant “moe” elements which is a shared and public one for the participants. Each “moe” element embraces certain meanings and refers to certain style of images or characteristics.

³⁴ Nijigen, にじげん. It not only refers to the two-dimensional world created by ACG culture, but also ACG fans and the subculture communities composed by ACG fans. It also means ACG related cultural industries. In a broader sense, it refers to various internet cultures that are affected by ACG. See Shao, Wang, *Pobishu* 破壁书 [A book to break down barriers], 12.

2000s such as Jin Yong's 金庸 martial arts (*wuxia*) novels and Qiong Yao's 琼瑶 romantic love stories. Concentrating on storytelling and a linear storyline, these online novels assert the significance of a complete storyline and construct the characters via plots and logical stories.

However, the nijigen internet literature, drawing heavily on the internet ACG culture especially online games, significantly transforms the landscape of Chinese online literature. As Wang suggests, media innovation generates new trends in online literature's narrative mode -- world setting is no longer just a premise of the narrative but has become an important part of it.³⁵ Moreover, characters are more independent compared to those produced by traditional internet literature, as they are based more on various "moe" elements than the original story, creating more opportunities for derivative works and fan-fictions.

Li Yangquan proposes a more encompassing concept of "virtual living experience," referring to the new type of mental structure, emotions, perceptions, and imaginations under the influence of digital media. These "virtual living experiences" also exert a multi-layered impact on Chinese internet literature. They not only enrich and complicate the contents, but also generate potentially new writing styles and imaginations for the web novels.³⁶

Seen from the studies mentioned above, web novels are intimately related to living experiences and practices in a digitalized society. However, the growing scholarly interest in media's influence on Chinese online literature as well as its paradigm shift, to some extent, privileges form (especially of the nijigen internet literature) over content and social context. My thesis aims to fill this gap. In analyzing a selected body of novels as well as readers' comments, it attempts to discover what are hidden behind the changing writing styles, forms, structures

³⁵ Wang, *Bianma xinshijie* 编码新世界 [Coding the new world], 8.

³⁶ Li, *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yu xūnì shēngcūn tīyān* 中国网络文学虚拟生存体验 [Chinese internet literature and virtual living experience], 32.

and established formulaic patterns as a result of media innovation, and how online literature can be treated as a dynamic microcosm of contemporary China's political and socio-economic realities.

Time Travel Romance

As noted above, Chinese time travel stories have been widely circulated via the internet following the popularity of *qingchuanwen* around 2006. Indeed, the genre has now become one of the most favored branches of Chinese online literature. In this section, I examine existing scholarship on time travel romances and how they continue to concentrate primarily on the traditional themes of romance and gender. I will then demonstrate how this thesis commits to a more multifaceted reading of the genre.

Jin Feng offers a pioneering examination of the genre in her audience-focused investigation of web romances. Through a meticulous study of two cases and the derivative multi-media works produced by fans,³⁷ Feng introduces the search for “Mr. Right” into time travel romances and unravels how these works and their fans produce the “intended hero.”³⁸ Feng argues that female netizens’ passion for creating perfect heroes displays little feminist consciousness,³⁹ yet by “producing and creating, imagining and envisioning,” these female fans are establishing “new forms to represent masculinity and femininity” and “have moved from being passive receptacles of patriarchal ideologies to active pursuers of their own welfare.”⁴⁰

³⁷ The two cases Feng studies are: Zouzou 邹邹’s *Qingchao jingji shiyong nan* 清朝经济适用男 [An economical and serviceable man in the Qing dynasty, 2009], <https://book.qidian.com/info/1347473/>; Guixin Zelian 关心则乱’s *Zhifou, zhifou, yingshi lüfei hongshou?* 知否, 知否, 应是绿肥红瘦? [The story of Minglan, 2010-12], <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=931329>.

³⁸ Feng, *Romancing the internet*, 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 164, 166.

Haoming Gong and Xin Yang adopt a similar attitude in their exploration of online time travel romances, asserting that the gendered desires of these narratives are “both transgressive and conservative.”⁴¹ Through a dissection of *Bubu Jingxin* 步步惊心 (Startling by Each Step, 2006) and *Taizifei Shengzhi Ji* 太子妃升职记 (Go Princess Go, 2012), they contend that time travel romances “evoke, revive, and aestheticize traditional values, aesthetics, and practices,” while simultaneously constructing “new discourses of gendered expressions.”⁴² For instance, *Bubu*, a typical representative of *qingchuanwen*, features a story in which a modern girl travels back to the Qing dynasty. However, the heroine fails to save the life of Yinsi 胤禩, the eighth son of the Kangxi Emperor 康熙, even though she already knew what would happen. Therefore, this novel can be read as a female fantasy in which a woman attempts to reshape history by using her knowledge and modern traits of freedom and equality.⁴³ Conversely, by telling the story of a modern heterosexual man named Zhang Peng who transforms into a princess via time travel, *Taizifei* utilizes transgender narratives and features to reconstruct gender and sexuality.

Through an examination of several works of *qingchuanwen*, Gao Hanning reveals that the female protagonists often time travel without their original bodies. This type of *hunchuan* (time travel of souls) accords with the virtual living experiences of netizens who experience their lives without a natural, unchangeable human body. Notably, Gao binds this tightly to romantic and gender issues. Gao views time travel romances as “a field for experimenting with romantic relationships” in which a young woman can transform into a man (like *Taizifei*), an old lady, or even an animal. In this sense, the genre is creating a

⁴¹ Haoming Gong and Xin Yang, *Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 80.

⁴² Gong and Yang, *Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture*, 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

gender revolution within online communities and seceding from stereotyped gender relationships.⁴⁴

As indicated in the studies mentioned above, time travel romances fit into a stereotyped impression which reads them mostly as a way to pursue “love” and to relate gender-based stories, an attitude also inflicted on female-dominated literary communities.⁴⁵ It is thus essential to introduce the concept of *nüxing xiang* (female-oriented) or *nüpin* (short for *nüsheng pindao*, channel for women). “Female-oriented” originates from the Japanese word “女性向け” (*jyosei muke*) and denotes products that are “facing and designed for women.” Within the context of popular culture, it can broadly be used to describe all products that meet women’s demands.⁴⁶ In the narrower community of Chinese online literature, “female-oriented” establishes an independent space that refuses male gaze. It refers to a trend of writing and consuming among (mostly) female netizens that aims to fulfil women’s desires and pursuits and employ more female-friendly languages.⁴⁷ In the realm of online literature, “channel for women” is a localized representation of “female-oriented literature.”

In the same way as time travel romances, “female-oriented” novels in literary websites have been regarded primarily as a venue for romantic expressions and gender experiments by scholars.⁴⁸ As both Shao and Li demonstrate, in male-oriented novels, male protagonists strive to realize their ambition of nation building and acquisition of political power through time travel, whereas “female-

⁴⁴ Gao, *Luomandike 2.0* 罗曼蒂克 2.0 [Romantic 2.0], 117.

⁴⁵ Li, *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yu xuni shengcun tiyan* 中国网络文学虚拟生存体验 [Chinese internet literature and virtual living experience], 227.

⁴⁶ Gao, *Luomandike 2.0* 罗曼蒂克 2.0 [Romantic 2.0], 12.

⁴⁷ Please see Xiao Yingxuan’s talk “*Nüxing xiang*” *yu wangluo shidai de nüxing wenxue shengchan* “女性向”与网络时代的女性文学生产 [“Female-oriented” and women literary productions in the age of internet], https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/E814cBP1_ZBMwTdYX2j9mA, 2023.

⁴⁸ Gao, *Luomandike 2.0* 罗曼蒂克 2.0 [Romantic 2.0], 104.

oriented” fiction tends to satisfy female travellers’ appetites for “love and romance.”⁴⁹

Moreover, Feng expresses her concern that as a result of being treated solely as “a women’s genre and a corpus of banal entertainment produced for female consumers,” web romances, including time travel romances, are continually marginalized in academia and are thus criticized for “failing to support literature’s state-promoted mission of nation-building and civic education,” and for “lacking revolutionary, anti-capitalist consciousness.”⁵⁰

However, through a detailed examination, this thesis provides a more comprehensive, nuanced scrutiny of the genre of online time travel romances and female-oriented communities. There are two key arguments to make in this regard. Firstly, romance and gender in the genre are inevitably explored extensively, yet they are closely interlinked with trendy discourses in a broader media environment and social context.⁵¹ Secondly, online time travel romances portray more than romantic stories and make hidden aspects of contemporary Chinese society visible. I endeavor to highlight the socio-political potency of the genre, which is not necessarily revolutionary or anti-capitalistic, but functions as an important vehicle for combining the consumerist, fan-based community with a developmental and nationalist consciousness.

Research Methods and Primary Cases

⁴⁹ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君, “Zai ‘yituobang’ li goujian ‘geren linglei xuanze’ huanxiang kongjian: Wangluo wenxue de yishi xingtai gongneng zhi yizhong” 在“异托邦”里构建“个人另类选择”幻象空间: 网络文学的意识形态功能之一 [Constructing a fantasy space of ‘individual, alternative Choice’ in a heterotopia: One of the ideological functions of internet literature], *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 2012, no.4: 16. Li Yangquan 黎扬全, “Wangluo chuanyue xiaoshuo: Puxi, YY yu sixiang beilun” 网络穿越小说: 谱系、YY 与思想悖论 [Online time travel novel: Structure, imagination and contrasting thoughts], *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 2015, no.12: 36.

⁵⁰ Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 8.

⁵¹ For example, early time travel romances align with the “left-over women” discourses widely circulated within social media around 2006. Please also see in Chapter 1.

As described in the previous section, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary investigation of online time travel romances. It presents close readings of both the novels, as well as the readers' comments, situating the texts not only in (mostly) female-oriented literary communities, but also in a broader socio-political context. In this regard, it draws on Henry Jenkins' methodology for studying popular cultures. In his ground-breaking work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins undertakes the dual role of both "an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture and certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of a community)." As an "aca-fan," he not only cites primary materials (essays delivered by diversified fans) in his research, but also participates passionately in online discussions.⁵²

More specifically, this thesis adopts Jenkin's methodology of "intervention analysis" and draws on the concept of "vernacular theory" proposed by Thomas McLaughlin who argues that fan-made magazines enable fans to "see through the strategies and understand the operations of the pop culture system itself." In so doing, they "become vernacular theorists, subjects who take up the work of dismantling the ideology they encounter in pop culture."⁵³ This reading asserts that the practitioners of "vernacular" activities are "natives" of popular cultures whose "vernacular" exercises and languages bear the characteristics of critical theory. In a similar vein, fans of online literature can be construed as "natives" of the internet literature field. Their practices and experiences bestow them with rich knowledge, endowing them with the capability of shaping and cultivating their "vernacular theories."⁵⁴

⁵² Cui Zairong 崔宰溶, "Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yanjiu de kunjing yu tupo" 中国网络文学研究的困境与突破 [Dilemma and Breakthrough in the Research of Internet Literature in China] (*Peking University*, 2011), 54.

⁵³ Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular* (Leuven: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 57.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, iii.

Nevertheless, both Jenkins and McLaughlin reject mere “native” accounts of popular culture. Instead, they agree that an individual’s position as a fan may generate an overt recognition of his/her studied subject; hence, “vernacular theories” complement those of an academic nature.⁵⁵ In this regard, whilst this thesis does not contain interviews and questionnaires, it shares significant similarities with ethnographic methodologies in its belief that “being there to observe people acting and interacting in the course of their everyday lives can yield more valid data about real-world social behavior than self-reports.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, “participant observation” is used because the central ethnographic method requires ethnographers to “perform a split self-positioning as both a cultural insider and participant” and “as an outside observer to transcribe details.”⁵⁷ More importantly, their aim is to produce “inscriptions of social life and social discourse” rather than value-neutral descriptions.⁵⁸

Therefore, based on six years of participation observation, I firstly select cases from (mostly) female-oriented literary communities. Notably, the selection criteria of the cases are mainly based on diverse agencies in the emerging landscape of internet literature: the readers, the commercial, the academic, and in some cases, the state. As will be shown in the following chapters, all of the chosen cases are popular among contemporary readers, as they are liked, discussed, and collected considerably according to the data shown in literary websites and other digital platforms. Many of them, due to their popularity, have been attracted to commercial capitals. They are either praised or recommended by editors or adapted to various forms of media products like TV dramas and animes. Moreover, some of them appeal to the academia and are regarded as

⁵⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 2013 firstly published in 1992), 6. McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, 6.

⁵⁶ Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan, “Introduction,” in *Approaches to Ethnography : Analysis and Representation in Participant Observation*, eds. Colin Jerolmack, and Shamus Khan (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2017), xi.

⁵⁷ Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 11.

⁵⁸ Robert M. Emerson et al., *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9.

representative or classic works of certain subgenres by scholars. Lastly, some cases have caught the special attention from the state, and they are either suppressed or praised by censorship.

Following textual analysis of these cases, I also collect writers' words and readers' comments on web novels from both literary websites and other related media platforms such as Weibo (microblog) and Douban. I then organize, paraphrase, and translate the languages of natives into those languages which are more rigorous and traditionally academic. The primary materials work in conjunction with critical analysis to depict how the vocabularies of online literary communities align with the infrastructure of contemporary Chinese society.

Primary Cases

In adopting the methodology of “aca-fan,” it is essential to identify a proper literary community that can offer not only a rich archive of original online novels, but also a wealth of responses from writers, fans, and editors, as well as commercial investors and government monitors. In this thesis, I draw my cases mainly from the “Jinjiang Literary Website” (晋江文学城) which is widely agreed as the largest literary website for female-oriented works. In the following section, I will firstly examine Jinjiang's operational mechanism, portraying how fans of online literature, commercialization investments and state censorship intertwine in the dynamics of internet literature. I will then expound on the factors that play a role in my selection of themes and cases.

According to Bingxin (one of the founders of Jinjiang), Jinjiang experienced “ungoverned growth (野蛮生长)” before 2003 when it was primarily driven by fans' “free love” because all the novels were voluntarily submitted by users. In 2008, Jinjiang accepted large-scale commercial investments from Shengda Corporation 盛大 and began to follow Qidian's VIP paid reading system. Based

on user-generated content, this system won Jinjiang not only numerous readers, but also considerable profits for both itself and the authors. It assisted Jinjiang in gathering and retaining a wealth of established writers producing high-quality works.

Other notable changes occurred around 2014. In 2015, China Reading Ltd., a subsidiary of Tencent, purchased Shengda Corporation and proposed new cooperation with Jinjiang. With the establishment of new subsidiaries such as Tencent Film Industry and Penguin Pictures, the scope of Tencent's business expanded to the fields of film and television investment, production, promotion and the distribution of dramas and variety shows, IP (Intellectual Property) authorization, and artist agency. This helped to establish “a pan-entertainment industry chain traversing through the internet cultural and creative industry” through a business model based on IP authorization.⁵⁹ More explicitly, after acquiring the intellectual property of internet literature, production corporations adapt original online novels into video games, manga, and dramas in order to earn profits. In this regard, Jinjiang is operating a dual model consisting of both a VIP paid system and IP operation. According to Bingxin, the success of the IP operation has given rise to a dramatic increase in the number of participants in the website.⁶⁰

Throughout the developmental trajectory of Jinjiang, its founders continue to highlight the importance of users. As Bingxin emphasizes, Jinjiang has been heavily praised for its user-friendly models, and its “classification/tag” searching system has been especially important in securing its popularity. As displayed on its home page (see figure 1), Jinjiang has eight main categories of works. Furthermore, it has created a complicated “hot word tag system” that collects and indexes the words used most frequently when searching for literary works (see

⁵⁹ Gao, *Luomandike 2.0* 罗曼蒂克 2.0 [Romantic 2.0], 67.

⁶⁰ Shao, Xiao eds., *Chuangshizhe shuo* 创始者说 [What the founders say], <https://d.dedao.cn/EhYbaEeOkasb33NG>.

figure 2). The combination of classification and tags makes it highly convenient for users to find novels that align with their interests.

Jinjiang is also noted for its reader-friendly and active communication system within its literary community, which is supported by a system of “scores and long comments.” As its new standards indicate, readers can score any novel on five levels (from -2 to 2) and can use flowers or bricks to convey their likes and dislikes.⁶¹ These bind readers closely to the website by empowering them to exert influence on the products and writers, as works with high scores receive more recommendation opportunities. Moreover, Jinjiang also designs a column specifically for readers to make lengthy comments on each work, encouraging closer relationships between readers and writers (see figure 3).

Furthermore, online literary communities are significantly shaped by government policies. As Gao explains, the early rise of online literature also benefits from the implementation of “Several Decisions of the State Council on the Entry of Non-public Capital into the Cultural Industry” (Decisions in short, 2005). According to the “Decisions,” non-public forms of capital are encouraged to enter the following fields:

“artistic performance groups, [...] internet service business, [...] cultural entertainment, art business, animation and online games, advertising, film and television series production and distribution, the use of technology development in broadcasting, cinemas and movie theatres, [...] distribution of books, newspapers and periodicals, distribution of audio and video products, packaging and decorative printing, etc.”⁶²

⁶¹ Jinjiang’s mark system, see <https://help.jjwxc.net/user/article/176>, 2023.

⁶² Gao, *Luomandike 2.0* 罗曼蒂克 2.0 [Romantic 2.0], 66.

The effective implementation of such “Decisions” paves the way for large-scale commercial investments in the field of internet literature and the proposal of “pan-entertainment” planning.

Political interventions of the field align closely with growing state censorship. Shao argues that the year 2014 stands as a crucial landmark for Chinese internet literature. In April 2014, the national office of “Eliminating Pornography and Suppressing Illegality” issued an announcement called “Guanyu Kaizhan Wangluo Yinhui Seqing Xinxu Zhuangxiang Zhili ‘Jingwang’ Xingdong de Tongzhi” 关于开展网络淫秽色情信息专项治理‘净网’行动的通知 (An Announcement about Erasing Online Obscene and Pornographic Information),⁶³ according to which not only pornographic contents should be prohibited, but also “messages that disseminate distorted party and national history” due to the potential harm they can inflict on the nation.⁶⁴ The announcement exerts a remarkable and far-reaching influence on online literary websites, including Jinjiang and Starting Point.

Strengthening state censorship not only means more administrative intrusions from the government in the realm of online literature,⁶⁵ but also stimulates self-censorship among both writers and readers. Notably, this generates an unwritten rule: “Do not describe any sexual behavior below the neck (脖子以下不能描述).”⁶⁶ This is widely diffused and accepted by the participants of Jinjiang and continues to work effectively within online literary fields.

⁶³ Please kindly see <https://www.shdf.gov.cn/shdf/contents/4483/200186.html>, 2014.

⁶⁴ Xinhuanet, *Yifa guanbi 133 ge chuanbo waiqu dangshi guoshi xinxi gongzhong zhanghao* 依法关闭 133 个传播歪曲党史国史信息公众账号 [Close 133 public accounts that spread distorted messages of party and national histories], <http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/shdf/>, 2014.

⁶⁵ Bingxin complains that after the issue of the announcement, “there are too many administrative apartments. Each apartment and each administrator holds different standards in estimating the novels. We (the literary websites) cannot influence the administration side, so we can only require the writers to follow the diverse and changing instructions.” Shao, Xiao eds., *Chuangshizhe shuo* 创始者说 [What the founders say], <https://d.dedao.cn/EhYbaEeOkasb33NG>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

In this regard, Jinjiang stands as an ideal example through which to illuminate the role of female netizens in the tension between market and censorship. Despite the crucial influence of marketization and state censorship, it is prosumers, especially readers, who occupy the focal position in constructing literary communities. According to data from Jinjiang, female users account for 91 percent of all website users, most of whom are aged between 18 and 35. Furthermore, the report states that 67 percent of users are based in first-tier cities and 10 percent live in developed countries such as the U.S., Australia, and Canada.⁶⁷ This aligns with findings of Feng who, through interviews with authors, readers, and administrators of Chinese online literature, depicts female prosumers of web romances as “young, urban, and well educated.”⁶⁸ This group overlaps to a large extent with the fans of idols and stars, as revealed in a report released by Weibo which states that women comprise up to 65 percent of consumers interested in fandom cultures, more than half of whom are born after 1995.⁶⁹ I observe that the construction of time travel romances hinges upon heated online discussions among these female netizens whose concerns about contemporary Chinese society principally engage with two major issues: the pursuit of individual interests and Chinese national development. As Jiaran Zheng points out, in their pursuit of individual benefits, contemporary young middle-class women in China focus on “careers, interpersonal relations, and individual development,” connecting closely with both gender and social mobility in current China.⁷⁰ Moreover, as mentioned above, this thesis aims to uncover the hidden aspects of contemporary Chinese society and entails socio-political potency. It thus makes references to the current social background of China, drawing attention to the national discourse of “China dream” and concentrates on

⁶⁷ About Jinjiang, see <https://www.jjwxc.net/aboutus/>, 2023.

⁶⁸ Feng, *Romancing the internet*, 13.

⁶⁹ Microblog 微博, 2022 *Weibo yule baipishu* 2022 微博娱乐白皮书 [The whitebook of entertainment in Weibo 2022] <https://ent.sina.cn/h5/2022weiboentbps.d.html>, 2023.

⁷⁰ Jiaren, Zheng, *New Feminism in China: Young Middle-Class Chinese Women in Shanghai* (Beijing: Foreign Language and Teaching Press 2016), xx.

developmentalism and nationalism. These two major concerns, regarding the “changing ideologies and mentalities” of today’s young Chinese woman, determine the themes and cases of this thesis.

Echoing the new global wave of digital feminism among the younger generation, Lixian Hou contends that Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo have given online activism among young women an enormous boost. Beginning with “Naked Chest against Domestic Violence (DV) 2012” which “featured with the radical body politics of nudity,” Chinese digital feminism peaked with “#MituInChina (the Chinese version of #MeToo movement)” in 2018, which opened a heated discussion on sexual harassment. The emphasis on the “body” substantively shapes the first chapter of this thesis. By selecting Bobo’s 波波 *Wan Qingsi* 绾青丝 (Coil up the Hair, 2006), Qidaojun’s 祈祷君 *Mulan Wu Zhangxiong* 木兰无长兄 (Mulan Has No Elder Brother, 2014), and Xianshi Tingyu’s 闲时听雨 *Dalao Dou Aiwo* 大佬都爱我 (All the Bosses Love Me, 2018), I explore changing body constructions in the genre and how they correspond to contemporary social phenomena.

Moreover, this female-led online activism underlines “personal issues and activism highlighting hypervisibility, connectivity, and individuality.”⁷¹ It purports to “politicize women’s private matters” and to “provoke public discussions and press the government for policy changes.”⁷² “Social mobility” and “work-family balance” have also become key buzzwords on social media. Following this trend, the second chapter delves into the discussions of gender and class presented in Guanxin Zeluan’s 关心则乱 *Zhifou Zhifou Yingshi Lüfei Hongshou* 知否知否，应是绿肥红瘦 (The Story of Minglan, 2010-2012). By concentrating on the female protagonist as a representative of contemporary

⁷¹ Lixian Hou, “Rewriting ‘The Personal is Political’: Young Women’s Digital Activism and New Feminist Politics in China,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no.3 (2020): 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 339.

middle-class woman, it examines in more detail the desires and concerns of fans of time travel romances.

Alongside gender-focused discussions, narratives of cyber-nationalism and China's national development project also gain immense popularity among female netizens. Nigel Inkster argues that China has focused on the national development project for more than a century to maintain "a sense of national self-esteem," ranging from the modernization of the state in the late Qing dynasty to the recent call for an informationized society through the development of the internet.⁷³ Echoing this social phenomenon, in the third chapter, I select Yujing Pengxiang's 御井烹香 *Mengxi Dalu* 萌系大陆 (A Cute Land, 2011) and Wushiling's 雾矢翎 *Moshi Chongsheng Zhi Jüedui Duchong* 末世重生之绝对独宠 (Rebirth in Apocalypse: Absolute and Exclusive Love, 2014) as my primary sources. By a close reading of the two novels, I explore the theme of national developmentalism and investigate how evolutionary developmental discourses, primarily led by the central government and intellectuals, are performed and reinvented in online time travel romances.

Always perceived as "masculine" and male-dominated, cyber nationalism in China is believed to integrate "right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics" as a means of disseminating ethno-nationalist and racist sentiments.⁷⁴ However, nation-building and state protection also play an important role in the daily activities of female netizens, of which the emergence of *little pink* (nationalist young women) functions as a typical example. Originating from a discussion forum on boys' love in Jinjiang, the term was named after the site's pink background and high percentage of female users. In 2008, overseas students or

⁷³ Nigel Inkster, "Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Freedom and Control," *Adelphi Series* 55, no.456 (2015): 22.

⁷⁴ Chenchen Zhang, "Right-wing Populism with Chinese Characteristics? Identity, Otherness and Global Imaginaries in Debating World Politics Online," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no.1 (2019): 88.

immigrants on the site began to express nationalist tendencies.⁷⁵ The group was later widely circulated within the public media and was considered “softer and more seductive” than male-dominated waves of nationalism.⁷⁶ Female-led nationalist narratives such as “little pink” remain understudied and online romances follow this trend. Based on such a social background, in the final chapter, taking Fengdiuzi’s 疯丢子 *Bainian Jiashu* 百年家书 (A Home Letter from A Hundred Years Ago, 2016) as an example, I seek to uncover this hidden nationalism in time travel romances through an examination of nationalist discourses in female-oriented literary communities. I also include state censorship in the analysis in order to facilitate a comparison with Chuiniuzhe 吹牛者’s *Lingao Qiming* 临高启明 (Enlighten Lingao, 2009 to now), a male-dominated example. In both cases, I examine the complex relationship between individual desires and collective nationalist discourses.

In exploring the themes and cases, it is of necessity to address the pressing problem of preserving the online materials due to their instability and temporality. As some of the cases will show, their contents have been blocked, revised, or deleted due to various reasons.⁷⁷ In order to preserve these materials, I firstly choose to download all the texts and reserve the snapshots and videos, trying to create an archive of my own. Moreover, I use the “wayback machine” to trace the internet history and restore the online storage.

In sum, hidden behind the overwhelming theme of “love and romance,” many of these aforementioned aspects remain underexplored. In the following, I will discuss these repressed points in more detailed way with cases that are all widely

⁷⁵ Wu Zhiyuan 吴志远, “Cong ‘quyuan miquan’ dao ‘aidou zhengzhi’: Qingshaonian wangluo minzuzhuyi de xingdong luoji” 从“趣缘迷群”到“爱豆政治”:青少年网络民族主义的行动逻辑 [From “funky fans group” to “idol politics”: The logic of youth online nationalism in action], *Dangdai qingnian yanjiu* 当代青年研究 2019, no.2: 19.

⁷⁶ Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, “Demystifying ‘Little Pink’: The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China,” *New Media & Society* 20, no.6 (2018): 2163.

⁷⁷ For example, the original text of the case *Chongsheng Zhi Juedui Duchong* in chapter 3 is blocked in Jinjiang. So I downloaded the novel from other websites.

circulated within the online literary communities and have an abundance of readers and comments.



Figure 1: Home page of Jinjiang (05/02/2023)



Figure 2: Tag system of Jinjiang (05/02/2023)

Figure 3: The column specifically for readers' long comments in Jinjiang

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Drawing upon the current online literary context which bears witness to the cooperation of political, commercial, and public factors, this thesis presents a detailed examination of the genre of online time travel romances. It includes four chapters that explore female-oriented online communities and the shielded pictures of contemporary Chinese society.

Chapter One explores the transformation of female bodies in Chinese cyberspace through an analysis of three time travel romance novels produced from 2006 to 2018. Whilst the earliest piece reiterates the stereotype of feminine submissiveness, later examples demonstrate evident ruptures from such traits. The trajectories of female bodies described in these works showcase a growing feminist consciousness among female netizens over the past two decades. Notably, the chapter investigates new forms of female bodies inspired by posthuman imaginations, which are always repressed by traditional readings of online romances.

Chapter Two firstly proposes the concept of “spatialization of class,” connecting it with time travel romances. It focuses on the subgenre of *zhaidou*, which normally features stories about domestic power struggles between characters (mostly women) in elite families in an ancient time. By investigating three forms of “domestic fights” depicted in the selected novel, I show how this genre portrays the feminine domestic sphere as a typical middle-class workplace in the contemporary Chinese labor market, an arena which has been governed by the logic of the privatization of power since the market reform and connects closely to the vogue of neoliberalist feminism in the female-dominated online space of the 2010s.

Chapters Three and Four transcend the traditional boundaries of gender and romance in romance fictions to examine the shielded political aspects in female-oriented web communities. Chapter Three explores two subgenres of time travel romance and traces the genealogy of developmentalism as an “extraordinary

powerful and pervasive ideology” in China starting from the late Qing era. The first subgenre *yishi dalu* (the other land) involves stories in which a modern woman travels to a different world and depicts her life with aborigines who are usually portrayed as half-human, half-beast. This genre, showing a barbarian context of “the other land,” reflects the combination of social Darwinism and colonial developmentalism proliferating in Chinese cyberspace. The second subgenre, *moshi* (apocalypse), which portrays life in apocalyptic settings, provides online representations of China’s shift towards sustainable development and its connection with new materialism.

In Chapter Four, I concentrate on a frequently discussed topic in online Chinese discourses, namely “nationalism.” Yet in the field of internet romance fictions, this remains a hidden topic. In this chapter, I therefore introduce and compare a noted male-oriented time travel novel to a highly praised nationalist time travel romance in Jinjiang. By examining the different strategies and methods adopted by the two pieces in expressing individual desires and collective nationalist ideology, I also analyze the contrasting treatment of the two works by the authorities.

Chapter One

From Queerness to Post-human Imagination: The Transformation of Female Body in Online Time Travel Romances

“Online space is gendered,”⁷⁹ as declared by Haoming Gong and Xin Yang, so is the genre of online time travel romance. Focusing on the female body in time travel romances, this chapter concerns primarily with identifying the feminist consciousness of fans and examines how online female bodies capture the concurrent socio-political context, together with the hidden pictures of Chinese society. I will analyze three exemplary time travel novels, namely, Bobo’s *波波 Wan Qingsi 绾青丝* (Coil up the Hair, 2006), Qidaojun’s *祈祷君 Mulan Wu Zhangxiong 木兰无长兄* (Mulan Has No Elder Brother, 2014), and Xianshi Tingyu’s *闲时听雨 Dalao Dou Aiwo 大佬都爱我* (All the Bosses Love Me, 2018).⁸⁰ I discuss the three novels in chronological order by their date of publication, in doing so to demonstrate not only how female bodies change and develop in the novels, but also how they are interlinked to feminist ideas and thoughts in connection to social events.

Due to the complexity, scope and vast numbers of online time travel romances, this chapter does not aim to provide a full understanding of the entire genre or all female internet users. Instead, by exploring the three exemplary novels, I attempt to map out a changing picture of feminist consciousness not only in the online community, but also in contemporary Chinese society. I have chosen the examples for three main reasons. Firstly, all the three pieces are widely disseminated and read by a large number of fans.⁸¹ Secondly, they are widely agreed as representative works of the time travel genre: *Wan Qingsi* is considered as one of the earliest classics in time travel romance stories;⁸² *Mulan* achieved the

⁷⁹ Gong and Yang, *Reconfiguring class, gender, ethnicity and ethics in Chinese internet culture*, 135.

⁸⁰ Later in this chapter, I will use *Mulan* as a shortcut for *Mulan Wu Zhangxiong*, and *Dalao* as a shortcut for *Dalao Dou Aiwo*.

⁸¹ In Jinjiang, Bobo’s *Wan qingsi* has been clicked almost 50,000,000 times and received more than 10,000 comments. Please kindly see <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=130145&chapterid=0>. *Mulan* receives more than 50,000 comments and got an overall mark of over one and a half billion marks. Please kindly see <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2214297>. And *Dalao* has over 66,000 comments and a mark more than one billion. Please kindly see <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3283072>.

⁸² Smilingsky, readers’ comments in Douban. Please kindly see <https://book.douban.com/subject/10480178/>.

third place in Sohu's ranking list of Chinese online fiction in 2015;⁸³ *Dalao* is highly recommended by both editors and readers, and was also selected as one of the representative novels in Jinjiang.⁸⁴ Apart from their immense popularity, the third reason is that they are closely associated with social events that hit the headline in the external of the texts. The development of digital media also contributes to uncovering shielded imaginations of body constructions that differ from traditional female bodies in romantic tales. I will detail them in later sections.

Before stepping into the online literary world, it is of necessity to offer a brief genealogy of body politics in Chinese literary history from a feminist perspective.⁸⁵ In traditional society, as suggested by Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue, women are the gender to be coerced and controlled.⁸⁶ For this reason, they are entangled within the patrilineal *jia* (family) and saddled with roles of *nü* (daughter), *fu* (wife) and *mu* (mother). Female bodies are fractured and objectified with abundant metaphors. For instance, women of beauty are compared to “flowers” and “jade” (*ruhua siyu*), while comely female eyebrows are analogous to mountains (*meiru yuanshan*). These body discourses not only indicate women's position as desired objects, but also underline men's rights for desire.

During the early twentieth century, when China was facing severe national problems, new feminist discourses emerged. It advocates the unleashing of female bodies from the previous physical and intellectual limitations such as foot-binding and lack of education. However, as Karl Gerth argues in his research on the image of consuming women since the late Qing, the purpose of women's

⁸³ Sohu, 2015 *Niandu zhongguo wangluo xiaoshuo paihangbang jiexiao* 2015 年度中国网络小说排行榜揭晓 [The ranking list of Chinese online fictions in 2015], <http://news.sohu.com/20160129/n436329863.shtml>, 2016.

⁸⁴ In Jinjiang, there are some different tags that can be attached to certain outstanding works. The book of *Dalao* is attached with two tags: the first of “Qiang” 强 (Strong) meaning that the work is strongly recommended by the editors and readers, and the second “Nian” 年 (Year) indicating that the work is one of the representatives of all the books published in that year.

⁸⁵ Due to the space limits, I only focus some representative scholarly claims and general trends here.

⁸⁶ Meng Yue 孟悦, and Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: Xiandai funü wenxue yanjiu* 浮出历史地表: 现代妇女文学研究 [Emerging from the surface: A study on contemporary women's literature] (Henan: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989), 2.

emancipation has been running under the focus of nation salvation. In other words, the seemingly liberated female bodies are mainly established to serve the nation. The “granting of intrinsic or inalienable rights of women,” as Karl Gerth points out, is rarely discussed and attained.⁸⁷

During the Mao period, slogans such as “Funü nengding banbiantian” (Women hold up half the sky) were widely circulated among the public. On the surface, women were endowed with equality with men. In essence, however, terms like *funü* (woman), *gongren* (worker), *qingnian* (youth), and *wuchan jieji* (proletariat), actually pertain to “a discursive constellation with modern state categories...under a Maoist inscription.”⁸⁸ They are hence treated in the same way as males under the control of a shared collective that belongs to the PRC. That is to say, during that period, women dismissed their “female” bodies and female individualities.

After the Cultural Revolution, the reform and opening policy stimulated a popular trend of consumerism, introducing new waves of Western feminism, such as the “écriture feminine” (feminine writing), into the Chinese literary field. Greatly inspired by these trends, new feminist writings tend to concentrate on “personal writings” and “body writings,” which pay attention to not only individual feelings, but also details of female sexual desire and self-appreciation of their bodies.⁸⁹ On the one hand, these body-based feminine writings are extolled as “path-breaking,” since they buttress free expressions of female sexual drive and initiate self-exploration of women. Consequently, they are believed to grant women with independent and unconstrained sexual subjectivities. However, on the other hand, critics claim that there are two negative implications. First,

⁸⁷ Karl Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 291.

⁸⁸ Tani E Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: *Funü*, *Guojia*, *Jiating* (Chinese Woman, Chinese State, Chinese Family),” in *Body, Subject & Power in China*, eds. Angela Zito and Tani E Barlow (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 254.

⁸⁹ There are many famous female writers who make a great contribution to “personal writings” and “body writings” since 1990s: Chen Ran 陈染 with her noted novel *Siren shenghuo* 私人生活 (Private life, 1996), Lin Bai’s 林白 *Yigeren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争 (An individual war, 1994), and Wei Hui’s 卫慧 *Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝 (Shanghai baby, 1999), etc.

these writings, with a central focus on personal and body experiences, are on the verge of losing social significance which literary works are encouraged to encompass.⁹⁰ Secondly, the sexual pictures of female bodies elaborated in these writings actually invite the erotic male gaze, which turns out to contaminate the feminist intentions of these works. These negative consequences, as Hu Peiping asserts, would also in turn be utilized by some writers to obtain benefits in the profit-oriented literary market.⁹¹

Drawing on the general overview of the female body in Chinese literary history, I bring into my enquiry the following questions: How does the online literature produce (if any) new narrative forms of the (female) body? What are the continuities and discontinuities between these new and the past constructions of the female body? How has the depiction of female bodies in online literature changed and developed over the past two decades? And finally, what are the connections between these fictitious female bodies and contemporary Chinese society? How do they incorporate the fans' gendered desires?

It is my observation that the online literature creates varied, or even contrasting archetypes of female bodies. They are symptomatic of the concurrent sociopolitical debates about the social lives of women that include the shielded aspects of gendered issues, implying a dynamic female-based community with growing feminist consciousness. The following section starts with one of the pioneering works of online time travel romance.

⁹⁰ Niu Xuezhi 牛学智, "'Wufa gaobie de shiji' yu nüxing huayu liqing: Nüxing zhuyi wenxue pipingjia Dai Jinhua" "无法告别的十九世纪" 与女性话语厘清——女性主义文学批评家戴锦华 [“The inextricable 19th century” and discourses of women: Feminist literary critic Dai Jinhua], *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 小说评论 2012 no.6: 205.

⁹¹ Hu Peiping 胡沛萍, “Shenti xiezu, cong zhuiqiu jiefang dao zouxiang duoluo: Dangdai wenxue zhong ‘shenti xiezu’ de shanbian” 身体写作：从追求解放到走向堕落--当代文学中“身体写作”的嬗变 [Body writing, from liberation to corruption: the transformation of “body writing” in contemporary literature], *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛 2007 no.2: 15.

1.1 *Wan Qingsi*: Marriage-oriented Body Perfection

Written by Li Ke 黎珂 (pseudonym as Bobo), a 30-year-old middle class woman, *Wan Qingsi* features a story in which a modern woman Ye Haihua 叶海花 travels to an ancient period and falls in love with several men. Similar to Li, Ye has also recently turned 30. As a pursuer of true love, she is purposely designed to have a corpulent figure. In Chapter 5, Ye traces her unsuccessful love experiences with several men, and concludes that her failed, bloated body is to blame. She complains: “(Men’s) love is filled with lies and sordid thoughts. Men are hypercritical about women’s face, figure, temperament, education, job, family background, and at least, fortune (爱情充满了谎言和欺骗, 充满了市侩和算计[...])男人挑剔你的长相、你的身材、你的谈吐气质, 计较你的学历、你的工作、你的家世背景, 再不济也要有个可时时算计的钱包).”⁹² The novel thus features the experience of time travel for Ye through which she is transformed into Wei Lanxue 蔚蓝雪, with a new and “improved” profile. Wei, “the young daughter of the Prime Minister Wei Jinlan, is well-educated, gentle and refined (当朝宰相蔚锦岚的千金, 乃[...]知书识礼、娴静端庄的一位大家闺秀).”⁹³

More importantly, Wei’s body is much slimmer and younger than Ye’s. “My round face has become an oval one. My skin becomes like my smooth and white 18-year-old skin. Wei Lanxue must be very young, maybe less than 18 years old. I am so glad to find that I am a beauty when I become slimmer (我的圆脸变成了现在的瓜子脸。皮肤还原成我十八岁时的晶莹雪白光洁, 这说明蔚蓝雪还很年轻, 应该不会超过十八岁。我欣喜地发现, 自己瘦下来的青春模样, 也勉强可以算得上是个美人).”⁹⁴ Upon close inspection, the book shares

⁹² *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 5 “Qianshi” 前世 [Previous life].

⁹³ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 1 “Chenghuan” 承欢 [Making love].

⁹⁴ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 9 “Jinluan” 禁脔 [Exclusive domain].

striking similarities in two ways with the “body writings” literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Here I adopt Wei Hui’s *Shanghai Baby* as a counterpart to *Wan Qingsi*, not only because this novel stands as a noted example of the “body writing” group, but it also delivers a love-seeking heroine Coco and details the love story between her and various male lovers. On the one hand, the “body writing” female authors portray the heroines as young and attractive women who are obsessed with disclosing their strong sexual desires. For instance, Wei Hui delineates how the female protagonist is indulged in her sexual experiences with her German lover Mark:

Yet another kiss, long and leisurely. This was the first time that I realized kissing before lovemaking could be so comfortable, steady, unhurried, enhancing my desire [...] these thoughts increased my excitement. [...] I closed my eyes and listened to him moan [...] struck the most sensitive part of my womb.⁹⁵

In a similar manner, *Wan Qingsi* also devotes a considerable proportion to describing the “tenderness and sweetness” felt by the heroine in sexual activities.⁹⁶ In Chapter 32, When Ye (“I”) kisses one of the male characters Jun Beiyu 君北羽, she declares: “(I) like his lips and kisses so much that I cannot help but tremble. A thrill of pleasure hits my brain and it makes me feel dizzy and soft (好喜欢，好喜欢他的唇他的吻，我控制不住地颤抖起来，只觉得一股极致的快感击中我的大脑，让我头发晕，全身酥软).”⁹⁷ It is notable that both works depict how the heroines are thrilled at the men’s “voices” and “lips,” carving out their female body map from “uterus” and “brain” to the whole body.

⁹⁵ *Shanghai baby*, Chapter 10, “Take Me to Your Place.”

⁹⁶ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 9, “Jinluan” 禁脔 [Exclusive domain].

⁹⁷ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 32, “Gouyin” 勾引 [Seduction].

These bold depictions position the heroines as sexual subjects whose bodies matter.

On the other hand, as critics have proclaimed, the sexualized female bodies in writings like *Shanghai Baby* would be metamorphosed into sexual products in a patriarchal capital market. As a “semi-autobiography work,” *Shanghai Baby* became a best-seller partly due to Wei’s self-exposure of her sexual desires and body expressions as a young ‘beauty writer’ based in Shanghai.⁹⁸ Yet the commercial success of the novel was criticized as “the commercialised fetishism of female sexuality in the name of body writing.”⁹⁹ Interestingly, both *Shanghai Baby* and *Wan Qingsi* feature a scene in which the female protagonist performs a striptease in front of male audience. In the former, the heroine CoCo states that she is fond of undressing herself. She always wears only underclothes before her boyfriend Tiantian, hoping to arouse his sexual desire:

But I kept on undressing, like a stripper. A tiny blue flower began to burn my skin, and that odd sensation made me blind to my beauty, myself, my identity. Everything I did was designed to create a strange new fairy tale, a fairy tale meant just for me and the boy I adored.¹⁰⁰

The author then suddenly alters the first-person narration to a third-person one, picturing the glaring portraiture of CoCo’s body through the eyes of the man:

⁹⁸ Xueping Zhong, “Who Is a Feminist? Understanding the Ambivalence towards *Shanghai Baby*, ‘Body Writing’ and Feminism in Post-Women’s Liberation China,” *Gender & History* 18, no.3 (2006): 646. 635-660.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 646.

¹⁰⁰ *Shanghai Baby*, Chapter 2, “Modern Metropolis.”

The boy sat entranced against the railing [...] watching the girl dance in the moonlight. Her body was smooth as a swan's, yet powerful as a leopard's. Every feline crouch, leap and turn was elegant yet madly seductive.¹⁰¹

In *Wan Qingsi*, due to the dramatic change of her family, Wei is forced to be a prostitute at some point. In the brothel, she names herself Carmen as a way to showcase her desire to become the brave and wild Gypsy girl Carmen.¹⁰² The debut of this Carmen is also a performance of dancing. She is dressed in a specially designed robe, which is intentionally clipped to show the legs, a large amount of cleavage, and the whole back to “excite the ancients’ eyeballs and nerves (刺激古人的眼球和神经).”¹⁰³ It is interesting to notice the parallel with *Shanghai Baby*, where the impressive beauty of the heroine’s body is also exposed through the words of men:

The ravishing prostitute Carmen, wow, is so bold. The expression in her eyes is so sexy and charming, her waistline so soft, her legs so snow-white, and her songs and dances so breath-taking. (She) is really a stunner, exceedingly fascinating and charming (那个艳妓卡门，哎哟，那胆子大得，那眼神媚得，那腰软得，那腿白得，那歌唱得之绝，那舞跳得之销魂，真是一个魅惑人心、风情万种的尤物啊).¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, in Chapter 17 titled “Jingpai” 竞拍 (Auction), the heroine’s virginity is considered as a profitable commodity. It is sold with a mounting price from a hundred taels of silver to ten thousand tales of gold. Consequently, compared to its predecessors such as *Shanghai Baby* that tend to conceal the

¹⁰¹ *Shanghai Baby*, Chapter 2, “Modern Metropolis.”

¹⁰² *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 16, “Kamen” 卡门 [Carmen].

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 19, “Chengming” 成名 [Making a name].

hegemonic masculine capitalism under the veil of “love,” the body of Carmen in *Wan Qingsi* is more explicitly articulated as expendable, or in the authors’ words, “pork to be butchered (待宰的猪肉).”¹⁰⁵

To summarize, readers of the “body writings” literature will find familiar expressions of female sexual desires and pervasive “male gaze” in time travel novels like *Wan Qingsi*. I argue that the novel is a site for patriarchal capitalism and consumerism, and also a response to the proliferation of global capitalism. It is interesting to note that the female subjects in contemporary American young adult fiction, as shown in Victoria Flanagan’s study, are not dissimilar to their Chinese counterparts in this sense. Flanagan contends that these YA novels are promoting a “patriarchal discourse on femininity.”¹⁰⁶ She finds that female bodies are foundational in constructing female identities in these works for they “seek to prescribe only certain body shapes, physical features and behaviors as desirable” based on patriarchal viewpoints.¹⁰⁷

Echoing the global patriarchal capitalism aside, it is more entangled to deep-seated Chinese social discourses such as *shengnü* (leftover woman) which began to grab the public attention when *Wan Qingsi* was serializing in Jinjiang.¹⁰⁸ Generally referring to urban professional women who remain unmarried after their late twenties, the word *shengnü* effectively renders the female uneasiness of their withering youth and beauty, their eagerness to get married at an “appropriate” age, and more significantly, a commonly shared social standard regarding womanhood based on male perception. Leta Hong Fincher demonstrates that since 2007, Chinese media has been actively engaged in a state-sponsored campaign about “leftover” women, with the Xinhua News Agency and the

¹⁰⁵ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 17, “Jingpai” 竞拍 [Auction].

¹⁰⁶ Victoria Flanagan, *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2014), 101.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Leta Fincher Hong, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London, New York: Zed Books, 2014), 3.

Website of Women's Federation as pivotal pioneers. She points out that there is convincing evidence for "a broad resurgence of gender inequality in post-socialist China particularly after the market reform."¹⁰⁹ Ample media reports reinforce the bitterness of being "left" and the happiness of entering a harmonious family, urging young women to rush into a male-dominated marriage quickly.

It is reminiscent of the opening pages of *Wan Qingsi*. The author stresses Ye's anxiety about love and marriage, which directly leads to the ensuing beautification of her body and its extraordinary sexual appeal through time travel. As the novel continues, Wei revels in amorous relationships with a variety of male characters, ranging from an officer in the nether world (Mingyan 冥焰, Fire in the Nether World), a famous musician (Fengge 凤歌, Song of Phoenixes), to the emperor (Jun Beiyü 君北羽), and a martial arts expert (Chu Shang 楚殇). The heroine thus adheres to the established paradigm of "seeking Mr. Right" seen in early works of this genre, as mentioned in introduction.¹¹⁰ In Feng's sensitive reading of *Qingchao Jingji Shiyongnan* 清朝经济适用男 (An Economical and Serviceable Man in the Qing Dynasty, 2009) as well as readers' responses in a website called Yaya Bay,¹¹¹ she detects that many authors of early online time travel romances "typically present two or more male characters as potential, if not actual, romantic and sexual partners for the heroine."¹¹² Their heroines are always seeking an ideal Mr. Right furnished with not only "monogamy, reserve, intellectual power, practical skills and physical strength," but also unconditional love and loyalty to the heroine. This penchant is shared by their readers who are fond of deciphering the intended, or "right" hero in the novels.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 140.

¹¹¹ The book was firstly published in Qidian in 2009. And in the preface of the book, the author mentions that the work is encouraged by the group of *qingchuan wen* 清穿文 (works that tell a story of modern girls who travel back to the Qing dynasty) that enjoys a great fame among the web world around 2004 to 2006.

¹¹² Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 153.

¹¹³ Ibid., 145.

Readers' comments of *Wan Qingsi* reveal a similar kind of fascination with the heroine's "enhancement" of her body, together with the substantial number of her amorous relationships. A noteworthy body of comments denounce *Wan Qingsi* as a prototype of *malisu* (Mary Sue), an internet slang that refers to the narcissistic female writers who imagine themselves as captivating heroines in their own stories, attracting a number of charming male characters.¹¹⁴ Some fans claim that the work portrays the protagonist as a female "Mack Daddy" (a male heart-throb) and question the illogical activities of the heroes in the novel: "Once the hero talks to the heroine, he is immediately attracted by her. Also at the beginning, when an unknown man sees the heroine for the first sight, he cannot resist the appeal of the heroine...Damn it! Isn't this characteristic of Mary Sue? (男主角...一跟女主交谈马上就被女主角吸引, 连一开始陌生男人望着女主角时候也架不住……我靠, 这不是玛丽苏吗?)."¹¹⁵ The discourse of *malisu* carries multiple implications, which can be clearly witnessed among the comments of *Wan Qingsi*.

On the surface, the fans seem to have completely rejected the "narcissism" of the heroine (and the author). By disapproving the "self-indulging" (自以为是), "delusional" (恶俗妄想) and "narcissistic" (自恋成癖) heroine, the readers show apparent distaste for the author Bobo, even to the extent of reviling her as "neurotic (神经病)" or "stupid (傻逼)."¹¹⁶ Suffice it to say, the readers believe that the heroine is a projected perfect image of the author's imagined self. Hence the portrayal of the heroine, who possesses not only eye-catching beauty but also outstanding gift in business, medicine as well as politics, appears unrealistic and even unbearable to contemporary readers.

¹¹⁴ Shao and Wang, *Pobishu*, 287.

¹¹⁵ Readers' comments about *Wan qingsi* in Douban, see <https://book.douban.com/review/6510118/>.

¹¹⁶ Readers' comments about *Wan qingsi* in Douban, see <https://book.douban.com/review/6510118/>.

Yet it is important to note that most comments available were produced after 2012, and many of them mentioned that the book was tremendously popular when it was initially published in 2006: “The book, though terrible enough, has received such high praise (这本烂书评价这么高)”;

“I can’t believe it was so popular at that time (当年居然那么火).”¹¹⁷ And they also questioned themselves when they read the book: “I can’t understand myself when I was reading the book (不知道当初怎么看的)”;

“I was drowned in my sparkling daydream when reading it (当年中二病的时候看的).”¹¹⁸ The readers are clearly aware that the major attraction of the book around its publication date, which invited criticism a few years hence, lies in how all the “excellent” men fall in love with the heroine irrationally: “The Emperor, the rich merchant, the duke, the orchid thief, even the King of the hell—all of them love her (皇上喜欢她, 巨富喜欢她, 侯爷喜欢她, 采花贼喜欢她, 就连小阎王也喜欢她)”;

“this group of ancient people must be blockheads (这群古人是智障吧).”¹¹⁹ It is this “inexplicable emotional entanglement between the heroine and numerous men (女主与众男之间莫名其妙的感情线)” that articulates women’s strong demand for love and marriage, and most importantly, an urge to stay away from the stigma of “leftover women” within the female-dominated online community. In many ways, these traits of *Wan Qingsi*, as well as its fans’ responses, are shared by a considerate body of early time travel romance novels around 2006 and 2007.¹²⁰ Essentially, the driving force behind the perfect heroine is the patriarchal discourse of femininity within both the social and internet contexts.

¹¹⁷ Readers’ comments about *Wan qingsi* in Douban, see <https://book.douban.com/review/6510118/>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ To name a few here, Jinzi’s *Menghui daqing* 梦回大清 (Go back to the Qing dynasty in a dream, 2006), Tonghua’s *Bubu jingxin* 步步惊心 (Step by step, 2006), and Li Xin’s *Dubu tianxia* 独步天下 (Unparalleled in the world, 2007) all follow the tropes of body advancement and polyamorous relationships of the heroine. These three works are worshiped as three huge mountains of works that see the heroine’s time travel experience to the Qing dynasty (清穿三座大山). For example, see <https://www.163.com/dy/article/F11HINMK0517AAPE.html>.

The male superiority is further reinforced by a striking narrative of “rape” in the opening chapter. The author first portrays the male protagonist’s body in detail:

“a face of manhood, a straight nose you see in ancient Greek sculptures, angular lips, and thick eyebrows: it’s delicate and well-proportioned, such a perfect face.[...] Also, how can his figure be so wonderful? He is over 180 cm, with burly muscles, tanned skin, raised buttocks, a narrow waist, ape-like arms, broad shoulders, and upright back (瘦削却刚毅的脸庞，挺直如古希腊雕塑的鼻，棱角分明的薄唇，粗黑挺拔的浓眉，无一不比例匀称精致，完美不可挑剔。[...]怎么身材也这么好？身高起码 1 米 8 以上，啧啧，那结实有力的肌肉，古铜色的皮肤，那臀部、那窄腰、那猿臂、那宽肩、那松一样挺直的脊背).”¹²¹

In short, it is a paragon of ideal male body. Then the heroine suddenly realizes that she is being raped by the “man with a perfect body,” and the author describes her reaction as this: “The intense anguish of my body, together with the heavy pressure makes me cry out. I have to bear the consecutive pain imposed by the man (从身体传来的撕心裂肺的痛楚和沉重的压力令我忍不住呻吟出声；我强忍着男人仍我身上不断制造的痛楚...).”¹²² This presentation of rape features a sharp contrast between the mighty, flawless masculine body and the fragile and fractured female one, echoing the concept of “heterosexual desire” proposed by Sheila Jefferey that suggests “eroticized dominance and submission.”¹²³ It further underlines female fans’ susceptibility to self-manipulation, indicating their embrace of an inferior position in gender relations during the early years of internet time travel romance.

¹²¹ *Wan qingsi*, Chapter 1, “Chenghuan” 承欢 [Making love].

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Rachel Carroll, *Rereading Heterosexual: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 4.

I contend that the trope of “body perfection” through time travel unfolds a consciousness of self-adaptation among early female fans of the genre. Indeed, it complies well with the patriarchal taste for sweet and sexually captivating females. Female netizens, rather than projecting a self-cultivated autonomous individual subjectivity, still rely on the traditional desires of meeting Mr. Right. The bodies of the heroines in the stories are consequently constructed with men’s wifely preference. However, the next example, published several years later, seems to paint quite another picture.

1.2 *Mulan Wu Zhangxiong*: Queerness and Femininity against Patriarchal Discourse

Interestingly, like Bobo, the author of the second case *Mulan* is also a middle-class woman in her early 30s. Praised as a “diligent and good writer,” Qidaojun’s story demonstrates apparent deviations from the patriarchal discourses showcased above. It originates from the well-known legend of Hua Mulan 花木兰 in *Mulan Ci* 木兰辞 (Ballad of Mulan, Northern Wei dynasty). The legend is about Hua Mulan, who, in place of her father, dresses herself as a man and joins the army. Talented in military prowess, Mulan quickly grows to be one of the best-regarded soldiers and embraces great achievements in battle. After the end of the war that sees a victory of Mulan’s side, she reveals her female identity and returns home in retirement.

As a recreation of the legend, the online novel of *Mulan* follows the main storyline of *Mulan Ci* while adding details that draw from the daily lives of contemporary female netizens. In this newly-invented story, the protagonist experiences time travel twice. In the first time travel, a modern woman named He Mulan 贺穆兰 travels back in time and finds herself becoming the famous Hua

Mulan. This Mulan, however, has already retired from the battlefield and returned to her hometown. Although He Mulan, as an unmarried 28 year old woman, faces the predicament of being a “leftover woman” similar to Ye in *Wan Qingsi*, she does not follow the vogue of body beautification through time travel.¹²⁴ Rather, as revealed in the novel’s preface and the first few chapters, Mulan’s body appears as the opposite of Wei Lanxue’s, with her “long figure, ordinary face, cheerless personality, extraordinary physical strength yet without any reproductive ability (身材高挑, 样貌并不美, 气质冷冽, 力大无比[...]葵水从未来过).”¹²⁵ It thus demonstrates a different understanding of female bodies and marriage, showing a feminist consciousness that problematizes the necessity of a patriarchal marriage for women. At the same time, it also represents a female body that aims to revolt against the male ideal.

However, I contend that the feminist intent to save Mulan from marriage and reproduction comes at the expense of denying her sexuality or even humanity. As the second chapter depicts, the retired General Mulan “does not receive any flowers or applause (没有鲜花与掌声).”¹²⁶ Instead, the now 32-year-old single woman who killed countless enemies in battle is treated as a “monster by her fellow villagers,” and they “covet her rewarded farmlands, cotton and silk, and even her willingness of living alone becomes a vice (被乡人传成怪物一般, 得到的赏田和布帛被人覬觐, 甚至连孤老终身都成了一种罪过).”¹²⁷ The desexualization and demonization of Mulan thus raise questions for the readers: Will Mulan ever be able to flee from the stigma of being a “monster”? If so, what options will she choose? Will she, following Wei, transform her body into a sexually appealing one that accords with the dominating patrilineal disciplines?

¹²⁴ *Mulan*, Chapter 1, “Mulan Mulan” 穆兰木兰 [Mulan Mulan].

¹²⁵ *Mulan*’s preface. Please kindly see <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2214297>.

¹²⁶ *Mulan*, Chapter 2, “Zhenzhai Mulan” 镇宅木兰 [Mulan who stabilizes the house].

¹²⁷ *Mulan*, Chapter 2, “Zhenzhai Mulan” 镇宅木兰 [Mulan who stabilizes the house].

While Mulan's first time travel subjects her to misunderstandings and criticism, from Chapter 114, she starts her second time travel that covers some 80 percent of the whole book. This time she travels to the time just before Mulan joins the army. It explores how Mulan grows to be a respectful female general in both the army and the government, making her second time travel experience a *Bildungsroman*. I contend that the novel showcases an apparent feminist consciousness to negate the patriarchal definitions of women. Throughout her second time travel, He Mulan has not only maintained her queer body with excessive physical strength, but also declares her feminine sexuality which gains support from the public, which has been always hidden in scholarship of time travel romances. I will explore this contention in terms of queerness and femininity.

1.2.1 *Mulan and Di Yefei: Queerness Opposed to "Heterosexual Matrix"*

As a term that historically refers to gays, lesbians and people who are regarded as "being different," "queer" later embraces a more general meaning that points to "a challenge to traditional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, the binaries, and language that supports them."¹²⁸ Conventional binaries about identities like "male/female, masculine/feminine, and proper/improper" are called into question in queer theories that are used to "disrupt and challenge traditional modes of thought and, by standing outside them, examine and dismantle them."¹²⁹

As mentioned above, the "queerness" of Mulan's body is underlined repetitively. Moreover, a male character named Di Yefei is created to compare with Mulan's queer body. Starting from Chapter 115, Di's feminine appearance

¹²⁸ Elizabeth J. Meyer, "'But I'm Not Gay': What Straight Teachers Need to Know about Queer Theory," in *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity in Education*, eds. Nelson M. Rodriguez and William F. Pinar (Switzerland: Peter Lang Copyright, 2007), 25.

¹²⁹ Meyer, "'But I'm Not Gay'," 26.

and stunning beauty are regularly reiterated. Described as a “faerie” (仙子), rumors opine him to be an extremely beautiful woman: “It is said that once ‘she’ (here refers to Di) entered the camp, the room was suddenly full of extraordinary fragrance. Her skin is as smooth as a peeled egg and her figure is as enchanting as flowers (话说她一入军营，满室皆是异香，皮肤光滑的好像新剥的鸡子，身材妖娆的就如随风摇摆的花枝).”¹³⁰ His queer appearance brings him not only admiration, but also sexual harassment and disdain from his fellows. Other soldiers mocked him as a “sissy” (娘娘腔), and his commander uses his beauty as a pretext to rebuke him.¹³¹ The misunderstandings and sufferings of Di (also Mulan during her first time travel), mainly caused by his queer body, reminds us of the concept of “heterosexual matrix” proposed by Judith Butler. She defines it as follows:

A model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.¹³²

The concept is explored in the chapter titled “Nanxing nüxing” 男性女性 (Male and female), where Mulan detects Di’s struggle under a two-sided pressure. On the one hand, he is confident in his physical strength and martial arts skills which, as he perceives, qualify him to be a “man” (一方面，他觉得自己的力量、武艺都足以匹配“男人”这个词汇).¹³³ On the other hand, he cannot change

¹³⁰ *Mulan*, Chapter 121, “Xianlian lianpi” 先练脸皮 [We should firstly practice to have tougher skin]. Chapter 116, “Shuren daolai” 熟人到来 [The arrival of an acquaintance].

¹³¹ *Mulan*, Chapter 122, “Nengzhe duolao” 能者多劳 [Able person should do more work]. And Chapter 130, “Youyong wumou” 有勇无谋 [Foolhardiness].

¹³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* [1990] (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 194.

¹³³ *Mulan*, Chapter 134, “Nanxing nüxing” 男性女性 [Male and female].

his appearance with queer beauty, and there is a soft spot in his heart that plagues him most (但是另一方面，他确实无法改变自己的长相[...]狄叶飞的内心其实有十分柔弱的一面[...]这是狄叶飞最痛苦的地方).¹³⁴ Mulan then realizes that like Di, many other Xianbei 鲜卑 men also suffer from their queer “softness.”¹³⁵ This shared dilemma derives from the fact that they disdain attributes like “softness and tenderness,” which they believe to have close ties with women, just as power to men (鲜卑的男人唾弃柔情，认为那是和女人联系在一起的东西，就如同力量往往和男人联系在一起).¹³⁶

These gender stereotypes in online literature can be further explored in light of the heated discussions of *xiao xianrou* (beautiful young boy) on social media. The term *xiao xianrou* went viral in 2014, the same year that *Mulan* began to serialize online. *Xiao xianrou* generally refers to young men with good-looking, docile or even feminized bodies, which evokes two radically different views from the public. The first mainly comes from men, expressing a decided distaste for “feminine” young men. For example, director Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚 once commented: “[They are] too girlish (太娘了)...They stroke their hair provocatively [...] like prostitutes (搔首弄姿[...]又不是开窑子的).”¹³⁷ Other critics agree with him, blaming *xiao xianrou* for their negative influence on young men, which may produce detrimental effects on the future of the nation.¹³⁸ In other words, *xiao xianrou* is also depreciated for nationalist concerns. I argue that

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ *Mulan*, Chapter 134, “Nanxing nüxing” 男性女性 [Male and female].

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Fenghuangwang Yule 凤凰网娱乐, *Feng Xiaogang tongchi xiao xianrou tainiang: Xiangtuo you bugantuo, saoshou nongzi* 冯小刚痛斥小鲜肉太娘：想脱又不敢脱，搔首弄姿 [Feng Xiaogang criticizes *xiao xianrou*: They want to take off their clothes but they don’t dare, and they stroke their hair Provocatively] http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20170620/42949780_0.shtml, 2017.

¹³⁸ Slogans such as “Shaonian niang ze zhongguo niang” 少年娘则中国娘 [If the youth are effeminate the nation will be effeminate] have been proliferated among different online platforms. This slogan is taken from the well-known saying “Shaonian Qiang Ze Zhongguo Qiang” 少年强则中国强 [If the youth are strong, the nation will be strong] proposed by Liang Qichao in *Shaonian Zhongguo Shuo* 少年中国说 [Power of Chinese youth, 1900]. See <http://finance.ifeng.com/c/7ftousORmc9>, 2018.

these views are consistent with Xianbei men's perceptions of gender and point to a shared idea of misogyny.

In her path-breaking work on “male homosocial desire” (or male-bonding) in English culture, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers an insightful reading of homosexuality in ancient Greece. She points out that the homosexual relationship between an adolescent boy and an older man in classical Greek culture is identical to the romantic heterosexual one. In both relationships, the adult men hold the superior and subjective position, and the boys and women are mastered as sexual objects.¹³⁹ Therefore, men fear terribly of being “feminized” and they establish “male bonds” through sharing the privileges of sexual subjects.¹⁴⁰ So they oppress and exclude *xiao xianrou* for their femininity. In this light, *xiao xianrou* is placed on a similar level with heterosexual women who are always treated as “the objects of desire for the men and the spoil of male rivalry.”¹⁴¹ The misogynistic male culture thus positions women in an inferior and disparaged situation.

Contrarily, the second opinion towards *xiao xianrou* treats them as praiseworthy “idols.” As mentioned in introduction, readers of Jinjiang and the fans of the *xiao xianrou* type idols probably overlap with each other to a large extent and they enjoy a shared affinity for *xiao xianrou*, which is in sharp contrast with the prominent male mass.¹⁴² It is worth noting that both *Mulan* and the readers' comments indicate their appreciation of these feminized young men. As seen in Chapter 134, *Mulan* believes that Di should not be concerned by his queer

¹³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁴⁰ Ueno Chizuko, *Yannü: Riben de nüxing xianwu* 厌女: 日本的女性嫌恶[Misogyny: Women Hating in Japan], trans. Wang Lan (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2015), 19.

¹⁴¹ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 209.

¹⁴² As shown by 2018 Online literature industry Report, see http://www.cyzone.cn/article/173762.html#_Toc505606637, the internet literature benefits greatly from big online literary IPs (Intellectual Property), which mostly follow the way of reediting a popular online fiction to other forms of cultural products, such as TV dramas, films, and audio dramas. And many of the celebrated TV dramas and films, originated from the online IPs, have *xiao xianrou* as their heroes. This inspires a large degree of overlap between the fans of online literature and the fans of *xiao xianrou*.

body. Rather, his extraordinary beauty is his strength that attracts attention and rumor, just like Mulan's great physical power ([...]你大可不必表现出这么.....为此困扰的样子。每个人最出色的地方自然会被别人说道，比如我的力气 [...]以及.....你的脸。)¹⁴³

Di is also a particularly beloved figure for the readers. They nicknamed him “Di Meiren” 狄美人 (Beauty Di) to express their fondness for him. More importantly, their affection for him is based on his handsomeness as well as his personal traits.¹⁴⁴ It echoes with Mulan's conclusion: “Being soft is not shameful (柔软并不是可耻的).”¹⁴⁵ The story also justifies the presence of queer bodies. In Chapter 294, Mulan defeats prince Juqu Mujian 沮渠牧犍 who is also notable for his supreme physical power.¹⁴⁶ This plot, by celebrating Mulan's triumph over Juju in physical power, brings the essence of “heterosexual matrix” into question and therefore rejects the patriarchal idea of misogyny.

1.2.2 Femininity: Empowerment of Mulan in Public Realm

While He Mulan's second time travel defends the queerness of both Mulan and Di, she is not placed in a similar predicament of being a “desexualized monster” like her first time travel. Rather, her femininity is asserted and defended in both public and private realms. First, Mulan preserves and emphasizes her femininity in public spaces mainly within the army and the government, where female sexuality is supposed to be abrogated or concealed. Prior to the 2014 online novel, the legend of Hua Mulan has been adapted to various versions ranging from verse, drama, and novels to films and TV dramas.¹⁴⁷ Joseph R. Allen argues that it is the

¹⁴³ *Mulan*, Chapter 134, “Nanxing nüxing” 男性女性 [Male and female].

¹⁴⁴ Shen Yanjiu 沈宴九, readers' comments about *Mulan wu zhangxiong*, <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=2214297&commentid=281126>, 2017.

¹⁴⁵ *Mulan*, Chapter 134, “Nanxing nüxing” 男性女性 [Male and female].

¹⁴⁶ *Mulan*, Chapter 294, “Shi'er fude” 失而复得 [Regain what has been lost].

¹⁴⁷ Joseph R. Allen, “Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior,” *Positions* 4, no.2 (1996): 346.

“need to restore social order” (which is necessarily a patriarchal one) that forms the pivot of these diversified Mulan narratives.¹⁴⁸ After a careful examination of Mulan’s preparation for her life as a warrior, Allen contends that the horse Mulan prepares for the war is endowed with all “male associations,” symbolizing her “perceived gender change” to perform as a male fighter.¹⁴⁹ That is to say, disguised as a man, Mulan is obliged to disavow her femininity during her life in the troops.

Then after the end of the war, Mulan’s major concern is fully expressed through her conversation with the emperor, which is closely associated with domestication. As the fifth stanza of *Mulan Ci* indicates,

The Khan asks what it is that each desires
But Mulan has no use for a government post
She wants only a fine camel that can run a thousand leagues
To carry this daughter back to her old hometown.¹⁵⁰

Therefore, the key point of Mulan’s post-war life is to return to her family, retaking her role of a docile daughter or a potential wife in a traditional familiar order. In other words, the government leaves no space for Mulan whose femininity has already been made public.

In this sense, the 2014 time travel story of *Mulan* differs significantly from the preceding versions. In Chapter 268, Mulan positively uncovers her striking secret--that she is a woman--to the Emperor Tuoba Tao 拓跋焘 while she is still in the army. It stands in sharp contrast to the previous versions that maintains to

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 347.

¹⁴⁹ Allen, “Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior,” 351.

¹⁵⁰ Here I use Joseph’s translation of *Mulan ci*.

hide Mulan's femininity to the troops. The online novel exhibits the emperor's unexpected tolerance to Mulan's female identity, as he articulates:

“Hua Mulan, you are useful to me not because you are a brave and excessively powerful ‘man,’ but because you are Hua Mulan. What I value is you, not your gender. I choose you because I believe you are the one that I am waiting for. You are the one that is precious for our nation Wei (花木兰，我用你，不是因为你是勇猛过人的‘男人’，而是因为你是花木兰。我要用的是你的人，不是你的性别 [...] 我会选你，是因为我觉得你就是我一直在等的那个可用之人，我大魏一直在等的那个可用之人).”¹⁵¹

The emperor's words, undermining the importance of “sexuality” and “sex,” recall Foucault's perception. For Foucault, the notion of sex is an “artificial unity” that combines “anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures.”¹⁵² This “fictitious unity” is always used erroneously as a “causal principle” and “an omnipresent meaning.”¹⁵³ Therefore any notion of a “natural or essential sex” of a body is meaningless within discourses, and the body is given certain meanings “only in the context of power relations.”¹⁵⁴ Sex is thus produced as “an artificial concept” that effectively surpasses and conceals the power relations that capture the most significant sense.¹⁵⁵ In *Mulan*, the emperor manages to relieve Mulan's anxiety about her female identity as a general: “Your worries are misplaced, for they will all obey me (你的担心都是多余的，因为他们得听我的).”¹⁵⁶ Taking the central role in power relations, the emperor resolves a repeated impasse of the earlier Mulan stories that compel the heroine

¹⁵¹ *Mulan*, Chapter 268 “Ta de bixia” 她的陛下 [Her Majesty].

¹⁵² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 154.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 124.

¹⁵⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 124.

¹⁵⁶ *Mulan*, Chapter 268, “Tade bixia” 她的陛下 [Her Majesty].

to abandon her femininity in the army. In other words, Mulan in the 2014 fiction is empowered by the power holder to preserve her femininity in the male dominated troops.

The relationship between the emperor and Mulan in the online work is also worthy of attention, bringing light to the shielded aspects in past online romantic novels. For Mulan, the emperor is more like her *dingtou shangsi* (line manager) than a monarch with unchallengeable supremacy or an intended “Mr. Right”: “(Tuoba Tao) is like those liberal-minded bosses in the 21st century ((拓跋焘)就像是后世那些[..]心怀宽广的上司).”¹⁵⁷ In this light, *Mulan* does not present a familiar “a strict social hierarchy” between a emperor and his officials in a Confucian society.¹⁵⁸ Rather, it is an attempt to empower women in a more progressive work environment that reflects the social reality in 2014.

This boss-employee relationship between Mulan and the emperor paves the way for Mulan to transform from a warrior to an official in the male-dominated government after the war despite the revelation of her gender identity. In Chapter 472, Mulan unveils her female identity to the government, sparking a fierce controversy that sweeps the country. Although criticism and prejudice permeate the court, the emperor and prime minister decide to keep Mulan in the government, making her the first ever female general, Duke and the crown prince’s supervisor (魏国第一位女将军、女侯爷、女三司) in Northern Wei.¹⁵⁹ It contrasts with the previous Mulan stories, as the ending of Chapter 472 declare: “The spread of the news that ‘Hua Mulan is a woman’ only marked the start of a reform in Northern Wei (随着‘花木兰是个女人’的消息渐渐传了出去，一场由大魏发生的变革[...]才算是刚刚开始).”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ *Mulan*, Chapter 268, “Tade bixia” 她的陛下 [Her Majesty].

¹⁵⁸ Dryburgh Marjorie, “Foundations of Chinese Identity: Place, Past and Culture,” in *Understanding Chinese Society*, ed. Zhang Xiaowei (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 9.

¹⁵⁹ *Mulan*, Chapter 472, “Youguo zaishen” 有过在身 [I am wrong].

¹⁶⁰ *Mulan*, Chapter 472, “Youguo zaishen” 有过在身 [I am wrong].

While Mulan's rise to power is attributed greatly to the emperor (as a superior male figure), the reformation of the Northern Wei dynasty triggers a remarkable feminist wave of self-empowerment within the women groups inspired by Mulan. It combines individual progress with systematic advancement and has tactics similar to the consciousness-raising of women's parties in 1960s America. According to Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson, this generation, which was active in the women's movements, is one that believes in "the personal is the political."¹⁶¹ They tend to adopt the "wholistic approach to social reconstruction" to show "sisterhood."¹⁶² It stresses cooperation and unity among women and aims to "bring about political change" and develop a "collective consciousness," which has always been shielded in many other time travel romances.¹⁶³

Examples of the "wholistic approach" can also be found in the 2014 online novel, both within the palace and the new troops after the war. In Chapter 470, Madame He (贺夫人), the emperor's ex-wife, is distraught when she is ordered to return to the palace to raise the prince. Claiming "women are not weak (女人不是弱者)," Mulan tries to invoke Madame He's will to fight back.¹⁶⁴ Greatly encouraged by Mulan, He turns to see the imperial harem as her battleground and envisions to challenge the prevailing gender discrimination within the imperial system.¹⁶⁵ The novel ensues to explain He's will: "This is an opportunity no one has captured before [...] to try to change the miserable future of women in the harem (一个从未有人能够得到的机遇[...]去试试改变后宫女子们凄惨的未来)."¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Joyce L. Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914-1984* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 3.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ *Mulan*, Chapter 470, "Shuide zhanzheng" 谁的战争 [Whose war].

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ *Mulan*, Chapter 470, "Shuide zhanzheng" 谁的战争 [Whose war].

Similarly, in Chapter 482 “Bangyang de liliang” 榜样的力量(Power of a role model), an unnamed young woman is stimulated by Mulan’s achievements and joins a new troop called “Jianfu Ying” 健妇营 (Robust Women Command) established by Mulan. This command, which is responsible for “studying medical skills, transporting and treating wounded soldiers (负责运送伤兵, 学一些医术, 治疗受伤的将士们),” serves not only to impart knowledge of surgical techniques (西医的外科技术), but also to extend opportunities for women in political institutions.¹⁶⁷ These self-empowered female officials are emerging as a force in their own right, as one of the last chapters suggests: “Now women can be government officials too. Not to mention the newly promoted women officials in the palace, take a look at the government outside. We have the civilian officer Yucui working as an ambassador in the Court of State Ceremonials. And we also have military officers. Look at the woman walking by right now. She is Hua Mulan, the Huwei General...现在女儿家也能当官了。宫里诸位新封的女官不说, 外面文的, 有鸿胪寺少卿的玉翠使君, 武的, 就是刚刚过去的那位虎威将军, 花木兰.....”¹⁶⁸

1.2.3 *Mulan in Private Settings: A Determined Leader with Femininity*

While Mulan’s post-war life becomes active in political arenas, her private life is also worthy of careful examination. As discussed above, the previous versions of the story, together with Mulan’s first time travel experience, offer two disparate pictures of her post-war private life: either retreating into the patrilineal family system as a docile daughter or wife, or living as a desexualized monster without femininity. However, the second time travel presents how she manages to challenge the traditional patriarchal family order while maintaining her

¹⁶⁷ *Mulan*, Chapter 482, “Bangyang de liliang” 榜样的力量 [Power of a role model].

¹⁶⁸ *Mulan*, Chapter 479, “Waizhai nantao” 外债难逃 [Unavoidable debts].

femininity and, more importantly, how it relates to the shielded expressions of female netizens connected to contemporary context.

It is well-known that the centuries-old model of Chinese patrilineal family is grounded in Confucian ethics where men are guaranteed with greater power than women, and they assume the roles of provider and decision maker. In this light, Mulan, having ended her career as a warrior, is supposed to stay at home and demonstrate obedience to her father, as depicted in the past versions of the story.

However, He Mulan's life in her second time travel is poles apart from this repetitive picture. In Chapter 355, Mulan's parents and her younger brother, the only male of Mulan's generation in the family, leave their hometown and go to live with Mulan in Pingcheng 平城 (the capital of Northern Wei). Their family life contests, or even overturns the Confucian patrilineal family order. Examples abound in the final section of the book. For instance, He Mulan's parents are responsible for hosting guests, managing the family and other household chores for her. And in Chapter 446, Mulan's parents and brother, especially her father, are waiting for Mulan after she has completed her mission: "He Mulan rides quickly to the house, and she finds that her parents and younger brother Hua Mutuo are greeting her at the front door. As usual, her father is leaning against the door, waiting delightedly for Mulan to greet him (贺穆兰骑马狂奔，一路奔回门口，正遇上花父花母携着花木托一起出门相迎，花父就像之前无数次那样，就倚在门口，满脸欣慰表情地等着贺穆兰上来跟他打招呼)." ¹⁶⁹ This clearly deviates from the "gendered division of labor" of Confucian families that burdens women with domestic chores.

Moreover, Chapter 363 reveals that Mulan's parents "would not have dinner until she returns (他们二老不等到她回来是不会开饭的)." ¹⁷⁰ It indicates that in

¹⁶⁹ *Mulan*, Chapter 446, "Biaohan zhengqi" 彪悍正妻 [A sturdy wife].

¹⁷⁰ *Mulan*, Chapter 363, "Bixia songli" 陛下送礼 [Gifts from the Majesty].

the Hua family, the daughter Mulan is granted with the highest position despite the generational seniority of her parents, and the single son in the family is not significant at all and is always ignored by the family (几乎没什么存在感).¹⁷¹ In fact, it is more symptomatic of contemporary family structure that can be explained by the resource bargaining theory. Originating from resource theory, resource bargaining theory follows the social exchange principle and suggests that the sources of power in a family are attributed to “the relative economic resources” that a family member “brings to” the family, such as “income, education, and occupational prestige.”¹⁷² The author elaborates on how the heroine, as an empowered figure in the public realm, brings considerable economic benefits to the Hua family: “Wealth! Status! They are all indebted to Mulan who fights in the dangerous wars (什么富贵荣华, 什么地位尊崇, 全部都是靠花木兰靠命搏来的).”¹⁷³ Consequently, Mulan remains to be the ultimate leader of the family.

Resource bargaining theory also examines the distribution of labor within the household and posits that family members’ “differentiated participation in paid labor confers greater power on the one with higher earnings to ‘bargain out’ of housework.”¹⁷⁴ As previously discussed, this principle is also at play in the Hua family. This reminds us of today’s professional women who are tormented by the unequal division of labor in the household. Jiping Zuo points out that in the post-Mao era, urban Chinese women are still unable to realize gender equality because they are forced to accept the lingering traditional gendered roles.¹⁷⁵ Career-oriented women are pushed into a more disadvantaged position when they pursue

¹⁷¹ *Mulan*, Chapter 469, “Xiejia guitian” 卸甲归田 [Take off her armor and go home].

¹⁷² Jiping Zuo, “Rethinking Family Patriarchy and Women’s Positions in Presocialist China,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71, no.3 (2009): 544.

¹⁷³ *Mulan*, Chapter 446, “Biaohan zhengqi” 彪悍正妻 [A sturdy wife].

¹⁷⁴ Yang Hu, “What about Money? Earnings, Household Financial Organization, and Housework,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 2019, no.81: 1093.

¹⁷⁵ Jiping Zuo, *Work and Family in Urban China Women’s Changing Experience since Mao* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 140.

equitable distribution of domestic work. *Mulan*, however, serves to fulfill the desires of contemporary career women (as targeted readers) to be liberated from gendered domestic duties and override male dominance in the familial context.

While *Mulan*'s position in the family structure questions the family patriarchy, her relationship with the male figure Di Yefei is also worthy of discussion. In Chapter 485, *Mulan* inadvertently has sex with Di once, after which the two develops a long-term romantic relationship. As *Mulan* explains:

“If she were capable of procreation, she would worry about bearing endless children because she has indulged so much in sensual pleasures. But now that she is not menstruating, she need not worry about that (如果她能够生育，恐怕还会担心这一般纵欲之后会不停的生孩子的问题，但她癸水一直未至，也没有这方面的顾虑). [...] It is normal to have a boyfriend, but it is not necessary to get married. The lives of the two (*Mulan* and Di) will not change drastically, and they can also have someone to ‘communicate deeply’ (have sex) (正常人交个男朋友也没什么嘛。就算不成亲，两人的生活也没啥变化，还多了个可以 “深入交流” 的对象).”¹⁷⁶

This claim not only undermines the Confucian value of *chuanzong jiedai* 传宗接代 (carrying on the ancestral line), but also helps *Mulan* to shake off the stigma of being a desexualized and dehumanized monster after the war, as portrayed in the first time travel. I argue that *Mulan*'s viewpoint about romantic relationships echoes that of contemporary Chinese youths. As Chao Yang explains, young Chinese professionals today hold “more liberal attitudes towards love and sexual matters.”¹⁷⁷ They degrade stable heterosexual marital relationships, but bring forth diverse dating practices such as “same-sex relations, triangular relationships,

¹⁷⁶ *Mulan*, Chapter 485, “Yingxiong jiumei II” 英雄救美 (二) [The hero saved a beauty II].

¹⁷⁷ Chao Yang, *Television and Dating in Contemporary China Identities, Love, and Intimacy* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017), 50.

multiple relationships, extramarital relationships and one-night stands.”¹⁷⁸ Moreover, the implementation of one-child policy (OCP) accelerates the culture of nuclear family and these youths are more self-centred, striving for “personal happiness and individual realization” over family responsibilities.¹⁷⁹ It stimulates the currency of “an enterprising self” among young Chinese female professionals who favor desire-oriented dating relationships over responsibility-tied marital bonds.¹⁸⁰

The romantic relationship between Mulan and Di exemplifies this social trend. The novel details Mulan’s bodily sexual desires, making her what Lisa Rofel terms a “desiring subject” -- “the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest.”¹⁸¹ At first glance, she is aroused by Di’s attractive body: “Di exercises routinely, and he is quite brawny. His square shoulders, narrow waist, and straight legs exude and beauty, and this somehow excites Mulan (狄叶飞长期锻炼，肌肉结实，偏偏肩宽腰窄，一双腿也是笔直有力，浑身散发着力与美的气氛，让她忍不住有些口干舌燥).”¹⁸² Then, she is allured by Di’s appealing facial expression, so she touches his body and has sex with him: “Mulan is at once so captivated by Di that she reaches out her hand and touches his Adam’s apple ... ‘Hey, shall we just be together...’ Mulan feels Di’s body in a deep voice (贺穆兰一时为其所惑，竟伸出手去，在狄叶飞的喉结上摸了一把[...])我说，要不我们就凑活凑活吧.....’贺穆兰粗噶着声音，伸手从狄叶飞身上拂过.”¹⁸³ After that, Mulan develops a long-term romantic relationship with Di while remaining unmarried till the end of the book. So here it is Mulan’s subjective sexual “desires” that determines the relationship

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Yang, *Television and Dating in Contemporary China Identities, Love, and Intimacy*, 56.

¹⁸⁰ Yunxiang Yan, “The Chinese Path to Individualization,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no.3 (2010): 505.

¹⁸¹ Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁸² *Mulan*, Chapter 485, “Yingxiong jiumei II”英雄救美（二）[The hero saved a beauty II].

¹⁸³ *Mulan*, Chapter 485, “Yingxiong jiumei II”英雄救美（二）[The hero saved a beauty II].

between the two characters. In other words, the romance story of the couple is entirely Mulan-centred and orientated by her desires.

This female-dominated relationship manifests another significant desire among *Mulan's* female fans who pursue dominance in gender relationships. Chapter 485 elaborates how Mulan, in her sexual experience with Di, becomes the master of his body. The chapter conveys noticeable details articulating Di's special "needs" in sex. Only when he is choked can he become sexually energized, alluding to his inferiority and fragility in sexual relationships. Only Mulan knows the secret: "She has already acquired a whole knowledge of his body (她其实就已经对他的身体了如指掌)."¹⁸⁴ Mulan also manipulates Di's body and feelings during their sexual communication, as she first discovers Di's "special sexual needs" and then "starts to explore other places on his body that can arouse him (探索起了他身上的其他敏感点)."¹⁸⁵ And finally, Mulan becomes the master of Di's body as a "well-informed" modern woman in sexual knowledge: "She makes Di, as a 30-year-old virgin, become fully excited (贺穆兰毕竟是“见多识广”的现代人[...]理论知识绝对丰富, 诸般手段施展出来, 直叫还是童子鸡的大龄男青年狄叶飞.....)"¹⁸⁶

In addition to her dominance in the sexual partnership, Di is also dependent on Mulan both socially and emotionally. During Mulan's second time travel, Di remains to be Mulan's subordinate in both the army and the government. In Chapter 368, Mulan instructs Di to find and excavate coal mines near Pingcheng, which later turns out to be a milestone in his career. Moreover, Di has been hankering for Mulan's love for many years: "Although Di Yefei claims that he has been in love with her for a long time, he also made a statement saying: 'I love you (Mulan) but I do not ask you to reciprocate' (虽说狄叶飞一直说他爱着自

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

己，但他也说过“我爱慕你又不指望得到你的回应),” indicating that *Mulan* occupies a privileged position in both social settings and private emotions.¹⁸⁷ It echoes the fad of *xiao xianrou* among female netizens around 2014. As Yang Ling analyzed the industry of young male idols in China: “Only when women’s social status has improved considerably, and feminist consciousness has been manifested to a certain extent, would women be more inclined to accept gentle, obedient and less aggressive partners.”¹⁸⁸ *Mulan* is thus a timely reflection of female netizens’ desires to obtain superior status in gender relationships. Readers’ comments also reveal the story’s important influence on its fans.¹⁸⁹

In this sense, *Mulan* distinguishes itself from earlier time travel stories (such as *Wan Qingsi*) and manages to unveil the hidden gendered desires, despite their shared emphasis on women’s sexual desires. As mentioned earlier, the stigma of “leftover women” defines the ways in which early time travel female protagonists pursue intimate relationships with multiple male figures. The heroine’s queer masculine body in *Mulan*, however, embodies a gesture of defiance against male-defined femininity. Besides, the main body of *Mulan* does not dwell on love and sex, but on *Mulan*’s professional progress as a young woman who gains power and status in both social and familial contexts. Thereupon, *Mulan* presents a redefinition of female beauty and femininity and enriches the imagination of

¹⁸⁷ *Mulan*, Chapter 485, “Yingxiong jiumei II”英雄救美（二）[The hero saved a beauty II].

¹⁸⁸ Pan Wenjie 潘文捷, “Zhuanfang Yang Ling: Cong ‘Chaoji nüsheng’ dao ‘Ouxiang lianxisheng’ de bian yu bubian” 专访杨玲：从《超级女声》到偶像练习生的变与不变 [Interview with Yang Ling: The changes and continuities from *Super Girl* to *Idol Student*] *Jiemian Wenhua* 界面文化 . <https://3g.163.com/dy/article/DFCUKTMI0514AJ2B.html>, 2018.

¹⁸⁹ For example, reader Hongfen Kulou 红粉骷髅 makes a high appraisal for *Mulan*’s public contribution: “The most distinguished point of this book is that during her second time travel experience, *Mulan* is not fight for self interests, but rather, she is taking advantages of all her crafts to picture a better future for her living world (作者这文大气在，木兰并不是为了一己私欲蝇头小利而重来而奋斗，她一直在利用自己的一切[...]为自己眼前这个世界谋求一个更好的命运和将来).” (Jinjiang, 2015) And reader Binglian huanjing 冰莲幻境 shows her favor for *Mulan*’s feminist consciousness which can be seen in both the court and private settings: “I am fond of her (*Mulan*’s) exploration of women’s independence, yet she never disdain the women in the harem[...]What counts is that she is a symbol, a symbol that tells later generations how great a woman can be in a male-dominated world (我喜欢她探讨女性的独立，却从不鄙夷后宫的女子[...]重要的是她是一个象征符号，告诉后来人曾有一个女性可以这么伟大地存在于男人的世界里).” (Douban, 2017). <https://media.weibo.cn/article?id=2309404425606535184661>.

“ideal” female images in contemporary China, showing a charismatic representation of professional women who succeeds both in public realms and in family structure and gender relations.

1.3 *Dalao Dou Aiwo* and *Lian Yu Zhizuoren*: Posthuman Imagination in Online Products

My final case *Dalao* belongs to a relatively new subgenre of online time travel literature named *kuaichuan* (quick time travel or quick transmigration). Delivered by Xianshi Ting, *Dalao* offers a quick time travel novel in which the heroine Jiang Rui 姜芮 travels to ten worlds with different identities. She encounters ten diversified men, who turns out to be ten incarnations of the same hero.¹⁹⁰ In quick time travel stories, the female protagonist usually leaves her living world and transports to a virtual one. Different from other time travel stories, the new world the heroine travels to is one like a web game. The heroine is selected as a player in the web game and has to undertake missions or reach a certain score before she can return to her real life. After accomplishing her first mission, which is always to win the love of one of the major male characters in that world, she will be sent to the next world and has to complete a new but similar task there. The whole process ends only when the heroine reaches a certain score or accomplishes all the missions. The settings of the varied worlds are always unrelated and different, and in these worlds, the female protagonist will be given diverse bodies, identities, or even forms.

Apparently, in these *kuaichuan* narratives, fixed corporeal bodies of the characters are replaced by changing virtual forms. This pattern is also adopted by

¹⁹⁰ There's little information about the writer Xianshi Tingyu online.

many online games.¹⁹¹ In this section, I will also examine a popular online game (concurrent with the boom of *kuaichuan* fiction) called *Lian Yu Zhizuoren* 恋与制作人 (A Producer and Her Lovers, since late 2017) as a counterpart to *Dalao*, with the intention to offer a more comprehensive picture of feminist expressions and desires in today's female-dominated online communities.¹⁹² In *Lian*, the player takes on the role of the heroine and encounters five major male characters who possess psionic powers. The male protagonists are equal in the game and the player can choose to fall in love with any, or as many of them as she likes.¹⁹³ The player needs to collect various cards in the game, which usually appear in the form of elaborately designated images or short videos of one of the heroes.¹⁹⁴ Notably, new developments in time travel genres and online games serve as active

¹⁹¹ For example, please kindly see William W. Lewis, "Performing 'Posthuman' Spectator-ship," *Performance Research* 2017, no.22: 3.

¹⁹² I will use *Lian* as a shortcut for *Lian yu zhizuoren*. Female-oriented online games like *Lian* are also called as "otome games." The name originates from the Japanese word "乙女ゲーム," which is a combination of the words "乙女" and "ゲーム (game)." The word "乙女 (otome)" means "girl." The word "otome game" is an English transcription of "乙女ゲーム." As Feng indicates, "otome games" cater to teenage girls and other unmarried young women and often feature the central plot of one woman (the avatar of the player) pursuing several beautiful men. Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 141.

¹⁹³ Initially, there are four major male characters in the female-dominated web-game *Lian*. They are all very handsome and successful in their careers. All of them are granted with different psionic powers (in the game, it is given with the name of Evol). The first male protagonist Baiqi 白起 is a 24-year-old regimental policeman, and his Evol is the control of wind. Zhou Qiluo 周琪洛, a 22-year-old superstar, is the second male protagonist and his Evol is his definite attractiveness to all. And Li Zeyan 李泽言 is a 28-year-old CEO of a huge company named Huarui 华锐, and his Evol is to stop time. And the fourth hero in the game is a 26-year-old scientist named Xu Mo 许墨 who is equipped with an Evol of repetition. And the final hero Ling Xiao 凌肖 appears in March 2019. Ling is a 20-year-old student, and his Evol is the control of thunder. Reports have pointed out the extreme popularity of the game and indicates the major male characters, with their handsome looks, high social status, and mysterious Evols, are very appealing to young female consumers. For more information, please kindly see <https://evol.papegames.cn/home#5>, 2023.

¹⁹⁴ The cards play an important role in the game of *Lian*. In the game, players need to constantly acquire resources such as gold and diamonds in order to buy props and level up the characters. Secondly, cards are a way to improve the characters' abilities in the game. In *Lian*, each character has its own attributes and skills. In the game, if you want to make your character more powerful, you need to keep collecting cards and upgrading their level and quality, so that you can improve your characters' attributes and skills. Furthermore, cards can also help players unlock new storylines. In *Lian*, each character has its own storyline, and these plots allow players to both gain a deeper understanding of the characters' background and provide a colorful gaming experience for the players. Some storylines require specific cards to be unlocked, which requires players to keep collecting cards in order to unlock more storylines. Finally, cards can also be used to compete in in-game competitions. In *Lian*, players can participate in various competitions, such as concerts, dance competitions and so on. And these competitions require players to have certain strengths and abilities, and cards can come into play at this time.

agents in addressing the hidden feminist imaginations in today's digital society, offering new possibilities to challenge the patriarchal social disciplines.

The blurring of bodily boundaries, as Kim Toffoletti suggests, is central to theories of posthumanism that has become an immensely popular topic in the cybernetic age.¹⁹⁵ As early as 1977, Ihab Hassan, one of the most celebrated pacesetters in postmodern literary critics, announced the advent of posthumanism: “we need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism.”¹⁹⁶

Before examining posthumanism in Chinese online literature and games, it is of necessity to review feminist approaches towards posthumanism in existing scholarship since internet-based posthuman products are such a trend in female-based online communities. The relationship between technology and feminism is a good starting point, and Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* serves as a seminal study in this field.¹⁹⁷ Haraway claims that “science and technology are possible means of great human satisfaction as well as a matrix of complex dominations.”¹⁹⁸ She then defines the image of the “cyborg” as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality and a creature of fiction.”¹⁹⁹ The combination of a group of opposing poles can therefore be a useful instrument for feminists, since it brings the maze of dualism (e.g. nature/artifice, organism/technology, reality/fabrication, and self/other) into question.²⁰⁰ Accordingly, the “cyborg's” feature of boundary transgression

¹⁹⁵ Toffoletti Kim, *Cyborg and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2007), 2.

¹⁹⁶ Ihab Hassan, “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, eds. Benamon Michael and Caramella Charles (Milwaukee: Centre for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1977), 212

¹⁹⁷ See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthumans: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Kim's *Cyborg and Barbie dolls*, etc.

¹⁹⁸ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 181, 150.

¹⁹⁹ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 181, 150.

²⁰⁰ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 173.

empowers women to contest concepts such as the original “I” and the human subject, which is always performed as a man.

Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* has spawned a cascade of studies on feminist posthumanism, among which *Posthuman Bodies* (coedited by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone, 1995) and Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) are two ground-breaking works. As an edited volume, *Posthuman Bodies* investigates hybrid forms of queer posthuman bodies, including “mutants, aliens, monsters and cyborgs,” questioning established categories of gender, sexuality and ethnicity of individual identity.²⁰¹ Hayles follows this tradition by proclaiming that “the multiple implications of the posthuman can be explored,” which can benefit women in turning away from conventional definitions of body and identity.²⁰² She also shows her concerns with privileging mind/information over body/embodiment in some cybernetic discourses. She contends that this can be detrimental to feminism, especially for those who seek to construct female subjectivity through bodily experiences.

Inspired by these studies, Toffoletti explores posthumanism in pop cultural products in twenty-first century American popular culture. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, Toffoletti links feminist scholarship with new accounts about posthuman beings in new economies like virtual reality, and moreover, the change “in feminist conceptualizations of the operations of representation on subject formation.”²⁰³

In sum, since Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, feminist posthumanism has zeroed in on how to transcend the boundaries that define women as the Other, the object, and the inferior, and how to open up new forms of female subjectivity that are

²⁰¹ Judith Harberstam and Ira Livingstone, “Introduction: Posthuman Bodies,” *Posthuman Bodies*, eds. Harberstam, Judith and Livingstone, Ira (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3-4.

²⁰² Hayles, *How We Became Posthumans*, 23.

²⁰³ Kim, *Cyborg and Barbie Dolls*, 6.

equal to the dominant male one. In other words, these posthuman-inspired feminist scholarships are still under the very influence of patriarchal discourses on femininity, female bodies, and female subjectivities. While these studies draw on posthumanism to produce new subject forms for women, little has been attributed to the new configurations of male bodies in female-oriented post-human cultural products. Do they differ from the predominant patriarchal subjects? Are they, in turn, offering new lights for female fans engaged in post-human thoughts? Moreover, in that both the subgenre of *kuaichuan* and the game *Lian* belong to relatively recent popular Chinese culture, the representation of the posthuman in these products has received little scholarly attention in existing English literature, highlighting the significance of my ensuing discussion.

It is noticeable that in both *Dalao* and *Lian*, the bodies of the female protagonists are either omitted or hidden. In *Dalao*, as an exemplary work of the *kuaichuan* genre, the female protagonist is thrown into a game-like system and is obliged to undertake ten missions in ten different sub-worlds. From the outset, the heroine Jiang Rui has already been transferred to the first world and occupied the body of another girl Du Baoqin 杜宝琴, leaving no trace of Jiang's own body and identity. It is notable that few words are devoted to the heroine's corporeal features in any of the ten worlds. That is to say, *Dalao* omits the heroine's body completely.

Lian resembles *Dalao* in this regard. In the game, as previously explained, each player plays the role of the producer (heroine). The story develops when the producer meets the leading male characters. Upon closer inspection, the heroine's body is intentionally hidden, made incomplete or insignificant in most of the game settings. For instance, the opening screen of the game (see Figure 1.1) features only the male characters while the heroine being absent.



Figure 1.1 The opening page of *Lian*

As the game progresses, new cards appear, each introducing a particularly important event.²⁰⁴ However, most cards also fail to offer a full picture of the heroine's body. As exhibited in a famous card of Bai Qi (2018, figure 1.2), the heroine's body is represented only by one of her hands, making a sharp contrast to the clear and complete body of Bai, which takes up almost the entire card face.

²⁰⁴ There are five levels of the cards in *Lian*: HN, N, R, SR, and SSR (from low to high). The higher the level of the card is, the less likely it is to be drawn by the player. And cards of higher levels will be more helpful for the players to promote the story.



Figure 1.2 A card of Bai titled “Cisheng juanlian” 此生眷恋 (Love of the whole life)

Despite their absent physical bodies, the minds of the female protagonists in both stories remain stable and unchanged.²⁰⁵ In *Dalao*, despite her different identities in each sub-world, the heroine’s name Jiang Rui remains unchanged for the whole process of her time travels. It thus sees how an unchanged single mind, appearing as Jiang Rui, confronts ten different and disparate bodies. The first chapter ends with an explanation: “Jiang Rui finds her (i.e. Du Baoqin’s) soul and asks her if she would be willing to offer Jiang her body. As an exchange, Jiang will fulfill her wishes (姜芮寻到她的神魂，询问是否愿意将身体的使用权交给她，作为交换，她可以满足对方的愿望).”²⁰⁶ As the following lines read, “she (Jiang) has approached many people who just died, with an attempt to trade

²⁰⁵ Although in the original Chinese novel, the author adopts the words “灵魂/神魂” which literally can be translated as “soul” to refer to the heroine, it has little to do with religious implications about soul (especially Buddhism or Daoism) that stresses metempsychosis. Nor does it intend to convey a very philosophical meaning about soul that can be traced back to the ancient Greek times. See Dorothea Frede, Burkhard Reis eds. *Body and soul in ancient philosophy*, 1. Rather, this particular word in *Dalao* is more about the heroine’s own consciousness, ideas and wills to accomplish the missions issued by the game-like system. So in this part, I will use the word “mind” to represent “灵魂” for better understanding.

²⁰⁶ *Dalao*, Chapter 1, “Baling bingge 01” 八零兵哥 01 [A soldier in 1980s, 01].

with them for a body and an identity (她接触过很多刚死的人[...]想要与他们交易, 获得一具身体, 一个身份).”²⁰⁷ This deal is highlighted in the chapter’s title “Exchange a Body, and the Soul Enters (交换身体, 灵魂进入),” denoting that it is the heroine’s soul that represents the “essence” of Jiang Rui.

Lian adopts a parallel pattern with *Dalao*. The player needs to implant his/her own mind into the always-blurry body of the female protagonist. At the beginning, the player is requested to give the heroine a name. Throughout the game, this name is taken as an emblem of the player’s mind, which represents the female protagonist and determines further progress. This design affirms the autonomy of the mind and its function as the core of human beings. Underpinning this viewpoint is the assumption of a hierarchical relationship within mind/body dualism, where the mind outweighs the body.

It is conterminous with Hayles’ claim: “A historically specific construction called the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman.”²⁰⁸ The proliferation of multiple posthuman forms is closely associated with the deconstruction of “the liberal humanist subject” built upon the idea of possessive individualism.²⁰⁹ The liberal humanist subject, or to borrow Heidegger’s words, “the idea of human essence,”²¹⁰ contains an essential idea that an individual is the possessor of his/her “own person and capacities,” so being human requires “freedom from the will of others, and freedom is a function of possession.”²¹¹ This is an imagined “state of nature” as a retrospective creation of a market society. It establishes the foundation of the labor of free market, privatization, and other relations in a modern capitalist society in which a real,

²⁰⁷ *Dalao*, Chapter 1, “Baling bingge 01” 八零兵哥 01 [A soldier in 1980s, 01].

²⁰⁸ Hayles, *How We Became Posthumans*, 2.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. Farnell David (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 298.

²¹¹ Hayles, *How We Became Posthumans*, 3.

stable material body plays a central role. Nonetheless, as Hayles suggests, this human-centric way of thinking is superseded by the posthuman that “privileges informational pattern over material instantiation,” so that embodiment is far from inevitable in life. Moreover, posthumanism regards consciousness as “the seat of human identity [...] as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show.”²¹² As a consequence, consciousness, or, the informational pattern, is given more weight in Hayles’ perception of the posthuman.

Contemporary popular Chinese internet culture shares this line of theoretical thinking of posthumanism. I argue that the omitted female bodies in *Dalao*, *Lian* and other similar works not only rescue women from the obsolete patriarchal structure which still finds its way in *Wan Qingsi* and *Mulan*, but also allay Hayles’ anxiety about the peril of posthumanism for feminist theories. Contrarily, in these popular cultural products that values mind over body, women are mainly instructed by mind and are thus free from the restrictions of female bodies. Moreover, women are treated as the universal one that is subjective and superior, especially when compared to the male characters in the same stories.

On closer scrutiny, the male characters in both *Dalao* and *Lian* differ radically from the mind-centered female characters. The male characters’ minds are undermined, whereas their bodies are accentuated. As the author of *Dalao* states: “I need to say something about the hero [...] In each sub-world, there is a hero, who is actually a fragment of the mind belonging to the hero of the overall story, which is also the last world, or in other words, the world of the heroine herself (关于本文男主...这里说一下，每个世界都有男主，且男主都是灵魂碎片，主世界 [即最后一个世界，也是女主本身所处的世界] 合成一个).”²¹³ Only when the heroine (Jiang Rui) has accomplished all the missions and gathered all

²¹² Hayles, *How We Became Posthumans*, 2-3.

²¹³ *Dalao*, Chapter 3 “Baling bingge 03” 八零兵哥 03 [A soldier in 1980s, 03], “The author has something to say” part.

the fragments can the integrity of the hero's mind and body be achieved. That is to say, the male protagonist is deprived of his rights to possess autonomous consciousness. He can only be rescued and reassembled by the heroine. In a similar token, the male protagonists in *Lian* function as NPCs (non-Player Characters). So their bodies, identities, words, and actions are all prescribed by the game designers, preventing their possession of free minds and consciousness.²¹⁴

However, if we turn to the male bodies portrayed in the two stories, we find that both the authors/producers and consumers have devoted much more attention to the bodies of the male characters. *Dalao* elaborates each male body in every sub-world. To take the primary male protagonist Zhao Nan 赵南 as an example, his body appears firstly in a photo: "The man in the photo is younger than 30, dressed in a tidy military uniform. His hair is short, and he looks at the camera with a serious face (里头人三十不到的年纪, 穿着一身整齐的军装, 头发理得短短的, 满脸肃穆地看向镜头)."²¹⁵ Chapters 6 and 7 examine Zhao's body more thoroughly: "There is a man standing next to the bus stop. His back is straight like a pine tree, and he also looks like a sword [...] He is tall and has a handsome face. He is strong and manly (汽车站点下站了个人, 瞧他背影, 挺拔得似一颗青松, 又像一柄宝剑[...]好高的个头[...]长得也不错[...]还是像这样阳刚硬朗的, 才有男人味)."²¹⁶

The elaborately devised male bodies, compared to their deficiency in minds, can be further analyzed through the theoretical lens of simulation. As Baudrillard

²¹⁴ Shao and Wang eds., *Pobishu*, 364. NPC (Non-Player Character). In general, all roles that are not controlled by the players in the game can be regarded as NPCs. In the era of web games, NPCs are usually manipulated by the game designers. NPCs always take the roles as follows: the one who assist the players, the one who oppose the players, the key figure that instruct the players to accomplish certain missions, the one who offer missions and who reward the players, and also the one who are the victims of the players' violence. They are all significant characters in the game.

²¹⁵ *Dalao*, Chapter 3, "Baling bingge 03" 八零兵哥 03 [A soldier in 1980s, 03].

²¹⁶ *Dalao*, Chapters 6, 7, "Baling bingge 06,07" 八零兵哥 06, 07 [A Soldier in 1980s, 06, 07].

demonstrates, “the operation of the simulation is nuclear and genetic [...] no more mirror of being and appearances of the real and its concept.”²¹⁷ Therefore, the system of meaning is no longer the familiar “operations of consumption and production,” but “the circulation of signifiers with no referent in reality” of an informational era.²¹⁸ In short, in the age of mass media, “a sign system based in image culture” has become the main method of reading the “real.”²¹⁹ For Baudrillard, signs and images of simulacra stand independently. They merely relate to other signs that have little connection with social reality. The men with fragmented souls in *Dalao* are thus only images detached from the real person.

Nevertheless, as suggested by Baudrillard in investigating the effectiveness of advertisements, the superficial signs that form the simulacra of the products still contain material effects. The genuine cultural implications of the images make them sites of a sense of reality that can yield much leverage in consumers. This argument is also valid to *Dalao* if we look at readers’ comments. For example, a comment in Chapter 9 (posted by Jiejie 介绍) reads: “I do not know why, but he reminds me of my elder brother (我为什么想起了我哥).”²²⁰ These images of the heroes in each sub-world, based on the discrete articulation of their bodies as well as their identities and characteristics, arouse readers’ imagination of communicating with, falling in love with and living with these simulated males. These imaginary scenarios greatly enhance readers’ pleasure in consuming these *kuaichuan* products.

Another incident about an image of Bai Qi in *Lian* serves as a more telling example of the oscillation between simulation and reality of online posthuman products. On 14th May 2019, *Lian* released a short video of one of Bai’s new cards

²¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

²¹⁸ Kim, *Cyborg and Barbie Dolls*, 33.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Jiejie 介绍, Reader’s comments. <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3283072&chapterid=9>, 2018.

“Meng Lüren” 梦旅人 (A Traveler in the Dream). However, it immediately sparked fierce criticism from netizens. From my reading of the comments posted on Weibo (figure 1.3 and 1.4), players agree that this image of Bai is thoroughly flawed, ranging from his gestures and actions to his figure and face.²²¹



Figure 1.3 (Criticism on Bai’s gestures and acts)

²²¹ Here are the translations of the netizens’ comments in the two figures. Figure 2.3: a. Indeed, the moving action is kind of silly. b. What’s wrong with the action? c. It is so rigid. d. It is ugly, in fact....e. How to say...I do think the image of the card is ruined. Figure 2.4: a. Back to the drawing board, please. Is this the right quality for a standard sp? (SP can be regarded as a SSR card plus picture video, or in other words, a picture video of a card at the SSR level). It looks silly when it is moving, and the proportions of the figure collapse. b. (What’s wrong with) the shoulders? c. Although I went to pick up the moon with Bai Qi, his face is becoming more and more odd. His front face is OK but his side face is too strange. d. This is not the SP that I want. Go away!



Figure 1.4 (Critics about Bai's figure and face)

The players consider this image of Bai (see figure 1.5) much uglier than the previous version (see figure 1.6) and call for the restoration of the original, “real” Bai. This incident reminds us of the concept of “hyperreal” raised by Baudrillard.²²² As explains, simulation produces a “hyperreal” world in which there is no reality outside the sign system. In this sense, reality becomes “an effect of the sign.”²²³ Simulation, on the contrary, upholds the illusion of reality. As Toffoletti points out, “the reality principle is thus maintained by the approximation of the appearance.”²²⁴ Therefore, in the hyperreal world of *Lian*, players experience their lives with Bai “more real than real,” and any subtle

²²² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Kim, *Cyborg and Barbie Dolls*, 36.

amendment of his body would provoke strong resistance.²²⁵ In other words, in order to maintain the illusionary reality constituted by the simulation, the consumers enforces the game producer to rehabilitate Bai in “Meng Lüren” to its original form. This is reminiscent of the “strategy of deterrence” promoted by Baudrillard, whose primary principle is to conceal the fact that there is no equation between a referent and reality in the world of posthuman.²²⁶ It thus unveils the central point of Baudrillard’s theory of simulation: reality is a production. This theoretical claim was also illustrated by the destiny of the image of “Meng Lüren.”

A week later, the game producer released a modified image of Bai according to the consumers’ feedbacks (see figure 1.7). As one of the comments indicates, this altered Bai has a rounder head and a smaller face. The distance between his eyes is narrower and his neck is also amended (头顶的轮廓比较圆了, 脸看起来也没那么宽了, 眼距也改了, 脖子也调整了 figure 1.7).²²⁷ Implicit in the arbitrary alteration of Bai’s body is that all the male characters in the game, as NPCs bereft of an independent mind, are essentially simulated products that have cultural reaches in reality, enabling the female fans to construct their partners based on their own tastes. Therefore, I argue that posthuman imaginations manifested in both the *kuaichuan* genre and online otome games like *Lian* provide an effective strategy for (mostly) female web users to exercise their feminist power to define their male partners.²²⁸ This strategy firstly stresses mind over body, then omits or hides the female bodies to hide them from patriarchal

²²⁵ Kim, *Cyborg and Barbie Dolls*, 35.

²²⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 7.

²²⁷ Yi Qingfeng-0729 Baiqi Shengri Kuaile 倚清风-0729 白起生日快乐 [Happy birthday to Bai Qi on July the 29th], users’ comments on Weibo, <https://m.weibo.cn/3248438592/4374749100379733>, 2019.

²²⁸ Toms, *Lian Yu Zhizuoren de nüxing wanjia bili gaoda 94.2%, yinü youxi zouhong zheshe de bujin shi juda shichang xuqiu* 《恋与制作人》的女性玩家比例高达 94.2% 乙女游戏走红折射的不仅是巨大市场需求 [The proportion of female players of "Love and Producer" is as high as 94.2%, and the popularity of the girl game reflects not only the huge market demand], <https://www.czlogo.com/art/fq/22450.html>, 2021. According to the report, female players account for 94.3% of *Lian*’s whole players and *Lian* is widely accepted as one of the most celebrated representatives of otome games that aim to fulfil female players’ heterosexual imaginations.

judgments, and finally allows (female) consumers to sculpt their male partners' bodies according to their own desires. These posthuman imaginations adopts a feminist strategy which reverses the traditional gender hierarchy in terms of the mind/body dualism. This time, it is women who act as "the guardians of culture and the things of the mind," while men are closely related to "the mortal body" that is to be manipulated by the mind.²²⁹



Figure 1.5 The first version of "Meng Lüren"

²²⁹ Londa Schiebinger, "Introduction," *Feminism and the Body*, ed. Londa Schiebinger (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.



Figure 1.6 The original image of Bai



Figure 1.7 (Left: The first Bai in “Meng Lüren”; Right: Amended Bai in “Meng Lüren”)

Conclusion

Looking through the (female) body constructions in online time travel romances since mid-2000s, this chapter contends that these online narratives construct a community of female netizens engaged in an ever-growing feminist consciousness. The changing community not only satisfies the female web users’ gendered desires, but also mirrors the concurrent socio-political context.

During the early years of the literary genre, echoing the “leftover women” social trend, female fans were longing for an ideal “Mr. Right” and a perfect

marriage. As *Wan Qingsi* demonstrates, the current online works were mobilized to produce female bodies that were voluntarily adapted to patriarchal discourses of femininity through time-travel. The beautified women, therefore, were presented with numerous archetypal male lovers.

However, the female-oriented time travel discourses around 2014, exemplified by *Mulan Wu Zhangxiong*, aim to indicate embodied ideals of females opposite to their predecessors and attempt to delve into more hidden aspects of women-concerned social contexts. Despite the queerness of the heroines' bodies, they win over the patriarchal perceptions and keep their self-cultivated subjectivities. Discussed with the contemporary prevalence of *xiao xianrou* discourse in public, these narratives break down the boundaries set by their precursors. They showcase not only the female netizens' intentions to protest against the male-determined female bodies, but also their strong desires to reshape their roles in social life and private relationships.

And the latest case of *Dalao Dou Aiwo*, examined together with the popular online game *Lian Yu Zhizuoren*, brings female netizens to hidden realms beyond ordinary perception and real-life experience, creating more definite feminist expressions. The two products provide female fans with a space transposing the mind/body dualism that tends to treat men as symbols of the mind and women as the temporal body. By bringing in posthuman imaginations, these online products empower women to take the position of mind and thus possess the authority to define their male partners' bodies.

Notably, this posthuman trend also goes in line with the emergence of “dividual” as a counterpart to “individual” in digital culture. It is well known that in the modern society, individual stands both as “a unified person” and “as an agent in charge one's actions before the state and the institutions.”²³⁰ As an indivisible

²³⁰ Bruno Fernanda and Manolo Rodríguez Pablo, “The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39, no.3 (2022): 28.

being, individual is closely “related to the constitution of the subject” as well as “the grounding of the modern states” and societies.²³¹ However, in the digital age where individuals are always counted on the basis of data, they tend to “lose their aura of distinctiveness because the selves are able to be classified (and thereby manipulated) by the very data which are supposed to serve individual needs.”²³² In this sense, individuals are giving ways to dividuals as human subjects that are “endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control, like computer-based systems.”²³³ Nevertheless, as Bruno Fernanda and Manolo Rodríguez Pablo note, contemporary society does not always promote an opposition or exclusion between the dividual and the individual. Rather, they are showcased in a “co-presence,” or an “individual-dividual composition,”²³⁴ just as in the cases of *Dalao* and *Lian* where women adopt the presence of “dividuals” for the pursuit of individual rights and interests. The flourishing presentations of dividual and the co-existence of dividual and individual in popular online products offer valuable insights in the realm of popular culture and digital cultures, which are worthy of further explorations.

²³¹ Fernanda and Pablo, “The Dividual,” 34.

²³² Robert Williams, “Politics and Self in the Age of Digital Re(pro)ductibility,” *Fast Capitalism* 1, no.1 (2005): 108.

²³³ Ibid., 104.

²³⁴ Fernanda and Pablo, “The Dividual,” 40.

Chapter Two

“Domestic Fights” (*zhaidou*) Fiction: A Feminist Reading of Online Middle-class Culture

“I find that I am becoming more and more keen on reading ‘domestic fights’ novels. I can always relate to them (发现我现在越来越爱看古言宅斗了，总能戳到我的点).”²³⁵ Browsing today’s Chinese cyberworld, it is not surprising to find that a considerable number of netizens are talking about their interest in a subgenre of online literature known as *zhaidou* (domestic fights). This chapter focuses on this subgenre of online literature, which normally features stories set in ancient times and concerns itself with domestic power struggles between mostly female characters in elite families, and many of these stories include heroines as time travellers.

According to Shao, these internet-based novels are significantly different from their famous predecessors that were prevalent on TV and print media during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Shao calls them old-fashioned love stories, based on a model established by Qiong Yao, “a myth of love” (爱情神话).²³⁶ In Qiong’s model, love is given without restraint and true love surpasses all other factors. This “myth of love” model in popular romances originates from the May Fourth period. As is widely known, intellectuals employed love as “a politicized symbol of the absolute hypergods of the May Fourth modern: freedom, equality, rights,” thus translating “true love” into a firm and central foundation for modern Chinese sensibilities.²³⁷ Following this tradition, Willam Jankowiak and Robert Moore

²³⁵ From internet user “IFLYUnderwater” on Weibo.

²³⁶ Shao, *Wangluo shidai de wenxue yindu* 网络时代的文学引渡 [Literary extradition in the age of internet], 153-4.

²³⁷ Lee Haiyan, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 105.

also highlight that “love” has become the key ingredient of dating and marriage in their discussion about family life in post-socialist China.²³⁸

The heroine in *Shunü Gonglue* 庶女攻略 (Strategies for A Concubine’s Daughter, 2010-11), however, showcases the opposite orientation towards love.²³⁹ Shao believes that this popular online story, as a representative example of the *zhaidou* genre and female-oriented online literature, offers a new model that represents an ideal type of romance contrasting with Qiong Yao’s model. Labelled as “anti-romantic” romance stories by Shao, the new paradigm is deliberately named after the traditional “romantic stories,” stressing how the main female characters in these new stories are the diametrical opposite of their predecessors. Underlying the paradigm shift lies the notable change of Chinese citizens’ value and attitudes toward romance and marriage. The heavy pressure of everyday living and the pursuit of wealth has taken the place of “love” in shaping popular romantic stories, with Shao finding that the heroine in the book treats her husband more like a boss than a lover.²⁴⁰

Shao’s findings bring new light to cyber-based romance literature, yet the factors and elements behind the dramatic change of these romantic novels have yet to be fully understood. To explore these hidden aspects, in this chapter, I use an example of online *zhaidou* fiction titled *Zhifou Zhifou Yingshi Lüfei Hongshou* 知否知否，应是绿肥红瘦 (The Story of Minglan, 2010-2012) as my case. Similar to many of its peers, this novel identifies itself as an “anti-romantic” romance story, as evidenced in Chapter 91: “In such a world (the ancient patriarchal world the heroine travels to), what can an ordinary modern woman do? To pursue freedom and ideals? To pursue faithful love and a wholehearted lover?

²³⁸ William R. Jankowiak and Robert L. Moore, *Family Life in China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

²³⁹ Zhizhi 吱吱, *Shunü gonglue* 庶女攻略 [Strategies for A Concubine’s Daughter], <https://book.qidian.com/info/1626560/>, 2010-11.

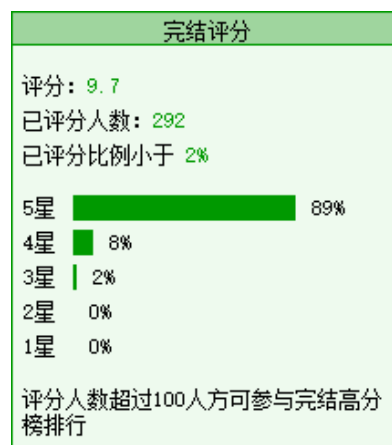
²⁴⁰ Shao, *Wangluo shidai de wenxue yindu* 网络时代的文学引渡 [Literary extradition in the age of internet], 152.

How could it be possible?! (在那样的世界，一个普通的现代女子能做什么？追求自由理想？追求坚贞的爱情和一心人？这怎么可能？！)”²⁴¹

Written by Guanxin Zeluan 关心则乱, a middle-class woman who claims to be a fan of *A Dream of Red Mansions* and the domestic lives of ancient women, the online story of *Zhifou* quickly became a best-seller and was well-received among online readers since 2010. It has already received more than 130,000 comments and is bookmarked by 200,000 readers (see figure 2.1).²⁴² More crucially, the novel enjoys a high reputation among online literature fans, with 89% of its readers giving it a five-star review (see figure 2.2).²⁴³ It has also garnered a number of faithful fans, with a reader with an ID called Yun 溱 revealing she has read the book multiple times. Each time she wants to read something but cannot find anything suitable, she would re-read *Zhifou* (see figure 2.3).²⁴⁴

非v章节章均点击数: 1317635 总书评数: 134889 当前被收藏数: 192146 营养液数: 175525 文章积分: 3,879,061,760

Figure 2.1 Data about *Zhifou* in Jinjiang 1



²⁴¹ Chapter 91, “Bukan buzhidao, gudai zhen qimiao” 不看不知道，古代真奇妙 [You do not know if you do not see, the ancient time is so interesting], “The author has something to say” part.

²⁴² Please kindly see <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=931329>.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Figure 2.2 Data about *Zhifou* in Jinjiang 2



Figure 2.3 Reader Yun's comments about *Zhifou* in Jinjiang

The novel was adapted for TV with the same title and was first broadcast between late 2018 and early 2019 by Hunan television, one of the most-favored TV stations in mainland China.²⁴⁵ Additionally, three famous websites, iQiyi, Tencent video, and Youku also made the TV drama available for watching during the same period. On hitting the small screen and the internet, the TV adaptation was an immediate blockbuster cultural hit. According to data collected by the official account of the drama in Weibo, *Zhifou* enjoys high audience ratings (over 2%)²⁴⁶ and has been played over ten billion times online (see figure 2.4). More importantly, the immense success of the TV-play has triggered the revival of *zhaidou* stories among popular debates since 2019 and “domestic fights” remains a favorite topic in female-oriented popular culture to the present day.

²⁴⁵ The TV drama of *Zhifou* was initially broadcast from 25/12/2018 to 13/02/2019, and it has 78 episodes in total.

²⁴⁶ The average audience ratings of Hunan television are around 1.05%.



Figure 2.4 Data about the TV drama of Zhifou

The online novel and the TV drama embrace the same basic storyline: they both elaborate the life story of the ordinary girl Sheng Minglan 盛明兰. As a less-favored daughter of a concubine from an official family in ancient times, she makes remarkable efforts to survive the harsh patriarchal environment and lead a good life. However, as the novel and the drama are promoted on platforms with different socioeconomic bases, they bear notable variations that are worthy of further inquiry.

By exploring the two identical yet different cultural products, this chapter addresses the following questions: What social factors are hidden behind the online *zhaidou* stories? What role does “social class” play in generating the “anti-romantic” online narratives?²⁴⁷ Do these cyber-based *zhaidou* stories refer to the lives of certain class or strata in the current socioeconomic context? What kind of images do they create? What kind of social values do they promote or deny? What are the differences between the online narrative of *Zhifou* and its TV adaptation? And finally, what factors are set into motion to determine the differences?

In answering these questions, the first part will focus on the shielded spatial politics presented in *Zhifou*, arguing that *zhaidou* stories are well-matched with middle-class life in contemporary urban China. The next part will examine three forms of “domestic fights” depicted by the novel and argues that Minglan represents a feminist cultural icon for middle-class female netizens. The final section compares the TV adaptation and the original online fiction, probing the possible economic, cultural, and political factors that generate the differences between the two products.

²⁴⁷ “Social class” discussed here does not refer to the Maoist social class that concentrates on class struggle. Rather, it mainly points to the newly-emerged idea of social class after the reform and opening up and the construction of post-socialist market, which considers social, economic, cultural and political capital required by certain social groups.

2.1 Matched Marriage and Class Spatialization: Middle-class Culture in *Zhifou*

In delineating middle-class life in Kunming, Li Zhang proposes a concept of “spatialization of class” to articulate the two-sided cultural process of class-making and space-making.²⁴⁸ Firstly, she explains how socioeconomic differences can be “spatialized and materialized” in the process of remaking urban communities.²⁴⁹ Zhang adopts the idea of “stratified living space” that sheds light on the apparent disparities between diversified living spaces of different social groupings. She compares “luxury neighborhoods” and “middle- stratum neighborhoods” in the city and emphasizes how the former group, usually endowed with the name of “gardens” (yuan or huayuan 园 or 花园) surpasses the latter in terms of locations, living environment, community services and “the social composition of residents.”²⁵⁰

In a similar vein, the fictitious world in *Zhifou* is also depicted as a stratified class society embodying a clear hierarchical order, which has been ignored by previous studies of web romances that focus on “love” and “seeking Mr. Right.” The story paints a picture of the ordinary life of two different social communities. The upper-class is mainly composed of members of the imperial house and other nobles, such as the family of Qi 齐, the Xiangyang marquis 襄阳侯, and the

²⁴⁸ China’s middle class has emerged as an economic and social force in contemporary China. The 2001 Chinese Academy of Social Science’s (CASS) report recognized middle class in contemporary Chinese society with six defining characteristics: (1) the type of work (intellectual labor in a safe and clean environment); (2) rights and duties at the workplace (including responsibilities, the right to speak up, make suggestions and exercise some form of control); (3) income, including all perks, patrimonial assets and other benefits directly or indirectly deriving from employment; (4) skills (especially education higher than high school, training and experience); (5) lifestyle and consumption habits; and (6) moral and civic consciousness. Xin Wang, “Capital, Habitus, and Education in Contemporary China: Understanding Motivations of Middle-class Families in Pursuing Studying abroad in the United States,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2020, vol.(52)12: 1315. 1314-1328.

²⁴⁹ Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca N.Y., London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 108.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

family of Gu, the Ningyuan marquis 宁远侯.²⁵¹ Meanwhile the Sheng family, where the female protagonist hails from, is placed within a “middle-class” community, which by and large consists of officials and rich merchants.

The physical disparities between the residential houses of the two social classes can hardly go unnoticed. Chapters 49 and 52 portray the two residences in detail, implying how the living space of the upper-class Qi family is much more advanced both architecturally and environmentally. Chapter 49 details how the Sheng house is so cramped that the Sheng sisters (3 girls) must share their living space: “the Sheng house in the capital is not very spacious, so the three girls cannot have separate living places. They were positioned together in a big yard, and their bedrooms were divided by some fences and screen walls (京城盛府[...]三个兰没法子住开, 便另辟一处空阔的大院子, 将三排厢房略略用篱笆和影壁隔开了...).”²⁵²

It is a striking contrast with Chapter 52 that chronicles the mansion of the Qi family through the eyes of the hostess of the Sheng family: “(When she stepped in the mansion), she immediately feels the openness and brightness. The mansion is spacious and clear. In the distance, there are also bridges, rivers, hills, and trees (只觉得眼前倏然开朗, 府内高阔平和, 远眼过处还有小桥流水和山丘树林).”²⁵³ Moreover, the architectural style of the Qi family implies a strong sense of magnificence and wealth, as the place is replete with “carved corridors and paintings, and the doors, windows, and porch pillars are all decorated with gold (只见处处雕廊画栋, 着实气派富贵, 便是那门窗廊柱都是描金绘彩的).”

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²⁵¹ The wife of Xiangyang marquis is Pingning infanta 平宁郡主, who is the nephew of the emperor.

²⁵² Chapter 49, “Xinzhaoyu xinren,” 新宅与新人 [New house and new people].

²⁵³ Chapter 52, “Xiangyang houfu yiriyoushang,” 襄阳侯府一日游上 [A day trip to the house of Xiangyang marquis I].

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

Besides with the apparent disparities in physical construction, Zhang finds that an everyday “class milieu” and “self-conscious middle-class subjects” are being created in the mutual relationship between class-making and space-making under the regime of property and living.²⁵⁵ The cultivation of a distinct “milieu” specific to the upper-level group can also be observed in *Zhifou*, as commented by Ms. Wang (the hostess of the Sheng family): “There are many rich mansions in the world, but it is rare to like your house which has an elegant layout. It embraces a good omen! (天下富贵宅邸多了, 难得的是贵府格局雅致, 真是好山好水, 好兆头).”²⁵⁶ In this sense, compared to the Sheng family, this splendid house carries more cultural and symbolic capital than mere spatial divisions. Wang’s approval delivers a hinted message that the access to a house or community is directly connected to a relevant lifestyle, which symbolizes one’s class status and membership. It embodies a particular “class milieu” that bestows upon the upper-class members like the Qi family “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability.”²⁵⁷

It is no coincidence that with the impact of such distinct “class milieu,” these upper- and middle-class communities are more characterized with segregation and exclusion. As Zhang points out, upscale communities tend to “heighten social isolation and segregation” to “exclude unwanted intruders.”²⁵⁸ There is in this “exclusivity” a parallel with the story of *Zhifou*. It is interesting to note that in this online novel, the orientation towards segregation and exclusion is mostly showcased through vocabularies concerned with spaces and locations. The online text devotes vivid manifestations to demonstrating the spatial ordering between the characters. For instance, in Chapter 54, Qi Heng 齐衡, the single son of the Qi family, expresses his sincere love for the heroine Minglan. Minglan, despite

²⁵⁵ Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*, 108.

²⁵⁶ Chapter 52, “Xiangyang houfu yiriyong shang,” 襄阳侯府一日游上 [A day trip to the house of Xiangyang marquis I].

²⁵⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 185.

²⁵⁸ Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*, 120.

her positive feelings towards Qi, earnestly rejects his advances due to the clear class distinction between them. The author then maps out a detailed seating chart in a feast held in the Qi family after the sad break-up between the two. As the story unfolds, Qi Heng “holds the *central* position surrounded by the crowd (他在人群中央),” like “a myriad of stars around the moon (众星拱月).”²⁵⁹ Whereas Minglan, coming from a family with a relatively lower social position, is excluded and segregated to “a remote *corner*, and fragrances like a flower alone (而她在冷僻角落，独自芬芳).”²⁶⁰ It is also in this marked spatial division where we can find resonance in the aforementioned new “anti-romantic” pattern of contemporary online time travel romances.

To defend their privileged position, upper- and middle-class residents play a crucial role in constructing “a moral geography of otherness” to define those ranked lower socially and economically.²⁶¹ This intention of demoralizing “others,” though being hidden or neglected, also leaves its traces in online *zhaidou* stories. In *Zhifou*, Pingning infanta works hard to exclude the “malicious girls” from her son Qi Heng’s company to preserve the “purity and pristineness” of his environment.²⁶² “She inculcates her son to stay away from the chasing girls. As for the female servants in the house (谆谆教导儿子要谨防那些殷勤的姑娘，至于房里的丫鬟),” as the story goes, “the infanta treats them as *thieves*. If any of them displays signs of frivolity, they would either be beaten or sold, and some would even face the danger of losing their lives (郡主更是跟防贼一般，但凡有半分轻狂的，轻则打罚一顿，重则撵卖出去，甚至还有出了人命的).”²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Chapter 53, “Xiangyang houfu yiriyou zhong,” 襄阳侯府一日游中 [A day trip to the house of Xiangyang marquis II].

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Karin Till, “Neotraditional Towns and Urban Villages: The Cultural Production of a Geography of ‘Otherness,’” *Environment and Planning*, no. 11 (1993): 709-732

²⁶² Pow Choon-Piew, *Gated Communities in China : Class, Privilege and the Moral Politics of the Good Life* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 30.

²⁶³ Chapter 54, “Xiangyang houfu yiriyou xia,” 襄阳侯府一日游下 [A day trip to the house of Xiangyang marquis III].

The hidden yet permeated moral order within the desirable upper- and middle-class communities not only creates morally depraved others, but more importantly, as Erving Goffman puts it, the others are “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”²⁶⁴ In other words, their life stories are always viewed as pointless. In the world of *Zhifou*, the group located on the lowest rung of the social ladder is the servants and workers in these upper- and middle-level communities. They are forged to bear the identity of dubious “others.” While the story explores the life of the former two strata explicitly, the lowest group is largely erased from the lively picture of *Zhifou*. Except from playing the role of submissive subordinates of their masters, most of them, to a greater or lesser extent, are “invisible” to both the author and online readers and few of their individual lives are discussed. In a similar vein, Zhang also points out that in the upper- and middle-class communities in Kunming, the service workers like security guards and baby-sitters also occupy a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they are “wanted and depended upon” by the wealthy residents and “physically visible” in the well-decorated houses.²⁶⁵ On the other hand, they are perceived as others who are “despised, distrusted” and “socially invisible.”²⁶⁶

In so far as the novel *Zhifou* reveals, the online subgenre of *zhaidou* stories creates a certain type of self-conscious class subjects who share a distinct “class milieu.” They are characterized by two salient tendencies. Firstly, they accept the clear “social division marked by the emerging class distinction,” following the spatial ordering underpinned by the class stratification. And secondly, they take efforts to build a moral geography of “difference” and “otherness.” By bringing order to their communities, they maintain their privileged social status and are inclined to stigmatize and overlook the constructed “others.”

²⁶⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 3.

²⁶⁵ Zhang, *In Search of Paradise*, 135.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Such tendencies are not only abundant in the texts of the *zhaidou* stories. It is not difficult to find similar expressions among the readership of these online novels. And more importantly, it resonates with an overarching narrative of class and marriage widely accepted and circulated in contemporary Chinese social media. In a recent online debate in Weibo, user 虐芯墙 initiated a public discussion with a single question: “Brothers and sisters, according to your opinions, is *mendang hudui* (matched marriage) important? (兄弟姐妹们, 按照你们的心里所想, 在婚姻中, 你们觉得#门当户对重要还是不重要# figure 2.5)?”²⁶⁷ It titillates a broad public response, and it is of little surprise that the most “liked” comments underscore the unshakable significance of *mendang hudui* in looking for potential partners. Most of the participants of the discussion - seen from the comments - are typical of the class-conscious subjects delivered in the online *zhaidou* novels.

What is striking, however, is that many of the popular comments appear in a certain pattern that offers a story between an economically well-off middle-class woman and her ex-boyfriend or husband (or sometimes the family members of the man) as a representation of the “other.” For example, one woman criticizes her ex-boyfriend’s mother, who says to her son: “What’s the point of buying a house to get married? [...] Her family has one, ask them for it (上一个男朋友的妈妈跟我男朋友说, 结婚买什么房子啊[...]她家有房子, 跟她家要啊).” It recasts her understanding of the importance of *mendang hudui* and class stratification. As the final words of her comments indicate, she constructs a direct connection between “poverty” and “others” that are morally incorrect. “I cannot

²⁶⁷ *Mendang hudui* is a term that no brief explanation can adequately describe. Generally speaking, it can be traced back to traditional marriage in China, indicating that the two families of the marriage are usually of equal social status and have equal social property. Generally speaking, the couple are not allowed to meet each other before marriage and they are forbidden to choose their own partner, so “*mendang hudui*” is one of the most important criteria for parents to choose the right ones for their children’s marriages. In contemporary China, it quits the tradition of blind marriage yet containing a broader meaning than equal social and economic conditions of two families. The new interpretation of “matched marriage” also requires shared values, especially consumption ideas. See figure 2.5 and 2.6 about the online debates of “matched marriage.”

stand that your family confidently treats your poverty as something rightful. Matched marriage means not only matched economic status, but also parable values between two families (我接受不了你家人穷得理直气壮，门当户对指的不仅仅是经济，而是两个家庭的三观, figure 2.6).” The discussion is replete with parallel expressions and most of them are women’s voices. It is also reminiscent of Shao’s observation that sees the waning of love and romance in marriage. I contend that these female netizens, together with the active members (mostly women) in the online community of *zhaidou* stories, with their “relatively coherent identity as middle-class members,” has established a distinct class culture based on a certain set of socioeconomic attitudes, values, and actions, with a shared yet hidden awareness of “class milieu.”²⁶⁸ The story of *Zhifou*, in this sense, can be viewed as a snapshot of the life of contemporary middle-class, especially young middle-class women whose lives are inevitably closely tied with the internet, echoing the images of web romances’ fans portrayed by Feng and other reports discussed in introduction.

²⁶⁸ Chunling Li, “Characterizing China’s Middle Class: Heterogeneous Composition and Multiple Identities,” in *China’s Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, ed. Cheng Li (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 136.



Figure 2.5 A post about “matched marriage” on Weibo



Figure 2.6 Comments about the “matched marriage” post

2.2 Three Types of “Domestic Fights”: How Minglan is Idealized

2.2.1 “Domestic Fights” between Male-dependent Women: Patriarchal “Sexual Contract”

While the online middle-class subjects internalize and emulate the shared values of class stratification and tendency to disparage the lower classes, contrasting interests and goals produce endless conflicts within their stratum. As the title of the subgenre makes clear, “domestic fights” is a single and coherent theme traversing the entire novel. Seen from *Zhifou*, there are three major types of “domestic fights” in online *zhaidou* stories.

The most evident type is how female members within a family compete for the limited resources allocated by the male master (the breadwinner). A clear example within the Sheng family occurs between the master’s (Sheng Hong 盛纮) wife Ms. Wang 王氏 and one of his favorite concubines Ms. Lin 林姨娘. Since Lin is more sexually attractive, docile, and shrewd, Sheng favors her over Wang to a large extent and proffers her with considerable resources: “You give her farms and shops (给她庄子店铺). You provide them (Lin and her children) with estates and lands (给他们房产田地傍身).”²⁶⁹ Consequently, Lin has attained equality with Wang in terms of material benefits, despite her disadvantaged identity as a concubine.

A more significant form of the rivalries between these male-dependent women can be best articulated by another example. In Chapter 14 Hualan 华兰, the oldest daughter and first child of Sheng Hong and his wife Ms. Wang, is preparing for marriage with a son from a noble family. Sheng Hong invites Mrs. Kong 孔嬷嬷, a former palace maid and an expert of courtly female manners, to educate his daughter. While Hualan is the main recipient of the teaching, other younger

²⁶⁹ Chapter 1, “Youren shengguan le, youren siqiao le, [...] hai youren chuanyue le,” 有人升官了, 有人死翘了……还有人穿越了 [Someone is promoted; someone dies [...] and someone experiences time travel].

Sheng daughters are also required to attend Kong's class of imperial etiquette, where vivid manifestations of the tensions between the Sheng girls can be observed. While Mrs. Kong's objective is to ensure Hualan is educated to be a proper and decent hostess of an imperial family, Molan 墨兰, the daughter of concubine Lin and thus a competitor to Hualan, is a distracting presence. "She follows Hualan closely and does whatever Hualan is taught to do (墨兰亦步亦趋的跟在华兰身边, 华兰做什么她就做什么)" and disrupts the teaching by asking questions like "Am I right in doing this? Would this be good?", regarding herself as the prominent student. ((墨兰)还时不时的问 '嬷嬷我这样对不对', '嬷嬷您瞧这么着好吗', 几乎喧宾夺主的把自己当正牌学生了)."²⁷⁰ This results in Molan being criticized by Hualan's younger sister Rulan 如兰: "You mustn't bother Mrs. Kong all the time. You will encumber our big sister (Hualan) (别一天到晚缠着孔嬷嬷, 倒拖累了大姐姐)." ²⁷¹ This example clearly showcases how the women within a mansion battle for cultural capital that comes from their single male master. And the female protagonist Minglan's life as an unmarried girl is fraught with a great many other examples that are comparable to this rivalry between the Sheng girls.

Seen from this fierce competition, it is fair to say that how to become a desirable mate for a middle or upper-class family dominates the thinking of the two unmarried girls, especially Molan whose mother occupies an inferior position in the family line. Molan makes relentless efforts to take the cultural resources from her own sister, with the main purpose of equipping herself with attributes that are "necessary" to be a suitable wife for a man with relatively high social status. In so doing, she extends the possibility for herself to "marry up." As the heroine's understanding reads, these "morally and ceremonially correct"

²⁷⁰ Chapter 14, "Kong momo de peixunban," 孔嬷嬷的培训班 [Training class of Mrs. Kong].

²⁷¹ Ibid.

attributes are made to “add additional values to the girls” (明兰的理解是增加女孩的附加值).²⁷² It is evident that these girls who fight against each other are mostly perceived as commodities of different prices in the marriage market for the middle and upper-class in *Zhifou*. In other words, the marriages in the story include a profit-driven marriage contract drawn from capitalist market principles.

I argue that these stories of the Sheng women are in essence a retelling of the “sexual contract” proposed by Carole Pateman. In her ground-breaking work that adequately addresses how modern civil society, operating according to a “social contract,” is patriarchal in a fundamental way because it hides the “sexual and marriage contract” included in it. The “social contract” creates a civil society that is “divided into two realms”: a male-dominated public realm and a private one mainly inhabited by women. The public one, entrenched in a capitalist market, garners the majority of social attention and guarantees the political power of males. The private one is shaped by the omitted sexual contract that is believed to be politically irrelevant.²⁷³ Drawing on this contract, men not only uphold “political right over women,” but also “establish orderly access (by men) to women’s bodies.”²⁷⁴

This hidden yet lingering sexual contract is congenial to one of the most important underlying logics of today’s Chinese heterosexual marriage market, which is also suppressed in many romantic novels. As mentioned in the first part, emotional fulfillment in marriage-making is greatly undermined in online fiction. Rather, today’s marriage sees the importance of pragmatic interests and active engagement with “profit-oriented activities” of the young protagonists.²⁷⁵ This can be observed in a popular understanding of the post-socialist marriage market

²⁷² Chapter 13, “Duijiu dangge, rensheng jihe,” 对酒当歌，人生几何 [The wine, the song, life goes on].

²⁷³ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity in association with Basil Blackwell, 1988), 3. Here it is a feminist and economic history analysis that sees the dichotomy “between the family as the private sphere of social reproduction and the public realm of the market economy.” This chapter will maintain this division between the private/public spheres. Also see Pow, *Gated Communities in China*, 25.

²⁷⁴ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 2.

²⁷⁵ Jankowiak and Moore, *Family Life in China*, 97.

proposed by a self-styled “relationship expert” called Ayawawa 哎呀娃娃. Her “relationship theories” are mainly dependent on two concepts: mv (mate value) and pu (paternity uncertainty). According to Ayawawa, a woman’s mate value refers to her fertility. She is, therefore, in need of youth and beauty to demonstrate her high “mv” in the market. Unlike women, men are biologically uncertain about whether their descendants are truly theirs and therefore have paternity uncertainty. Women that are obedient and loyal to their mates will gain more economic and emotional investment from their male partners.²⁷⁶

Her idea is widely accepted and supported by young people looking for a suitable spouse. It has become customary for them to assess values in the marriage market before they develop emotional commitment to a potential partner. Not incidentally, women are placed in a more deferential situation to men under such a context. For example, Ayawawa promotes a marking system to evaluate women’s appearance, height, and figure through the lens of male preferences. It is initially published in her book *Ai De Shiwange Weishenm* 爱的十万个为什么 (One Hundred Thousand Reasons for Love) and is then circulated by new media such as Weibo and Wechat.²⁷⁷ Many female netizens are supportive of this marking system that aims to encompass all women in the marriage market, and want to be part of the system, as shown by a comment of one of the articles of Ayawawa: “I would like to know how to grade my appearance. I want to know my mark (我想知道怎么给自己长相打分, 我想知道自己能有多点分, figure 2.7).”²⁷⁸

What is more notable is that by employing language like “achieve self-improvement, receive perfect love, and embrace harmonious family (实现自我

²⁷⁶ See Ayawawa’s official account in Wechat, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XSMUPZPAdSQjtTF35mYdvQ>.

²⁷⁷ Yang Bingyang 杨冰阳 (Ayawawa), *Ai de shiwange weishenm* 爱的十万个为什么 [One hundred thousand reasons for love] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chuban gongsi 中国友谊出版公司, 2015), 319-320. The book offers a detailed marking system for women..

²⁷⁸ Ayawawa’s official account in Wechat, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XSMUPZPAdSQjtTF35mYdvQ>.

提升, 收获完满爱情, 拥有和谐家庭),” Ayawawa’s suggestions targeting unmarried women is deployed in a guise that borrows feminist rhetoric such as women’s own “choice” and “empowerment.”²⁷⁹ Far from empowering women with unconventional choices, Ayawawa’s ideas are in effect “‘permission’ to sexualize and objectify women—often by women themselves.”²⁸⁰ The self-chosen sexualization and objectification of women is underlined by her as an important way to increase their “sexual attractiveness.” The female followers of Ayawawa are taught to flaunt their “sexual attractiveness” as an important way to obtain status. They utilize their bodies as “objects to obtain a specific type of attention” and thus gain more (economic/cultural) investment from their male superiors.²⁸¹ As concubine Lin tells her daughter Molan after a battle with the other girls: “Don’t be afraid, my dear. (...) As long as we grab your father’s heart, there’s nothing to worry about (傻孩子, 怕什么? [...]咱么只要抓住了你父亲, 便一切都不怕了).”²⁸²

Therefore, the aforementioned type of “domestic fights,” generally occur between women fighting for capital generated from the single male head of the middle- and upper-class family, is in perfect sync with one of the mainstream understandings of marriage and romantic relationships in contemporary Chinese social media. It is a typical manifestation of how women choose to be presented as sexual objects in exchange for public power and economic resources held by men. Rather than looking for gender equality at structural, institutional, and political levels, the pervasive “teachings” of Ayawawa in diverse media platforms contribute to women’s embrace of traditional gender roles, trying to convince them that such patriarchal roles are the major source of their benefits and profits.

²⁷⁹ Ayawawa’s official account in Wechat (before revision). These contents have been deleted at the moment.

²⁸⁰ Kristin J. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-feminism in A Post-feminist Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 18.

²⁸² Chapter 16, “Yige dou buneng shao,” 一个都不能少 [No one should be left behind].

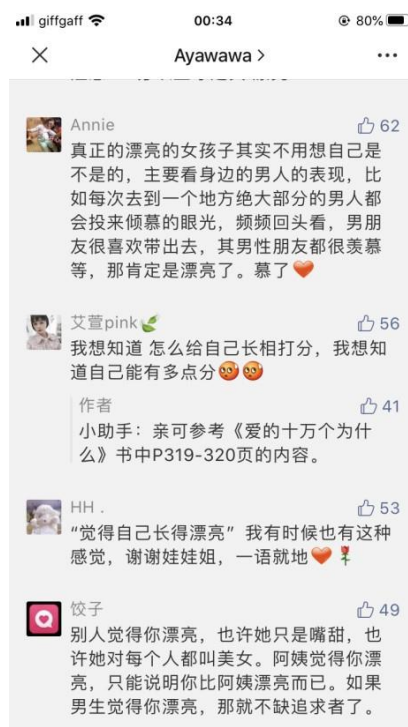


Figure 2.7

2.2.2 “Domestic Fights” between the “Negative” and the “Positive” Women

Taking a second look at the novel, it is not difficult to find that although female characters like Lin and Molan benefit from the logic of the marriage market that they are familiar with (especially during the first half of the book), they are favored by neither the author nor online readers. In 2007, a book called *Dulala Shengzhiji* 杜拉拉升职记 (Go Lala Go) was published and became one of that year’s best-sellers. In 2010 (the same year *Zhifou* was first published online), a film version of *Dulala* was released, which also received wide media attention. In his reading of Lala’s story, Marco Fumian finds that the battles between “good” Lala and her morally and ethically incorrect “bad” colleague figure largely in the novel. In these works, writers are encouraged to create two polarized “type”

figures belonging to “opposite” camps, namely, the *zhengmian* (positive) group and the *fanmian* (negative) group.²⁸³ These tales delineate the war between the two contrasting sides, and they always witness victory by the “positive” over the “negative”.

Interestingly, the online story of *Zhifou* also follows the mentioned story pattern. Female characters such as Ms. Lin and the younger Qin (小秦氏, the stepmother of the hero Gu Tingye 顾廷烨) can be considered as “negative” women within the “domestic fights” and are subject to criticism throughout the story.²⁸⁴ Reading the whole story, it is easy to see that the author deliberately connects their characters with moral depravity and with tragic ends to their lives, stressing their roles as classical “negative” types.²⁸⁵ As the author demonstrates in her discussion with readers, “everyone will embrace his/her determined end. There is no need to worry about whether those who should be punished would flee (每个人都会有应该的结局的, 大家不用担心该虐的没虐到之类的).”²⁸⁶ This brings forth the second form of “domestic fights” which occurs between the “negative” characters and the “positive” ones, like Minglan and Ms. Hai 海氏, the daughter-in-law of Ms. Wang. The author contributes a large portion of the novel to detailing this form of rivalry for power, indicating her approval to the social values attached to the “positive” female characters.

The celebration of these “positive” female figures provides online fans with another way of reading Minglan and her female peers’ lives. According to the sexual contract proposed by Pateman, the domestic sphere which has been closely

²⁸³ Marco Fumian, “‘Chronicle of Dulala’s Promotion: Exemplary Literature, The Middle Class, and The Socialist Market,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 28, no.1 (2016): 101.

²⁸⁴ In the novel, the main female gainers of the first type of “domestic fights” includes Ms. Lin and her daughter Molan, the younger Qin, Aunt Kang (康姨妈), who is Ms. Wang’s sister, and also Manniang 曼娘, the hero Gu’s “kept woman” (外室) as well as ex-girlfriend.

²⁸⁵ For example, concubine Lin killed Minglan’s mother, and finally Lin was sent to a remote farm; the younger Qin cheated Gu for more than twenty years and she also wanted to burn Minglan to death, and finally she also died miserably.

²⁸⁶ Chapter 178, “Tianxiashi, jiashi, guoshi,” 天下事, 家事, 国事 [Social events, family affairs, and national events], “The author has something to say” part.

tied to women only, is deemed as “politically and publicly irrelevant” and subordinated to the male-dominant public realm. As noted by Ueno Chizuko in her incisive explanations of patriarchy and capitalist markets, the demarcation between “the capitalist market” (the public realm) and “the family” is regarded as the origin of sexual discrimination in industrial societies. In the capitalist, market driven society, the domestic sphere, or the family, is set outside the market system. In other words, women’s “reproductive works” within the domestic settings like reproduction and housework are not included and recognized by the market system. In this sense, women’s work is considered worthless, and both patriarchy and capitalism benefit from this result--the men forcibly occupy women’s labor at home, and the capitalist market is immune from the high cost of the “reproduction of human beings.”²⁸⁷

To borrow Shao’s words in her reading of *Shunü Gonglue*, I contend that for Minglan and other “positive” female figures, the household in these *zhaidou* novels can be read as a metaphor of the contemporary Chinese workplace. As indicated in *Privatizing China*, the 1978 opening reform implanted market-dominated ideas across the mundane life of Chinese citizens. Meanwhile, the neoliberal logic linked to “entrepreneurialism” and “self-enterprise” has also been anchored in the Chinese economy which had been under strict hegemonic control for decades.²⁸⁸ It would be preposterous and impractical to claim today’s China as a neoliberal society, yet to adopt Aihwa Ong’s concept of “neoliberal exception,” sovereign states are in practice supposed to take “a measure of sovereign flexibility.” It permits and promotes neoliberal exceptions to “create new economic possibilities, spaces, and techniques for governing the population.”²⁸⁹ As Zhang and Ong assert, although the neoliberal thinking and

²⁸⁷ Ueno Chizuko, *Fuquanzhi yu zibenzhuyi* 父权制与资本主义 [Patriarchy and capitalism], trans. Zou Yun 邹韵, Xue Mei 薛梅 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2020).

²⁸⁸ Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong, *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), 4.

²⁸⁹ Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

strategies have been clearly and determinedly declined by the Chinese government, “many of the new policies and practices introduced under the rubric of privatization have been deeply influenced by what we would consider a neoliberal line of reasoning.”²⁹⁰

To describe the theory of neoliberal exception further, Ong attributes the notable economic growth of cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong to a particular “space-time ecosystem” stimulated by neoliberal exception. Within these specific ecosystems, various elements like “strategic knowledge, resources and actors” interact to create a “self-spun web of symbiotic relationships.” As Ong explains, the underlying logic of the ecosystem is to “reposition the hometown (*oikos*) within the web...for the strategic production of specific material and social values.”²⁹¹ Moreover, it creates important “platforms” in which members of the ecosystem can utilize the “services, tools, and technologies” provided by the system to “enhance their performance.”²⁹² In this sense, I contend that the online time travel *zhaidou* stories can also be viewed as a virtual “ecosystem” and the domestic sphere described in the stories, as metaphoric working places, are presented as the “platforms” created by the ecosystem. Within these particular platforms, neoliberal reasoning emphasizing the logic of the privatization of power is broadly proliferated, aiming to animate self-enterprising and self-entrepreneurialism subjects. Middle-class women like Minglan, who make strenuous efforts to strengthen “the power of the self” in their working places (households), can hence be regarded as typical proponents and beneficiaries of these social values.

To have a better understanding of how these “positive” female characters increase their private grip on power, here I follow Ong and Zhang to divide the

²⁹⁰ Zhang and Ong, *Privatizing China*, 4.

²⁹¹ Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 8.

²⁹² Marco Iansiti and Roy Levin, “Strategy as Ecology,” *Harvard Business Review* March (2004): 69.

privatized powers into two essential categories. The first relates to powers of property, which mainly deal with issues of property rights and ownership, accumulation of capital, management of labor and resources, and the understanding of entrepreneurialism. The second focuses on powers of the self, which is more concerned with individual pursuits of career, health, and other “spiritual needs.”²⁹³

As a number of academics have discovered, John Locke’s “creation myth” of property has been very widespread and influential within post-socialist China.²⁹⁴ Embracing the belief that “possession means power [...] power to make choices, power to control their own lives,” Chinese citizens, especially the middle-class, are becoming accustomed to increasing their autonomy by expanding their property portfolio and accumulating wealth.²⁹⁵ In *Zhifou*, the author devotes a whole chapter to detailing Minglan’s dowry as a collection of her own properties, ranging from fixed assets like land, farms and shops (田产和店铺), to other forms of material wealth such as furniture and precious cloth (家具、名贵布料). A large sum of money is also indicated that will support her in married life. As declared by Minglan in Chapter 44, “what she really wants to say is that property of one’s own is much more important than his/her offspring (其实她想说的是, 千子万子不如手中的银子), illustrating that private property is an important and indispensable source of power for women like her.”²⁹⁶

Besides direct descriptions of Minglan’s accumulation of diverse forms of wealth, the novel is much more dedicated to enhancing her power via rationalized labor control and construction of entrepreneurialism. A succession of chapters (111 to 120) is used to develop a new workplace for Minglan after her marriage.

²⁹³ Zhang and Ong, *Privatizing China*, 5.

²⁹⁴ Pow, *Gated Communities in China*, 24.

²⁹⁵ From a 1985 speech by John Moore quoted in Letwin, Shirley Robin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993), 102.

²⁹⁶ Chapter 44, “Ta jianglai hui jiashui” 她将来会嫁谁? [Who will she marry in the future].

In these chapters, the author frequently adopts direct references to the discourses of post-socialist market system, suggesting the household of Gu is more of a modern Chinese enterprise than a traditional Confucianist family. Minglan views the mansion of Gu as “yige qiye” (an enterprise 一个企业), within which she herself works as the CEO (chief executive officer) who administrates the employees based on their “recorded personal performance” (详细确实的人事档案).²⁹⁷ To further standardize the labor management and increase her authority, Minglan engages actively in practices such as imposing “organizational rules” and formulating “job descriptions” that are familiar to middle-class women in a contemporary Chinese context: she “writes clearly about what they (the employees) cannot do, where they are not allowed to go, what words they cannot utter, and what clothes and accessories they are not permitted to wear (白纸黑字写清楚哪些事不能做, 哪些地方不能去, 哪些话不能说, 什么打扮不应当).”²⁹⁸ Moreover, she “defines every individual’s duties and clarifies job responsibilities (明确责任, 每个人的职责先敲定)” within the household.²⁹⁹ All these decisions and actions shed light on the idea that “a formal rational system” is in the making within the firm governed by the heroine. As Richard Scott explains, the formalization of an organization denotes that within it, behaviors and roles are governed according to a set of “precisely and explicitly formulated” rules and systems.³⁰⁰

It is notable that later in Chapter 137, which examines how Minglan transforms the management system of the couple’s farms, the female protagonist claims clearly that she is discontented with the low efficiency of the traditional slavery

²⁹⁷ Chapter 112, “Dangnian shi, dangnian qing, dangnian ren, haiyou dangnian de yinzi” 当年事, 当年情, 当年人, 还有当年的银子 [The events, the feelings, the people, and the money in that year]. Chapter 116, “CEO gongzuo baogao yiri jilu,” CEO 工作报告一记录 (One-day record of CEO work report).

²⁹⁸ Chapter 120, “Neizhai zhengzhi, haishi shengchan, Hejia de yiyaoce” 内宅整治, 海氏生产, 贺家的医药册 [Inner house remediation, Ms. Hai’s production, medicine book of He family].

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.; London: Prentice Hal, 1998), 33.

system (明兰并不认同古代这种奴仆效率).”³⁰¹ Rather, Minglan adopts a newly constructed, formalized structure mainly for reasons of higher efficiency and profits. As Doug Guthrie states in his book discussing the emergence of capitalism in post-socialist China, efficiency and rationalist theory of organizational action can serve as a useful theoretical base to inquire into the reforming actions of many Chinese corporations. As the chapter proceeds, Minglan is cognizant of the irrationality of the old system: “Those stewards deal with issues that concern large sums of money and lands. They work hard to make the farms prosperous. But at the same time, as slaves who have no personal freedom, they are not allowed to maintain their own properties and welfare. It is absolutely contrary to the laws of economy and human nature (那些经手大笔田产银钱的管事，通过辛勤努力把田庄打理得红红火火，可是作为没有人身自由的奴仆，却不能有自己的财产，这绝对是违反经济规律和人性原则的).”³⁰² As an important consequence, she decides to construct an “incentive rewards and punishments (激励性奖惩)” mechanism to produce “long-term stable benefits (长远的稳定的出效益).”³⁰³ It fits neatly with the rationalist theory which views “the organizations as profit-maximizing entities,” and these organizations, like the ones under Minglan’s management, employ rational strategies and measures for a “head-long pursuit of market efficiency.”³⁰⁴

In addition to low efficiency, the old system is inclined to cause more intractable problems that run counter to moral standards and ethics. Before delving into the actual moral problems stirred by the outdated system, we first turn our attention to a nuanced coincidence created by the author in *Zhifou*.

³⁰¹ Chapter 137, “Xiaoyu zhuang – Heishan zhuang; ou’er shishou de yanjipai” 小雨庄——黑山庄：偶尔失手的演技派 [Xiaoyu farm, Heishan farm; Occasional misses of the actor]. The farms were under the control of Gu’s stepmother, the younger Qin before it was transmitted to Gu.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Doug Guthrie, *Dragon in A Three-piece Suit: The Emergence of Capitalism in China* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8.

Similar to Minglan and her husband Gu Tingye and their major rivals in the Gu family (led by the younger Qin), the new emperor in the novel is also in constant tension with old forces within the court.³⁰⁵ The author creates an environment that has much in common with the reforming socialist China. Minglan and Gu Tingye play the roles of forerunners of the market reform under the aegis of the central state (the emperor). Their major competitors--the younger Qin and other members of the Gu family, are representative practitioners of the pre-reform (old) system favored by the obsolete powers. Many researchers have pointed out that the system adopted before market reform, mainly featured by “dependence, deference, and particularism,” is liable to cause moral problems such as corruption and abuse of power.³⁰⁶ The supervisors within such systems are likely to hire and promote workers based on personal relations rather than formal rules or measured performance. Furthermore, supervisors are likely to affect considerably “the extent to which a worker and his or her family may enjoy the many non-financial benefits and advantages supplied by the enterprise.”³⁰⁷

An example from *Zhifou* clearly illustrates this argument. In Chapter 138, the author narrates an issue that occurs in a farm named Guyan (古岩庄), which was under the control of the younger Qin before being transferred to Minglan. Giving unrestrained rights to the stewards, the farm is in a chaotic state: “Not only is the rent 20% to 30% higher than the neighboring royal farms, but the head steward Mr. Wu frequently enslaved the tenant farmers to work for him. At every festival, he would extort money and labor from the farmers, and would increase rent on the merest whim. Furthermore, the stewards of the farm would regularly humiliate the wives and daughters of the farmers (不但田租比旁的皇庄高出两

³⁰⁵ The new emperor was originally a prince with his own fiefdom. Since the old emperor had no heir, he was summoned to the capital to become the crown prince. He was chased on his way to the capital and was saved by the male lead, Gu Tingye, so Gu is the new emperor's founding father.

³⁰⁶ Guthrie, *Dragon in A Three-piece Suit*, 44.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 45.

三成来, 姓吴的还动辄役使佃农们给他干私活, 逢年过节索钱要人, 遇上由头还要加租, 一干庄头们仗势肆意凌辱人家妻女).”³⁰⁸

Following Minglan’s suggestion, Gu compensates the farmers for their losses and drives the vile stewards away, bringing formalized rules to the once disordered organization. More crucially, it is a form of reorganized moralism that refers to the reformulation of neoliberal principles to “rearticulate labor rights practices.”³⁰⁹ It goes beyond the organizational level and enters into the state-based domain such as enhancing labor rights and carrying out labor protection. As the following chapter reads, the switch from an excessive emphasis of connections to a more rational bureaucratic structure wins the emperor’s approval and potential involvement. Minglan’s idea sets an exemplary model for the emperor, as chapter 139 indicates, “Seeing the fake accounts of the royal farms revealed, the emperor must be very happy. It will be much easier for him to practice redundancy and replacement in the future (把那些皇庄管事的黑心账抖搂出来, 皇上心里这会儿不定多痛快呢! 以后皇上要裁换人手也容易些).”³¹⁰ It is reminiscent of the idea which, as mentioned before, suggests that this online story constructs a neoliberal exceptional platform where various elements cooperate together to buttress the heroine, as the alter ego of a middle-class woman, to pursue power by means of a multitude of private decisions and practices. Seen from this example, other elements like political force and social relations--the attitudes of the new emperor in this case -- are evidently supportive of Minglan’s measures that are in tune with neoliberal reasoning.

Moreover, in addition to the immoral activities conducted by the stewards of the farm, the author contributes a large proportion of the novel to show how the major opponents of Minglan, namely the younger Qin and other members of the

³⁰⁸ Chapter 138, “Guyanzhuang Fengyun,” 古岩庄风云 [Guyan farm events].

³⁰⁹ Zhang and Ong, *Privatizing China*, 88.

³¹⁰ Chapter 139, “Miyue,” 蜜月 [Honeymoon].

Gu family, actively promote such unethical practices. It is worth taking a close look at Chapters 144 to 146 and Chapters 169 to 177, which constitute the most substantial part of the second form of domestic flights within the novel. Describing how Gu breaks away from his elder brother, his father's unfulfilled wish, and his ancestors' spirits successively, the first three chapters present a radical departure from the connections of the past defined by a Confucian family clan. As the final sentence of Chapter 146 shows, the dark past, coming in the shape of the ancestral hall of the Gu family, makes a sharp contrast to the bright and clear future which is represented by the heroine.³¹¹

Chapters 169 to 177 disclose the egregious behavior of the younger Qin in her bid to rival Minglan for power. In cooperation with her allies, Aunt Kang and Gu's ex-girlfriend Manniang, the younger Qin sets fire to Minglan's house, aiming to burn the pregnant Minglan to death.³¹² The evil nature of the younger Qin's deeds further justifies Minglan's promotion of formalized managerial practices based on neoliberal principles.

The application of the more advanced, formalized work ethics to the workplaces under Minglan's management reaps rewards. However, it is of necessity to point out that although certain improvements have been achieved in the living and working conditions of the labor force, the system is, to a large extent, "a form of labor containment devoid of worker participation and empowerment."³¹³ As discussed in the earlier section, the personal opinions of the servants who are simultaneously the workers at the lowest level within the novel are still significantly repressed and neglected. For example, in Chapter 168, the author indicates how a "disloyal" servant girl Caihuan 彩环 is punished by the couple, as she "does not recognize Minglan as her master from the bottom of

³¹¹ Chapter 146, "Gu Tingye, ni zuxian hanni qu liaotian" 顾廷烨，你祖先喊你去聊天 [Gu Tingye, your ancestors call you to chat].

³¹² Chapters 169-177.

³¹³ Pun Ngai, "Reorganized Moralism: The Politics of Transnational Labor Codes," in *Privatizing China*, eds. Zhang and Ong, 102.

her heart (从心眼里没把自己（明兰）当成主子）。”³¹⁴ In pursuit of socially “climbing up (上位)”, Caihuan is considered a potential threat to Minglan’s interests and safety. It results in the miserable end to her life: “Send her to the farm. If she is still indocile, then sell her (撵到庄子里去，若再不听话，直接卖了就是)。”³¹⁵ In this regard, the organization under Minglan’s control is still a paternalistic, hegemonic management that demands solely obedient and productive workers. The moral imperatives of her improvement of the working environment are in essence a capital, profit-oriented alteration that serves to increase the heroine’s privatized power. It also mirrors the Chinese system of authoritarian neoliberalism.

Not only does the rationalized administration of properties help Minglan to empower herself as a self-enterprising subject, *Zhifou* also gives notable coverage exploring how the heroine manages herself through a multitude of self-centered practices. Widely informed by neoliberal rationale, the middle- and upper-class Chinese in contemporary China are experiencing an ever-growing focus on body care and body management.³¹⁶ In a similar manner, in the book of *Zhifou*, the modern Chinese woman Minglan differs from her traditional female peers who care more about others, placing her primary importance on her own well-being: “Minglan always felt sorry to her body when she was a modern woman [...] Since she has travelled to the ancient time, her favorite thing is to preserve her health. If she is good to a man, she may be cheated; if she is good to a servant girl, the servant girl may develop a love affair with her husband; and if she is good to her sister, her sister might betray her. After much deliberation, what is really safe and faultless is only one thing---to take care of the health of one’s own body (明兰一直觉得对不住上辈子的身体[...]自打来了古代后，她最热衷的事就是养生。

³¹⁴ Chapter 168, “Kaizhan, fengyu yulai,” 开战，风雨欲来 [The war is on, the storm is coming].

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Nancy N Chen, “Consuming Medicine and Biotechnology in China,” in *Privatizing China*, eds. Zhang and Ong.

对男人好，可能被小三；对丫鬟好，可能被爬床；对姐妹好，可能遭背叛；想来想去，只有对自己的身体好才是大吉大利，百无一失）。³¹⁷ This example clearly manifests a strong sense of the self-centred ethos of the heroine.

Moreover, traditional themes of “love and romance” of web romantic fictions repress an important feature of “upward social mobility” shared by most middle-class citizens in today’s China, which best explains Minglan’s efforts to increase her power.³¹⁸ It is closely interlinked with education of the self. Ong states that in a society where neoliberal rules are functioning, individuals are encouraged to manage themselves under the guidance of “market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness,” which is applicable to an optimizing technology that concerns itself more about the technologies of the self.³¹⁹ Depending on a systemized expert knowledge structure, this technology of neoliberal subjectivities promotes “self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency, and competitiveness,” which contains not only the close attention to health regimes, but “acquisition of skills” as well.³²⁰ Correspondingly, Guthrie’s observation about the educational background of business leaders after the market reform in China also verifies this claim. He discovers that with the aim to adopt more formalized and institutionalized organizational rules, organizations are more likely to hire general managers with “an education in economics or business” that are significantly influenced by the “professionalism occurring in educational venues.”³²¹ These leaders are inculcated with the values, norms and rules of market-based organizational systems in “universities and professional training institutions,” and their professional knowledge obtained from these crucial centers help them to develop

³¹⁷ Chapter 127, “Yanyin qianhou, xia” [Before and after the banquet, II].

³¹⁸ Luigi Tomba, “The Housing Effect: The Making of China’s Social Distinctions,” in *China’s Emerging Middle Class: Beyond Economic Transformation*, ed. Li, Cheng (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 195.

³¹⁹ Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 4.

³²⁰ Ibid., 6.

³²¹ Guthrie, *Dragon in A Three-piece Suit*, 59,60.

qualified understandings of organizational management in economic transitions.³²²

As shown in the novel, this type of professional education is also high on Minglan's daily agenda. In Chapter 174, after her fierce conflict with the younger Qin, the author details the heroine's educational life: "Minglan is an ordinary woman like us (both the author and the readers). She feels difficult in the ancient time, and she studies very hard [...] she is not born to be a genius in household fights (她是个和我们一样的普通女子, 在古代, 她也很辛苦, 很认真的在学习[...]她不是天生的宅斗高手)."³²³ Her final success in her competition with the younger Qin is essentially grounded in her "ten-year-long vocational education (十年的职业教育)" after her time travel. In other words, Minglan achieves considerable individual progress through education informed by professionalism that intends to cultivate an expertise in organizational administration and domestic fights. In this sense, to quote Fumian in his description of Du Lala's professional life, I suggest that Minglan takes an analogous *Bidungsroman* course with Du, a "typical representative of the middle class."³²⁴ Starting as an employee at ground level, Du develops her professional techniques and grows to be a leader in the transnational corporation. Like Du Lala, Minglan is portrayed as an ambitious middle-class working woman who is equipped with expert knowledge and professional skills, or in short, a rational and powerful professional in household fights and management.

³²² DiMaggio, Paul, and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organization Fields," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, eds. Walter, Powell and DiMaggio, Paul (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 31.

³²³ Chapter 174, "Dongfeng chui, zhangu lei zhi liu: Qianqi de siwang yuanyin" 东风吹, 战鼓擂之六: 前妻的死亡原因 [The east wind blows, the drums of war beat No. 6: The cause of death of the hero's ex-wife], "The author has something to say" part.

³²⁴ Fumian, "'Chronicle of Dulala's promotion,'" 100.

2.2.3 “Domestic Fights” between “Positive Women” and Men: The Idealized “Big Heroine”

It is the “rational and professional discourse” based on neoliberal logic that bestows women like Minglan with the ability to compete with men (usually their fathers and husbands) for power, which is the third type of “household fights” depicted in the novel, and this type of conflicts has not been fully explored in previous studies about web romances and *zhaidou* fictions. These men, called as *zhanan* (jerks), always come together with figures known as *bai lianhua* (white lotus), forming a pair of archetypes frequently seen in contemporary popular culture. Referring to women who appear pure and innocent but are de facto wicked, “white lotus” women always “hide in the back” and “go for certain ‘men of justice’ when they need to fight (白莲花的战斗模式决定了她们必然隐藏在后头，需要借助某些‘正义人士’)”³²⁵ These “men of justice” are easily deceived and seduced by “white lotus” women and are likely to display characteristics such as irresponsibility and foolishness.³²⁶

As the novel discloses, the alliance between “white lotus” women and “men of justice” always produces negative outcomes. For instance, the alliance between Sheng Hong and his concubine Lin results in an unstable situation within the Sheng family. Only when Sheng is reminded by his daughter-in-law Haishi, a rational and upright woman, that his favoritism towards Lin not only triggers unbalanced power relations within the family, but also brings potential danger to his political life, does he change his behavior and brings order back to the family.

³²⁷ This can be viewed as a telling example of how the rationalized

³²⁵ Chapter 175, “Feng chuiwan le, gu ye leipo le: Fanghuo, Manniang, Chang ge’er” 风吹完了，鼓也播破了：放火，曼娘，昌哥儿 [The wind ends, and the drum is broken: Set a fire, Manniang, Chang ge’er].

³²⁶ In the novel, there are two typical pairs of “white lotus” and “jerk”: one is concubine Lin and Sheng Hong, and the other one is Gu Tingye and Manniang in the early stage, the time before Gu falls in love with Minglan.

³²⁷ Chapter 72, “Qianyin houguo,” 前因后果 [Causes and consequences].

feminine domestic power exerts incontrovertible influence over the male-dominated public realm.

Similarly, in the first half of the book, Gu Tingye has an intimate relationship with Manniang and trusts her words indubitably, leading to his exile from upper-class society and his family. As Gu admits in chapter 173: “for years, I have been living in lies and been played a fool (by Manniang) (自己多年来生活在谎言中 [...] 自己多年便如傻子般的叫人玩弄于股掌之间).”³²⁸ It is Minglan who helps him realize the facts about Manniang and saves his captivated mind: “What you said makes sense. No one would believe it when he said it, but Minglan was the only woman he had had a good conversation with besides Manniang. That little girl [...] never swears with empty words, but seriously speaks logic and presents facts. After he went back, he thought it over and over again, no matter what he thought, he felt that Minglan’s words were correct (你的那番话, 很有道理。说出来可能没人相信, 明兰是除曼娘之外, 他唯一好好交谈过的女子。那个小小的女孩子 [...] 不曾拿空话虚话来胡骂一气, 而是认真的讲逻辑, 摆事实。他回去后反复思索, 怎么想, 都觉得明兰的话没错).”³²⁹ This example illustrates the inversion of power division between the hero and Minglan. Gu, who acts like a jerk when beside a “white lotus” woman, needs to be remolded according to Minglan’s will before he can regain his property and reputation as a man from a dominant family. According to the two examples above, I argue that the third type of “domestic fights” sets itself apart from the other two that concentrate on fights between female characters. Rather, it challenges the patriarchal social order in its pursuit of equal power relations between men and women, especially those women who are labeled as “positive.” As one of the comments from an unknown reader suggests, “this novel [...] puts

³²⁸ Chapter 173, “Dongfeng chui, zhangu lei zhi liu: Xiaohundan chushi” 东风吹, 战鼓擂之七: 小混蛋出世 [The east wind blows, the drums of war beat No. 7: The birth of Minglan’s son].

³²⁹ Chapter 176, “Feng chuiwan le, gu ye leipo le: Zhen’ai de daijia” 风吹完了, 鼓也擂破了: 真爱的代价 [The wind ends, the drum is broken: The price of true love].

the hero on the back burner, and I think it's the same, the heroine's relationship with the hero [...] is more about control and compromise (这部小说[...]把男主放在次要位置, 我想也是如此, 女主对男主[...]不如说是驾驭与妥协之间)." ³³⁰ It also fits well with the "anti-romantic" pattern suggested by Shao, which sees the waning of romance and the emergence of power struggles between the couple.

Another rival for power, occurring between Minglan and her father Sheng Hong, can be regarded as a more aggressive example for the third type of "domestic fights." In Chapter 192, the novel reaches a powerful climax when Minglan's grandmother is poisoned by her daughter-in-law, Ms. Wang, who is aided and abetted by her sister Aunt Kang. Compared to Minglan who is instantly eager to treat and cure her grandmother, and determined to punish the perpetrators, Sheng's immediate reaction is to conceal this crime and absolve his wife, because the scandal would be detrimental to his reputation and career. In Chapter 193, Sheng slaps Minglan for her "disobedience to her father" (忤逆生父) and "refusal to take the whole situation into consideration" (不顾全大局), evoking an outburst of a bitter wrangle between the two. ³³¹ Yet Minglan, now an experienced, professional, and powerful expert in "domestic fights" and rational organization, immediately rejects Sheng, blocks the entire mansion and takes over the whole family. Sheng has to abandon his plan and follow her instructions. It is a deliberate conversion from the first half of the story, when Minglan was a "compliant, cute little girl (乖巧可爱的小女儿)" under the control of her father as a typical "Confucian scholar official (封建士大夫)." In the last pages of the

³³⁰ Chapter 93, "Zuihou de wangri" 最后的往日 [The last day of the past], see readers' comments, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=931329>.

³³¹ Chapter 193, "Shijian dao zhi yaomo," 世间道 之妖魔 [The way of the world: Demons].

story, Minglan has become a strong, forthright woman with a firm position against the patriarchal social disciplines.³³²

In this way, Minglan stands out as an idealized model of neoliberal feminism and self-entrepreneurism whose most burning concern is the privatization of power. She realizes self-empowerment through the accumulation of property, the formalized organization of the households, and self-promotion. Moreover, the heroine is perfectly located in the discourse of “big heroine” (*da nüzhu* 大女主) permeating current popular culture, which champions the image of a powerful woman from the middle/upper strata of society.³³³ It is also worth noting that the public image of Zhao Liying 赵丽颖, who plays the role of Minglan in the TV drama, also takes advantage of the discourse of “big heroine” to demonstrate her hard working and professional skills as an actress.³³⁴ The overlap between Zhao and Minglan further consolidates the image of “an aspiring young woman with personal success,” promoting it as a collective blueprint that other middle-class women can follow.

2.3 TV Adaptation of *Zhifou*: Defanged Feminism Expressions

³³² Chapter 193, “Shijiandao zhi yaomo,” 世间道 之妖魔 [The way of the world: Demons]. Chapter 5, “Sheng Hong laoye de lianghang zhandou, quansheng” 盛紘老爷的两场战斗，全胜! [Senior Sheng Hong’s two fights, all win].

³³³ Huozi Wenhua 活字文化, *Nüxing duli or nüli zhuyi? Zhuanfang beishida Bai Huiyuan laoshi* 大女主剧 or 女利主义? 专访北师大白惠元老师 [Independent women of women for benefits? An interview to Prof. Bai Huiyuan from Beijing Normal University]. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/pwRw2aLDjeUokryLue30A>, 2020. Bai believes that “the history of the development of Chinese TV dramas with ‘big heroines’ has gone through roughly three stages. The first stage was in the 1990s, when a typical TV drama image was ‘Wu Zetian.’ [...] The second stage starts from the new century, especially with the rise of online literature. It gives rise to a large number of ancient female biographical dramas. Among them, *gongdou* 宫斗 (court fights) and *zhaidou* are common themes. The third stage is the contemporary urban female inspirational dramas after 2015.”

³³⁴ For example, see https://www.sohu.com/a/294210693_100027492, 2019.

While the online novel can be read in light of neoliberal reasoning that delivers “positive” self-entrepreneur female characters, the TV adaptation does not contain the same neoliberal ideology. Compared to the novel, the TV version of *Zhifou* has two notable differences regarding the plot.

In order to protect herself and her future child (Minglan is pregnant) while Gu is away for work, Chapters 168 to 174 of the novel describe in great detail how the heroine firstly defeats two of her major competitors--aunt Kang and Manniang--and then formulates a deliberate plan to protect herself from any potential threat from the younger Qin, her prominent opponent.³³⁵ It is not until Minglan has given birth to her son, and all the pressing problems have been resolved successfully, that Gu returns. In other words, the author has made Gu absent in this chain of domestic hostilities. These chapters henceforth represent a thorough display of Minglan’s professional skills and practical strategies in household fights, showing a typical neoliberal discourse that stresses fierce competition, self-entrepreneur construction, and meritocratic professionalism in a public labor market. Nevertheless, many online readers express their discontent with the female protagonist. They criticize her to be “太弱了 (too weak)” as an expert in household fights due to her failure to foresee the younger Qin’s violent activities in Chapter 174, demonstrating how the female netizens are looking for flawless middle-class women marked by perfect self-actualization and sophisticated working tactics.³³⁶

Meanwhile, the TV version of *Zhifou* contradicts the online novel in its portrayal of the “positive” female figures. It eliminates all the efforts made by

³³⁵ Minglan first defeated aunt Kang, who forced her niece Kang Zhao’er be Gu’s concubine. But after consulting Zhao’er, Minglan helped her to get rid of aunt Kang’s control and leave the capital. Then Manniang came to provoke her, and Minglan drove her away as well. On the day of her giving birth to her son, Minglan made careful arrangements. For example, she invited a doctor to her home in advance and hired guards to protect her, but she still didn’t expect the younger Qin who tries to set fire, hoping to burn Minglan to death.

³³⁶ Chapter 174, “Dongfeng chui, zhangu lei zhi liu: Qianqi de siwang yuanyin” 东风吹，战鼓擂之六：前妻的死亡原因 [The east wind blows, the drums of war beat No. 6: The cause of death of the hero’s ex-wife], “The author has something to say” part.

Minglan to secure the safety of her family, and instead shows her to be at her most vulnerable when giving birth to her son. Central to the scene is the enormous significance of Minglan's husband Gu who saves her life from aunt Kang's attack.³³⁷ In this regard, the story dilutes the strength, intelligence and strategic thinking of the heroine and transforms it into a cliché of “the male hero saving the weak female beauty.” Minglan's remarkable ability in self-empowerment as a middle-class woman is considerably weakened by the TV adaptation.

Another major change in the TV adaptation concerns the portrayal of the relationship between Minglan and her father Sheng Hong. As mentioned previously, in Chapters 192 and 193 when Ms. Wang poisons Minglan's grandmother, there are two very contrasting attitudes of Minglan and Sheng Hong towards this serious event. Compared to Minglan who is determined and sincere to save her grandmother, Sheng Hong is, as the author underlines later, essentially a “hypocrite” who has little genuine feelings towards others. “Only real interests can yield leverage in his decision making (只有实际利益，才能最坚定他的决心).”³³⁸

The novel consolidates an impression of Sheng Hong's hypocrisy and selfishness in ensuing chapters. Minglan is clearly aware of his character traits and expresses dissatisfaction with her perfidious father until the end of the story. As one detailed plot in Chapter 213 implies, when the younger Qin threatens to accuse Minglan and her husband of unfilial actions, Minglan receives Sheng Hong's authoritative guidelines (权威意见) sent by her sister-in-law: “Qin has her own children and grandchildren and large fortune, it is difficult for her to impact the reputation and interests of her step-son and step-daughter-in-law (Gu and Minglan) for being unfilial (似小秦氏这种自己有儿有孙，又带着大笔家

³³⁷ Please kindly see episode 71 in TV drama of *Zhifou*.

³³⁸ Chapter 200, “Shijian dao zhi tianxia dadao,” 世间道之天下大道 [The way of the world].

产分家另过的，还要告继子继媳不孝，难度高得很).”³³⁹ Minglan laughs mockingly at Sheng’s mendacious concern for his troubled daughter, “what he really cares about is his ‘rich son-in-law’ who brings him wealth and fame (明兰扯动嘴角——盛老爹是怕金龟婿变心爱上新岳父罢).”³⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the TV adaptation of *Zhifou* witnesses a significantly different portrayal of Sheng Hong in the final episodes. Instead of showing fake concern for Minglan, as expressed in episode 76 where Minglan is facing the menace of the younger Qin, Sheng Hong not only brings Minglan back to the Sheng family home and safeguards her, but also drives away the younger Qin’s subordinate Ms. Xiang (向妈妈), showing sincere parental love for the heroine.³⁴¹ The whitewashed image of Sheng engenders an obviously different ending to the TV drama. Compared to the novel that retains the heroine’s determined aversion to her father, in the TV version, Minglan and her father are reconciled and the drama ends with a scene of the Sheng family reunion, talking and laughing happily together, denoting a symbolic harmonious, united Confucian family.³⁴²

Similar plots are not uncommon among other popular TV dramas featuring “big heroines.” In another highly popular TV drama entitled *Dou Tinghao* 都挺好 (All is Well, 2019), the “big heroine” Su Mingyu 苏明玉 is born in an unhappy family. Composed of a cowardly and miserly father Su Daqiang 苏大强 and an authoritarian mother who prefers boys to girls, together with two dependent yet self-centred brothers, the Su family is suffocating for Mingyu. Eventually she successfully disengages herself from her tortuous family life and becomes a senior manager in a famous corporation. But the final episode of the

³³⁹ Chapter 123, “Lurou zhoudi de fengbo,” 卤肉肘子的风波 [The event of marinated pork elbow].

³⁴⁰ Chapter 213, “Zhangliangji he guoqiangti,” 张良计和过墙梯 [Each one has his/her own response]. Since if the hero Gu Tingye, who is favored by the emperor and endowed with high social status, is affected by Qin’s false charge, Sheng’s own interests would also be influenced badly.

³⁴¹ Episode 76 in TV drama of *Zhifou*.

³⁴² Episode 78 in TV drama of *Zhifou*.

drama turns Mingyu's self-empowerment on its head and reverts to patriarchal stereotype. It proffers a different Su Daqiang from his lasting image as a selfish and gutless coward. The final scene shows him suffering from senile dementia, but despite forgetting nearly all his life experience, Su Daqiang determines to fix Mingyu's old textbook since he believes that Mingyu is still a studious teenager. Deeply moved by her father's actions, Mingyu is determined to give up her successful career and takes care of her father like a good filial daughter.

These similar cultural products downplaying middle-class women's pursuit of privatization of power, while searching for reconciliation with ostensible, even hurtful patriarchal power holders, do not go unnoticed by online feminist critics. For instance, reader "starstuff" denounces Sheng Hong's heartless deeds, calling him "bastard" (混帐东西).³⁴³ The denouement of *All is Well* also receives severe criticisms from female viewers. They regard it "unreasonable" for Su Mingyu, a determined middle-class woman who makes strenuous efforts to break away from her indifferent family, to sacrifice considerable amounts of self-interest to look after her self-serving father. Female netizens claim that these TV series are "not feminist at all," in that all these "big heroines" are ultimately harnessed or suppressed by a male character.³⁴⁴ In this regard, the "big heroine" trend in the TV market stands in diametrical opposition to the online *zhaidou* narratives that are dedicated to denying self-objectified women and to the promotion of empowered middle-class women via self-determination and self-actualization as "positive" big heroines.

I argue that unlike the original online texts, the recomposed TV dramas showcase a "defanged feminism." Various actors contribute to the radical rupture between the TV dramas and the online expressions, among which state censorship

³⁴³ Chapter 193, "Shijian dao zhi yaomo," 世间道之妖魔 [The way of the world: Demons]. See readers' comments, <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=931329>.

³⁴⁴ Huozi Wenhua 活字文化, *Nüxing duli or nǚli zhuyi?* <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/pwRw2aLDjeIUokryLue30A>.

occupies the prominent position. Ample researchers have addressed that both online and offline cultural products, ranging from online literature, online dramas and short videos, to traditional TV series, are under an “ever-tightening control from the Party-state” since the 2010s onward.³⁴⁵ Moreover, traditional TV dramas are under much stricter supervision than internet cultural works, as the former are facing “patent examinations,” while the latter are mostly self-regulated.³⁴⁶ It is also notable that the online novel of *Zhifou* was primarily produced and popularized between 2010 to 2012, when online literary websites like Jinjiang were still in their early state of “experimenting with commercial mechanisms,” so the online novel enjoys “a greater degree of freedom” than the carefully-regulated TV drama.³⁴⁷

2.3.1 Political Reasons

TV dramas with the tag of “time travel” have been under strong official criticism since 2011. In March 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued an instructive document titled *An Announcement About the Publicity of National Shooting and Production of TV Dramas*, blaming the “odd plots and the errant values” of some time travel dramas, for a “distortion and disrespect of history.”³⁴⁸ Since early 2012, time travel dramas have been under tougher governmental control. As Zhang Lijie notes in her essay about how time travel dramas have been incorporated into the state’s cultural control, a message from the “training course of managing the publicity of TV drama’s shooting and production” shows that time travel TV series had been banned in

³⁴⁵ Ni, “Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance,” 179.

³⁴⁶ Touheima 投黑马, *Guonei wangluojia dianshiju shenhe de chayi* 国内网络剧, 电视剧审核的差异 [Differences in censorship on web dramas and TV dramas], https://m.sohu.com/a/57500671_114965/?pvid=000115_3w_a, 2016.

³⁴⁷ Guo Shaohua, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet: Creative Visibility in the Digital Public* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2020), 11.

³⁴⁸ Zhang Lijie 张利杰, “Chuanyueju de dikang yu shoubian” 穿越剧的抵抗与收编 [The resistance and adoption of time travel dramas], *Chengdu shifan xueyuan xuebao* 成都师范学院学报 29, no.4 (2020): 107.

provincial television stations during prime-time.³⁴⁹ The clampdown on TV dramas incorporating time travel continued to exert its influence right through to 2020.³⁵⁰ Within this context, the TV drama of *Zhifou* changes Minglan from a modern professional woman experiencing time travel into a girl born in the ancient time. This particular revision lays the foundation for the significant changes between the online Minglan and the TV Minglan, from a self-empowered expert in neoliberal organization into a more male-dependent woman keener on “domestic fights” than organizational and structural improvements.

The revision of the TV version of *Zhifou* also echoes the bigger political agenda of the central government. A growing scholarship has underpinned the particular significance of the middle-class for the Chinese government, “regarding its consolidation as fundamental both for the economic development of the country and for the maintenance of social stability.”³⁵¹ Jie Chen describes the Chinese middle-class as one “without democracy,” disclosing the reciprocal relationship between the state and the middle-classes in China. A number of social analysts make the point that for many developing countries, the state “plays a decisive role in creating social classes like new entrepreneurs and new middle classes.”³⁵² The newly emergent middle-class in China is thus generally supportive of the central government as its socioeconomic and political interests are largely shaped by state policies. It also shares the same ideological discourse with the state in building “a harmonious society,” out of fear of an unstable society and possible threats from other social classes.³⁵³

³⁴⁹ Zhang Lijie 张利杰, “Chuan yue ju de di kang yu shou bian” 穿越剧的抵抗与收编 [The resistance and adoption of time travel dramas], 107.

³⁵⁰ Zhongguang Hulan 中广互联 (TVOAO), *Zhongguo dianshi/wangluoju fazhan baogao 2020* 中国电视/网络剧发展报告 2020 [China TV/Web drama development report 2020] <https://www.tvoao.com/a/202085.aspx>, 2020.

³⁵¹ Fumian, ““Chronicle of Dulala’s Promotion,” 84.

³⁵² Jie Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 17.

³⁵³ “The harmonious society” is proposed by the fourth generation of the CCP leadership under Hu Jintao since 2004.

In *The Chronicle of Du Lala*, Fumian contends that the heroine Du Lala is a paradigm of a middle-class professional who embodies the desirable traits that are necessary for the state. Here the popular cultural products work in union with the government to construct a “harmonious socialist market society.”³⁵⁴ Similarly, Minglan in the TV-version of *Zhifou* can also be interpreted as a typical middle-class figure endorsed by the state. The harmonious middle-class culture requires not only personal economic success, but also “the maintenance of social stability,” the preoccupation of today’s Chinese government. In a word, middle-class women in “big heroine” TV dramas like *Zhifou* are significantly molded according to the political concerns of the central government.

2.3.2 Audience’s Preferences

Abundant scholars have addressed that the Chinese TV market has shifted to a more user-generated mode since the market reform in 1978.³⁵⁵ As Yong Zhang points out, research shows that the audience has already been “institutionalized, routinized and normalized” since the 1990s and the contents of TV dramas are mainly designed and evaluated according to an “audience’s needs and satisfaction.”³⁵⁶ Compared to the online narrative that attracts a large crowd of young female fans who are fond of the privatizing powers of the heroine, the TV adaptations are more overarching in terms of its audience. As mentioned previously, the TV version of *Zhifou* was broadcast on multiple platforms. According to the data collected from the major video websites (Tencent and Youku), 89% of the online audience are women, the majority of which are aged from 20 to 39. It is with little surprise that this particular group considerably

³⁵⁴ Fumian, ““Chronicle of Dulala’s Promotion,” 85.

³⁵⁵ Bai Ruoyun, *Staging Corruption: Chinese Television and Politics* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2014), 18.

³⁵⁶ Yong Zhang, “From Masses to Audience: Changing Media Ideologies and Practices in Reform China,” *Journalism Studies* 1, no. 4 (2000): 629.

overlaps with the readers of the web novel, as admitted by the data analyst.³⁵⁷ However, since the TV version of *Zhifou* is broadcast through the Hunan TV station, it embraces not only the young female audience, but also a much wider demographic of viewers. As Shen Fei and some other researchers discovered in their study about the distribution of Chinese audiences in a multi-layered media environment, people preferring to view their favorite programmes on TV channels have an average age of 46, with a balanced gender and account for almost 60% of the total population. With lower education and income, they are inclined to have more traditional family-based tastes for their selected cultural viewing.³⁵⁸

Interestingly, it coincides with Bai Huiyuan's observation about audiences of the "big heroine" dramas. In an interview, Bai explains how "big heroines" are being interpreted among the wider audience: "During the first half of the story, the audience prefers to see the big heroine fighting back against her competitive family members. During the second half, the audience prefers to witness a softhearted big heroine who reconciles with her family and her father."³⁵⁹ The audience's comments of the last episode of *Zhifou* resonate with Bai's claim. To welcome the end of the drama, the actor of Sheng Hong left a comment on Weibo, rousing a number of replies from the audience and netizens. Browsing these responses, it is clear that the majority embrace the harmonious and happy familial union between the big heroine and the now loving father. They are either moved by what Sheng Hong does for Minglan in withstanding the younger Qin' housemaid, or celebrate the fulfillment of his wishes of "having many children

³⁵⁷ Qianqian 浅浅, *Da shuju jiedu Zhifou* 大数据解读知否 [Reading *Zhifou* via big data] <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/55713144>, 2019.

³⁵⁸ Shen Fei 沈菲 et al., "Xin meijie huanjingxia de zhongguo shouzhong fenlei: Jiyu 2010 quanguo shouzhong diaocha de shizheng yanjiu," 新媒介环境下的中国受众分类: 基于 2010 全国受众调查的实证研究 [Chinese audience classification in the new media environment: An empirical study based on the 2010 national audience survey], *Journalism Bimonthly* 2014, no.3: 104-105.

³⁵⁹ Huozi 活字文化, *Nüxing duli or nüli zhuyi?* <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/pwRw2aLDjeIUokryLue30A>.

and grandchildren (子孙满堂)” and “obtaining a prosperous career as an official (仕途顺遂).”³⁶⁰ From this perspective, the cultural preferences of the TV audience account significantly for the substantial difference between the online fictions and their TV adaptations.

2.3.3 Production Companies

In addition to the political limitations and audience preferences, the role of the production companies, together with their cooperation with other media institutions, should not be ignored. The TV adaptation of *Zhifou* was produced by “Daylight Entertainment” (正午阳光). Backed by noted producer Hou Hongliang 侯鸿亮, “Daylight Entertainment” is widely accepted as a brand of “consciousness of domestic dramas” in delivering a number of serious TV dramas with high quality and economic success.³⁶¹

Here I would draw on Shaohua Guo’s concept of “visibility” and argue that the key driving force for “Daylight Entertainment,” in producing and deciding the contents of their cultural offerings such as *Zhifou*, is to maximize their “visibility.” Guo believes that “the network of visibility” stands as the prominent mechanism underlying the vibrancy of contemporary Chinese internet culture. In chasing “the network of visibility,” the different players within the cultural realm are competing for two significant elements: (1) user attention, and (2) content authority.³⁶² On the one hand, the production and promotion of TV *Zhifou* is inclined to attract and monetize audience attention (both online and offline).

³⁶⁰ Episode 78 of TV drama of *Zhifou*, comments on Weibo, <https://weibo.com/6109452047/4339331823103949>.

³⁶¹ Zhao Shu 赵舒, “‘Zhengwu Yangguang’ xianxiangji shuxie jiqi zhipian gainian: Jiantan dangqian dianshiju zhipian guanli de duowei xiangdu” “正午阳光” 的现象级书写及其制片观念——兼谈当前电视剧制片管理的多维向度 [The Phenomenal writing of “Daylight Entertainment” and its production concept: The multidimensional direction of current TV production management], *Liaoning jiaoyu xingzheng xueyuan xuebao* 辽宁教育行政学院学报 2019, no.99: 97.

³⁶² Guo, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet*, 11.

Moreover, “Daylight Entertainment” also cooperates with multiple video platforms and social networking platforms to “expand the outreach” of the TV drama, aiming to “increase its heat and attention.”³⁶³ On the other hand, as Guo explains, the rivalry for content authority between diverse media institutions concentrates on “the possession and acquisition of authoritative voices.”³⁶⁴ In this sense, private and commercial production companies like “Daylight Entertainment” keep a close eye on the changing state and industrial regulations to enhance their “credibility and authority.”³⁶⁵ In short, in order to weave “the network of visibility” within the marketized authoritative context, production firms play active roles in producing cultural works that achieve both economic success and ideological impact.

If we examine the “honors” celebrated by the official account of the TV drama of *Zhifou*, it is easy to find that they incorporate a double logic. For instance, on the last day of the debut of the TV drama, the account posted a “good news” story to announce the noticeable acclaim the TV drama had garnered. The post not only underlined the drama’s leading audience ratings and extremely high number of online viewers, but also the recognition from the party-led official media like *People’s Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency* (see figure 2.8 and figure 2.9). More evidently, in early January of 2020, the account of “Daylight Entertainment” in Weibo showcased the awards it obtained in an activity hosted by *People’s Daily*, which nominated the TV drama *Zhifou* as an “exemplary cultural product” that disseminates “positive energy.” The production company was also rewarded with the title of “Excellent Production Institution” (优秀制作机构) simultaneously (see figure 2.10).

³⁶³ Feng, Shasha 冯莎莎 and Xiao, Yingying 肖盈盈, “‘Zhengwu Yangguang’ dianshiju jingpin zhiduo zhong de hulianwang siwei,” “正午阳光”电视剧精品制作中的互联网思维 [Internet thoughts in the production of TV dramas with high qualities], *Yingshi zhizuo* 影视制作 12, no.80 (2018): 80.

³⁶⁴ Guo, *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet*, 11.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

Different from the novel in which the self-empowered heroine plays the central role, the revised TV version is more of a consequence of the complicated interplays between the party state, SARFT, diverse groups of audience, the production company of “Daylight Entertainment,” local television stations, and other internet media platforms. This is also a key point that is largely marginalized in discussions of online time travel romances and their TV adaptations.



Figure 2.8 (01/22/2021) the Post to celebrate the success of the debut of TV *Zhi Fou*

Figure 2.9 How the TV was praised and recognized by the Party-led medias (01/22/2021)



Figure 2.10 (01/22/2021) *Zhifou* and the “Daylight Entertainment” were officially rewarded.

Conclusion

Different from the “love and romance” focused perspectives, the popular “domestic fights” narratives imply a hidden yet noticeable middle-class culture, particularly for middle-class female netizens. *Zhifou* can be viewed as a typical model of this subgenre of online time travel literature. It portrays a specific spatial

politics of segregation and exclusion, presenting itself as a mirror of the lives of the middle and upper strata in today's urban China.

By detailing the three diversified yet interrelated types of “domestic fights,” *Zhifou* introduces the heroine Minglan as an idealized “big heroine” celebrated by female readers online. The aspiring female protagonist sees her working place, namely, the household, as a neoliberal exceptional platform where the rationalized capitalist rules function to buttress her privatization of power. In other words, the internet “domestic fights” stories manifest a certain degree of neoliberal feminist expression of the middle-class female netizens.

The TV adaptation of *Zhifou*, nevertheless, differs from the internet-based novel significantly. It reflects a more reality-based situation wherein the middle-class women's trajectory to feminist self-empowerment is repressed economically, culturally, and politically. In this sense, the TV version of *Zhifou* can be interpreted as a product of the ideological apparatus of the government with its main purpose being to construct a harmonious society.

Chapter 3

Evolutionary Discourses of Developmentalism in Chinese Context

In *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture*, Andrew Jones asserts that developmentalism has been an “extraordinary powerful and pervasive ideology” in China since the last decades of the nineteenth century.³⁶⁶ The online literary field in contemporary China also showcases proliferating discursive expressions of developmentalism in a global context, and this is largely hidden in previous discussions on time travel romances. This chapter examines two subgenres of web-based time travel romance where the discourse of development can be identified in various forms. The first subgenre, labelled *yishi dalu* (the other land) involves stories in which a modern woman travels to a different world and lives with aborigines who are usually half-human and half-beasts. The second subgenre, *moshi* (apocalypse) portrays lives in apocalyptic scenarios, suggesting China’s shift towards sustainable development and its connection with new materialism. In this chapter, I study Yujing Pengxiang’s 御井烹香 *Mengxi Dalu* 萌系大陸 (A Cuteland, 2011) and Wushiling’s 雾矢翎 *Moshi Chongsheng Zhi Juedui Duchong* 末世重生之绝对独宠 (Rebirth in Apocalypse: Absolute and Exclusive Love, 2014) as respective archetypes of each subgenre.

My key questions include: How has the discourse of development emerged, proliferated, and mutated in the context of Chinese online culture? Does the Chinese online literary field give rise to new narrative forms of developmentalism? And what is the connection between the new forms and the desires of netizens in a globalized Chinese society? Before delving into the two cases, it is necessary to present a brief genealogy of the indigenization of developmentalism as an

³⁶⁶ Andrew F Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 16.

ideology in China and its relationship with the global environment.

3.1 The Trajectory of Developmentalism in China

Since the late nineteenth century when the unstable Qing Empire was imperiled by imperialist and capitalist modernity of the West, “development” has remained a keyword in modern Chinese history. The discourse of development in China has experienced three important transformations over the past century.

The introduction of developmentalism was primarily led by Yan Fu 严复. He translated T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* and published it under the title *Tianyan Lun* 天演论 (On Evolution) in 1897, which immediately achieved resounding success among intellectuals. Upon closer examination, Yan’s book can be regarded as a sinified recreation of Darwinian thoughts rather than a faithful translation. In addition to Huxley’s lectures, another important source for Yan is social Darwinism, particularly the essential views of Herbert Spencer.³⁶⁷ Yan follows Spencer in believing that components of human nature such as “egoism” and “self-assertion” serve as the “spur of progress.”³⁶⁸ More notably, he shares Spencer’s view that the monist law of evolution – “a change from a relatively indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent heterogeneity”³⁶⁹ – can be applied to both biological phenomena and human societies. This invokes an analogy between the body and the state -- “the body as ‘a cellular state’ and the state an organism composed of individual cells.”³⁷⁰ Just as an individual organism will naturally advance to a high structure, so too will a social organism. Spencer thus underpins the theory of laissez-faire

³⁶⁷ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Jinhualun yu lunlixue (fu Tianyan lun)* 进化论与伦理学 (附《天演论》) [Evolution and ethics (with *On evolution*)], trans. Song Qilin 宋启林 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010), 72.

³⁶⁸ Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 108.

³⁶⁹ L. A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, 2nd edition (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich College Publishers, 1971), 90.

³⁷⁰ Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*, 15.

that rejects any special policies by the government and state intervention in business. Yet based on evolutionary theory, his organicism admits the possibility of self-conscious improvement. Yan finds this surprisingly suitable for the late nineteenth century China, as it provides intellectuals with the only way to escape from their semi-colonial position within “a naturalized imperial order.”³⁷¹

Moreover, other key concepts such as “modernity” and “civilization” are also concomitant with the discourse of “development.” For Yan Fu and his contemporaries in search of national development in a colonial world, modernity can be interpreted as “China’s humiliating and unequal participation in the globalized historical time of the modern interstate system” accompanied by inescapable experiences of torture and survival. “Development” was considered the right Spencerian path for China to achieve “civilization.” Believed to be “an emblem of all what was advanced, standing as a synecdoche for the power and prestige of the West,” it is part of a pedagogical process.³⁷²

The second essential transformation of the perception of “development” occurred in the 1980s. Following Deng Xiaoping’s proposition of “development is the absolute principle (发展才是硬道理),” China began to create a unique and all-encompassing memory of national development.³⁷³ As John Wong notes, Deng’s proposal “marks an ideological liberation for China” as it shifts from “income redistribution” to an “emphasis on economic growth and material progress.”³⁷⁴ Although its pivotal point lies in economic development with GDP as a central indicator, the national development program also envisions enduring advancement in the realms of politics, culture, and people’s livelihoods.³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*, 15.

³⁷² Ibid., 17.

³⁷³ Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, “Zai Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai dengdi de tanhua yaodian” 在武昌、深圳、珠海、上海等地的谈话要点 [Excerpts from talks given in Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shanghai and other locales], *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan* 邓小平文选 [Selected writings of Deng Xiaoping], vol.3 (Beijing: Renmin Press, 1994), 377.

³⁷⁴ John Wong, “Xiao-kang: Deng Xiaoping's Socio-economic Development Target for China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 7, no.17 (1998): 143.

³⁷⁵ Chris Bramall, *Chinese Economic Development* (London: Routledge, 2009), 4.

With the arrival of the twenty-first century, the discourse of development in China has changed considerably due to the fluctuating natural and social environment. Criticism of environmentally degrading development dominates social media and promotes the emergence of sustainable development. The deterioration of nature and the pursuit of sustainable development are more than a local problem, bringing Chinese developmental discourse back into the global sphere.

3.2 *Mengxi Dalu*: Upholding the Discourse of Development

Written by Yujing Pengxiang, who signs a long-term contract with Jinjiang and is warmly welcomed by Jinjiang's readers, *Mengxi Dalu*³⁷⁶ tells the story of a modern Chinese woman, Jian Ning 简宁, who travels to a different land under the control of half-human and half-beasts. She successively encounters a cat-man³⁷⁷ Erhei 二黑 (the hero) and other figures such as white-fox-man Fengyan 凤眼 (slanted eyes) and Changmao 长毛 (long hair). Jian manages to settle herself in this strange new world and becomes friends with the local dwellers. Eventually she marries Erhei and gives birth to two babies, which endows her with a sense of belonging to the land.

Mengxi can be considered as one of the pacesetters of the subgenre of *yishi dalu*.³⁷⁸ I select the story mainly because it is one of the most acclaimed works within the online literary community, ranking third in this subgenre of Jinjiang. With approximately one and a half million readers and an overall mark³⁷⁹ of

³⁷⁶ Henceforth *Mengxi*.

³⁷⁷ In the novel, the hero's race is called "Maoren" 猫人, a half-human, half-cat. In this paper, I use the word "cat-man" to represent half-human, half-cat for convenience. In a similar vein, the race of half-human, half-white-fox is called "white-fox man", and the half-human, half-mouse is termed "mouse man".

³⁷⁸ A fervor has existed among the online literary community of the subgenre of *yishi dalu* since 2011. See <http://www.jjwxc.net/bookbase.php?fw=0&ycx=0&xx=1&mainview=0&sd=0&lx=0&fg=0&bq=57&sortType=0&isfinish=0&collectiontypes=&searchkeywords=&page=1>. Yet it is notable that *Mengxi Dalu* was among the earliest group, and it started to be published online in 08/06/2011.

³⁷⁹ See the mark system in Jinjiang. According to the rules, each novel published in Jinjiang will receive an overall mark which is decided by several elements: the level of authorization of the book (for example, the highest level

around 1 billion,³⁸⁰ numerous readers have marveled at the cuteness of the hero and the pleasant environment of the land.³⁸¹ As discussed in the introduction, the character *moe* (cute) in the title originates from ACGN culture and generally means the cuteness of characters or images, so I will also use “Cuteland” to refer to the *Mengxi* land. The protagonist has also been interpreted as an archetype of “modern woman (现代女性)” because of her outstanding ability to remold the environment and her steadfast respect for dignity.³⁸² Therefore, I also view the novel as an ideal case to demonstrate female netizens’ understandings of social realities and individual desires. To answer the question of how the subgenre displays developmentalism as a prevailing ideology in recent Chinese history, I primarily analyze *Mengxi* through the prism of “self and other.”

3.2.1 An Onlooker of the Other Land

This section analyzes how the heroine Jian, as a stranger in an unfamiliar world, serves as an observer of “the other land” as an entirety. The story starts with introducing the heroine’s special interest in shooting and hunting, which invites her friend’s mockery: “Your wild and barbarian traits are still so strong! You can go to Africa and hunt! (野性还没褪尽啊！干脆去非洲打猎算了).” Later, Jian discovers that she has been transported to a strange world. This unfamiliar land is portrayed as a “land very similar to the African virgin jungle (这块和非洲原始丛林很相似的大陆),”³⁸³ reminding us of the “barbarous soil” in the writings of nineteenth century British colonizers.³⁸⁴ The novel then introduces the

of authorization is that one novel is only published in *Jinjiang*, and *Jinjiang* is authorized to undertake all subsequent productions of the book, such as being printed, recomposed to other forms), number of words, number of clicks and readers, number of downloads and collections, number of comments, readers’ marks for the book, and so on. For more details, please kindly see <http://help.jjwxc.net/user/article/2>.

³⁸⁰ Data about *Mengxi* in *Jinjiang*, <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1155575>.

³⁸¹ Readers’ comments about *Mengxi*, <https://www.ptt.cc/bbs/YuanChuang/M.1319635872.A.FCA.html>.

³⁸² Houzuoshang de Mao 后座上的猫, readers’ comments about *Mengxi*, <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=1211397&commentid=67823>, 2011.

³⁸³ *Mengxi*, Chapter 1 “Bulie” 捕猎 [Hunting].

³⁸⁴ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1 Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 51-52.

appearance of the hero as an aborigine in the land; he resembles a creature -- half-human, half-beast -- and wears few clothes. As the story proceeds, Jian observes that the habitants of the land, belonging to different half-human, half-beast species, generally live as clans with their own leaders. They primarily make a living from hunting and farming (albeit in an underdeveloped manner). These characteristics are reminiscent of colonial accounts of the geological environments and aborigines in Africa, Australia, and America, where European colonists spread their knowledge, power, and brutality. Thus, the “other world” in *Mengxi* curiously reiterates the stereotype of “the new world” in the imaginations and narratives of the colonists.

In addition to the colonial “new worlds” setting, the novel gradually presents a detailed depiction of the half-human, half-beast races. These narratives have a flavor of conservative colonial developmentalism that follows biological and social Darwinist principles. As is widely known, the “struggle for existence, survival of the fittest, and natural selection” are key concepts in Darwin’s theory of evolution.³⁸⁵ Notably, the aboriginal races in the novel are also created on the basis of these rules. For instance, they are supposed to experience an infant and a juvenile stage before they become adults, during which their intelligence, language ability and physical power will evolve to some degree. Darwinism in the form of biological evolution is clearly illustrated by the hero, a young cat-man who has just reached adulthood. He has “sharp tiger teeth,” “claw-like nails,” and a “strong tail” suitable for hunting. They are a result of evolution (他的牙齿、指甲和尾巴，都是为了捕猎而进化成这个样子的).³⁸⁶ As a mighty figure, he possesses a large territory and stands at the pinnacle of the food chain in the land. In other words, the cat-man is selected by nature as one of the fittest species in the “Cuteland” mainly because of his evolutionary progress.

³⁸⁵ David J Galton and Clare J Galton, “Francis Galton: And Eugenics Today,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 24 (1998): 99.

³⁸⁶ *Mengxi*, Chapter 4 “Dingxing” 定性 [Determining the nature].

Juxtaposed with the presentation of the Darwinian biological evolution is the way in which the native society is structured. As mentioned previously, it is composed of different clans. Basically, there are three clans in the “Cuteland,” where the races of cat-man (the hero’s race) and white-fox-man (the hero’s friends) stand in sharp contrast to the mouse-man. Jian accentuates the mouse-man’s somatic abnormality compared with humans and underlines their bloodcurdling(恐怖) and nauseating (猥琐): “Their faces are similar to humans to some extent, but there still remains a lot of elements of beasts in them [...] They look like unsuccessful products. Although they have human faces, their lower jaws protrude like mice, and they have small black eyeballs and mouse ears. They are not adorable at all (它们的脸虽然已经有了人类脸膛的样子，但是还残留了很大一部分的兽类元素。它们看起来就像是一个失败的作品一样，虽然脸是一张人类的脸，但下颚吻部依然老鼠般突出，配合上滴溜溜乱转的小黑眼珠和头上的老鼠耳朵。一点都不可爱...)” Consequently, Jian characterizes them as a race with incomplete evolution (没有进化完全的兽人).³⁸⁷ Nevertheless, when introducing the cat-man and white-fox-man, except from the palpable characteristics of beasts such as catamount eyes, fox tails, and claws, Jian intentionally anthropomorphizes them. She compares the hero with a “normal young man, with a high nose, deep eye sockets, and thin lips” (正常的年轻男子, 高鼻深目, 嘴唇菲薄).³⁸⁸ The hominine characters of the half-human, half-foxes are also emphasized when she alludes to their “beautiful, sharp faces (美丽的、轮廓深刻分明的脸).”³⁸⁹ Jian prefers the female white-fox-man for their more human-like qualities, with “a pair of eyes that are similar to humans and less hairy (眼珠比雄性更接近于人类, 毛发更是明显稀疏),”³⁹⁰ granting

³⁸⁷ Mengxi, Chapter 23 “Meijia” 美甲 [Manicure].

³⁸⁸ Mengxi, Chapter 3 “Qushui” 取水 [Getting water].

³⁸⁹ Mengxi, Chapter 53 “Juhui” 聚会 [Gathering].

³⁹⁰ Mengxi, Chapter 54 “Toukui” 偷窥 [Peer].

them with greater human acuity. The two races hunt mouse-man as their regular food.

This comparison of the three races clearly marks the core principle of their society. Races that are more humanized are endowed with more intelligence and physical power, and hence have evolved to a higher level. Therefore, I argue that the social structure portrayed in *Mengxi* not only reflects the ideology of anthropocentrism, but also an underlying endorsement of social Darwinism, resonating with Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, Mao Zedong, and other intellectuals who advocated developmentalism in modern Chinese history. As noted previously, social Darwinists promote the law of evolution, naturalizing the “racialized hierarchies of the interstate system” and imperialist order in the early twentieth century.³⁹¹ The half-human, half-beast races in the “Cuteland” are also differentiated based on their evolutionary status, forming a racialized hierarchy.

The logic of social Darwinism reaches its pinnacle in Chapter 73, which is reminiscent of the philosophy of eugenics developed by Sir Francis Galton in the nineteenth century. As a fervent disciple of Darwinism, Galton strives to improve the human race through eugenics as a new science aiming to improve “inherited stock.” He believes that “more suitable races or strains of blood” should be given better opportunities for living, and that the expansion of what he terms the less suitable should be restricted.³⁹² This gave rise to the Eugenics movement in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s that focused on eliminating undesirable traits of the population through sterilization. Consequently, certain families were segregated and prevented from having offspring.³⁹³ In a surprisingly similar vein, a chapter titled “Extermination (灭绝)” in *Mengxi* depicts an organized, bloody genocide of mouse-man. Designated as an inferior race, the half-human, half-mouse is considered “less suitable,” and should therefore be eliminated. The

³⁹¹ Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*, 30.

³⁹² Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Dent and Sons, 1883), 24.

³⁹³ Troy Duster, *Backdoor to Eugenics* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

mouse-man clan dwells on an island adjacent to the other two races. Because they have frequent multiple births and repeatedly harass their neighbors, the hero cooperates with the white-fox-man clan to exterminate the mouse-man. Firstly, the white-fox-man invades the island and massacres the majority of the mouse-man, following which the hero manages to exterminate the race by destroying their habitat with a great fire: “The fire lasts for more than 10 days. After the fire, the Mouse-man Island becomes parched (火烧了十多天, 熄灭后, 鼠人岛已成焦土).”³⁹⁴

The mass violence in *Mengxi* bears a striking resemblance to massacres in colonial Africa, America, and Australia in the early modern era. In Australia, the aborigines were attacked by more powerful invaders, resulting in countless deaths and the destruction of their existing societies. Jian’s attitudes toward the apathetic extermination of mouse-man merits further discussion. Although she has not participated in the annihilation and admits her discomfort when she catches sight of the remains of some mouse-men, she retains her faith in “survival of the fittest” and believes resolutely that they should, as inferior creatures, be eradicated as a biologically correct choice. She believes that high-class races such as the cat-man and herself, as the theory of eugenics suggests, ought to be granted better living resources. The chapter’s “the author has something to say” part reveals a similar attitude to mouse-man: “Finally the mouse-man is being weeded out. I dislike this supporting character too. Sigh (终于把鼠人解决了, 这个配角我自己都不喜欢, 松了一口气).”³⁹⁵ This further implies the social Darwinist ideas adopted by the *yishi dalu* stories. It appears that the logic of colonial developmentalism and social Darwinism continues to operate as a vital mindset in contemporary online culture.

³⁹⁴ *Mengxi*, Chapter 73 “Miejüe” 灭绝 [Extermination].

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

3.2.2 Two Types of “Self-Other” Relationship

The case of *Mengxi* is far more than an echo of the conservative narratives of colonial developmentalism and social Darwinism. Through closer scrutiny, I contend that it can be seen not only as a revolutionary account in gender relations, but also as a paean to the discourse of national development since the late nineteenth century. In this section, I unravel how the female protagonist communicates and lives with the cat-man and white-fox-man. The novel produces a unique relationship between self and other, thus mirroring the desires of the female netizens.

Before teasing out the self-other dynamics, it is necessary to point out that the story is told entirely from the perspective of the heroine Jian as a representative of contemporary female netizens. As the beginning of the novel shows, Jian is a modern young woman who comes from a military family, a typical example of the users in Jinjiang. More importantly, Jian keeps using popular online vocabularies like *erhuo* (stupid, stubborn guy) in the novel, making it easier for the readers to imagine themselves as the heroine and understand her feelings and thoughts.³⁹⁶ In this regard, readers tend to interpret the story from Jian’s perspective and there are two layers of self-other relationship: one between the heroine and the hero as two individuals, and the other between the heroine as a human (a young Chinese woman) and the inhabitants of the “Cuteland.” I will first discuss the former self-other relationship and how it reflects a progressive mode of gender relations in online literature.

Notably, from the first time Jian meets Erhei, the palpable physical weakness of the heroine compared with the robust hero is emphasized. “After Jian is beaten by Erhei on the back, she is turned upside down by the hero who later pulls her to his own location. Throughout the process, she finds herself with little possibility to revolt or even struggle for freedom (一阵剧痛袭击了简宁的后背...

³⁹⁶ *Mengxi*, Chapter 27 “Jiaoxiao” 娇笑 [Sweet giggles].

接下来，简宁被抓住后脚倒拎了起来 [...] 这个雄兽是把她放在地上拖着走的...让简宁完全没有办法反抗)。³⁹⁷ This striking contrast seems to reflect the traditional gender structure of romance stories that feature an unequal relationship between a strong, domineering hero and a puny, vulnerable heroine. However, the last few pages of the novel indicate a definite inversion of their relationship. In Chapter 123, after living with Jian for a long period, Erhei has developed the habit of following Jian and doing whatever she tells him to do (在长期的生活中，他已经养成了对简宁言听计从的习惯，简宁说什么就是什么)。³⁹⁸

In constructing the shifting relationship dynamics, the novel does not attempt to change the heroine's relative paucity in physical strength; rather, it illuminates how Jian manages to obtain the dominant position during her everyday communication with the hero mainly from two aspects. Firstly, the heroine serves as a competent language teacher and trainer for the male protagonist. She names the hero Erhei 二黑 based on his thick black fur, and routinely gives lessons in Chinese. Moreover, informed with more advanced technologies, Jian ameliorates their living conditions through the provision of housing, clothing, eating, and transportation. For instance, she invents a fishing net so that they can eat fish in a near river. In her relentless efforts to improve their housing situation, she devises a series of artefacts, ranging from small items such as a toothbrush, as well as a mattress to large alterations such as building a new storeroom. In the later section of this chapter, where the relationship between the female protagonist and other half-human, half-beasts will be discussed, I will again consider how the heroine offers linguistic and technological instructions to the locals.

The transformation of the relationship between the couple culminates in Chapter 102, when Jian's privileged position is confirmed not only in their daily

³⁹⁷ *Mengxi*, Chapter 1, "Bulie" 捕猎 [Hunting].

³⁹⁸ *Mengxi*, Chapter 80, "Jiaojin" 较劲 [Competition].

lives, but also in their sexual relationship. The chapter explains that half-human, half-beasts will be in full rut during the rainy season, a period when males are supposed to engage in frequent sexual activities with their female partners. However, Jian has been reluctant to enter into a sexual relationship with the hero. Also, she is concerned that the cat-man's extraordinary physical strength and sexual capacity might imperil her, so the hero's sexual urges are always suppressed during the first three years. It is not until Jian unearths a specific black mineral, which can temporarily weaken the sexual ability of the cat-man and recognizes her libidinal desire, that she allows Erhei to engage in copulation with her. The frequency, location, and quantity of their sexual intercourse, however, are fully controlled by the heroine. The hero's sexual desire, in this respect, is rigorously restricted.³⁹⁹ Consequently, Erhei bears a continuous temporary castration due to the will of the female protagonist. Significantly, gender relations are reversed here, presenting a female "self" and a male objective "other."

In sum, a new hierarchy between the two is established in which the heroine becomes the tutor, parent, and, most importantly, "master" of the hero. Moreover, echoing the title of the work, the author reprises the word *moe* throughout the piece and employs this frequently to describe the hero and the white-fox-man. As mentioned above, it always refers to the loveliness of little boys, girls, animals, and other immature beings, which further consolidates the hero's inferior position as an unenlightened "other."

The second self-other relationship concerns the heroine and other aboriginals. Notably, both the cat-man and white fox-man are created in accordance with Western aesthetics. Most males are born with Western appearances: "they look very much like Erhei, and with their chiseled features they resemble handsome mixed-blood (就和小二黑没有什么不一样了, 也是轮廓深邃, 带有混血儿感觉的帅哥)." ⁴⁰⁰ Their aesthetic standard for female beauty also matches

³⁹⁹ Mengxi, Chapter 68, "Baocan" 饱餐 [A good feed].

⁴⁰⁰ Mengxi, Chapter 53, "Jühui" 聚会 [Gathering].

Western values, as the most welcomed female white-fox-man is the tallest and strongest figure and is therefore in some ways the prettiest (是这些雌性中最高挑最强壮, 某种意义上来说也最美丽的).⁴⁰¹ Hence, when Erhei's brothers see the heroine for the first time, they scoff at Jian's weakness and the "ugliness" of her Chinese face.

As discussed above, the heroine's dominant position is further consolidated through her guidance in both language and technology. On a linguistic level, each race originally has a distinct language (the cat-man speaks cat language, while the white fox-man speaks white-fox language), but they can understand each other in sharing considerable similarities. The cat language contains various sounds for diverse references and emotions, but it is a developing language that relies on gestures for subtle descriptions (猫语现在大致还在发展期的语言, 需要肢体的配合).⁴⁰² As Joshua T. Katz declares in his summary of "linguistics," human languages always start with a combination of different sounds which mobilize the formation of "meaningful sequences." These sequences then interact with others to shape clauses, facilitating the production of "more intricate narratives (discourse analysis and stylistics)."⁴⁰³ The languages of the aborigines, as Jian perceives, have just entered the stage of producing meaningful sequences, resulting in an inability to deliver complicated messages. The subsequent sentences give an explicit example to illustrate the complexity and accuracy of Chinese compared to the local languages. Using Chinese, Jian is able to express the meaning of "there is food near the river where you always go to," while in cat language, the cat-man can only ask the heroine to "go with him" and bring her to

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² *Mengxi*, Chapter 29, "Qiaoyu" 巧遇 [Chance encounter].

⁴⁰³ Joshua T. Katz, "Linguistics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, eds. Alessandro Barchiesi and Waltraud Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.

the river.⁴⁰⁴ The underdeveloped local languages (with their Western appearance) thus serve as a contrast to the more sophisticated Chinese language.⁴⁰⁵

The representation of Chineseness in *Mengxi* extends beyond linguistics. As the story continues, the heroine's advanced knowledge of technology and science is also displayed in her contact with the white-fox-man and the cat-man. Jian offers a plenitude of technical skills and scientific machines beneficial to gregarious living. Under her guidance, both the two clans learn the technology of pottery, knitting, felling, and building wooden houses. Moreover, with the discovery of a copper mine close to their habitats, Jian instructs the locals other technologies such as exploiting the mine, metallurgy, and making axes and chippers. Last but not least, Jian's discovery of the "black mineral" can not only reduce the sexual impulses of the males, but also control their birth rate which considerably expands their population. As one of the final chapters concludes, "their life has been changed tremendously with these instruments. Each year the cat-man clan can achieve technological development, and now they have become a veritable primitive tribe rather than a group of wild beasts (有了这些工具...他们的生活几乎已经算得上是天翻地覆。猫人部族每一年都有技术上的进展, 现在她们比较像是一个货真价实的原始群落, 而不再像是一群野性的兽了)." ⁴⁰⁶

Such progress further underlines the significance of the Chinese language as it represents a more advanced system with modern technological and scientific knowledge. As indicated by the denouement of the book where Jian's children have become grown-ups, for the last fifteen years, the language introduced by their mother (Jian) has pervaded the whole land. Jian's two children win lots of respect from their fellow countrymen as they can speak better Chinese than others.

⁴⁰⁴ *Mengxi*, Chapter 45, "Shandong" 山洞 [Cave].

⁴⁰⁵ *Mengxi*, Chapter 29, "Qiaoyu" 巧遇 [Chance encounter].

⁴⁰⁶ *Mengxi*, Chapter 87, "Fuhuo" 复活 [Resurgence].

People believe the ‘spirit’ in language and mastering the language gives them power.⁴⁰⁷

It is no exaggeration to infer that Jian, with her knowledge of linguistics and technology, has achieved dominance of the “Cuteland”: “It seems that they regard Jian as a God-like figure, because every time she visits them, she brings new technologies that will improve their living standard. So they are particularly reverent when they face Jian (但他们似乎是已经把简宁看做了神一样的人物, 她每次来访都会带来一些新技术什么的, 改变他们的生活。所以他们对简宁的态度相当的恭敬).”⁴⁰⁸ I argue that the half-human, half-beast society is constructed as an underdeveloped and ignorant “other,” highlighting the more-developed and civilized “self” of the Chinese heroine.

Additionally, the novel is also reminiscent of the discourses of Chinese national development. For instance, in Chapter 114, Jian is portrayed as a master of “modern civilization” (现代文明)⁴⁰⁹ and her knowledge is deemed “superior to theirs (aborigines); therefore, in all aspects they imitate Jian (一旦他们知道简宁所具备的知识要比他们所有的更优越, 他们 [...] 在每个方方面面都努力地模仿简宁).”⁴¹⁰ This evokes our memory of nineteenth century China, when “civilization” signaled “all that was advanced, standing as a synecdoche for the power and prestige of the West” and intellectuals were eager to learn Western knowledge and technologies.⁴¹¹ Familiar discourses of national development after the 1980s also leave their traces in the book, evidenced by sayings like “advanced, primary productive forces (先进生产力, 第一生产力)”⁴¹² and “the speedy development of science and technology requires more people (科技要更

⁴⁰⁷ *Mengxi*, Chapter 89, “Fanwai zhi qingdou” 番外之情窦 [Side story: First love].

⁴⁰⁸ *Mengxi*, Chapter 74, “Shaotao” 烧陶 [Making pottery].

⁴⁰⁹ *Mengxi*, Chapter 15, “Caifeng” 裁缝 [Tailor].

⁴¹⁰ *Mengxi*, Chapter 82, “Dasao” 大嫂 [The eldest brother’s wife].

⁴¹¹ Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*, 17.

⁴¹² *Mengxi*, Chapter 87, “Fuhuo” 复活 [Resurgence], Chapter 42 “Haoxue” 好学 [Being studious].

多人一起发展才更快).”⁴¹³ These key phrases display an affinity with the developmental discourses in China’s market reform era. In 1988, Deng Xiaoping declared that “Science and technology are the primary productive force (科学技术是第一生产力).”⁴¹⁴ This was later remolded and accentuated by Jiang Zemin in his “July 1 talk” in 2001, claiming that “science and technology are the primary productive force and are also the quintessential manifestation and emblem of advanced productive force (科学技术是第一生产力，而且是先进生产力的集中体现和重要标志).”⁴¹⁵

To summarize, the second layer of self-other relationship between Jian and the half-human, half-beasts alludes to the relationship between contemporary China and the West. It reminds us of the double-sided discrimination faced by Chinese women. As Susan Brownmiller indicates, Western cultures, particularly American, have historically perpetuated biased stereotypes of Chinese women, portraying them as either “Dragon Ladies” as a combination of “opaque, deceitful Asians” and “treacherous, glamorous women,” or as sexually provocative “China Dolls” who are “enigmatic fallen temptress.”⁴¹⁶ Nevertheless, these *yishi dalu* narratives like *Mengxi* are constructed against a different social backdrop. With China’s rapid development over the past decades, new nationalist discourses have emerged, presenting China as “a powerful economy, a potential market, a political entity seeking great-power status, and an ancient civilization fostering cultural confidence.” These new “China stories” shape the desired reality for female netizens, enabling them to challenge the male-dominated gender and Western-centric global order, while paradoxically reproducing colonial

⁴¹³ *Mengxi*, Chapter 89, “Fanwai zhi qingdou” 番外之情窦 [Side story: First love].

⁴¹⁴ People.cn, *Shisanjie sanzong quanhui guanjianci: Kexue jieshu shi diyi shengchanli* 十三届三中全会关键词：科学技术是第一生产力 [The key phrase of the Third Plenary Session of the 13th Central Committee: Science and technology are the primary productive forces] <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1106/c70731-23449619.html>, 2013.

⁴¹⁵ See <http://www.china.com.cn/ch-80years/zhongyao/9.htm>.

⁴¹⁶ Susan Brownmiller, “China Dolls and Dragon Ladies: American Images of Asian Women,” *Asian Woman* 6 (1998): 157-158.

paradigms.

3.3 *Moshi* (Apocalypse) Novels: Sustainable Development with New Materialist Effects

While the subgenre of “the other land” reflects the changing Chinese developmental discourse since the late nineteenth century, new narratives concerning development continue to emerge and proliferate in post socialist China. Online literature also captures these trends, among which a subgenre called *moshi* (apocalypse) is worthy of further examination. This subgenre echoes the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic trends in English (and especially American) popular culture since the early twenty-first century. While works in the English language either draw their inspiration directly from the biblical apocalypse or portray apocalyptic worlds resulting from zombies, viruses, or natural disasters, online Chinese apocalyptic fiction rarely incorporates biblical or religious themes.⁴¹⁷ I choose Wushiling’s 雾矢翎 *Moshi Chongsheng Zhi Juedui Duchong* 末世重生之绝对独宠 (Rebirth in Apocalypse: Absolute and Exclusive Love, 2014)⁴¹⁸ as my case, partly because it was published during the period of the so-called “2012 phenomenon,”⁴¹⁹ and partly because of its popularity.⁴²⁰

Delivered by Wu Shiling, a noted writer who has been producing romantic

⁴¹⁷ Sheinfeld Shayna, “Scenes from the End of the World in American Popular Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and American Popular Culture*, eds. Dan W. Clanton, Terry R. Clark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 202.

⁴¹⁸ The original web page of the novel (in Jinjiang) is locked. I will use *Moshi* as a short term for the novel.

⁴¹⁹ The subgenre of the apocalyptic fiction in online literature is specifically popular around 2012, following the wide circulation of the “2012 phenomenon” that believes the year 2012 would see the end of the world. For the “2012 phenomenon,” see Robert K. Sitler, “The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no.3 (2006): 24–38.

⁴²⁰ As mentioned before, the original data of the novel is lost, but the novel is still recommended by many fans in other apps and websites. For example, see Haoshu Tuijianshi 好书推荐师 [The one who recommend good books]. *Moshi chongsheng zhi juehui duchong: Mori tianchong, wei xiongmei, 4.3-4.5 xing tuijian* 《末世重生之绝对独宠》末日甜宠、伪兄妹 4.3-4.5 星推荐 [Rebirth in apocalypse: Absolute and exclusive love, sweetness and love in apocalypse, stepbrother and sister, recommend in 4.3-4.5 stars] https://www.sohu.com/a/336707810_651878, 2019.

stories in Jinjiang for almost 15 years, *Moshi* tells the story of a young man called Lou Dian 楼殿 who lives in an apocalyptic age in which zombies pervade the world. At one point, his stepsister, Lou Ling 楼龄, whom Lou Dian loves deeply, is killed by zombies as a result of jealousy. Drowned in desperation and hostility, Lou Dian avenges Lou Ling's death and dies in agony. However, upon his death, he is unexpectedly sent back to the days before the zombie outbreak. In this second life, Lou Dian protects and trains Lou Ling to meet the coming apocalypse and the main storyline features how they fight the zombies and other creatures and manage to survive.

What matters here is not only the strong emotions between the characters, but also the novel's representation as a significant example of "burgeoning new materialist literature" and its resonance with China's recent developmentalism.⁴²¹ Under careful examination, I observe that new materialism is "active everywhere and always throughout" the novel.⁴²² Entwined with popular themes in Chinese developmental and national discourses, it is particularly intriguing and timely for Chinese internet readers.

In the following, I will first explore how the novel aligns with the recent "material turn" in academia, together with an orientation towards posthumanism. Then, I will read the work from an environmentalist perspective, articulating how it reflects a materialist sustainable development reading and how it echoes China's "environmental and sustainable" developmentalism.

3.3.1 The "Material Turn" and Posthumanism in *Moshi*

Modern conceptions of materiality remain indebted to Descartes, according to whom matter is a "corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and

⁴²¹ David A. G. Clarke and Jamie McPhie, "Tensions, Knots, and Lines of Flight: Themes and Directions of Travel for New Materialisms and Environmental Education," *Environmental Education Research*, vol.26 (9-10) (2020):1232.

⁴²² Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van Der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, An imprint of MPublishing: University of Michigan Library, 2012), 14.

thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert.”⁴²³ Following the “material turn” in cultural studies and social sciences, however, new materialist ontologies now assume that “materiality is always something more than ‘mere’ matter.”⁴²⁴ That is to say, materiality is no longer an inert physical substance that necessarily entails causes and effects. Rather, matter is seen as “active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable.”⁴²⁵ In *Moshi*, the most important new material leading to the apocalypse is a devastating virus from outer space that infects creatures unpredictably and randomly. It creates countless zombies that infect and kill ordinary people.⁴²⁶

In addition to the destructive zombie virus, “superpower (*yineng* 异能) is another key material in the novel. They “really defy common sense (实在是违反了常理),” and like other new materials, they are active and contingent.⁴²⁷ The answers to questions like who will be given superpower, what kind of superpower they will attain, and how and when the superpower will be given remain accidental and unexpected. For instance, Lou Dian seizes two types of superpower: the power to manipulate space (*kongjian yineng* 空间异能) and the power to control minds (*jingshen yineng* 精神异能). The former not only provides him with invisibly large spaces to restore physical objects, but also creates a knife composed of air. The latter enables him to read, influence and even control the minds of others. In contrast, his younger cousin, Lou Yan 楼妍, although a genius in machine- and weapon-making, is never able to gain any superpower. Lou Ling’s situation is even more complicated. Originally, she remains to be an ordinary person with no superpower, but during Lou Dian’s second life (after time travel), she accidentally develops the superpower to

⁴²³ Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Coole (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁶ *Moshi*, Chapter 6, “*Moshi jianglin 2*,” 末世降临 2 [The coming of the apocalypse 2].

⁴²⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 64, “*Moshi jianwen 2*,” 末世见闻 2 [Stories in apocalypse 2].

communicate with and control plants, and she is also able to make them grow more quickly (*zhiwuxi yineng* 植物系异能).

The apocalypse also brings multiple kinds of superpower to non-humans. In *Moshi*, zombies as well as diverse animal and plant species also develop superpowers.⁴²⁸ Material agency is, therefore, extended beyond humans to non-human entities. As noted by John Reader, one of the fundamental traits of new materialism is its devaluation of human agency and emphasis on the non-human. He endorses the concept of distributive agency popular among new materialists, acknowledging the “entangled engagements of the human and non-human assemblages and collectives that determine life in the Terrestrial.”⁴²⁹

While the distributive agencies of superpower go beyond human individuals, the question of whether this demonstrates a “posthumanist sense of material agency” warrants further examination. In exploring the recent “non-human turn” in academia, Richard Grusin elaborates on the necessity to distinguish the posthuman turn from the non-human one. The former claims that “teleology or progress” starts from the human and entails a “transformation from human to the posthuman, after or beyond the human.”⁴³⁰ As for the non-human turn, its kernel lies in the fact that humans have “always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the non-human.”⁴³¹ In this sense, *Moshi*, though involving “the imbrication of human and non-human,”⁴³² can be seen more as a posthumanist work that depicts a “risk society”⁴³³ for the individual subjects, implying a “development from human to something after the human.”⁴³⁴ In a “risk society,” citizens are

⁴²⁸ See *Moshi*, Chapter 30, “Moshi lushang 1” 末世路上 1 [Journey in apocalypse 1], “The Zombies also evolved with extraordinary powers (丧尸也进化出异能了).” Also see Chapter 33, “Moshi lushang 4” 末世路上 4 [Journey in apocalypse 4], “This is a plant with extraordinary power (这是变异植物).”

⁴²⁹ John Reader, “From New Materialism to the Postdigital: Religious Responses to Environment and Technology,” *Postdigital Science and Education* 2010, no.3: 551.

⁴³⁰ Richard Grusin, ed. *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pix.

⁴³¹ Grusin, ed. *The Nonhuman Turn*, pix.

⁴³² Beck Ulrich, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), 54.

⁴³³ Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4.

⁴³⁴ Alaimo, *Exposed*, 4.

confronted with a “double shock” of threats to their health and safety and “loss of sovereignty.”⁴³⁵ It is the erosion of the “sovereign individual subject” that imposes a “posthumanist or counter-humanist sense.”²¹ Moreover, exposures to the “risk society,” replete with new materials and hazardous uncertainties, jeopardize personal lives and go “beyond the line of what could be policed.”⁴³⁶ In other words, human society is deprived of the Foucaultian power to maintain stable modern regimes and institutions. As the early chapters of *Moshi* show: “The whole world seems to be trapped in a state of panic (整个世界仿佛都陷入了一种恐慌中) [...] social order is disrupted (秩序乱了) [...] and the government is left to fend for itself (政府自顾不暇).”⁴³⁷ The introduction of the zombie virus and, more significantly, superpower in the work creates a pervasive sense of lost sovereignty and vulnerability. Three aspects further reinforce the catastrophic consequences for human beings in a posthumanist context.

Firstly, this chapter differs significantly from the posthumanist approach discussed in Chapter 1 that deprives fixed corporeal bodies of men and empowers women with the rational minds. While the latter enables the female protagonists in online romantic products to define their male partners’ bodies, *Moshi* does not emphasize body/mind dualism. Rather, human intelligence is granted to both human and non-human creatures. For instance, Chapters 18 and 94 identify “extremely clever animals with extraordinary power (这些变异兽会如此聪明)”⁴³⁸ and “a large tree with extraordinary power which is about to become a genie (快要成精了的变异树)”⁴³⁹ respectively. Moreover, Chapters 121 and 127 describe the emergence of “zombies with wisdom (智慧丧尸)” and the “King of

⁴³⁵ Ulrich, *Risk Society*, 54.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 5, “Moshi jianglin,” 末世降临 [The coming of the apocalypse]; Chapter 11, “Moshi renxin 2,” 末世人心 2 [People’s minds in apocalypse 2]; Chapter 17, “Moshi renxin 8,” 末世人心 8 [People’s minds in apocalypse 8].

⁴³⁸ *Moshi*, Chapter 18, “Moshi renxin 9,” 末世人心 9 [People’s minds in apocalypse 9].

⁴³⁹ *Moshi*, Chapter 94, “Moshi jiuyuan 8,” 末世救援 8 [Rescue in apocalypse 8].

the zombies (丧尸王).” As explained by Lou Dian, “above the zombies with wisdom, there should be a more powerful zombie to lead them [...] and we can call it the King of the zombies as it possesses supreme powers 智慧丧尸之上, 应该还有一个更强大的丧尸领导它们[...]而我们可以称这种绝对实力之上的丧尸为丧尸王).”⁴⁴⁰

The novel blurs the boundaries between the “zombies with wisdom” and humans both physically and spiritually. Lou discovers that “(the King of the zombies) is no different from a human except for a pair of blood-red eyes (除了一双血红色的眼睛, 与人类无异).”⁴⁴¹ Furthermore, “zombies with wisdom possess the same intelligence as humans do [...] (They) no longer attack humans blindly. Instead, they plan step by step, guiding the zombies to attack the city (衍生智慧的丧尸与人类的智慧一般[...]引领着丧尸攻城, 一步步地计划[...]不再是盲目地攻击人类).”⁴⁴² In this regard, the “cognitive abilities, intentionality and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption” that used to privilege the human species have lost ground.⁴⁴³ *Moshi* therefore defies human exceptionalism in an anthropocentric world.

Secondly, similar to the subgenre of *yishi dalu*, *Moshi* also depicts a Darwinist evolution of diverse creatures. “After the apocalypse, some of the humans evolve with extraordinary powers, creating an additional guarantee of survival in this cruel post-apocalyptic world (末世后, 人类进化为异能者, 使得人类在这个残酷的末世中多了份生存的保障).”⁴⁴⁴ Yet, at the same time, “zombies have also evolved with superpowers (丧尸也进化出异能了) and both plants and animals undergo evolution (植物、动物在进化), putting all the human and non-

⁴⁴⁰ *Moshi*, Chapter 127, “*Moshi jieju 3*,” 末世结局 3 [The end of apocalypse 3].

⁴⁴¹ *Moshi*, Chapter 134, “*Moshi jieju 20*,” 末世结局 20 [The end of apocalypse 20].

⁴⁴² *Moshi*, Chapter 125, “*Moshi jieju 11*,” 末世结局 11 [The end of apocalypse 11].

⁴⁴³ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” 10.

⁴⁴⁴ *Moshi*, Chapter 21, “*Moshi renxin 12*,” 末世人心 12 [People’s minds in apocalypse 12].

human beings on an equal footing (大家都处于平等的地位)⁴⁴⁵ where the Darwinist laws of natural selection dominate. Moreover, the evolution of superpower goes with increasing levels. Notably, zombies always go one step further than humans. For example, in Chapter 88, the most powerful humans with superpower are at level three, while the strongest zombies have reached a higher level (人类现在最强的不过是三阶[...]却没想到丧尸比人类还走到前面).”⁴⁴⁶ Up to the final war between the zombies and humans, except from Lou Dian who has inherited superpower from his previous life, humans are still at an inferior position:

“It is not as simple as just facing the normal zombies. The King of the zombies who has already reached level seven is the most powerful of all and its power is expected to continue to grow over the coming year. However, the strongest humans, who are at level six, are poured out by the research institute at the capital base (丧尸王可不是单单面对丧尸那么简单，那可是所有丧尸中最厉害的王者，已经达到了七阶，估计一年时间它还会有所成长，人类现在最强者的六阶，还是首都基地的研究院[...]催灌出来的).”⁴⁴⁷

This persistent “desperate (令人绝望的)”⁴⁴⁸ gap, stimulating a deep sense of threat to the human survival, signals the demise of the Cartesian-Newtonian materialism that underpins modern societies, where humans “have the right or ability to master nature.”⁴⁴⁹

Lastly, the loss of sovereignty of human subjects is also haunted by continuing material interchanges between diverse human and non-human agents. “Once a zombie or zombie animal reaches level one, a crystal nucleus forms in its head

⁴⁴⁵ *Moshi*, Chapter 66, “*Moshi jianwen 4*,” 末世见闻 4 [Stories in apocalypse 4].

⁴⁴⁶ *Moshi*, Chapter 87, “*Moshi jiuyuan 1*,” 末世救援 1 [Rescue in apocalypse 1].

⁴⁴⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 130, “*Moshi jieju 16*,” 末世结局 16 [The end of apocalypse 16].

⁴⁴⁸ *Moshi*, Chapter 130, “*Moshi jieju 16*,” 末世结局 16 [The end of apocalypse 16].

⁴⁴⁹ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” 10.

[...] Humans and animals with superpowers also have crystal nucleus (丧尸和丧尸兽只要抵达一阶后，脑袋里就会凝结出晶核 [...] 异能者和变异兽也有晶核).”⁴⁵⁰ More significantly, “superpowers can be cultivated on their own, or they can be promoted by absorbing others’ crystal nucleus, all kinds of which can be used for cultivation (异能可以自行修练，也可以吸收晶核晋升。只要是晶核，都可以用来修练).”⁴⁵¹ For those who are willing to advance, a simple way is to devour the crystal nucleus of others, whether they be zombies or humans with superpower.⁴⁵² The crystal nucleus is hence presented as a vehicle for the interchange of superpower among variegated and distributed agents.

In other cases, the transfer of superpower operates more directly with no need for crystal nucleus. Chapters 94 to 97 describe a furious fight between an old locust tree with superpower and a group of superpowered humans led by Lou Dian. Chapter 96 portrays the end of the war: “Lou Dian focuses on fighting the injured tree with his mental power [...] Creating a net, he uses his power to strangle the old locust tree’s mind bit by bit, gradually destroying the spiritual barrier that has blocked the entire city (楼殿专注着和受伤的变异树用精神力较量[...]精神力化为网，一点一点地绞杀老槐树的精神力，将封锁整个城市的精神屏障一点一点地瓦解吞噬).”⁴⁵³ After winning the battle, Lou Dian’s mental superpower rises from level seven to ten, exactly the same level as the beaten tree (恰好是先前那棵变异树的精神等级).⁴⁵⁴

The following model (figure 3.1) illustrates how the various agents engage in the complex and continuous circulation of new materials in *Moshi*. I suggest that the story exemplifies materialist posthumanism by embodying two ontological shifts: “from essentialism to relationality;” and from human-centric agency to

⁴⁵⁰ *Moshi*, Chapter 26, “Moshi renxin 17,” 末世人心 17 [People’s minds in apocalypse 17].

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Chapter 33, “Moshi lushang 4,” 末世路上 4 [The journey in apocalypse 4].

⁴⁵² *Moshi*, Chapter 87, “Moshi jiuyuan 1,” 末世救援 1 [Rescue in apocalypse 1].

⁴⁵³ *Moshi*, Chapter 96, “Moshi jiuyuan 10,” 末世救援 10 [Rescue in apocalypse 10].

⁴⁵⁴ *Moshi*, Chapter 97, “Moshi jiuyuan 11,” 末世救援 11 [Rescue in apocalypse 11].

material affectivity with distributed agents.⁴⁵⁵ Primarily, new materialism proposes a relational interpretation of myriad materialities. With constantly changing forms, they engage and assemble with other material relations and continue through “the emergent capacities or becomings that they gain in these interactions.”⁴⁵⁶ In this regard, events and interactions are perceived as assemblages, showing fluid and flexible arrangements or orderings.⁴⁵⁷ The assemblage does not consist of relations; “rather, it is a ration.”⁴⁵⁸

Therefore, as Braidotti Rosi, one of the founders of new materialism indicates, the subjectivity of posthuman subjects “has to include the relational dependence on multiple non-humans and the planetary dimension as a whole.”⁴⁵⁹ As shown in figure 4.1, humans with superpower relate to other posthumanist subjectivities like superpowered zombies and animals in a “multi-directional and multi-scalar manner.”⁴⁶⁰ The levels of superpower of these posthuman subjects are not only defined by their own evolution and cultivation, but also by other beings. This points to the second ontological shift in materialism which underlines the activeness and affectivity of all matter, or a “thing power,” as “things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power.”⁴⁶¹ The ability to affect and be affected by assembled others shapes the convergence of posthuman subjects as a “we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same” type.⁴⁶² Throwing new lights on the distinction between humans and “all the other stuff conventionally treated as the ‘environment,’” posthumanist materialism calls for alternative ways to understand nature, society, and relations, bringing us to another approach to reading *Moshi*, which will be discussed in the following

⁴⁵⁵ Nick J Fox and Pam Alldred, “Sustainability, Feminist Posthumanism and the Unusual Capacities of (Post)humans,” *Environmental Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2020): 122.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Guattari Félix, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 45.

⁴⁵⁸ Ian Buchanan, “Assemblage Theory, Or the Future of an Illusion,” *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 11 (3) (2017): 465.

⁴⁵⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 35.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁶¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

⁴⁶² Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 45.

section.⁴⁶³

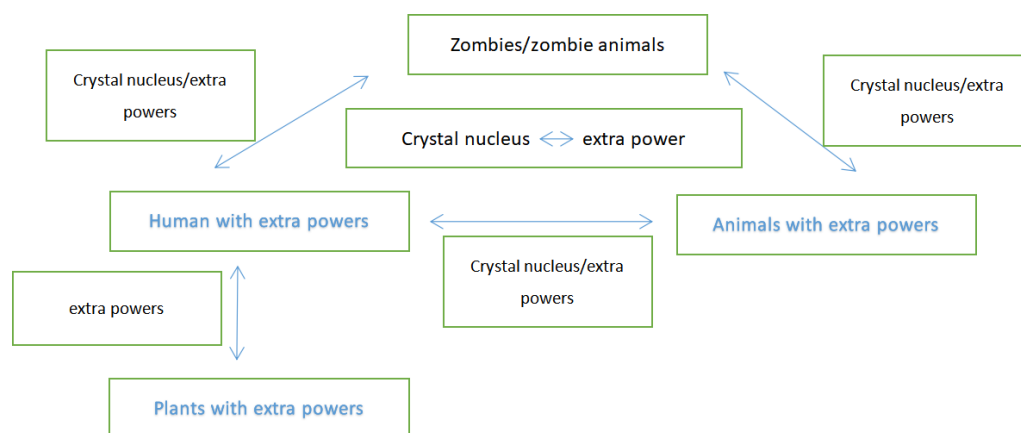


Figure 3.1 Circulation of new materials in *Moshi*

3.3.2 A Post-humanist Environmental Project: Under Sustainable Development Governance

Based on the posthumanist approach, another crucial strand of new materialism considers the “biopolitical and bioethical issues concerning the status of life and of the human.”⁴⁶⁴ In other words, a new materialist understanding of environment encourages ecological concerns beyond the immediate operations of human society, addressing issues such as (global) climate change and the deteriorating natural environment more than the dichotomy of nature/culture.⁴⁶⁵ Notably, *Moshi* also addresses these issues in a posthuman context:

“After the apocalypse, the climate is so disordered that there is no spring or autumn, only winter and summer, and the extreme cold of winter and extreme heat of summer made many people lose their lives (末世后[...]气候紊乱，没有春秋只要

⁴⁶³ Fox and Alldred, “Sustainability,” 123.

⁴⁶⁴ Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” 7.

⁴⁶⁵ United Nations (UN), “The Sustainable Development Goals Report,” <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/#sdg-goals>, 2019.

冬夏，冬天的极寒与夏日的极热，都让不少人承受不住而因此而丧命).⁴⁶⁶ The environment changed dramatically, especially the changes in plants, making the deep forests no less dangerous than the cities, with ubiquitous plants with superpower able to keep humans away (环境发生了巨大的变化，特别是植物的变异，使得深山老林成为不亚于城市的危险的存在，那些无处不在的变异植物，也让人类止步).⁴⁶⁷

I contend that the novel can be read as a posthumanist work that concentrates on the dialectic between human society and the natural environment via the lens of new materialism. As Nick Fox and Pam Alldred remark, the crux of a posthuman ecological work centering on protecting the natural environment is to recognize humans as “an intrinsic part of the material world,” and that both animate and inanimate matters possess “vital, self-organizing capacities.”⁴⁶⁸ In a subsequent article, they identify three key features of a post-anthropocentric work, all of which can be found in *Moshi*.

Firstly, as emphasized earlier, a posthumanist understanding of the natural environment involves the relationality between distributed agents and the affectivity of matter. Compared to the relationality and affectivity shown in figure 3.1, the superpower of plants fosters more intimate relationships and profound connections between humans and plants. As discussed above, Lou Ling possesses the superpower of plants, enabling her to not only hasten their ripening processes but more significantly, communicate with seeds (能和种子们沟通). “It is a very mysterious yet indescribable feeling. But it makes the seeds listen to her and grow as she wants them to, so that they are under her control (那是一种十分玄奥的感觉，难以说清楚，不过却能让那些种子们听她的话，按着她的心意生长，

⁴⁶⁶ *Moshi*, Chapter 33, “Moshi lushang 4,” 末世路上 4 [Journey in apocalypse 4].

⁴⁶⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 43, “Moshi ganqing 4,” 末世感情 4 [Emotions in apocalypse 4].

⁴⁶⁸ Nick J Fox and Pam Alldred, “Re-assembling Climate Change Policy: Materialism, Posthumanism, and the Policy Assemblage,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 2 (2020): 271.

如此算是收伏了它们)。”⁴⁶⁹

Through such communication, Lou Ling is also influenced by these abnormal plants. In Chapter 105, she encounters a large patch of red willow in a desert. She discovers that “(her) mind seems to gradually merge into these red willows, as if gradually merging with the scent they emit. And she can even see the traces of those desert-based red willows growing with their rhizomes rooted deep into the sand 自己的精神似乎渐渐地融入了这片沙漠红柳中，仿佛与它们散发的气息渐渐相融，甚至可以看到那些沙漠红柳生长的痕迹，它们的根茎深深地扎入沙中……”⁴⁷⁰ The intertwining of the lives of humans and non-humans, as Donna Haraway boldly announces, denotes the coming of the so-called “Chthulucene.” According to Haraway, Chthulucene follows the Anthropocene and much like the new materialist propositions, “entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages -- including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus.” ⁴⁷¹ In order to welcome the Chthulucene, she proposes a powerful slogan “Make Kin Not Babies,” as she perceives “Kin” as “an assembling sort of word” and “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense.”⁴⁷² As the example of Lou Ling and the red willows reveals, all creatures “share a common ‘flesh,’ laterally, semiotically, and genealogically.”⁴⁷³

Another characteristic of a posthuman environmentalist approach, aligned with new materialism, is the rejection of evaluating events based on anthropocentric values or prioritizing human agencies. Fox and Alldred thus invite a new assessment in terms of the “unusual capacities” of humans “to act altruistically towards unknown others.” ⁴⁷⁴ These “unusual capacities” can

⁴⁶⁹ *Moshi*, Chapter 42, “Moshi ganqing 3,” 末日感情 3 [Emotions in apocalypse 3].

⁴⁷⁰ *Moshi*, Chapter 105, “Moshi youran 8,” 末世悠然 8 [Leisure days in apocalypse 8].

⁴⁷¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016), 101.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁷³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 103.

⁴⁷⁴ Fox and Alldred, “Sustainability,” 124, 126.

activate “the full range of human and non-human capacities.”⁴⁷⁵ In other words, the ideal environment assemblage, with ceaseless emergence, alteration, fragments, and fractures, is vibrant yet “self-organizing.”⁴⁷⁶ Remarkably, the end of *Moshi* adopts an analogous tone in painting a dynamic picture of a self-organized, assembled environment:

“By the seventh year after the apocalypse, humans [...] have adapted to the new world order. Although the climate may still be harsh, the living space still small, and threats from zombies, animals, plants, and sea creatures with superpower still exist, it is undeniable that having become accustomed to this world humans begin to recuperate and work towards building a future (到了末世七年，人类[...]已适应了新的秩序，虽然可能气候仍是那么恶劣，生存空间仍是那么狭小，要面对来自丧尸、变异兽、变异植物、海洋生物等等的威胁，但不可否认，当适应了这样的世界后，人类开始了休养生息，为未来谋取发展).”⁴⁷⁷

Based on the two features, *Moshi* follows a monistic materialistic ontology, according to which both human and non-human are brought together in an assemblage based on their abilities to affect or be affected. This perspective emphasizes that “human” bodies and relationships within the assemblage are interconnected with, and hold equal importance to, the surrounding “environment.”⁴⁷⁸

According to Fox and Alldred, the final characteristic posthumanist works must have to do with environmental justice, as they shall generate new ways to express political and ethical concerns about different aspects of the natural environment. For example, the concept of sustainable development constitutes such an expression that has generated significant impact in politics and cultural arenas alike. Being a contested concept, it “draws into assemblage a range of natural

⁴⁷⁵ Fox and Alldred, “Sustainability,” 126.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 136, “Moshi houji,” 末世后记 [After the apocalypse].

⁴⁷⁸ Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism* (London, England: Sage, 2017), 42.

science, ecological, economic, political, social justice and other perspectives on the interactions and conflicts between nature and culture.”⁴⁷⁹ The concept was first proposed in the *1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. Defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,”⁴⁸⁰ it was widely disseminated and quickly accepted in the fields of environmentalism, economics, political science, and international relations.⁴⁸¹

Notably, *Moshi* was published in 2014, just a few years after the well-recognized turning point in China’s developmental policy. According to Cindy Fan, China’s Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-10) represents a “revolutionary”⁴⁸² shift in Chinese developmentalism from “getting rich first” to “common prosperity,” or in other words, from an emphasis on economic growth to a more comprehensive pursuit for environmental development and a reduction in inequality.⁴⁸³ The plan is founded on two key constituent conceptualizations of development: *kexue fazhan guan* (the concept of scientific development) and the establishment of a “harmonious socialist society.”⁴⁸⁴ Both of them emphasize sustainability and sustainable development that concerns about the “carrying capacity of the natural environment.”⁴⁸⁵ Fan further explains that government targets concerning the natural environment concentrate on both “the consumption of energy and natural resources and environmental pollution.”⁴⁸⁶ Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, notions like “scientific development,” “harmonious socialist society” and “sustainable development” gained currency

⁴⁷⁹ Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism*, 47.

⁴⁸⁰ G. Brundtland et al. *Our Common Future (The Brundtland Report)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.

⁴⁸¹ Fox and Alldred, “Sustainability,” 123.

⁴⁸² Asia Times Online, “New Five-Year Plan Called ‘Revolutionary.’” http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business/GJ13Cb01.html, 2005.

⁴⁸³ C. Cindy Fan, “China’s Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010): From ‘Getting Rich First’ to ‘Common Prosperity,’” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 47, no.6 (2006): 709, 710.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁵ Barry Naughton, “The New Common Economic Program: China’s Eleventh Five Year Plan and What It Means,” *China Leadership Monitor* 2005, no. 16, http://media.hoover.org/documents/clm16_bn.pdf.

⁴⁸⁶ Fan, “China’s Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010),” 711.

as early as 2003.⁴⁸⁷ By the time the Eleventh Five-Year Plan was implemented, and especially when *Moshi* began to serialize, both China's public media and the novel's fan base had become familiar with environmental and ecological terminologies related to these goals. The novel demonstrates great awareness about the development of these goals and terminologies as well. For instance, in Chapter 5, when the zombie virus starts to pollute the water, Lou Ling has already begun to avoid wasting water [...] as she is clearly aware of the situation and the importance of conserving water resources (已经自觉性地不浪费水资源 [...]她 [...]意识到[...]人类的处境, 明白水资源的重要性).⁴⁸⁸ Chapter 17 offers a gloomy picture after environmental degradation: "The mountains and the fields are barren[...] and the withered crops in the fields are soaked in water [...] In the distance, the mountains and forests are grey and dull (山林田野中是一片荒芜 [...]田里那些泡在水里的枯萎的作物[...]而远方的山林, 也是一片灰蒙)." ⁴⁸⁹

However, the concept of sustainable development, by its very definition, is human-centered, as it focuses on human responsibilities and capabilities. Sustainable developmentalism in a Chinese context, in particular, is subject to continuing dispute and strong criticism. For example, China's industrial waste management is blamed to pursue for "economic efficiency and expansion of resources" rather than environmental protection. Similarly, the policy of afforestation is found more an economic concern than an ecological concern one.⁴⁹⁰ Sustainable development in China encompasses not only environmental improvements, but also "politically and socially sustainable programs."⁴⁹¹ What lies behind it is in fact the exploration of how to exploit the environment in the *longue durée* and thus a reaffirmation of the economic focus of a human-centered

⁴⁸⁷ Fan, "China's Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010)," 709.

⁴⁸⁸ *Moshi*, Chapter 5, "Moshi jianglin," 末世降临 [The coming of the apocalypse].

⁴⁸⁹ *Moshi*, Chapter 17, "Moshi renxin 8," 末世人心 8 [People's minds in apocalypse 8].

⁴⁹⁰ Joy Y Zhang and Michael Barr, *Green Politics in China Environmental Governance and State-society Relations* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 7.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

society.⁴⁹²

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the Chinese model of sustainable development is incompatible with posthumanist new materialism. As recent postcolonial theory indicates, the post-anthropocentric tendency in current Western social materialism is not totally new. Juanita Sundberg scrutinizes current posthuman studies and claims that overlooked “indigenous epistemes” also offer serious considerations of the material world in the formation of political ontologies. For example, the Zapatista movement⁴⁹³ in Mexico reveals many “complicated knowledge systems wherein animals, plants, and spirits are understood as beings who participate in the everyday practices that bring worlds into being.”⁴⁹⁴ They cross barriers between the dualist nature/culture tradition, posing challenges to the universalized Eurocentric epistemologies from the anthropocentric age to post-anthropocentric times.

Coincidentally, the well-known Chinese indigenous episteme of “the inherent unity between human-nature integration in environmental philosophy” (天人合一 *tianren heyi*) conveys similar messages.⁴⁹⁵ Emphasizing the harmonious and balanced relationship between humans and nature, the concept of *tianren heyi* can be traced back to the pre-Qin period. In Daoism, this idea is clearly articulated: “Heaven and earth are born with me, and all things are one with me (天地与我并生，而万物与我为一).”⁴⁹⁶ This unity between human society and nature, as Yang Yingzi puts it, rejects anthropocentrism and egocentrism. Rather, it leads to

⁴⁹² Zhang and Barr, *Green Politics in China Environmental Governance and State-society Relations*, 8.

⁴⁹³ On 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous armed organization, declared war on the Mexican Government, demanding “work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace.” Australian Institute of International Affairs. *The Zapatista Movement*.

⁴⁹⁴ Juanita Sundberg, “Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies,” *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 21(1) (2014): 35.

⁴⁹⁵ Yang Yingzi 杨英姿, “‘Tianren heyi’ zhiyu zhongguo tese huanjing zhexue de jiangou” “天人合一” 之于中国特色环境哲学的建构 [Significance of human nature integration on construction of environmental philosophy with Chinese characteristics], *Nanjing linye daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexueban)* 南京林业大学学报 (人文社会科学版) 2015, no.4: 55.

⁴⁹⁶ Zhuang Zi 庄子, *Qiwu lun* 齐物论 [Discussion of the equality of things], <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/adjustment-of-controversies/zhs>, the Warring States Time.

a posthumanist and new materialist understanding that perceives humans merely as one of many things (人但物中一物耳)⁴⁹⁷ and underlines the “thing-power” of matter.⁴⁹⁸ This reminds us of Lou Ling’s experience with the red willows in Chapter 105, when she is so deeply immersed in the process of “feeling their (the red willows’) breath of life (感受到它们的生命气息)” that she almost “loses her mind (迷失神智).”⁴⁹⁹ It thus calls for moderate use of natural resources and sincere protection of the natural environment, which, as Yang claims, fits well with contemporary Chinese policies of sustainable development.⁵⁰⁰ Moreover, Yang argues that it is imperative to construct an environmental philosophy with Chinese characteristics to address the problems of limited natural resources and the deteriorating environment in the Chinese context. She therefore suggests drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese culture such as *tianren heyi*. By clarifying the monism implied in the concept, sustainable developmentalism with Chinese characteristics differs from the modern dichotomy of nature versus culture and confines with the monistic ontology of new materialism, operating beyond Eurocentric paradigms of development rooted in imperial conquest and colonial exploitation.

Moreover, as Fox and Alldred indicate, sustainable development in a new materialist framework is more than ecological concerns such as global climate change and environment degradation. Rather, it “needs to focus upon potentials and capacities,” which is characterized by an ethical standpoint that values “differentiation, rhizomes and becoming-other.” It goes beyond the conventional emphasis solely on human potential, extending its scope to encompass the

⁴⁹⁷ Zhang Zai 张载, *Collections of Zhang Zai* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shujū 中华书局, 1978), 313.

⁴⁹⁸ Yang, “‘Tianren heyi’ zhiyu zhongguo tese huanjing zhexue de jiangou” “天人合一”之于中国特色环境哲学的建构 [Significance of human nature integration on construction of environmental philosophy with Chinese characteristics], 55.

⁴⁹⁹ Zhang, *Collections of Zhang Zai*, 313.

⁵⁰⁰ Yang, “‘Tianren heyi’ zhiyu zhongguo tese huanjing zhexue de jiangou,” “天人合一”之于中国特色环境哲学的建构 [Significance of human nature integration on construction of environmental philosophy with Chinese characteristics], 54.

potential for all forms of matter within an all-encompassing “environment” (which includes humans) to “become other.”⁵⁰¹ *Moshi* presents two types of “becoming others” of humans. The first, as mentioned above, is how humans become kinships with others via the transfer of superpower. The second type mainly refers to Tan Mo 谭默, a specific character who turns into an “other” not through superpower, but by scientific technologies as he is “an experimental subject (一个实验体)” created by a human-led research institute (研究院) before the apocalypse. With a “remodelled body (改造过的身体),” Tan, like those with superpower, is also more powerful than ordinary people.⁵⁰²

Tan’s example highlights the significance of science in materialist sustainable development, which is “ethically transformative, and not bound to the economic imperatives of advanced capitalism.” As Braidotti contends, it is a “new science” that acknowledges “its material subject as complex, assembled from disparate materialities, and relational.”⁵⁰³ Notably, the plan named “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)” proposed by The UN Development Summit also underlines the importance to combine natural sciences and social sciences and “the docking of scientific research and decision-making.”⁵⁰⁴ Following this trend, China makes relentless efforts to bridge science and sustainable development goals. For instance, Hongyan Liu introduces how Chinese geographers use “3S technology (remote sensing, geographic information systems and global navigation satellite systems)” to improve the sustainable water supply in Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, showing great potentials for human and environment.⁵⁰⁵

Such scientific progresses with considerable potentials are also abundant in *Moshi*. As the final pages of the novel shows, after several years’ development,

⁵⁰¹ Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism*, 47

⁵⁰² *Moshi*, Chapter 65, “Moshi Jianwen 3” 末世见闻三 [New knowledges in apocalypse].

⁵⁰³ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 171.

⁵⁰⁴ Hongyan Liu et al., “China’s Road Towards Sustainable Development: Geography Bridges Science and Solution,” *Progress in Physical Geography* 43, no. 5 (2019): 695.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 696.

four major security bases (安全基地) are established in China, each of which achieves biotechnological breakthroughs that are key to human survival:

“The Research Institute in the Capital Base has finally invented a communicator adapted to the new magnetic field of the Blue Star (the Globe), so (China) can communicate with overseas countries. The Northwest Base has developed plants and animals with superpowers that can be eaten by ordinary people; the Southwest Base has found the medicinal value of plants with superpowers in the highland mountains; the Southeast Base has detected some edible marine creatures... (首都研究院终于研究出适应蓝星新磁场的通讯器，与海外国家联络；西北基地研究出普通人可以食用的变异动植物；西南基地研究出高原山区中变异植物的药用价值；东南基地探测到一些可以食用的海洋生物...)”⁵⁰⁶

As declared by the author, she aims to deliver an apocalyptic world that is not so hopeless (不那么绝望的末世). Although human survival is difficult, it is not entirely devoid of hope or a path forward (虽然人类生存困难，但却也不是黑暗到没有前进之路的). If the story continues to progress, the world will likely soon enter the interstellar era, even reaching a time when scientific technology and superpower are combined (估计很快便进入了星际时代，甚至到时候是科技与异能的结合时代).⁵⁰⁷ This echoes the materialist sustainable development that “counters forces and affective flows that constrain the environment’s potentialities.” Although the apocalypse in *Moshi* brings catastrophic consequences to the environment, both the superpower and the development of sciences “foster in their place affects that enhance human and environmental potentiality.”⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ *Moshi*, Chapter 136, “Moshi houji” 末世后记 [After the apocalypse].

⁵⁰⁷ *Moshi*, Chapter 103, “Moshi youran” 末世悠然 [Leisure days in apocalypse], “The author has something to say” part.

⁵⁰⁸ Fox and Alldred, *Sociology and the New Materialism*, 47.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed various aspects of Chinese developmentalism in a global context. By examining the subgenres of *yishi dalu* (the other land) and *moshi* (apocalyptic) fictions, it shows how contemporary online narratives reflect the changing developmental discourses in China since the late nineteenth century, which has always been hidden in studies of time travel romances.

In reading *Mengxi Dalu*, two aspects of developmentalism are explored from the perspective of “self-other” relationships: “the imagination of the other world” and “the construction of the other.” On the one hand, the “other world” functions as a reiteration of Western colonists’ description of the “barbarous soil” in Africa in the nineteenth century. The portrayal of the aboriginal society in the “Cuteland,” based on social Darwinism, corresponds to the popular understanding of developmentalism among Chinese intellectuals in the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, the story produces a binary hierarchy where the Chinese heroine functions as a spiritual leader, while the hero and other local habitants with westernized appearances are her devout followers. *Mengxi* not only demonstrates a progressive gender consciousness, but also constructs a new world order based on the Chinese national discourse of development since the 1980s which resonates with the cultural desires of contemporary Chinese netizens.

Moshi is an online novel influenced by developmental policies in China after the 1990s. Portraying intertwined relationships between diverse agents, it presents a posthumanist understanding of a new materialist assemblage of human and environment. Its environmentalist approach to a dystopian world resonates with the sustainable development discourse that has gained currency in China since the early twenty-first century.

Chapter 4

Individual Desires and Nationalist Narration: Dissecting *Lingao Qiming* and *Bainian Jiashu*

Since 1994 when China was connected to the internet for the first time, discourses on nationalism have been developed and disseminated through a diverse range of internet-based media. Emerging from early online platforms such as chat rooms, forums, bulletin boards, and personal blogs to more recent web media like Baidu Tieba, Weibo, and Tencent QQ, Chinese cyber/digital nationalism evolved from immediate responses to important political events to more grass-roots topics.⁵⁰⁹ Liu Hailong argues that this bottom-up self-mobilization makes nationalist ideology more approachable and more closely entwined with daily life and self-identity.⁵¹⁰ It is also notable that online expressions of patriotism flourish in an “interplay between different stakeholders,” ranging from individual netizens to the state.⁵¹¹

Moreover, cyber/digital nationalism has always been perceived as “masculine” expressions by “angry youth,” yet nation-building and state protection also play an important part in female netizens’ daily activities. As mentioned in introduction, the group of *little pink* functions as a typical example. Originally from the discussion forum on boys’ love in Jinjiang, the term was named after the site’s pink background and high percentage of female users. Around 2008, overseas students or immigrants began to express both their individual desires and nationalist tendencies on the site.⁵¹² Later, the group gained widespread

⁵⁰⁹ Xu Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications* (Lexington Books, 2007), 2.

⁵¹⁰ Liu Hailong, “From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China,” *Xiandai chuanbo* 现代传播 2017, <https://m.aisixiang.com/data/128175.html>.

⁵¹¹ Florian Schneider, *China’s Digital Nationalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

⁵¹² Wu Zhiyuan 吴志远, “Cong ‘quyuan miqun’ dao ‘aidou zhengzhi’: Qingshaonian wangluo minzuzhuyi de xingdong luoji” 从“趣缘迷群”到“爱豆政治”:青少年网络民族主义的行动逻辑 [From “funky fans group” to

circulation in the media and the “cross-strait memes war” in 2016 marked the surge of the *little pink* phenomena, when thousands of young female netizens “flooded social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to protest Taiwan’s political drift from China” before Taiwan’s 2016 pro-independence election.⁵¹³ Fond of internet literature and entertainment circle, many of them were fans of idols and pop stars.

The emergence of *little pink* also engaged with fandom nationalism, when in 2019 the disordered Hong Kong saw numerous conflicts between the police and protesters. Posting pro-police or pro-China words in Instagram, popstars like HK artist Wang Jia’er and K-pop star Zhang Yixing were attacked by some HK locals online. To protest the idols, their fans, most of whom were young women, gathered in Instagram and fought against those forcible HK locals. They followed the logic of fandom culture as they treated China as the most supreme idol and formed a fandom group called “izhong” (love China). Using “numerous funny and provocative internet memes” rather than “rock or angry statements,” these female-dominated digital nationalist movements was considered “softer and more seductive” compared to male-dominated waves of nationalism.⁵¹⁴ Female-led nationalist narratives remain to be understudied, including in scholarship of online literature. To explore this hidden aspect, I will examine two online time travel novels: Chuiniuzhe 吹牛者’s *Lingao Qiming* 临高启明 (Enlightening Lingao, 2009 to date) and Fengdiuzi’s 疯丢子 *Bainian Jiashu* 百年家书 (A Letter Home from a Hundred Years Ago, 2016),⁵¹⁵ with the aim of painting a more comprehensive picture of individual desires and nationalism in online literary communities. Notably, *Lingao* is selected from a male-dominated literary community while *Bainian*, from Jinjiang, is emblematic of female-dominated

“idol politics”: The logic of youth online nationalism in action], *Dangdai qingnian yanjiu* 当代青年研究 2019 no.2: 19.

⁵¹³ Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, “Demystifying ‘Little Pink’: The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China,” *New Media & Society* 20, no.6 (2018): 2163

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Henceforth, I will use *Lingao* to refer to *Lingao Qiming* and *Bainian* to represent *Bainian Jiashu*.

discourse of nationalism. The two forms provoke comparisons not only in contents and styles, but also responses from state censorship.

This chapter addresses a series of questions: What kind of transformation has the profusion of nationalist discourses undergone during the past two decades? How are they associated with the concurrent sociopolitical situation? How do online authors and readers use popular nationalist narratives to construct “imagined communities” and build up their desirable states? How does the Chinese state deal with online individual/collective rewritings of the nationalist narratives? Are they valued or suppressed by the government? And finally, how do netizens respond to official mandates? Do they accept them, or do they develop alternative narratives to resist political censorship?

In the following, I will firstly focus on *Lingao* and investigate how a group of time travelers invent an imaginary world based on their own personal wills and how these personal desires collide with the nationalist agenda of the state. I will then examine *Bainian* and analyze how, via the pursuit of historical authenticity, it manages to create congruence between the heroine’s individual desires and the collective nationalist discourse and is thus rewarded by the state.

4.1 *Lingao Qiming*: Building a Technology-based World

As one of the most popular time travel novels in Qidian, *Lingao Qiming* enjoys a high reputation among both readers and editors. Former deputy editor in Qidian regards the novel as number one among the top ten wondrous books of Chinese internet literature, confirming its uniqueness and intellectual significance.⁵¹⁶ The title of *Lingao Qiming* 临高启明 means to build a civilization in Lingao, or to enlighten Lingao. Here Lingao refers to the place where the time travelers transfer

⁵¹⁶ Zhen Fangshi 真方士, *Yiqie rongyao shuyu yuanlaoyuan: Wangluo xiaoshuo shida qishu diyiming—Lingao Qiming* 一切荣耀属于元老院: 网络小说十大奇书第一名——《临高启明》(All honours belong to the Assembly of the Supreme Statesmen: Number one among the top ten wondrous books of Chinese internet literature—*Lingao Qiming*), 2017. <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404091765039731704>.

to, which, out of the control of the Ming government, is a deserted place near Hainan Island. The character *qi* means to start, and *ming* refers to the advanced civilization brought by the time travelers. A review of *Lingao* by Yang Ling highlights the distinctive features of the novel:

“Compared to other novels, *Lingao*, created by a number of netizens, is more like a huge, real, open world with an extreme level of freedom. Whereas a traditional novel tells a story within a single text, *Lingao* constructs a circle with the text at the center, offering readers a sense of the real world of the circle (与小说相比,《临高启明》更像是一个由众多网友创造的真实,宏大,自由度极高的开放‘世界’。如果传统小说是一本书告诉大家一个故事,临高则是以一本书为中心的一个圈子,令人有置身一个世界的真实感).”⁵¹⁷

Yang notes that the novel describes in detail the efforts of the time travelers to construct a modern, new industrial world in the late Ming Dynasty.⁵¹⁸ It resonates with Mark J. P. Wolf’s theory of world-building. As he suggests, “for works in which world-building occurs,” the necessity for world-building surpasses that of storytelling.⁵¹⁹ *Lingao* contains numerous “details and events” that have little to do with the progress of the story, but they “provide background richness and verisimilitude to the imaginary world.”⁵²⁰

“Technology” can be conceived as a keyword underlying the “details and events” for building the new world in *Lingao*. In the words of Wang Luobin, one of the main characters of the novel, a “large-scale, standardized industrial society is able to beat any ancient society (规模化、标准化[...]工业化的社会,足以击

⁵¹⁷ Yang Ling, “Lingao Qiming yu dangdai huanxiang wenxue zhong de shijie jiangou” 《临高启明》与当代幻想文学中的世界建构 [Lingao Qiming and the world building in contemporary fantasy literature], *Journal of Jining University* 39, no.1 (2018): 54.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹⁹ Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 2, 10.

⁵²⁰ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 10.

败任何一个古代社会).”⁵²¹ The novel ensues to offer more explicit explanation:

“A large group of time travelers are called upon to travel to that time space.. As masters of modern technology and administrative knowledge, they bring with them the facilities and technologies of modern industry and establish a base. By constructing an integrated industrial system, they head toward building and dominating the globe (召集大批掌握现代科技、管理方法的穿越者，携带现代工业设备和技术，一起穿越到那个时空，建立一个基地，完成基本的工业化，形成一套完备的工业体系，以此为出发点制霸全球).”⁵²²

The close liaison between technology and authority/power is reminiscent of the theory of “technological politics” proposed by Langdon Winner, who instructs us to identify “certain technologies as political phenomena in their own right.”⁵²³ Firstly, he clarifies the concepts of “politics” and “technology”: “Politics” means the “arrangements of power and authority in human associations,” together with “the activities that take place within those arrangements,” and the term “technology” refers to “all of modern practical artifice.”⁵²⁴ The focal point of Winner’s theory lies in his two-fold interpretation of how technological artifacts embody political significance. First, the design and invention of some technological devices and systems can “open certain social options and close others.”⁵²⁵ More importantly, he asserts that there are “inherently political technologies,” denoting that human-made systems can “require or be strongly compatible with particular kinds of political relationships.”⁵²⁶

Lingao proffers a compelling example of the second type. In Chapter 104 (Volume 2), Wen Desi, the leader of the time travelers, develops a theory called

⁵²¹ *Lingao*, Chapter 2 (Volume 1), “Wenzong de yewang” 文总的野望 [Ambitions of Boss Wen].

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Winner Langdon, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in An Age of High Technology* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1986), 22.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Donald Mackenzie and Judy Wajcman, “Introductory Essay: The Social Shaping of Technology,” In *The Social Shaping of Technology*, eds. by Donald Mackenzie, Judy Wajcman (Open University Press, 1985), 4.

⁵²⁶ Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor*, 22.

the “technological generation gap” (技术代差). In order to conquer and control the world, the time travelers have to rely on the local people to build an army (为了征服和统治，我们 (穿越者) 要依靠当地人的帮助。所以迟早会建立土著军队).⁵²⁷ According to Wen, the only method to maintain their dominance is to preserve their technological advantage (唯一的办法是保持技术代差).⁵²⁸ In this regard, advanced technologies and industrial systems are shown to be “inherently political,” because they enable the time travelers to govern or even enslave the local inhabitants.

The fervent technological politics within the world of *Lingao* makes the novel an exemplary portrait of the so-called *gongye dang* (Industrial Party/Party of Technology), a group of loosely connected educated netizens who share the essential proposition that social development is mainly driven by technology.⁵²⁹ Ren Chonghao (internet ID as Ma Qianzu 马前卒) is widely viewed as a pioneer of the group. He co-authored *Da Mubiao: Women Yu Zhege Shijie De Zhengzhi Xieshang* 大目标：我们与这个世界的政治协商 (A Great Goal: Our Political Negotiation with the World), which is believed to be a representative protest by the Industrial Party.⁵³⁰ He is also a founder and leader of the website “Tech-watchers,” the party’s base camp.⁵³¹

Interestingly, Ren’s profile matches that of *Lingao*’s readership, many of whom co-create the *Lingao* world. According to *The First Survey of Lingao Qiming’s Readership* (2017), more than 76% of the participants are men aged between twenty and forty.⁵³² These male readers grew up in an era when China was ruled

⁵²⁷ *Lingao*, Chapter 104 (Volume 2), “Zhupao III” 铸炮(三) [Construct cannons III].

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Lu Nanfeng 卢南峰 and Wu Jing 吴靖, “Gongyedang wangluo sichao de zhengzhi fenxi” 工业党网络思潮的政治分析 [A political analysis of online trend of the industrial party], *Dongfang xuekan* 东方学刊 2018 no.1. https://www.guancha.cn/wujing/2018_10_25_476802_5.shtml. It is notable that the Industrial Party is amplified by bifurcations and contradictions.

⁵³⁰ For example, see <https://www.zhihu.com/question/25685303>.

⁵³¹ Lu and Wu, “Gongyedang wangluo sichao de zhengzhi fenxi” 工业党网络思潮的政治分析 [A political analysis of online trend of the industrial party].

⁵³² See <https://www.zhihu.com/question/68757680>.

by red engineers, with their dominance at its peak during the 1990s.⁵³³ Zhu Rongji and Hu Jintao, for example, represented the technocratic elites who masterminded China's transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy. The composition of the technocratic elite also shifted, including experts not only in engineering, but also in finance, administration, and law.

This echoes the composition of the readership of *Lingao*. As revealed in the survey, almost 70% have a bachelor's degree, and the majority work in technology-based industries such as manufacturing, communications, and computing. A considerable number are also employed in finance and administration. Readers from these technocratic professions have been a vital force in the establishment and success of the imaginary *Lingao* world.

4.1.1 Developmentalism and Nationalism: Building the Lingao World Based on Personal Desire

The story of *Lingao* encompasses two intertwined themes that have shaped significant historical narratives of China since the late Qing dynasty, namely, developmentalism and nationalism. Specifically, the world-building of *Lingao* parallels the real historical development from the industrialization of early socialist China to the high economic growth after the opening up and reform policy. Furthermore, the story also corresponds to two widely circulated branches of the Industrial Party.

Later in the novel, the time travelers found an empire called Aosong 澳宋, mainly relying on heavy industries.⁵³⁴ As early as in Chapters 15 and 16 in Volume 1, the time travelers have already formulated ambitious plans for the future development of energy industry, machinery manufacture, and chemical

⁵³³ Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1.

⁵³⁴ The Aosong Empire starts from Lingao and gradually expands to Guangdong Province and other places. Lingao is the capital of the Aosong Empire. See the expansion process of the empire, Zhamu 扎姆, *Lingao Qiming: Full map of territory of the Aosong Empire* [临高启明：澳宋帝国疆域变化全图] <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ux411e78H/>, 2017.

engineering. Once they have established themselves in the Ming dynasty, the novel painstakingly details how these pillar industries are set up. They start with water and electrical power (Chapters 28 and 29, Volume 2), and go further to more advanced needs like the invention of cement (Chapters 38 and 39, Volume 2). This storyline parallels China's early industrialization in the 1950s. For example, during the first Five-Year Plan (1953-1957), China received an assistance package from the former Soviet Union including 156 projects mostly in the industrial sector, which functioned as a “booster” to China's modern industrial development under the policy of “giving priority to heavy industry.”⁵³⁵ The novel also refers explicitly to Mao's obsession with chimneys in the 1950s. In Chapter 39, with the invention of cement, the time travelers successfully create firebricks and build their first brick chimney. Seeing dark smoke rising from the chimney, one time traveler exclaims, “Oh my God, this is so beautiful (靠，真是太美了)!”⁵³⁶ One of the technical leaders, Wang Luobin, expresses the feeling comparable to that of Mao as he said in the early 1950s, “looking from the Tian' An Men, there should be chimneys everywhere (从天安门望出去，应该处处有烟囱).”⁵³⁷ Wang comments that Mao's idea arose because early socialist China was too accustomed to ancient city walls and lacked modern industry that symbolizes the development of a nation state.⁵³⁸ Notably, the emphasis on heavy industry matches the agenda of a branch of the Industry Party, the so-called *jijian dang* (Infrastructure Building Party), whose passion lies in building essential heavy industries, such as chemicals, electronics, coal, and machinery, paying homage to early socialist history.

Moreover, like the Chinese ruling elites since the late 1970s, the time travelers

⁵³⁵ Bei Jin, *China's Path of Industrialization: Endeavors and Inclusiveness* (China Social Sciences Press, Springer, 2020), 7.

⁵³⁶ Lingao, Chapter 39 (Volume 2), “Shuini” 水泥 [Cement].

⁵³⁷ Quan Xinli 全新丽, *Chuchai shouji: Canguan le yige gangtiechang* 出差手记：参观了一个钢铁厂 [Diary on a business trip: A visit to a steelworks], https://www.chndaqi.com/column/1293_2.html, 2019.

⁵³⁸ Lingao, Chapter 39 (Volume 2), “Shuini” 水泥 [Cement].

in *Lingao* are obsessed with discourses of development and nationalism. Starting in Volume 3, the leaders of the Aosong Empire begin to adopt a parallel model with the “post-socialist developmental state” (PSDS) one, which is widely accepted as a rational model representing China’s contemporary developmental mandate.⁵³⁹

Aosong’s model mimics the PSDS model in two ways. The first is concerned with the “systemic transformation” of the state, highlighting “economic liberalization, market institutionalization, and microeconomic restructuring.”⁵⁴⁰ As Andrzej Bolesta notes, the key to the systemic transformation in the PSDS model is “the re-organization of the industrial sector.”⁵⁴¹ The changing industrial landscape of the Aosong Empire is exactly in the direction of such re-organization. As the Minister of Light Industry declares: “Although our light industry is quite underdeveloped at the moment, I believe that it will have the largest share of our foreign trade in the future and it is necessary to improve the living conditions for both ourselves and the locals (现在轻工业没有怎么展开，但是我认为轻工业是以后对外贸易的大头，也是改善我们本身和属民们的生活条件所必须的).”⁵⁴² This focus on systemic transformation is further evidenced in the following chapter, where the time travelers present an ambitious and all-encompassing plan to construct light industries, ranging from textile and garment factories to chemical plants, including the invention of one of the most profitable products, soap.⁵⁴³ This is reminiscent of another key branch of the Industrial Party, the *jingji gongye dang* (Economic Industrial Party) who supports “reform and

⁵³⁹ According to Bolesta, the concept of the developmental state (DS) is believed to be “a key policy and institutional arrangement behind the greatest developmental successes of the second half of the twentieth century.” It is often “referred to as the East Asian miracle” and widely accepted as “the conceptual background of state policies and state institutional arrangements leading to the unprecedented developmental achievements among the so-called late developers of the Asian continent.” The PSDS version conflates the basic features of the developmental state with post-socialist transformation. Andrzej Bolesta, *China and Post-socialist Development* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2015), 7, 227.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 228.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 229.

⁵⁴² *Lingao*, Chapter 3 (Volume 3), “Wunian jihua III” 五年计划(三) [Five-year plan III].

⁵⁴³ *Lingao*, Chapter 4 (Volume 3), “Qingong zhanwang” 轻工展望 [Expectations about light industry].

opening-up and transformation of the economic system” as a strong stimulus to the industrialization process of the state.⁵⁴⁴

In addition to restructuring industry, the PSDS model, following the developmental state (DS) model, also proposes an important concept of “economic nationalism” that includes three assertions: a commonly shared economic fate among a nation’s citizenry, a positive role of the state in managing national economy, and decisive imperatives to regulate national economic policies based on the ideology of nationalism.⁵⁴⁵ Notably, “a conflicting relationship between imported consumer goods and native-produced goods” often gives rise to economic nationalism in East Asia.⁵⁴⁶ In other words, state in East Asia often protects domestic economy from the intrusion of more developed global competitors. In areas such as “trade and commerce, investment, finance and welfare,” the ideology of economic nationalism is specifically upheld in implementing public policies and administrations.⁵⁴⁷

The story about the South China Sugar Refinery (华南糖厂) in *Lingao* can be read as an exemplary case of “economic nationalism.” In Chapter 56, the time travelers set up a sugar business in Leizhou 雷州 and establish the South China Sugar Refinery.⁵⁴⁸ However, the thriving business of them poses a grave threat to the local sugar businessmen who has already established their own association, which has had a monopoly over the domestic sugar business for decades.⁵⁴⁹ In order to force the rival sugar refinery out of business, the leader of the local

⁵⁴⁴ Wu and Lu, “Gongyedang wangluo sichao de zhengzhi fenxi” 工业党网络思潮的政治分析 [A political analysis of online trend of the industrial party].

⁵⁴⁵ David Levi-Faur, “Economic Nationalism: From Friedrich List to Robert Reich,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 23(3) (1997): 360.

⁵⁴⁶ Kaname Akamatsu, “A Historical Pattern of Economic Growth in Developing Countries,” *Developing Economies*, vol. (1) (1962): 7.

⁵⁴⁷ Kevin G. Cai, *The Politics of Economic Regionalism: Explaining Regional Economic Integration in East Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11.

⁵⁴⁸ *Lingao*, Chapter 56 (Volume 3), “Tiangang fengyun: Yinmou” 甜港风云: 阴谋 [Changing situation in port Tian: Conspiracy].

⁵⁴⁹ *Lingao*, Chapter 54 (Volume 3), “Tiangang fengyun: Chashou” 甜港风云: 插手 [Changing situation in port Tian: Inversion].

association, Zhu'An 祝安, proposes a trade war with the time travelers. As both sides need to purchase large amounts of raw material from sugarcane farmers, Zhu decides to reduce the purchase price of their association, so the sugarcane farmers would have to sell all their raw material to the time travelers, who are unlikely to lower their purchase price in order to build a good relationship with the farmers.⁵⁵⁰ However, buying all the raw materials demands a large amount of cash (现银), and this will cause severe pressures on the time travelers' cash flow.⁵⁵¹

This cash flow crisis is also related to the national security of the Aosong Empire, which leads to military attacks from the local association. As the story develops, hoping to circumvent their cash flow problem, the time travelers decide to ship 50,000 taels of silver to Leizhou. Having discovered this plan, Zhu gathers a bunch of pirates to ambush the time travelers. This reminds us of another vital feature of the PSDS model adopted by contemporary Chinese government that concerns about national security. As Christopher Hughes suggests, China displays archetypal characteristics of DS-style economic nationalism not only in maintaining stable economic development, but also in broader domains such as foreign affairs and national security.⁵⁵² Bolesta supports this view that security issues are undeniably taking a prominent position in China's policymaking.⁵⁵³

In Chapter 78 (Volume 3), the time travelers, equipped with technologically advanced telegrams and an extensive information network, decide to utilize their well-developed military power to protect the security of the crucial sugar refinery, which is an important part of the national economy and security. Chapters 81 and 82 detail the naval battle between the two sides, which ends with the victory of the time travelers. The novel elaborates on the superiority of the weapons of the

⁵⁵⁰ *Lingao*, Chapter 56 (Volume 3), "Tiangang fengyun: Yinmou" 甜港风云: 阴谋 [Changing situation in port Tian: Conspiracy].

⁵⁵¹ *Lingao*, Chapter 60 (Volume 3), "Tiangang fengyun: Fengbao lailin" 甜港风云: 风暴来临 [Changing situation in port Tian: Coming of the storm].

⁵⁵² Christopher R. Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁵³ Bolesta, *China and Post-socialist Development*, 173.

time travelers, such as:

“The firing accuracy of the cannons on the warships (each weighing 12 pounds) is of a high standard. The cannons can engage enemies efficiently at a distance of 1,000 meters, and just a few shells can destroy a whole company (船上的 12 磅加农炮[...]其射击精度[...]也是处于较高的水平, 足以在 1000 米的距离上与敌人展开交战, 而且只需要数发炮弹就可使整连的敌人丧失作战能力).”⁵⁵⁴

The next chapter portrays a disturbing picture of the catastrophic defeat of the pirates as a result of the time travelers’ sophisticated weaponry:

“The sea area of Mao Tiaokou displays a dismal picture. All six ships (of the pirates) have been destroyed and are on fire [...] The sea is dotted with corpses and the wreckage of the ships. A broken mast is floating upside down in the sea, and the sail is still burning. The entire scene is both dreadful and spectacular (猫跳口海域已经是一片惨淡的模样, 六搜船全部中弹起火[...]海面上漂浮着尸体和船只的碎片。一根断裂的桅杆在海面上载沉载浮, 上面的船帆还在燃烧。整个场景恐怖又壮观).”⁵⁵⁵

The characters in *Lingao* are no less tenacious in other naval battles with their external enemies. For example, Chapters 135 to 137 (Volume 2) depict a war between the time travelers and Spanish pirates who attempt to invade the island. These foreign invaders are also thoroughly defeated due to the striking disparity between the military and industrial technologies of the two sides. The Spanish pirates flee, crying out, “God! It must be the black art of the demons (上帝! 这是魔鬼的妖术)!”⁵⁵⁶ Such scenes are reminiscent of the Opium Wars, the opening

⁵⁵⁴ *Lingao*, Chapter 81 (Volume 3), “Tiangang fengyun: Juhuayu haizhan I” 甜港风云: 菊花屿海战 1 [Changing situation in port Tian: Naval battle in Juhuayu I].

⁵⁵⁵ *Lingao*, Chapter 82 (Volume 3), “Tiangang fengyun: Juhuayu haizhan II” 甜港风云: 菊花屿海战 2 [Changing situation in port Tian: Naval battle in Juhuayu II].

⁵⁵⁶ *Lingao*, Chapter 135 (Volume 2), “Bofu zhi zhan I” 博辅之战(一) [War in Bofu 1].

chapter of China's humiliated semi-colonial history.⁵⁵⁷ In this sense, I contend that these battles, particularly the second battle, reflect an ideology of military power and nationalism. They represent “a defense mechanism” of the DS model “in the developing countries’ conflict with advanced countries” under the influence of historical colonialism.⁵⁵⁸ It recalls the tradition in which “if one travels back to the Qing dynasty, he/she must revolt” (穿清必造反) in male-oriented time travel fictions.⁵⁵⁹ Since the publication of *Yishijie: Zhonghua Zaiqi* 异世界：中华再起 (Another World: the Re-emergence of China, 2002), dozens of time travel novels have featured a young man who travels to the late Qing period and rebels against the government. Having established a modern and progressive regime, the hero leads China to defeat the Great Britain, France, and Japan in various military conflicts.⁵⁶⁰

The profusion of such military victories, together with their concentration on the technical details of weapons, sits well with the third branch of the Industrial Party, the *junzhai gongye dang* (Military Technology Party), with a membership who supports industrial development and are preoccupied with military technology and equipment.

This internet-based group mainly originates in Bulletin Board systems that cover contemporary political and military topics, and most platforms have “time travel” sections where netizens, especially Military Technology Party members, can create time travel stories to fulfill their dreams of victory over foreign enemies, expressing their feelings of patriotism and hostility towards China's international competitors. In this regard, stories like *Lingao* can be read as the

⁵⁵⁷ Wang Shaofang 王绍坊, *Zhongguo Waijiaoshi: Yopian Zhanzheng Zhi Xinhai Geming Shiqi, 1840-1911* 中国外交史：鸦片战争至辛亥革命时期, 1840-1911 [A Diplomatic History of China from the Opium war to the 1911 Revolution] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1988), 39

⁵⁵⁸ Bolesta, *China and Post-socialist Development*, 65.

⁵⁵⁹ For example, see question in Zhihu, “Why is there a saying in online literature that ‘if one travels back to the Qing dynasty, he/she must revolt?’,” <https://www.zhihu.com/question/263467929>.

⁵⁶⁰ For example, see https://www.zhihu.com/search?hybrid_search_extra=%7B%22sourceType%22%3A%22answer%22%2C%22sourceId%22%3A%22560150999%22%7D&hybrid_search_source=Entity&q=1911%E6%96%B0%E4%B8%AD%E5%8D%8E&search_source=Entity&type=content.

online Industrial Party's response to contemporary foreign affairs. As mentioned previously, international affairs that involve China are a major driving force behind online nationalism. Such affairs include "the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, [...], the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy, the 2001 U.S.-China spy plane collision, the 2005 nationwide anti-Japan demonstrations [...] Diaoyu Island."⁵⁶¹ Virtually all of them provoked heated online discussion and boycotts of the foreign antagonists, as well as portrayals of Chinese military, economic, and political triumphs in internet-based imaginary worlds.

In addition to industrialization and military powers, institutionalization is another key step for the time travelers to seek legitimacy in the world of *Lingao*. In Chapter 337 (Volume 3), they issue a seminal document entitled "The Current Common Program of the Time Travelers" (穿越集团现阶段共同纲领). This program establishes the Aosong Empire as an aristocratic republic, and guarantees all the time travelers, who simultaneously compose the supreme statesmen group, as the ruling class. The Assembly of Supreme Statesmen (元老会) stands as the preeminent institution in this imaginary world. As the Common Program states, "The supreme statesmen enjoy the highest political, economic and legal power within the state (由全体穿越者构成的元老阶层[...]享有一切最高政治、经济和法律权力)."⁵⁶² More notably, the program establishes a strict punitive system to control the indigenous population, while buttressing a democratic system for the time travelers.

"All the supreme statesmen are equal and have the rights to vote, elect and be elected, as well as all the rights guaranteed by the law to the supreme statesmen (元老之间一律平等, 均享有元老院表决权、选举权和被选举权, 同时享有一切法律规定的元

⁵⁶¹ Xu Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications* (Lexington Books, 2007), 4.

⁵⁶² *Lingao*, Chapter 337 (Volume 3), "Gongtong gangling: Yuanlao men" 共同纲领: 元老们 [Common program: The supreme statesmen].

老享有的权利) [...]Yet in law, there is a personal inequality between the supreme statesmen and the native people. Specific to the jurisprudence of crime: if a statesman kills a native individual, he/she is guilty only of the crime of property. If a native individual kills a statesman, he/she will be punished according to the future criminal law of the time travelers' empire (在法律上, 元老与土著之间具有人身不平等权。具体到犯罪行为判例上: 元老杀死土著, 只处于财产罪; 土著杀了元老, 依照穿越国家的未来的刑事法定罪)。”⁵⁶³

Differing from the colonial theme in the “other land” stories discussed in last chapter, which focuses on how the civilized modern heroine educates barbarian aboriginal “others,” *Lingao* portrays the time travelers as tyrannical colonizers. The Common Program guarantees extraordinary violence “as a part of the ordinary operation” of the Aosong Empire.⁵⁶⁴ With the criminal law and a police force in place, torture of the natives is “facilitated, systematized, and sanctioned,” becoming a key element in the “construction and maintenance of state sovereignty.”⁵⁶⁵

What does the design of this political system imply? Zhang Ni argues that while print-based realist literature addresses social problems, online literature is grounded on desires and fantasies of the emerging middle-class readership. In other words, online literature connects authors and readers by satisfying the latter's desires.⁵⁶⁶ In *Lingao* where readers are actively involved in creating the imaginary world and playing the characters within it, the boundary between readers and writers is largely blurred. The characters therefore represent the participants' desires directly, and the imaginary world of *Lingao* is built on the basis of the combined individual desires of the five hundred time travelers,

⁵⁶³ *Lingao*, Chapter 337 (Volume 3), “Gongtong gangling: Yuanlao men” 共同纲领: 元老们 [Common program: The supreme statesmen].

⁵⁶⁴ Deana Heath, *Colonial Terror: Torture and State Violence in Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11.

⁵⁶⁵ Heath, *Colonial Terror*, 11.

⁵⁶⁶ Zhang Ni, “Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance: Re-writing Revolution-Plus-Love in Contemporary China,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 32, no.2 (2020): 179-229.

whether they be progressive or immoral. In fact, this central idea is articulated from the outset:

The journey to a troubled world is not the result of a lightning strike, but their (the time travelers) own choice.⁵⁶⁷ Someone wants to be the king; someone hopes to save the people; someone is willing to rewrite Chinese history, preventing Chinese civilization from being conquered by the Western barbarians. Of course, there are people whose only desire is to have many wives and concubines and live an extremely corrupt life that is not permitted in their own worlds (穿越到乱世不是被雷劈，是他们自己的选择。有人想称王制霸，有人想解民于倒悬，有人想以己之力，阻止最后一次野蛮对文明的征服，从而改写中华民族的历史。当然也有人想得只是三妻四妾，过现世过不上的极度腐败的生活).”⁵⁶⁸

In a word, the nationalist discourse in *Lingao* is closely linked to the personal desires of the time travelers. More precisely, the nationalist (sometimes colonial-flavored) themes in the novel function more as an instrument to fulfill the senior statesmen's (mainly men's) individual ambitions than patriotic idealism.

In addition, *Lingao* also showcases characteristics of a discourse that has gained currency in Chinese social media, namely, what Chenchen Zhang terms “right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics.” This trend incorporates the vocabulary of “right-wing populisms in Europe and North America,” as well as ethno-nationalist and racist sentiments circulating in Chinese online communities.⁵⁶⁹ It is informed by both racial hierarchies and anti-feminism. *Lingao* also incorporates these features, and the case of the Housemaid Management Committee (女仆对策委员会) is a typical example.

Since most of the time travelers are heterosexual single men, the Aosong

⁵⁶⁷ Lightning strike is a commonly used reason for time travel.

⁵⁶⁸ See *Lingao*'s preface, <https://book.qidian.com/info/1262627/>.

⁵⁶⁹ Chenchen Zhang, “Right-wing Populism with Chinese Characteristics? Identity, Otherness and Global Imaginaries in Debating World Politics Online,” *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no.1 (2019): 88.

Empire is in urgent need of unmarried women. Instead of implementing a modern marriage system, the time travelers choose to buy housemaids as their future partners. As “specially supplied products” (特供商品), these housemaids are carefully selected, examined and cleaned.⁵⁷⁰ A housemaid school is set up to feed and train the maids, as “their supple and healthy bodies must not only meet all the desires and requirements of the supreme statesmen, but also prepare them to bear healthy children (柔韧的身体和健康的体质, 即能在各方面充分的满足元老的各种需求和欲望, 也为生育健壮的下一代做准备).”⁵⁷¹

More astonishingly, the Housemaid Management Committee unabashedly advocates for racial hierarchy. In selecting housemaids, the time travelers show a preference for women with “tall figures, long legs, slender waists, full breasts, big eyes” and “white skin” (高个长腿细腰大胸和一双大眼睛, 白净的肌肤).⁵⁷² In short, they favor western-style women over the natives. The time travelers also express specific interest in the so-called *dayangma* which refers particularly to women maids from the West.⁵⁷³ As the story unfolds, “although the supreme statesmen are broadly Sinocentric [...] they are extremely enthusiastic about white women (虽然元老们多多少少有皇汉的倾向[...]不过对白种女人却都充满着极大的热情).”⁵⁷⁴ They even develop a religion called “Worship of Yangma” (拜洋马教), and *dayangma* is unquestionably a buzz word among the male time travelers.⁵⁷⁵

This “right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics” is also gaining momentum in popular social media platforms like Zhihu. As noted by Zhang, although these populist ideas emanate from “ordinary people” who denounce the dominance of the elites, they appear more as “the observations and diagnoses of

⁵⁷⁰ *Lingao*, Chapter 376 (Volume 3), “Nüpu daolai” 女仆到来 [The coming of the housemaids].

⁵⁷¹ *Lingao*, Chapter 378 (Volume 3), “Nüpu zhi jiaoyu” 女仆之教育 [Educate the housemaids].

⁵⁷² *Lingao*, Chapter 376 (Volume 3), “Nüpu daolai” 女仆到来 [The coming of the housemaids].

⁵⁷³ It refers to western women, and it is a derogatory term.

⁵⁷⁴ *Lingao*, Chapter 456 (Volume 5), “Donna Marina” 唐娜玛丽娜.

⁵⁷⁵ *Lingao*, Chapter 456 (Volume 5), “Donna Marina” 唐娜玛丽娜.

Western politics” since they do not attempt to advance “a populist, anti-establishment agenda to challenge the domestic regime.”⁵⁷⁶ Moreover, as they promote “racial nationalist, illiberal and anti-Western claims,” they are not only tolerated by authoritarian and hybrid regimes (like the CCP), but are utilized and converted into “official populism” to maintain “governance and regime stabilization.”⁵⁷⁷

4.1.2 Banned in China: How *Lingao* Poses a Threat to the State

Lingao provokes official criticism and opposition, despite its upholding of “right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics” and nationalism. In April 2019, Qidian removed *Lingao* from its online library, claiming that the novel spread “historical nihilism” and therefore needed to be revised before it could be reinstated.⁵⁷⁸ I suggest that there are two main reasons for the political rejection of the novel.

The first and main reason resides in the novel’s “abuse” of communist symbols in building the imaginary world. Communist terminologies pervade the book, yet instead of conveying “politically correct” messages, they are used to describe how the time travelers’ greed for property and power is satisfied. For example, *Lingao* reveals the corrupt side of the time travelers through the launch of communist-style campaigns, a plotline that may be read in the light of David Der-wei Wang’s reading of *Jin Taowu Zhuan* (A Tale of Modern Monsters, 1950s) by Jiang Gui. Led by two self-proclaimed socialist revolutionaries, Fang Xiangqian and his nephew Fang Peilan, a communist campaign in a small town in Republican-era Shandong culminates in a disastrous riot that destroys the town. The novel traces the path that the Fangs take to seizing power and property, describing how the old Fang family houses are left to crumble (a conspiracy

⁵⁷⁶ Zhang, “Right-wing Populism with Chinese Characteristics?” 94.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ See <https://pincong.rocks/question/3874>.

between the communists, bandits and Japanese aggressors), and how a former prostitute is absurdly honored as the “Mother of the Revolution” in the political chaos. Wang argues that the novel is clearly an anti-communist work. In the name of eliminating what Lu Xun termed “old cannibalism,” Wang takes the view that the socialist revolution is a “higher cannibalism” comprising entangled political, moral, and libidinal forces.⁵⁷⁹ While purporting to bring “enlightenment and progress,” it inevitably orients to degeneration.⁵⁸⁰

In *Lingao*, Chapters 55 to 61 (Volume 2) provide an analogous instance. As newcomers in Lingao, the time travelers are in urgent need of salt for industrial development and their own consumption, and they plan to take over the nearest salt mine at Maxiao 马巢, which is under the control of a rich and influential landlord called Gou 苟大户. Cooperating with the local government, Gou forces the local villagers to accept loans at an extortionate interest rate. Those who refuse to repay these unreasonable loans are then imprisoned by the Gou family.⁵⁸¹ Lashing out at Gou, the time travelers mobilize the local “masses” (发动群众) to instigate a land reform (土改).⁵⁸² They launch a mass “struggle session” (斗争会/批斗会)⁵⁸³ against Gou, claiming that it is “a time-honored effective method of mobilizing the masses to incite revolution in the history of the CCP (我党历史发动群众闹革命屡试不爽的妙法).”⁵⁸⁴ Yet, as it turns out later in the novel, the local villagers will not have a share of the salt mine because according to the executive committee, it belongs to the time travelers alone (没有说盐场是人民

⁵⁷⁹ David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-century China* (University of California Press, 2004), 193,195.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁸¹ *Lingao*, Chapter 56 (Volume 2), “Yanchang II” 盐场(二) [Saltworks II].

⁵⁸² *Lingao*, Chapter 57 (Volume 2), “Qunzhong gongzuo” 群众工作 [Mass Works]; *Lingao*, Chapter 60 (Volume 2), “Fadong qunzhong III” 发动群众 (三) [Activate the mass III].

⁵⁸³ Here I use the translation in Liu Cixin’s *The Three Body Problem*. “This was a public rally intended to humiliate and break down the enemies of the revolution through verbal and physical abuse until they confessed to their crimes before the crowd.” Liu Cixin, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Liu Ken (Head of Zeus, 2015), 1.

⁵⁸⁴ *Lingao*, Chapter 71 (Volume 2), “Facai zhifu” 发财致富 [Becoming rich].

的[...]按执委会的想法，这盐场以后可是穿越众的财产)。⁵⁸⁵ In Chapter 124, the time travelers resort to a similar ploy and occupy the villages surrounding a significant port called Baitu 百图. For the locals, the bloody ending of the Gou family becomes a horror story, despite the time travelers' claim that it is more about mass mobilization and land reform (血洗苟家庄的事迹[...]已经成了一个恐怖传说).⁵⁸⁶

It is not surprising that the Chinese government accused *Lingao* of fostering so-called historical nihilism, a notion defined by communist historians as a line of thinking that deems communist and socialist reforms as worthless, outdated, and corrupted.⁵⁸⁷ It is paradoxical in *Lingao* that on the one hand, communist and socialist terminology permeates the novel, but on the other, there remains an implicit consensus among the time travelers that communist ideology is empty, abstract, and unnecessary. Du Wen 杜雯, portrayed as the most committed communist in the novel, proposes that they should be of one mind (统一思想) and take the right path (有一个正确的指导方向) to save the Chinese nation and realize communism (拯救中华民族，实现共产主义).⁵⁸⁸ Ma Qianzhu 马前嘱, one of the leaders of *Lingao* comments that however, no one will buy this idea (大家会买你的帐吗?). For the other male time travelers, their goals are clearly corrupt, "I want to raise little girls (as future partners) (我要养萝莉),"⁵⁸⁹ exposing a dark side of the time travelers. The communist tropes and themes in *Lingao* are therefore used as political stunts to meet the individual desires of the time travelers, especially those of men. In a similar vein to Jiang Gui's work, they are

⁵⁸⁵ *Lingao*, Chapter 61 (Volume 2), "Fadong qunzhong IV" 发动群众 (四) [Activate the mass IV].

⁵⁸⁶ *Lingao*, Chapter 124 (Volume 3), "Wuzhuang youxing" 武装游行 [Armed parade].

⁵⁸⁷ Gong Yun 龚云, "Lishi xüwu zhuyi yanjiu" 历史虚无主义研究 [Research on Historical Nihilism], *Makesi zhuyi yanjiu* 马克思主义研究 2017 no.6: 91. As Gong notes, there are another two important features of historical nihilism. The first is the denial of the destructive effects of revolution. The second is the disavowal of communism and socialism in orthodox Chinese history.

⁵⁸⁸ *Lingao*, Chapter 44 (Volume 1), "Hexin wenti" 核心问题 [Key problems].

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

replete with corruption and horror and thus cannot be tolerated in the eyes of the government.

Another reason for the official objection of *Lingao* lies in its particular mode of collective production. As mentioned above, unlike most online novels, *Lingao* is a product of collective creativity. It originates in a question posed by Dugu Qiuhun 独孤求婚 in an online forum (sonicbbs) in 2006: “If we travel to the late Ming dynasty and carry a large supply of modern products, how can we survive and change history?” The question received enthusiastic responses from other forum users interested in industry, military, and history. Chuiniuzhe began to write *Lingao* in 2009 based on the storylines and ideas posted on the forum. Moreover, how it builds its imaginary world also contributes to *Lingao*’s distinctiveness, as explained above. Michael Salor argues that collective participation of readers allows the built world to surpass the individual imagination of a single text. Instead, an independent, boundless, and sustainable virtual world is established, endorsed not only by the original text, but also by the fan community, fanzines, and fan websites where numerous fan fictions are produced.⁵⁹⁰ Creating new stories of the characters of the original novel, fan fictions are fan-made derivative texts of the original one, and they are utterly crucial to build the virtual world “in a web of story.”⁵⁹¹ In this sense, the construction of the imaginary world in *Lingao* is closely tied to the flowering of the work’s fan fictions. Since Volume 3, Chuiniuzhe has transformed himself from a writer to an editor of varied stories, since his main work is to “separate,

⁵⁹⁰ Michael Salor, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25-26.

⁵⁹¹ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 8. A wide variety of texts will either be included or excluded in the realm of fan fiction, depending on how we define the term. In a narrower sense, if we focus on Western studies of fan fiction since the 1960s, in which a number of established scholars, such as Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Constance Penley, have worked for years, fan fiction refers to “stories written about (Western live-action) TV shows that started with *Star Trek* and spawned con and zine culture, the form of which was borrowed from science fiction literary conferences.” But in this chapter, I use a more general understanding of the term, which sees fan fiction as the “imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds,” usually in the form of “derivative amateur writings.” Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, “Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now,” in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 5, 7.

sew, and sort” the fan fictions and incorporate them in the original novel.⁵⁹² Almost 300 supreme statesmen in *Lingao* are played by real readers (or co-authors). If a reader wants to play a role in the novel, he/she can write a piece of fan fiction and submit it. Once the text is accepted and appears in the novel, the reader can be formally offered a position as a supreme statesman.⁵⁹³ It not only enriches the world with new plots, characters, and settings, but also builds a limitless database for *Lingao*’s further development. According to a survey, fan fictions of the work are mainly published in such online platforms as sc bbs, beichao bbs, and the post bar of *Lingao*.⁵⁹⁴

The community of *Lingao* is therefore more than just an online gathering place for fans of the book. Rather, it is representative of “collective wisdom.” The imaginary world of *Lingao*, co-created by experts in industrial, military, and other sectors, as well as the ideologues of the Industry Party, has become an ever-growing organism with political ambitions. It involves not only an ideological obsession with developmentalism and racial nationalism, but also an unrestrained accumulation of individual desires for power and expansion. In other words, the organization is in its early stage of forging a powerful political agenda potentially capable of challenging the current regime. Therefore, the novel itself invited tighter restrictions by the government.

To sum up, *Lingao* mirrors contemporary netizens’ perception of and imagination about China’s history and current political standing. Nevertheless, as an imaginary world built upon unrestrained individual desires, it is a political threat to the government, and is thus suppressed by state censorship.

⁵⁹² Yang, “Lingao qiming yu dangdai huanxiang wenxue zhong de shijie jiangou” 《临高启明》与当代幻想文学中的世界建构 [Lingao Qiming and the world building in contemporary fantasy literature], 52.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Li Qiang 李强, “Jiti zhihui de duochong bianzou: You *Lingao Qiming* kan wangwen shengchan jizhi yu yishi xingtai zhi guanxi” “集体智慧”的多重变奏——由《临高启明》看网文生产机制与意识形态之关系 [Multiple performances of “collective wisdom”: Discover the relationship between the mechanism of the production of internet literature and ideology from *Lingao Qiming*], *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 2018 no.2. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/mfKxVp9EyE4vdQVnXrxgNQ>.

4.2 *Bainian Jiashu*: Individual and Collective Pursuit of Historical Authenticity

Different from male-oriented online literary works, nationalism remains to be a suppressed theme in web romances. This section uses *Bainian* as a representative example of female-led nationalist narrative. Delivered by Feng Diuzi, who is called *qicai* (genius) due to her unique yet engaging style of writing, *Bainian* is highly praised by the readers and it is believed as the best novel to describe the history of the Second World War in Jinjiang.⁵⁹⁵ The book tells the story of Ai Jia 艾伽, who reads an old letter that her grandfather has kept since the 1940s. After reading the letter, Ai travels to the early 1930s and finds herself becoming the author of it. As an ordinary young woman now called Li Jiajun 黎嘉骏, she chooses to be a war correspondent and records her experiences during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Unlike *Lingao*'s exaggerated world of imagination and individual desires, *Bainian* is an imaginary time travel story that strives for historical authenticity and seeks to reconfigure genuine memories of the warring past. Interestingly, compared to *Lingao* that takes the risk of being censored by the government, *Bainian* has received an opposite response from officialdom.

4.2.1 Seeking Historical Authenticity in *Bainian*

Following the diminishing number of the participation generation, there has been anxiety over the loss of living memories in the global Second World War culture studies. This spurs an upsurge in war-related mnemonic activities that may cause potential problems due to “dynamic contestation and myth-busting.”⁵⁹⁶ For

⁵⁹⁵ See <https://www.zhihu.com/question/45095351?f3fb8ead20=a5fd7800cdf017371d307dd10e3ad65c>.

⁵⁹⁶ Patrick Finney, “Politics and Technologies of Authenticity: The Second World War at the Close of Living Memory,” *Rethinking History* 21, no.2 (2017): 159, 160.

instance, one can create and disseminate “fake or fabricated memories” by disavowing factual evidence, and the “Nanjing Massacre denial” is a prime example. The deniers of the event are usually Japanese revisionists who “downplay, excuse or even deny the atrocities in Nanjing,” and they have become important voices in the global disputes over the “rape of Nanjing.”⁵⁹⁷ In this regard, there is an urgent need to verify the “authenticity” of war memories, which will not only recognize the value of war veterans, but also provide “political and cultural lessons” for future generations.

Bainian is also born out of commemoration of the war generation, as its preface reads: “Thank you my deceased, and living elders (谢谢你, 我已经逝去的, 和尚未逝去的老一辈).”⁵⁹⁸ In a previous yet more informative preface, the author writes that her primary concern is to remember earlier generations and educate the younger generation: “I was born in the 1990s and I speak for myself. If I do not remember the past, those children born after 2000 will not even know who brought them their current happy life (我是九零后, 我为自己代言。如果我都不记住, 那 00 后更不会知道他那生活是谁换来的).”⁵⁹⁹ She goes on to emphasize the importance of authenticity: “This novel [...] borrows much from documentaries, historical books, textbooks, novels, and other materials. I can promise that I will do my best to make sure that all the contents are ‘real’ (本文 [...]可能会有很多影视纪录片历史书本课本资料小说的影子。但我可以保证: 我会尽量做到里面的都是真的).”⁶⁰⁰ Furthermore, unlike many other time travel novels, the author rejects readers’ requests to rewrite history according to their own ideas, emphasizing the importance of preserving the original, authentic historical facts: “I will not change them (我不改); no matter what the heroine

⁵⁹⁷ Yoshida Takashi, *The Making of the “Rape of Nanking”: History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (Oxford, England, Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

⁵⁹⁸ Fengdiuzi 疯丢子, preface of *Bainian*.

⁵⁹⁹ The earlier preface of the book is no longer available in Jinjiang, but it can be found in other informal literary websites. For example, see https://www.shubaow.net/73_73551/16881905.html.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

does, there will be no other history (女主怎么都作不出不一样的历史来).”⁶⁰¹

Before delving into the “authentic” world of *Bainian*, it is necessary to point out that authenticity is now often considered as something “constructed, contested, desired, elusive and illusory.”⁶⁰² Based on experience, observation, and standpoints, it brings about variant cultural and political potentials. Authentic memories thus have influential power when they are accepted and absorbed pervasively. I therefore contend that the author of *Bainian* claims to reconstruct the “authentic” past for nationalistic desire, both individually and collectively, of the historical story it portrays.

First and foremost, this alleged authenticity is presented at an individual level, focusing on how the heroine, as a time traveler, manages to survive the war. The first volume makes several attempts to showcase the veracity of the narrative. For example, Chapter 28 details how Li Jiajun writes her first diary, which recounts the occurrence of the Mukden incident (the 9.18 incident) and the sorrowful life as a refugee from northeast China. In the following chapter, the heroine becomes a secretary in the Military Staff Committee for the Chinese side, affirming the factual basis of the military reports and information she obtains. In Chapter 66, the protagonist becomes a war reporter, and the novel begins to provide cogent proof of the story’s authenticity afterwards.

“Historical authenticity” is always defined in a two-fold way: “as witnessing and as experiencing the past.”⁶⁰³ The key prerequisites for authenticity are “first-hand accounts, historical places, and objects” of the past.⁶⁰⁴ In this sense, Chapter 70 provides a good illustration of first-hand witness account. The chapter describes how the heroine secretly follows Chinese soldiers and observes them

⁶⁰¹ *Bainian*’s former preface, see https://www.shubaow.net/73_73551/16881905.html.

⁶⁰² Finney, “Politics and Technologies of Authenticity,” 164.

⁶⁰³ Eva Ulrike Pirker and Mark Rüdiger, “Authentizitätsfiktionen in Populären Geschichtskulturen: Annäherungen,” in *Echte Geschichte: Authentizitätsfiktionen in Populären Geschichtskulturen*, eds. Eva Ulrike et al. Bielefeld: Transcript (Historische Lebenswelten in Populären Wissenskulturen, 2010), 17.

⁶⁰⁴ Stephan Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-first-century Museum: From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 5.

launching a night attack at close quarters. Describing a battle near the Great Wall, it details how the troop gathers around the Great Wall, races across the Shanhai Pass 山海关, and makes its way through the hills to reach Bai Taizi 白台子, where the Japanese are stationed. The fact that the Chinese soldiers are only equipped with swords is mentioned repeatedly, emphasizing the significant inferiority of their weapons. All these elements work together to portray an “authentic” picture of the heroine’s personal experience of the raid.

Besides factual accounts, historical authenticity can also be verified by individual emotions. “The evocation of authentic feelings” is closely interconnected with “the mood or atmosphere of the past,” which can be achieved via similar environments, familiar objects, and other elements.⁶⁰⁵ Chapter 120 offers an example in which the song *March of the Volunteers* affects the heroine, who identifies herself as a modern woman from the 2010s despite being in 1937 China. During an ordinary parade, the heroine’s attention is captivated when the crowd starts singing the song, which is not yet chosen as the national anthem but serves as the theme song of the film *Sons and Daughters of the Storm* 风云儿女 (1935).⁶⁰⁶ She is immediately struck by it: “Such a song, with its deeply familiar melody and lyrics, can break through the barriers of time and traverse the hundred years smoke of wars. It hits her brain and indulges her in emotions so deep that she cannot escape from them (有这么一首，用那种熟悉到骨子里的音调和歌词，击穿了时代的壁障，跨过了近百年的硝烟，撞击了她的脑膜，让她的情绪深陷其中，完全拔不出来)!”⁶⁰⁷ It gives her a strong sense of authenticity in the war, and she wishes that she had seen the film, since she is “witnessing history (她在见证历史呀)!”⁶⁰⁸

In addition to the heroine’s bodily experiences and memories, other elements

⁶⁰⁵ Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-first-century Museum*, 5.

⁶⁰⁶ *March of the Youth* was selected as the national anthem of P.R.C. in 1949.

⁶⁰⁷ *Bainian*, Chapter 120, “Zaiwen guoge” 再闻国歌 [Hear the national anthem again].

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

such as readers' comments and the mechanism of the platform also contribute to the novel's alleged authenticity. This brings us a "collective" perspective to read the story. According to Astrid Erll, when memory is discussed within a cultural context, it is necessary to distinguish collective memory from the individual one, as the latter is mainly concerned with "the level of the cognitive," while the former are considered at the level of "the social."⁶⁰⁹ Here I draw on Aleida Assmann's framework of four specific types of memory, namely, "individuals, social groups, political collectives, and cultures."⁶¹⁰ Both individual and social group memory are constructed at the individual level. Although social memory is mainly a "communicative network," it relies on sustained "interpersonal relations and conversation."⁶¹¹ In other words, it is "a coordination of individual memories."⁶¹² Cultural memory, however, depends on "a pool of experience and knowledge" that goes beyond its "living carriers and passes over into material media."⁶¹³ With the aid of symbolic media, cultural memory becomes more permanent and durable, reaching a cognitive and collective level. Similarly, political memory also has a long-term temporal horizon, and it requires "strong ties of loyalty" that tend to generate "powerfully unified collective identities."⁶¹⁴ In the following part, I will explore how these diverse formations of memory are constructed and recognized, and how they contribute to strengthening the "authenticity" of the novel.

Social memory is intimately associated with individual memory and always develops through "living interactions and communication."⁶¹⁵ Jinjiang is thus an ideal platform for processing social memory: once an author has submitted one chapter, readers can submit comments, and both sides can respond to each other.

⁶⁰⁹ Astrid Erll, "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll et al. (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2008), 5.

⁶¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity*, trans. Sara Clift (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 42.

⁶¹¹ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 19.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

As shown in figure 4.1, on the right side, comments highlighted by the author are also listed. Below the highlighted comments are frequently discussed topics related to the novel, inviting further comments from others.



Figure 4.1⁶¹⁶ the Comment page of *Bainian* in Jinjiang

Moreover, *Bainian* also receives attention from other online platforms, especially in Douban and Zhihu (figures 4.2 and 4.3). Although operating in different ways, all these platforms also invite immediate communications between users. In this sense, the comments and responses relating to the novel form an active and dynamic community that instantaneously establishes a social memory of the historical war.

⁶¹⁶ See <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2296323&chapterid=205>.



Figure 4.2 *Bainian* in Douban⁶¹⁷



Figure 4.3 *Bainian* in Zhihu⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁷ Accessed on July 1, 2022.

⁶¹⁸ Accessed on July 1, 2022.

As mentioned earlier, while social memory is based more on a “dynamic process of negotiation and engagement,” cultural memory is constructed mainly based on signs and symbols that are fixed in both material and institutional terms.

⁶¹⁹ The description of Zhang Zizhong 张自忠 in the novel, a famed KMT (Kuo Min Tang) general, can be perceived as a typical example.

Chapter 90 depicts how the heroine, as an ordinary girl from the twenty-first century who lacks detailed historical knowledge, believes in Zhang’s loyalty to his nation:

“Of the ‘eight brothers’ from the 29th Army that came from the former Northwest Army, she barely knew the eldest, Song Zheyuan, or the second, Xiao Zhenying, who was responsible for military affairs. She only knew Zhang Zizhong. He was a man labeled with ‘fighting in his blood’ and ‘giving his life for his country,’ and he was so important that an entire paragraph in high school history books was devoted to him (以老西北军为基础的二十九军的“八兄弟”中，她连老大宋哲元，军事兼二把手萧振瀛都没怎么听说过，唯独知道个张自忠，他可是在历史课本上拥有专门的一段话，被打上了“血战”和“殉国”标签的男人!)”⁶²⁰

Cultural symbols, selected and underlined in educational institutions (as in this case), form functional memories that help to establish “canons.” The process of canonization endows cultural symbols with “a sacred aura” that signifies a “transhistorical commitment to readings and interpretations.” ⁶²¹ Cultural histories can therefore “stretch over centuries” and increase a sense of authenticity for future generations.⁶²² Chapter 206, which details the death of Zhang in the battle of Zaoyang-Yichang (枣宜会战), is a representative instance.

⁶¹⁹ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 21.

⁶²⁰ *Bainian*, Chapter 90, “Shouzhu Wanping” 守住宛平 [Protect Wanping].

⁶²¹ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 40.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 21.

In this chapter, Li Jiajun, who already knows about the death of Zhang, manages to get close to him and tries to save his life. However, she soon finds herself powerless in a ferocious war. After leading the resistance against the Japanese invasion, Zhang is fatally wounded and loses consciousness. During these last moments of Zhang's life, Li reveals her secret as a time traveler to him:

“Dear General, maybe you are the only one to whom I can say this. Do you know that we (the Chinese) will win after 5 years? [...] On the day of victory of the anti-Japanese war, many say that they want to come back to tell those who sacrificed their lives: ‘The mountains and rivers are still there. Our country is prosperous, and our people are at peace.’ [...] Now I can say this to you. General Zhang, after a hundred years, the mountains and rivers are still there. Our country is prosperous, and our people are at peace.”

After saying these words, Li Jiajun burst into tears. [...] Suddenly she becomes extremely clear-minded, and she knows what she is doing.

The purpose of her coming around the battlefields is to find a person and tell him this slogan which has become a cliché in the twenty-first century.

“General Zhang, after a hundred years, the mountains and rivers are still there. Our country is prosperous, and our people are at peace.” This is her privilege. This is her greatest honor.

(“将军啊，我这辈子大概也就跟您说了，您知道吗，再过个五年，我们就要赢啦[...]抗战胜利纪念的时候，大家又都说，好想回到抗日的时候告诉那些牺牲的人：‘山河犹在，国泰民安’[...]我现在能说啦，张将军，百年后，山河犹在，国泰民安呢……”

黎嘉骏说罢，眼泪已经汹涌而下[...]她的思绪忽然清晰无比，她知道自己在做什么了，

原来，她这么来来去去，不过是为了找这么一个合适的人，说出这么一句在后世已经烂大街的话。

“张将军，百年后，山河犹在，国泰民安呢……”

这是她的特权，这是她最大的荣耀。) ⁶²³

⁶²³ *Bainian*, Chapter 206, “Jugong jincui” 鞠躬尽瘁 [Spare no effort in the performance of one's duty].

Here, the heroine firstly serves as both “historical witness” and “moral witness” at an individual level. According to Assmann, the historical witness functions as a messenger to “deliver news of an important event” to the outside world.⁶²⁴ Li, identified as a time traveler, is thus a critical secondary witness who reports the death of Zhang to today’s readers who are distant from the historical event. In this case, Zhang embodies the heroic image of a martyr whose sacrifice implies faith in an ideal nationhood, echoing the institutionalized cultural symbols discussed above.⁶²⁵

Moreover, in the role of “moral witness,” Li is both a victim of and witness to the war. Through her first-hand experience, the “truth and authority” of her story are validated and strengthened. A moral order with political importance is thus established, challenging the Japanese right-wing narratives of the war which tend to “efface historical traces and defend themselves against guilt through denial and other evasive strategies.”⁶²⁶

Secondly, Li is represented more as a “collective self-image” within the online community than as an individual witness. Readers’ comments clearly show that the heroine’s perceptions and emotions have raised wide resonance and recognition. The cultural symbol “山河犹在，国泰民安” appears repeatedly in their comments, representing not only a shared cultural memory, but also a collectively celebrated memory with political implications (see figure 4.4). The story stimulates readers’ memory of Zhang Zizhong through a shared experience of trauma and triumph, which not only construct a “collective past,” but also “a sense of national identity.”⁶²⁷ This further reinforces a sense of authenticity.

⁶²⁴ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 68.

⁶²⁵ Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 77.

⁶²⁶ Assmann, *Shadows of Trauma*, 72.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

No3 网友: 洋洋哪么么哒 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-09-18 21:17:51 所评章节: 206
泪目
[投诉] [回复]
No4 网友: ***** 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-09-12 04:10:44 所评章节: 206
为营造更好的评论环境, 近期网站要求发评须进行实名认证, 未实名用户评论暂时仅在对应作者后台及发评用户后台可见, 对其他人不可见, 实名制后评论将正常展示 (手机邮箱实名>> 身份认证实名>>)。
[投诉] [回复]
No5 网友: 望其成 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-09-07 17:21:09 所评章节: 206
山河犹在国泰民安 我们中国现在谁都欺负不了!
[投诉] [回复]
No6 网友: 49059967 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-07-06 01:56:15 所评章节: 206
哭死我了 山河犹在 国泰民安!
[投诉] [回复]
No7 网友: 喵喵喵喵喵喵 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-06-06 19:30:07 所评章节: 206
山河犹在, 国泰民安
[投诉] [回复]
No8 网友: 喵喵一口小汤圆 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2021-05-01 10:40:03 所评章节: 206
山河犹在, 国泰民安。
[投诉] [回复]
No9 网友: 雪丸子 评论: 《百年家书》 打分: 2 发表时间: 2020-12-11 10:23:02 所评章节: 206
泪目
[投诉] [回复]

Figure 4.4 Comments in *Bainian*

The political importance of the “collective past” created by the novel was later recognized and underlined by the state. On November 5, 2017, the awards ceremony of the Second Online Literature Biennial was held in Cixi 慈溪, Ningbo 宁波, and *Bainian* was awarded the silver prize.⁶²⁸ The prize is jointly sponsored by Zhejiang Association of Web Writers, Ningbo Literary Federation, and the CCP Publicity Department in Cixi. In 2016, Feng Diuzi’s work *Zhanqi 1938 战起 1938* (The War Begins in 1938), which tells another time travel story about the Second World War in Europe and Russia, was also nominated for the Mao Dun Literature Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in China. These rewards, reflecting the collaboration between Party institutions and the online community constructed around the two novels, have become an important part of official mandates seeking to create a “unified and instrumental” national memory. In other words, they help to shape and “reinforce a ritualized or institutionalized form of memory” within the community inspired by the author

⁶²⁸ Awards of *Bainian*, see <https://baike.baidu.com/reference/17968039/97211qwIOGeon8hjox03PHz0A8li7bcp96QC5eoF4s09J3c3vtWjvjNYJVdGSfEA7TZevu9TgRR8T-XhGmwbi2ZMoQfxo9h33vqrI9EylPCdfVqVsWFalG1Xkbbx>.

and her work.⁶²⁹ *Bainian* is thus ideologically charged through an “authentic” reconstruction of the national past, as the award words reveal:

“The work describes the cooperation between the CCP and GMT and the rise of the nation during the anti-Japanese war. It also portrays the patriotic and resistant spirits of the people from different classes, paying homage to the backbone of those who have embodied our national spirit since ancient times. The author’s positive approach to the portrayal of our history of oppression makes this serious historical work well worth reading (作品描述了抗战过程中国共合作与民族奋起，以及不同阶层的人们身上流淌着的民族大义与抗争精神，并向那些从古至今承载民族精神的脊梁致以崇高的敬意。作者用积极的心态，去感知和认识那段厚重的历史，使严正的历史题材具有很强的可读性).”⁶³⁰

Readers’ comments are equally complimentary: “Thank you to the author for producing such a good novel and writing her story based on historical facts (感谢本书极其遵从史实又写的超级棒的作者).⁶³¹ As the younger generation, we must not forget (身为后人的我们，不能忘却) [...]How lucky I was born in present-day China! May my country always be strong and prosperous (多么庆幸我生于今日之中国啊！惟愿我的祖国，永远强大而昌盛).”⁶³² In this sense, the novel produces powerfully “unified collective identities” that involve strong loyalty to the nation as part of national and political memory.

In sum, the story offers an “authentic” view of history through the lived personal experience of the heroine. The author-reader interaction, nationalist cultural signs and symbols, and the influence of political institutions successfully transform the novel from an individual desire for remembrance into a collective

⁶²⁹ Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum*, 9.

⁶³⁰ Award words of *Bainian*, see

<https://baike.baidu.com/reference/17968039/97211qwIOGeon8hjoX03PHz0A8li7bcp96QC5eoF4s09J3c3vtWjvjNYJVdGSfEA7TZevu9TgRR8T-XhGmwbi2ZMoQfxo9h33vqrI9EylPCdfVqVsWfalG1Xkbbx>.

⁶³¹ Readers’ comments of *Bainian* in Douban, see <https://www.douban.com/note/658051453/>.

⁶³² Ibid. These readers’ comments echo the author’s own words, as mentioned at the beginning of this part.

nationalist expression of conformity and patriotism.

4.2.2 *Bainian: The State's Tolerance of "Misguided" Individual Desires*

While the individual experience portrayed in *Bainian*, together with its pursuit of historical authenticity, fits well with official discourses and helps to shape a unified, collective national identity, the novel also depicts deviations from the CCP government's national policies. In *Bainian*, all the male members in the Li family are senior GMT officers. Instead of urging them to convert to communism and stay in mainland China after the war, Li Jiajun persuades her family to migrate to the U.S. to avoid potential political turmoil, such as the Civil War and the Cultural Revolution. In a side story, after the death of Li, the female protagonist, having forgotten her life in the 1930s, reincarnates as Ai Jia in 2016. In the same year, the daughter of Li and her family return to China and meet Ai Jia. As the dialogue between Ai and Qin Mu (the great-grandson of Li Jiajun) discloses:

Qin: "To me, the most admirable thing about her (Li Jiajun) is that after the success of the anti-Japanese war, she was determined to bring the whole family to the U.S. (我最佩服的, 就是她在抗战胜利后执意要全家移民美国)."

Ai Jia ponders this and then exclaims (艾珈琢磨了一下, 惊服): "She was really visionary (果然有远见)!"

Qin: "We did have a hard time during the Cold War and the Korean War, but my great-grandfather was a military officer of the GMT at that time...so you know (虽然冷战还有朝鲜战争时期不是那么好过, 但是我太外公那时候是国民党军官.....你懂的)."

Ai: "Yes, yes, yes (懂懂懂)!"⁶³³

Due to censorship, the novel avoids mentioning the political conflict between the two parties, but it subtly hints at an agreement of most online readers who still

⁶³³ *Bainian*, "Side story."

prioritizes individual desires and interests over a collective, party-led nationalist narrative, despite that the work is praised by the state.

Then what are the factors that contribute to the different responses of the state to *Bainian* and *Lingao*? Here, I follow Ni Zhange's analysis of two online *scifi-danmei* novels, namely, Priest's *Shapolang* 杀破狼 (Stars of Chaos, 2015) and Feitian Yexiang's *Erlingyisan/Mori shuguang* 2013/末日曙光 (Twenty Thirteen, or Dawn of the World, 2011). Unlike most *danmei* works, the two novels' protagonists are not only romantic lovers, but leaders and fighters "for national salvation on the global stage."⁶³⁴ "Under the dual pressure of the monetary extraction of media capital and the state's moral censorship," the two novels simplify romantic entanglements of the characters, yet prioritize themes of nation and *tianxia*, which Ni calls a sinicized rewriting of "homonationalism."⁶³⁵ Homonationalism is the result of the "confluence of American sexuality and politics" and refers to the "emergence of homosexual nationalism" in North America.⁶³⁶ It is a strategy often adopted by racial and sexual others in order to gain "national recognition and inclusion" and escape from "segregation and disqualification."⁶³⁷ I argue that under similar dual pressures of media capital and political censorship, *Bainian* develops a parallel strategy with its *danmei* counterparts. It concentrates on mapping out the Second Sino-Japanese war and the nationalistic calling to "remember the history of resisting foreign aggression and saving the nation," and thus wins government endorsement and legitimizes individual desires, even though it clashes with the collective national narrative occasionally.

Contemporary sociopolitical context also accounts for the government's

⁶³⁴ According to Ni, *danmei* novels are homoerotic romance featuring love affairs between male characters primarily, but not exclusively, for the entertainment of young women. Ni Zhange, "Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 32, no.2 (2020): 179.

⁶³⁵ Ni, "Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance."

⁶³⁶ Jasbir K Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1,2.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

preference for *Bainian*. It is well-known that the China-Japan relationship has long been “overshadowed by the history of war between them,”⁶³⁸ and a series of political events in the twenty-first century have further impacted their relations. For instance, in 2001, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Science and Technology approved a revised version of a junior high school history textbook. Containing controversial accounts of the Second World War, it was criticized for distorting historical facts.⁶³⁹ In 2012, Japanese right-wing activists landed on the Diaoyu islands near the East China Sea, the subject of a territorial dispute between the two countries. Events like these fueled widespread anger within Chinese society, sparking riots both online and offline. As Florian Schneider explains, events like the 2012 riots in China indicate the crucial importance of “popular nationalism in contemporary Chinese society,” which is closely linked to anti-Japanese sentiments, and this, he observes, informs political discussions and actions.⁶⁴⁰ These are the key points for the CCP, since they help to create “a sense of national unity.” Works like *Bainian* that emphasize the historical authenticity of Japanese military atrocities and collective national memory are therefore warmly welcomed by the state.

However, by presenting the female protagonist as a war reporter from a GMT military family, nearly three-quarters of *Bainian* describes how the GMT army, with its honorable officers and soldiers, fights the Japanese enemy. The role of the CCP in the Second Sino-Japanese War, however, is relatively downplayed, which is unusual in online novels under strict state censorship, because it poses a potential political danger. As the author declares in the preface (the first version): “I might be investigated by the police for writing this novel (这文[...]写不好我大概要喝茶).”⁶⁴¹ In the early stages of the writing process, the novel was also on

⁶³⁸ Austin Greg and Harris Stuart, *Japan and Greater China—Political Economy and Military Power in the Asian Century* (London: Hurst & Co, 2001), 48.

⁶³⁹ BBC Chinese.com, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/trad/hi/newsid_1250000/newsid_1257900/1257915.stm.

⁶⁴⁰ Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism*, 2.

⁶⁴¹ *Bainian*’s former preface, see <https://www.sto.cx/book-153323-1.html>.

the verge of being substantially revised or even canceled, as “the author has something to say” part in Chapter 67 unveils: “They (the editors) tell me that this subject is too politically sensitive.[...] I need to revise my work considerably. Neither real places nor nations can exist in the novel. Also, it cannot reflect historical events... (她们[...]告诉我, 这个题材太敏感[...]告诉我要大改, 不能有真实地国名, 不映射历史事件...)”⁶⁴² The work was finally approved on condition that “it is correct and conveys positive messages (能够保证正确和正能量).”⁶⁴³

I contend that the concurrent sociopolitical context also plays a role here. The author started to serialize *Bainian* in 2015, when China and Taiwan were at their last peak of peaceful diplomatic relations.⁶⁴⁴ On November 5, 2015, the meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Ma Yingjiu in Singapore was a ground-breaking event, marking the first time the leaders of the two sides met since 1949. “Communication, cooperation and peace” were the keywords for the future of both sides.⁶⁴⁵ In this political context, it is understandable that the individual desires of the heroine’s family, despite their escape from the PRC as GMT officers, are tolerated or even encouraged by the Chinese government, as long as the work takes on an overall nationalist overtone.

⁶⁴² *Bainian*, Chapter 67, “Quanjia songbie” 全家送别 [Say goodbye to the whole family], “The author has something to say part.”

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ According to the current web page of *Bainian*, all the chapters were published within a week in December 2016. But these were not the original publishing dates of the serialized work, since the story had been amended, and it is difficult to determine an accurate date for when the chapters were first published online. Based on the author’s words in “the author has something to say” section in several chapters, it can be deduced that the author began to serialize the book around 2015. For example, in “the author has something to say” section in Chapter 71, the author mentions that she went to the film *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, which was first released in mainland China on March 27, 2015. See <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2296323&chapterid=71>.

⁶⁴⁵ People.cn, *Tujie: Liang'an lingdaoren shouci lishixing huimian tanle shenme?* 图解: 两岸领导人首次历史性会谈了什么? [Infographic: What was discussed during the historic first meeting between the leaders from both sides of the Taiwan Strait?] <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/1107/c1001-27789502.html>, 2015.

Conclusion

While *Lingao* can be read as a story of how a group of time travelers, alleging to promote nationalism and communism, aims to satisfy their individual desires, *Bainian* takes a contrasting path. *Lingao* depicts the construction of an imaginary world around the Aosong Empire. The Empire, established through the aspirations of over 500 netizens affiliated with the Industrial Party, emerges from the developmental and nationalist discourses in contemporary Chinese society. However, *Lingao*'s indulgence in individual desires, satirical approach to communist symbols, and closely connected online community pose a threat to state stability and prosperity, leading to government-enforced restrictions.

In comparison, *Bainian* seeks historical authenticity in portraying the Second Sino-Japanese War from both the individual and collective perspective. Born from a female-oriented literary community, it points to the hidden national expressions in online romance fictions. By aligning the heroine's personal desire with the patriotic narrative of historical remembrance and dedication to the nation, the novel creates a unified, collective nationalist discourse. As a result, it garnered state approval despite occasional noncompliance.

Based on the comparison of the two novels, I argue that online expressions of individual desires, intertwined with nationalism, are on the one hand influenced by contemporary societal factors, especially far-reaching international events. As Xu stated, it is also a continuance of the tradition of Chinese cyber nationalism.⁶⁴⁶ On the other hand, compared with the personal voice in other internet-based media, individual desires in online novels are always showcased in a more grandiloquent, even barefaced manner, reflecting the characteristic of "YY" (short for *yiyin* unlimited imagination) of internet literature. That is to say, the individual yearnings displayed in online works are exaggerated presentations of personal desires in real life. Furthermore, internet literature fosters intense

⁶⁴⁶ Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism*, 2.

interactions among diverse groups and communities within and beyond literary websites, forming a powerful assemblage of individual ideas. In this sense, neither does the presentation of individual desires in online literature conform precisely to state-led nationalist ideology, nor does it turn its back to political patriotic indoctrination. In short, they have fostered an interlaced relationship that needs to be analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

Notably, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brings new light to the relationship between individual desires and nationalist narratives, which is worthy of further exploration. On February 15, 2020, “Gansu Daily” (每日甘肃网) reported the news describing how female medical staff in a hospital had their heads shaved to show their commitment to fighting the virus and avoid infection. Although it was claimed that they volunteered for this, a video showed them crying as their hair was removed, which sparked a fierce controversy on social media.⁶⁴⁷ Public indignation reached its peak when the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League issued two anime idols three days later. Netizens strongly criticized the female idol Jiangshanjiao 江山娇 (the beauty of the country),⁶⁴⁸ as it not only mocks a serious social crisis, but also epitomizes the government’s intentional suppression of individual, especially women’s rights and wills in favor of the national interest. Female netizens questioned Jiangshanjiao furiously: “Jiangshanjiao, do you shave your head for the nation (江山娇, 你为祖国剃头吗)? Jiangshanjiao, you go to the front line and take care of patients even though you are pregnant. You are the most beautiful nurse (江山娇, 你挺个大肚子还上前线治病救人, 你是最美护士).”⁶⁴⁹ Female

⁶⁴⁷ The Beijing News, *Nüxing yihu ren yuan jiti tiguangtou “chuzheng”*: *Bei zanmei de nixingzhe, bei hushi de nüxing* 女性医护人员集体剃光头 “出征”: 被赞美的逆行者, 被忽视的女性 [Female medical staffs collectively shaved their heads to “go on an expedition”: Praised antidromic people, neglected women] https://m.weibo.cn/status/4473646200543833?wm=3333_2001&from=10B9493010&sourcetype=weixin, 2020.

⁶⁴⁸ This name comes from Mao Zedong’s poem *Qinyuanchun Xue* (沁园春·雪). Short for “Jiangshan ruci duojiao 江山如此多娇 (the land so rich in beauty),” this verse was originally intended to show a nationalistic love for the country’s landscape.

⁶⁴⁹ See figure 4.5.

netizens also criticized the patriarchal social orders, and Jiangshanjiao became the symbol of Chinese women: “Jiangshanjiao, are you afraid of being raped when you walk alone at night? [...] Have you ever been indecently assaulted by your male seniors? [...] Answer us, Jiangshanjiao (江山娇, 你走夜路会害怕被人强暴吗? [...] 你被男性长辈猥亵过吗? [...] 江山娇, 你回答我们啊 see figure 4.5)?”⁶⁵⁰ These feminist narratives, showing individual women’s indictment of both the patriarchal social norms and the political structure, echo the Housemaid Management Committee in *Lingao* and illustrate a shocking intermingling of fact and fiction.

Moreover, the case of Jiangshanjiao reminds us of some revolutionary films of the 1930s, which, according to Pang Laikwan, form a collective subjectivity for the new revolutionary man which is largely defined by “both its ardor to the nation and the opposite sex.”⁶⁵¹ Pang offers a sensitive reading of two left-wing revolutionary films, which shows a clear tendency in 1930s revolutionary cinema where women’s individual desires and empowerment are suppressed by both “men’s individual libidinal needs” and collective national issues. Interestingly, traversing from cinema to the internet, fictions like *Lingao* and their male-dominated fandom, as well as sociopolitical events like Jiangshanjiao, convey the message that women are still overshadowed by the same dual oppression over almost a century. In this sense, online literature as well as public discussions offer abundant examples about the dynamic and complicated relationship between individual desires and collective nationalist discourse, which relates to not only social identity factors like gender and class, but also with contemporary sociopolitical context.

⁶⁵⁰ The original post of Jiangshanjiao and the numerous comments have been deleted. Some of the comments are reserved by netizens. Figure 4.5 shows some of them.

⁶⁵¹ See figure 4.5.

[illegible]

Comments about Jiangshanjiao in Weibo

Conclusion

In a recent interview about web romances, Ni Zhange calls for a renewed reading of them, suggesting using *shiqing* (worldly affairs) to replace *yanqing* (romance) as a new approach. As Ni explains, the term *yanqing* originates from the mandarin ducks and butterflies popular fiction in the early twentieth century. After several decades' development, especially with the emergence of Qiong Yao's commercial romantic novels and the appearance of female-oriented online literature, *yanqing* begins to represent love stories for women. *Shiqing* novels were firstly introduced by Lu Xun in *A Brief History of Chinese Novels* (中国小说史略). They refer to novels from the Ming and Qing dynasties that focus on human emotions and worldly affairs, rather than featuring immortals and demons as the main characters. Typical examples of this type are *The Golden Lotus* (金瓶梅) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦). Ni proposes using *shiqing* instead of *yanqing* because the labels of love and romance cannot wholly describe today's romances in female-oriented online literature. A growing number of web romances turn their attention from love and domestic affairs to the empowerment and development of women in public spheres. Notably, no CP (couple) is also a trend in today's web romances.⁶⁵²

It resonates with the concept of the hidden in my reading of online time travel romances. Used in a broad sense, the hidden refers to the female-focused voices, feelings, and imaginations that were marginalized or obscured in the public discourses surrounding socio-political events. The socio-political potency of the genre is thus particularly emphasized. This thesis focuses on four separate yet

⁶⁵² Kan Lixiang 看理想, *Buyao xiaokan "wunao yule" 不要小看“无脑娱乐”* [Don't underestimate "mindless entertainment"], <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/i9M3ZwGv5zJ5rtAFIaCviQ>, 2023. Here “no cp” means there is no main coupling in the novel. In online literature, it means that the major character does not have partners in the novel.

interrelated themes to explore this concept, illustrated by nine cases and numerous comments from fans. Notably, many of the cases in this thesis are recognized as classic works within certain subgenres and continue to enjoy high popularity among contemporary fans. According to Shao who endeavors to set academic standards for classic online literature, canons in the field need to be widely circulated among contemporary readers and imitated by other authors. Many of them are pioneers of certain subgenres, and their narratological and formulaic patterns set the foundation for the followers. Latecomers pay tribute to, revive, or even reverse the established patterns, but the classics remain to be monumental in the developmental process of the subgenres.⁶⁵³

In the following, I will first summarise the four themes and discuss how they can generate future studies in exploring the notion of the hidden. Then, I will read the concept in a broader sense and see how it can be interpreted in not only online literature, but also other realms of popular culture and media studies.

Potential Studies on the Discussed Themes

Body Construction

The cases in Chapter 1 depict diverse and sometimes contrasting portrayals of female bodies that are closely linked to contemporary public debates surrounding women and gender. The trajectory of these body types also implies a growing feminist consciousness among female netizens. As discussed in the chapter's conclusion, the posthumanist body constructions in *kuaichuan* (quick time travel) stories and otome games come with the emergence of *dividual* as a counterpart to *individual*. However, contemporary society does not always promote an opposition or exclusion between “*dividual*” and “*individual*.” Rather, they exist

⁶⁵³ Shao, *Wangluo wenxue xinyufa* 网络文学新语法 [New grammars of internet literature], 40.

as “co-presence,” or an “individual-dividual composition.” Notably, in addition to the dividual based on classification of digital data, it also has cultural representations. For example, in early time travel romances, many of the characters experience *hunchuan* (time travel of souls) in which the souls function as the dividuals.

The “dividual” stimulates numerous new settings in web romances , generating new forms of sex, gender, and body that are still largely marginalized in current scholarship. They can be further discussed in future studies. For instance, one of the newly emerged genre is *shaobing xiangdao* novels (Sentinel and Guide).⁶⁵⁴ A Sentinel is someone who has hyperacute senses, acute to the point of dangerous “zoning out,” and a Guide is someone who prevents “zoning” because of “empathetic or psychic abilities.”⁶⁵⁵ Both of them have spirit animals that are grown out of their subconscious, which are only visible or tangible to the two groups. In this sense, they symbolize the “individual-dividual” composition, where a human is combined with a spirit animal. Moreover, “for each Sentinel there is one perfect Guide and the two will imprint on each other.”⁶⁵⁶ What’s important about the fact is that they are paired not based on sex or gender. Rather, the couplings of them are determined mainly by “mystic” attractions between their spirit animals, which are more sensitive and sincere than human consciousness in finding perfect partners. The romance stories of the genre thus depend mainly on destined interactions and mystic matter transmissions between non-human beings, reflecting “a new kind of sex and production, linking these mutations to microcellular processes of information transmission” that indicates

⁶⁵⁴ Sentinel and Guide is “from the fandom of The Sentinel, where different characters live the experience of being sentinels or guides.” It originates from the TV show called *The Sentinel* from the late 1990s. It became “an extremely popular trope mainly in fandoms with military/police content” and was later introduced in Chinese fan fictions and other literary websites. Now it has become a popular and frequent genre in Chinese online literature. https://fanlore.org/wiki/Sentinel_AU.

⁶⁵⁵ <https://acollectivemind.com/2014/05/01/talk-the-talk-a-guide-to-fanfiction/>.

⁶⁵⁶ https://fanlore.org/wiki/Sentinel_AU

a “different conception of sex, femininity and desire” called “abstract sex.”⁶⁵⁷ This genre therefore questions the established natural sex or socially constructed gender identities.

From Neoliberal Feminism to Intersectional Analysis

In Chapter 2, treating the domestic sphere as a metaphor of working environment, the heroine Minglan in *Zhifou* serves as a representative figure of middle-class woman who seeks success in both family and working places. The neoliberal logic of self-entrepreneurship and self-empowerment entangles with feminist consciousness, forming a new wave of political stance known as “neoliberal feminism.”⁶⁵⁸ It is widely circulated among middle- and high-class female netizens who pursue “work-life balance” and “happiness.” However, as Catherine Rottenburg points out, the popularity of neoliberal feminism “abandons the key terms like equal rights and liberation.” By downplaying structural inequality, it “undoes the unjust gendered distribution of labor” and “ensure that all responsibility for reproduction and care work falls squarely on the shoulders of individual women.” As a result, women with lower positions are presented as “unworthy disposable female other” as a comparison with those “worthy capital-enhancing women.”⁶⁵⁹ As noted in Chapter 2, this comparison is also displayed in *Zhifou*, referring to the heroine and the servants. Nevertheless, it has been largely ignored by many of the fans who are exactly middle-class women.

In this regard, future studies can bring in the concept of “intersectionality” to dig into the suppressed aspects of online female-oriented literature. Firstly introduced by black feminists Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Collins in late 1980s, it refers to the double discrimination faced by black women being both a

⁶⁵⁷ Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations of Desire* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 4.

⁶⁵⁸ Catherine Rottenburg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

black and a woman. The concept is “a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics.” It reveals how “single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice.”⁶⁶⁰ In the context of Chinese online female-oriented literature, intersectionality mainly points to the combination of class and gender. Although *Zhifou* was extremely popular with netizens, it has received growing criticisms recently. For example, one user of microblog blames it as “trash of the imperial past” (封建糟粕) because of its promotion of the traditional social hierarchy between wife and concubine (see figure 5.1). Some readers prefer the subgenre of *zhongtian* (farming) than “domestic fights,” as the former describes idyllic mundane life of farmers or hunters, deviating from the competitive professional environment faced by middle-class women. Online feminist activism also turns their attention from middle- and high-class women to lower-class groups. For instance, a Shanghai-based feminist public-interest group called “Stand by Her” (予她同行), starting their career with donating sanitary towers to female doctors and nurses during the pandemic, now concentrates more on donating to lower-class women in villages and towns.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁶⁰ Cho Sumi et al., “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 787.

⁶⁶¹ Yuta Tongxing 予她同行_Standbyher, <https://weibo.com/u/5627318598>, 2020 to date.

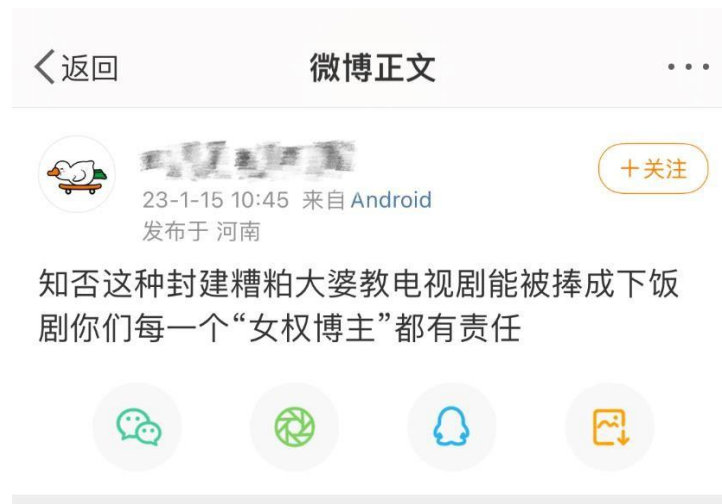


Figure 5.1

Developmentalism and Nationalism

As both Chapters 3 and 4 connect closely with China's national development project, and both the themes of developmentalism and nationalism are largely hidden in previous studies of online time travel romances, this part combine the two themes and explore further directions of research. As mentioned in Chapter 4, both *Lingao* and *Bainian* reveal an implicit consensus among netizens that prioritizes individual desires and interests over a collective, party-led nationalist narrative. Nevertheless, in more recent years, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, there has emerged an ever-growing consciousness for a unified nationalist voice in social media. It is a “simultaneously top-down and bottom-up process,”⁶⁶² not only due to an ever-tightening state censorship sees the “communist state as the embodiment of the nation's will” and requires loyalty to the “socialist system and road chosen by all nationalities in China under the leadership of the Communist Party,”⁶⁶³ but also based on voluntary and self-mobilized patriotic activities among netizens, evident both within and beyond the

⁶⁶² Yan Wang and Ting Luo, “Politicizing for the Idol: China's Idol Fandom Nationalism in Pandemic,” *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no.2 (2023): 307.

⁶⁶³ Suisheng Zhao, “A State-led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): 291.

field of online literature. According to the “2022 Report on the Development of Chinese Online Literature,” the realist genre of online literature has entered a golden period, with themes such as *fumin* (deliver a better life for peoples), *qiangguo* (build a strong country), technology, industry, and fighting becoming common labels for online literary works. Among them, works with the tag of *fumin* have shown an annual growth of 205% in 2022, making it one of the top 20 tags in the 2022 catalogue of China Reading Ltd. which also includes the tag of *qiangguo*.⁶⁶⁴ In Jinjiang, romantic novels also follow the nationalist trend. Novels like Keran’s 柯染 *He Guojia Jiqi Tanlian'ai De Zhengque Zishi* 和国家机器谈恋爱的正确姿势 (The Right Way to Fall in Love with State Apparatus, 2019-20)⁶⁶⁵ and Fanqie Caicai’s 番茄菜菜 *Nüpei Ta Zhixiang Baoxiao Guojia* 女配她只想报效国家 (The Female Supporting Role Only Wants to Serve the Country, 2021-2022)⁶⁶⁶ are either recommended by the literary website or widely circulated among the readers. In prefaces of the two novels, both authors express a tendency to sacrifice individual desires or interests for the nation, echoing the situation discussed in Chapter 4.⁶⁶⁷ Nonetheless, they are presented in a more voluntary way, responding to the state appeal during the pandemic.

In a broader social context, Chinese digital media has witnessed the rise of fandom nationalism, according to which netizens “protect the state as their idol.”⁶⁶⁸ Typical examples are that are concerned with the Taiwan election in 2016 and the HK issue in 2019. Like ordinary supporters of idols, the fans of the

⁶⁶⁴ Wenxue Shijie 文学视界, 2022 *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue fazhan yanjiu baogao* 2022 中国网络文学发展研究报告 [2022 Report on the development of Chinese online literature], <https://mp.pdnews.cn/Pc/ArtInfoApi/article?id=35022532>, 2023.

⁶⁶⁵ Keran 柯染, *He guojia jiqi tanlian'ai de zhengque zishi* 和国家机器谈恋爱的正确姿势 [The right way to fall in love with state apparatus] <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=4045139>, 2019-2020.

⁶⁶⁶ Fanqie Caicai 番茄菜菜, *Nüpei ta zhixiang baoxiao guojia* 女配她只想报效国家 [The female supporting role only wants to serve the country] <https://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=5723931>, 2021-2022.

⁶⁶⁷ For example, in *He guojia jiqi tanlian'ai de zhengque zishi*, Keran describes her novel as devote the heroine’s superpower to the country and protect the nation (把金手指上交给国家, 保家卫国). Similarly, Fanqie Caicai introduces her novel as “Don’t talk about love; don’t distract me from building our motherland (谈什么恋爱, 别耽误我建设祖国).”

⁶⁶⁸ Wang and Luo, “Politicizing for the Idol,” 307.

Chinese nation stand as a well-organized group, composed of branches with clear division of labors like protection against anti-fans and propaganda. They also develop diverse discourses to promote, glorify, or even deify the state. With China's adoption of the 'Zero Covid' policy, Covid has become the "new normal" in Chinese society, which serves as "both a special case and an everyday setting for fandom nationalism." As with the uncertainties and anxieties brought by a public health crisis, "people are likely to comment and respond to messages from the government," leading to the expansion and extreme expressions of nationalism.⁶⁶⁹ In this sense, topics on changes of developmentalism and nationalism in both online literature and social environment are worthy of further exploration.

Coda: The Hidden in Female-oriented Cultural Context

This thesis concentrates on the genre of online time travel romances and probes into how these romantic stories, though being blamed as too commercial and thus lack social importance,⁶⁷⁰ reveals some hidden aspects of contemporary Chinese society. It alludes to two urgent social concerns for today's (female) netizens, that is, the consciousness of individual and the rise of Chinese nationalism.

Chapter 1 explores the body constructions in time travel romances produced in different time periods, with a growing feminist consciousness among the female netizens. It examines the emerging posthumanist presentations of bodies, opening new possibilities in gender and sex that challenge patriarchal, heterosexual social norms. Chapter 2 introduces an idealized middle-class woman Minglan encouraged by neoliberal feminism. By connecting the gender issues with social class, it inspires potential studies on intersectional discriminations against lower-

⁶⁶⁹ Wang and Luo, "Politicizing for the Idol," 307.

⁶⁷⁰ Feng, *Romancing the Internet*, 8.

class women, which has always been shielded in previous studies of romances. Chapter 3 explores the shielded theme of developmentalism in China. By offering a brief genealogy of this theme, it examines how contemporary online time travel romances not only reflects the social Darwinism and colonial developmental ideas popular in early 20th century, but also the obsession with economic development of China after late 1970s. It also displays presentations of sustainable development in the genre. Chapter 4, following to focus on the shielded aspect of China's national development project, analyses the nuanced and changing relationship between individual desires and a unified, collective nationalist discourse in today's time travel fictions, and how gender can also play a role in it.

Exploring the notion of the hidden across the four themes, as mentioned above, it focuses on the female-focused voices that were marginal, invisible, or even criticized in the public discourses. Examining gender, class, race, and nationality, it bears important socio-political potencies. I use it in a broad sense, encompassing not only online literature but also female-oriented popular culture within digital media. For instance, otome games have often been dismissed as commercial and costly, perpetuating fake and stereotypical male partners;⁶⁷¹ idol fans, who are usually young women, have been subjected to denigration, labelled as irrational and extreme in their views.⁶⁷² Exploring the hidden aspects within the broader cultural field warrants further investigation and future studies.

⁶⁷¹ For example, see Jiemian Wenhua 界面文化, *Lian yu zhizuoren: Zui wanmei de aiqing, zui xuwu de shidai* 恋与制作人 [Lian yu zhizuoren: the most Perfect love, the vaguest world], <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/3PZd3DDkqytnKvCWXX8zfw>, 2018.

⁶⁷² Gao Hanning 高寒凝, “‘Shuzi laogong’men de zhanzheng: ‘Fanquan’ luanxiang yu hulianwang shidai de ouxiang gongye shengchan jizhi” “数字劳工”们的战争: “饭圈”乱象与互联网时代的偶像工业生产机制 [The war of “digital labors”: “Fandom” chaos and the idol industry production mechanism in the internet era], *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 2022, no.4, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/uuWkHoQ2IvrlHdZz4wJjng>.

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