Between Fantasy and Reality: 
Time-Travel Romance and Media Fandom in Chinese Cyberspace

by
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Abstract

The popularity of time-travel romance genre in Chinese cyberspace has become a phenomenon in recent years. *Between Fantasy and Reality* examines the most-read time-travel romance texts, fans’ participation and the affective space between the texts and their fans at Jinjiang Literature City. Going beyond traditional literary studies, this thesis analyzes fans’ interpretations, responses and discussions to reveal how much this literary practice has meant for young Chinese women on communal, cultural and social levels. I argue that there exists a motive of utopian realism behind their daily practices. Focusing on Web-based romance reading and writing, my thesis also reveals the new trends of Chinese popular literature.

Keywords: Web literature; time-travel romance; media fandom; the post-1980s generation; virtual literary community
To my dear partner Vincent,

And the post-1980s generation of China.
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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Chinese literature has undergone radical changes. The economic reforms that have swept through China have created a more open marketplace for literary production and consumption. Purely elite literature, which aims at high-brow audience has declined tremendously, while the market has witnessed an upsurge of diverse, entertainment-oriented and reader-oriented literary works. One of the most prominent phenomena is the emergence and proliferation of Web literature (wangluo wenxue). It has achieved a wide readership for its immediacy, subjectivity, equality and accessibility, and has constituted the dominant reading source of the vast majority of urban youth.

Before the 1990s, literary writing was considered an elite activity participated in by only professional writers, state-employed publishers, editors, critics or scholars. These professionals would have to “undergo a highly specialised training to [become] successful.” Purchasing books, magazines and journals was the only way that literary practices were achieved. The interaction between readers and writers was, therefore, limited, as contact between them was impossible without the mediation of publishing houses. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the market has witnessed a gradual decline of print literary products, especially as literary journals and electronic literary products started to emerge and flourish in cyberspace. The market share of serious literature continues to shrink nowadays. Publishing houses still suffer from low sales of literary

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magazines and masterpieces of contemporary writers. In contrast, the past two decades have seen a stunning proliferation of Web literature. It is such that “[t]he crisis of literary journals and print literature in the 1990s was an opportunity for both readers and aspiring authors, who found new possibilities (and markets) for expression and communication on the Internet.”\(^5\) The amount of Web publication has surpassed that of the published articles of print matters by 2000.\(^6\) An annual survey further indicates that since 2007 only around half of the people from ages 18 to 70 years old choose to read printed books. To be more specific, this means that nearly half of the population did not read one printed book throughout the whole year.\(^7\) By contrast, the latest report statistic from the state-run China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), issued online in July 2013, shows that China has around 591 million people (nearly half of the whole population) who access the Internet, among whom 41.9% access literature websites. The amount of literature website users has surpassed 248 million, roughly 20% of the population.\(^8\)

The origin of Web literature dates back to 1991, when an overseas Chinese student, Shao Jun published the first Chinese Internet novel Struggle and Equality at the first Chinese-language e-magazine, China Digest. Almost simultaneously, Wang Xiaofei established the first Chinese-language literary website (chpoem-1@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu). Invented and developed by overseas Chinese students, in the early 1990s, Web literature didn’t reach the public until 1998, when Cai Zhiheng (pen name: Pizi Cai), a Taiwanese student, serialized his novel First Intimate Encounter (Di yici de qinmi jiechu) on a university-hosted BBS (bulletin board system). His work was

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\(^6\) Birgit Linder, "Web Literature," 896.

\(^7\) Yang Wang 王扬, “Qunian woguo chengren tushu yuedu lü wei 49.3%, renjun juedu tushu 4.72 ben”去年我国成人图书阅读率为49.3%，人均阅读图书4.72本 [49.3% of Chinese Adults Read Printed Books Last Year, 4.72 Books per Person], last modified April 22, 2009, China Publish 中国出版网, http://www.chuban.cc/bwkx/200904/t20090422_47499.html

published in mainland China the next year and ranked top in the best sellers ranking for 22 weeks. Since then, Web literature has flooded Chinese Internet.9

Broadly speaking, any literary work published online can be called Web literature. This includes 1) downloadable e-books of pre-modern and modern Chinese literature, 2) edited literary works “published” at e-magazines, and predominantly, 3) unedited items from personal webpage, emails, chat rooms and original literary websites, also known as “pure Web literature”10. Both domestic and international academic research concerning Web literature incline to identify it as unedited original literary works created by amateur authors and published at a variety of literary websites, in order to distinguish it from the existing publishing literature created by professional writers. The third type is also by far the most exhaustible phenomenon with a wide readership.

The popularity of Web literature also encouraged the development of original literature websites. Nowadays, original literature websites constitute the main field for Web literature production and consumption, altering the old way in which literary works were produced, consumed, disseminated and evaluated.

Firstly, original literature websites provide an open space for non-professional writers, in contrast to traditional literature. All registered users are able to “publish” a variety of works online. Reading, however, is much simpler. One does not need to register at a particular website in order to start reading and criticizing. Web users are allowed to publish a broader range of works, including ones that have traditionally been marginalized. Therefore, the openness and diversity of Web literature is more “reader friendly”11 compared with the conventional print culture.

Secondly, the interactive feature of literary forums, BBS and other virtual literary communities enables interaction and participation. As argued by Yang, “Internet literature is also changing the meaning of authorship and the boundaries between

10 It is also literally addressed as “original literature,” or “wangluo yuanchuang wenxue” in Chinese language.
authors and readers.” Readers could get in touch with each other by posting threads across vast geographical distances, and offer instant feedback to authors directly, which is to say, immediately and independently. Readers and authors exchange creative inspirations, offer ideas on literary devices, debate over the critic standard of contemporary literature, and share their reading experience with each other. As Zhang Yongqing, a Chinese scholar and literary critic, puts it, “the production of literature becomes a collective literary activity.” The enthusiastic and productive readership and the non-elite authorship jointly foster the “reader-oriented” literary writing.

Thirdly, literary websites not only function as a field of literary production and consumption, but also cultivate different virtual communities by offering an open platform for individuals who share the same passions, interests and concerns. Users, registered or not, are able to interact through various means, including internal bulletin board and message board, external social networking sites and other forms of instant massages. Like any other special-interest virtual communities such as websites run by liberal intellectuals and scholars, Chinese diaspora, queer activists, or environmentalists, forums dedicated to specific topics or popular issues, common interests and passions in a specific subject domain is considered as the emblematic trait of virtual communities.

With assistance over the Internet, ordinary people gain access to literary production and criticism, and simultaneously start new forms of literary production and consumption: one can read and write literary works by simply sitting in front of his/her computer with Internet access, browsing a handful of websites, and typing – as easy as winking – rather than going bookstores or publishing houses. The rise of the Internet in China has, thus, utterly changed literary practices, “transformed the old, high-to-low writer-reader relationship”, “democratised literature” and “empowered readers.” It has also generated a new form of social communication and connection.

12 Ibid.
It is necessary to point out that the growth of literary websites is motivated with a pursuit of commercial profit. Web authors, bloggers and cultural celebrities have sprung up since 1998, gaining both fame and wealth. In “the hope of finding recognition and perhaps one day becoming an acclaimed print culture author” like the pioneers, Pizi Cai, Ning Caishen and Anni Baobei, who have made their millions by writing initially online, more and more ordinary people start to conceive their literary dream in cyberspace. Established Web authors are able to step foot into the book industry through the medium of literary websites such as Chinese Magic Fantasy Union (www.qidian.com), which has undergone a successful transition from non-commercial to commercial organization. Web authors, the majority of whom also identify themselves as Web readers, are clearly aware of what to write, how to write and why they write. Their works cater to the taste of the popular instead of the elite class nor the government. Within the framework of the commercialization of Web literature, some websites/publishers would sign contracts with authors who have built their reputations, or those who have published significant proportions of their works online, and been assessed as promising writers. Contract authors have an obligation to publish their works at a required pace, typically 3,000 to 5,000 Chinese characters on a daily basis to satisfy the reading need of their readers. Print versions come into being later than electronic ones. Consequently, literary works that are hot online could reach to the general public. As more and more literary websites transform into commercial organizations, the competitive Web literature market forces Web publishers to recruit and retain the most popular authors to write on the hottest topics. It became quite common to see Web authors (wangluo xieshou) publish their works in the printed form first, and reserve the electronic version for a particular site only. The commercial trend and the popularity of literary works online, therefore, mutually enforce each other.

It is also necessary to point out that such literary practice is accomplished in a virtual space. The virtual nature allows more “freedom of expression, […] offering a purer artistic world and aesthetic space” where each of the participants is able to reveal the “innermost feelings and experiences without considering the many real life

16 Michel Hockx, "Virtual Chinese Literature," 689.
Despite of the commercialization of Web literature, the vast majority of Web authors “operate] with mixed motives, some for fun, self-expression, and social interaction, others for profit or fame,” as pointed out by Yang. The desire to express ideas and will of empowerment of China’s young generation also contribute to the proliferation of Web literature and virtual literary communities. A report on the users of Web literature, 2010, indicates that 110 million users under 25-year-old made up almost 60% of the total number of Web-literature users, with college or above students constituting over one third of the total. Young Chinese people born in the 1980s and raised in the 1990s and 2000s underwent tremendous economic reforms. They are now used to a rapidly changing society full of fast-paced and stressful work. The cyber-savvy generation of readers access the Internet mainly for entertainment and communication over the past decade, according to a statistical report.

In resonance with the function of the Internet, Web authors and readers have developed rather different evaluation criteria from those established by conventional critics, scholars, writers and professional editors. Poetic aesthetics, political correctness, pedagogical and institutional functions lost their authority, while popularity and entertainment took charge. Web authors were able to build their fame and reputations by attracting large numbers of “hits”, a record indicating the popularity of works published online. Early Web-based authors stress the “noninstrumental” aspects of Web literature as opposed to elite literature. Its “anti-elitist” feature further implies the different aesthetic criteria. As addressed in Yang’s research, Web literature is “free and flexible in technique and content, has a spirit of fun and humour, and is short and crisp. […] Its] original purpose was simply to enable social communication among (often isolated)

17 Yongqing Zhang, "Reflecting on Online Literature," 187.
18 Guobin Yang, "Chinese Internet Literature," 346.
21 Guobin Yang, "Chinese Internet Literature," 342.
Chinese students overseas." In recent years, Web literature has been able to distinguish itself from conventionally published literature, becoming a recognized and controversial literary genre marked by its unique aesthetic feature. "Instant gratification" (shuang) and “interestingness” (haokan) are the central concerns of readers participating in fast reading. The readership shows a great favour towards serialized stories, which is a marginal genre in print culture. Martial arts fiction, fantasy, romance, adventure story and more popular literature genres, which used to be despised by academics and elite literary critics, dominate Web publication. It is reasonable to assume that a strong motivation is remolding people’s reading habits in a regime that has urged the writers to strive for “high literature” which appeals to highbrows only for decades.

It goes without saying that the Internet is challenging, undermining and shaping the production, consumption and reception of literary works in contemporary China. However, few scholars have explored what is actually taking place in Chinese cyberspace. It is observed that English-language scholarship has a persistent interest in the censorship, transformative aspect and institutional function of cyber culture. The literary aspect, is left unexamined. The methodology of textual analysis used by traditional literary studies also has its limitations. First, purely textual analysis has made it difficult to gain an insight into many cultural-specific features of Chinese Web literature. Previous Chinese scholarship tends to focus on the ontological aspect, aesthetic

22 Ibid.
elements and postmodern condition of Web literature. Some scholars have accused 
Web readers of being irrational consumers because they judge writers by the number of 
hits they get instead of the artistic standard they achieve. They also point out it is 
inappropriate to overlook the poetic and metaphorical language in a particular literary 
work. Second, preconceived elite cultural values identify Web-based serialized stories 
as merely mediocre novels that lack “literariness” and deliver incorrect moral messages. 
This has led to a consistently negative attitude towards Web-based literary works. 
Such misunderstanding of Web literature still prevails among a considerable number of 
researchers, as they are unable to define Web literature as “a self-contained and self-
sufficient organic unity” differentiated from traditional print literature. Another one of the 
stock arguments is that Web-based literature offers nothing but vulgar entertainment to 
the mass, and reading is merely a way to fill their otherwise unoccupied leisure time. 
They both take web-based writing and reading as pure literary practices, and fail to see 
the connections between their daily life and literary production, consumption, and 
appreciation. As a result, their literary criticism is limited on text. Two crucial aspects of 
dynamics of popular culture, namely, the external text and the interactivity among the 
mass fans, have unfortunately been left unexamined. The development of new media for 
mass communication, especially Web-based communication, is one of the topics that

27 See, for example, Youquan Ouyang, *Wangluo wenxue gailun* [Introduction to 
Internet Literature] (Beijing, China: Peking University Press, 2008); Ji Ma, *Duming shidai de 
xiezuo: wangluo wenxue shinian shi* [The Writing in an Era of Screen Reading] (Beijing, China: China Worker Publishing House, 2008).

28 See, for example, Jingze Li, quoted in Julia Lovell, "Finding a Place," 7.

29 Ibid.

30 See, for example, Dongfeng Tao 韦东风, "Qingchun wenxue, xuanhuan wenxue, daomu 

31 Yongqing Zhang, "Reflecting on Online Literature," 185-186.

32 See, for example, Xiaoming Gu, "Interview," quoted in Junqian Xu, "Fantasy History is a Novel 
“hardly had been couched in the scholarly literature but that have since emerged as a major object of study.”33

The dramatic surge of a particular literary genre within a specific context has caught researchers’ attention decades ago. Janice A. Radway’s examination of American women’s reading of romance as a social activity in the 1980s is a landmark of studies on gender-specific reading practices. She stresses that it is necessary to “connect particular texts with the communities that produced and consumed them and to make some effort to specify how the individuals involved actually constructed those texts as meaningful semiotic structures,”34 and carrying out “ethnographic” research. In Reading the Romance, Radway suggests that the external text is as important as, if not more than, the internal text of romance novels. Her external text includes “the social and materials situation within which romance reading occurs,”35 the reception and interpretation of romance readers, and female readers’ agency and empowerment in the “silent process of reading.”36 Her cultural studies of romance reading has inspired me to examine young Chinese women’s Web-based romance reading and writing practice. Her observation of reading as “escape” also helps me to discuss the distance and connection between the real world and the cyber world/fantasy with regard to Web-based activities among Chinese youth.

Scholars have pointed out that the emerging forms of Chinese popular culture were “too elusive to be pinned down by most standard research methodologies.”37 The rapidly changing readership of a large pool of popular literary genres, and the anonymousness of users have made it very hard to apply close, long-term ethnographic methodology. This thesis borrows from literary and cultural studies, and utilizes discourse analysis to investigate the complexities of Web literature fandom. I examine a

35 Ibid., 11.
36 Ibid.
popular Web literature genre—time-travel romance—and time-travel fans’ collective production of meaning within certain virtual literary community. It does so by looking at not only the meaning of texts, but also the interaction and discourses between fans and texts.

My research draws from a well-established literary website, Jinjiang Literature City (henceforth, Jinjiang), an elaborate literary organization consisting 50 thousand contract writers and 7 million registered users,38 as primary research subject and source. Though many virtual literary communities and literary websites exist, including, the largest literary website in China, Qidian zhongwen wang (Starting-point Chinese website, also known as Chinese Magic Fantasy Union, hereafter, Qidian)39, and the earliest-established literary website Rongshuxia (Under the Banyan Tree)40, Jinjiang stands out for its female-dominated readership, the royalty and active interactivities among users, and their vehement and somewhat taboo literary/cultural/social propositions. All the above features of Jinjiang make it a crucial field for not only literary studies, but also cultural studies, especially, studies on female-related issues.

My analysis focuses on Jinjiang heterosexual time-travel romance, and three of its sub-genres: early “emotionally abused” narratives (nüewen), and more recent “farming” fictions (zhongtian wen) and “matriarchal” narratives (nüzun wen). I will first examine the generic characteristics of time travel romance through a representative work Bubu jingxin (Startling by Each Step). I will then use the three subgenres to further my discussion on the cultural meaning and relevance of time-travel romance. The first one brings us to the question of why Chinese young women have a great and persistent appetite for historical time-travel stories, i.e. stories with protagonists traveling backward and involved in miraculous romance; while the latter two concern more about gender-specific issues involved in Web romance such as the self-realization of urban white-collar women, their pre-marriage and post-marriage life, domestic problems, and gender equality in contemporary China. In opposition to some scholarly works that engage in

theoretical discussions of the aesthetic, social and technological aspects of Web literature, I see time travel as a cultural experience in which fans’ reactions and interactions play an extremely pivotal role. As time-travel fantasy is a cultural practice which takes place in both textual and extratextual levels, my examination of time travel as an emerging cultural activity not only involves literary text but also fans’ reading practice. Besides a close analysis on texts, I also examine the communal activities taking place among fan readers, writers and the general public, trying to answer what kind of pleasure that the Jinjiang female users have derived from the process of writing, reading and sharing. Rather than engaged with the aesthetic aspect of literary texts, I will focus on female romance readers’ motivations and interpretations, and most importantly, how the Internet enables their creative and playful production and consumption of cultural artifacts to imaginatively speak out and satisfy their yearnings for empowerment that they otherwise cannot gain access to.

Thus the method I use to analyze the literary works and communities at Jinjiang consists of two major approaches: one is a textual analysis of popular time-travel romance texts and the other is a virtual ethnographical study of the online literary community Jinjiang Literature City. Except for the textual data that I collect during and after the serialization of particular works, I also use secondary literature to account for the connection between text and context. In Chapter 1, I trace the emergence, proliferation and evolution of Chinese Web literature since the early 1990s, addressed a handful of existing problems in the studies of Web literature in both Chinese-language and English-language research, and proposed my research subject. Chapter 2 sketches out the proliferation time-travel genre, with an emphasis on the difference between female-oriented and male-oriented fantasy. Chapter 3 gives a brief introduction to Jinjiang Literature City regarding its users, its multifunctional features and fan communities nourished there. Chapter 4 is a textual analysis on one of the earliest, most popular and influential time-travel romance Bubu jingxin, illustrating Web-romance authors’ attempt to challenge existing popular cultural products. At the same time, I challenge the idea that time-travel romance is simply a mixture of historical facts and romantic elements. Shifting its narrative away from the temple and court to domestic affairs in the back palace, time-travel romance attracts female readers with informative historical elements, the display of a heroine with dual identity – the ancient one and the
modern one – and an assembly of various idealized heroes. Chapter 5 discusses the space between time-travel texts and fans in the context of postsocialist China. I use Lawrence Grossberg’s concept of “affect” to highlight the social and cultural function of romance reading. I argue that fans are able to release their emotional tension, obtain practical instructions, and empower themselves by reading and sharing in the virtual community. The last chapter situates fans’ reading and writing practice of in the context of postsocialist China and restates why it matters for young Chinese women in particular. Besides entertainment and companionship, these young, well-educated urban Chinese women seek to construct their literary identities, realize their desires, produce gender-specific fantasy, and even propose resolutions to their real life situations. Jinjiang women’s reading and writing practice reflects that the Internet is gradually remoulding how popular literature is produced, consumed and appreciated. It keeps blurring the traditionally defined reader-author relationship and empowering a wide range of readership. The last chapter also takes account of the methodological issues in studies of Chinese popular literature and discuss the possibilities of further research.
2. What is Time-Travel?

2.1. A Genealogy of Time-travel Genre

Fantasy genres have been enormously popular in Chinese cyberspace for the past two decades. Time travel (*chuanyue*)\(^{41}\), originally as a stock trope in popular Web-based fantasy, emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In Chinese cyberspace, time-travel refers to stories with time-travel plots produced by Web-based authors. Reincarnated in different periods of Chinese history without highlighting the technological aspect (e.g. the help of time machine) which enables the trip, the hero/heroine gets involved in idealized romantic relationships (often undergoing sex-change or homosexuality) and a series of lurid adventures. There is minimum sci-fi imagination involved. The protagonist always travels back to a known historical period, when the political struggles, historical changes and achievements in each emperor’s career are familiar to common Chinese people. He/she would also travel to an unknown world that resembles a certain Chinese ancient society. Different from science fictions and fantasies in western culture, Chinese Web-based authors rarely depict or imagine trips forward in time to a distant future. According to a survey conducted by Shanghai University and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in December 2011, 60% of more than 2,500 respondents would like to take a trip back to the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) if time travel was possible. The other favourite eras were the Qing dynasty (1644-1912 AD), the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States period (475-221 BC). \(^{42}\)

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\(^{41}\) *Chuanyue*, literally means “to crossover” in English.

Time-travel fans’ reflection on their preference of “travelling back” indicates that modern travellers’ superiority over ancient people is one of the key factors that contribute to the popularity of trips back to history,\(^\text{43}\) so that time-travel fantasy could be the compensation to their somewhat unsatisfying living condition. As Chinese netizens satirically explain, “American time-travel TV dramas always feature travels forward in time, while Chinese ones tell stories of travels backward. The former cannot imagine a history, while the latter cannot imagine a future.”\(^\text{44}\) It also implicitly indicates a common feeling of Chinese people who are living in a rapidly changing society: they are unable to draw a picture of China in the coming future not only because the reality is depressing and disconcerting, but also because of the high speed of socioeconomic transformation.

Unanimously agreed by scholars, the rise of popular time-travel fantasy can be attributed to *Xun Qin Ji* (*Tales of Seeking Qin*, 1991), a well-known martial art novel written by Hong Kong writer Huang Yi, published in 1991 and latterly adapted to a popular TV series by TVB in 2001. The story describes modern SWAT member Xiang Shaolong, who travels back to the Warring States period (475-221BC). He helps the Duke of Qin to reunify China by the use of his modern knowledge and skills. *Xun Qin Ji* gave rise to the popularity of male-oriented time-travel fantasy in cyberspace. On the other hand, female authors have also learnt the magic of time-travel. They applied the trope of time-travel in romance writing. Taiwanese female writer Xi Juan’s maiden work *Jiaocuo shiguang de ailian* (*Love That Crosses Time*, 1993), describes the romantic adventure of a modern girl who died in a car accident and travels back to the Song dynasty (960-1127BC) by the help of her mother’s supernatural transmission ability. The commercial success of Xi Juan gave female readers an incredible appetite for time-travel stories, in which writers vigorously portray the idealized feminine sentimentality. Inspired by Xi Juan’s work, young female netizens started writing time-travel romance at original literary websites.


Web-based time-travel romance novels follow similar tropes. As time-travel fans concluded, time travelers often switch souls or bodies with ancient people, or are reborn in an ancient society. There is no need of time machine or time tunnel, which is to say, anything sci-fi. People travel backwards through time simply via the possession of antiques, presence at historical places of interest, encounter of life-threatening accidents, or by the help of the supernatural, suicidal behaviors or hallucination. They will travel because of anything inexplicable: a look into the mirror, a sneeze or a hiccup. Sometimes characters travel backwards simply by thinking, “I want to go back.”

China is never short of history to go back to. Amateur Web writers, as members of a subordinate cultural group vis-à-vis established professional writers, are able to get prolific source materials by simply browsing high school history textbooks or watching state-sponsored historical TV dramas. Intriguingly, the phenomenon of time travel is not only history-oriented, but also gender-oriented. If the traveler is a male, he will often switch souls with either an extremely significant historical figure or become a crucial character in that period of time. The protagonist is always endowed with superhuman prowess, and able to conquer the opponents and the opposite sex like a miracle, both physically and emotionally. He usually goes back to times of upheavals in history when he is able to help to build up or knock down a dynasty. Their favorites include the Spring and Autumn era and the Warring States era (Chunqiu Zhanguo, 722 BC to 221 BC, the most vibrant and violent periods of Chinese history), the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC), short periods before the Han dynasty (206 BC-202 AD, known as Chu-Han Contention in Chinese history), short periods before and after the Tang dynasty (around 618 AD, and between 907 and 960 AD), and the end of the Ming dynasty (around 1600 AD). Subjects on heroic adventures, wars and political contributions tend to be the main focus of such fantasy stories. The traveler goes through a series of adventures, defeats or helps to defeat adversaries, and conquers the opposite sex – the more the better – along his trip. Albeit disfavored by the majority of female readers, instantly gratified stories are still able to attract large male audiences. By writing and reading such time-travel fantasy, young adults, especially males, feel “enjoyable” and “instantly gratified.”

On the other hand, if the traveler is a female, she will switch souls with a young maid who attends the emperor and his family. She will gradually fall in love with a
handful of princes, or switch souls with a girlfriend/mistress/wife of an important historical figure and develop their love during her trip back. Female characters primarily go back to the Qing dynasty, partly because the Qing dynasty has the most number of emperors/princes to fall in love with, and partly because of the stability and prosperity of society that allow the traveler to indulge in love. Yongzheng’s reign\(^{45}\) is their favourite period. These imaginary love stories appeal to a broad young female readership. Sometimes a sex-change occurs: the female traveler reincarnated in the soul of a male figure could dominate the world. No matter which aspect these fantastic stories focus on, the deployment of time-travel is necessary and essential.

2.2. What’s Hot? Who’s In?

If it is possible to say time-travel fantasy reached a niche audience – most of whom are Internet-addicted escapist young adults – before 2007, then the fact that time-travel theme reached its peak in 2007 is beyond dispute. Several most-read time-travel fictions were published and republished successively at Jinjiang, Qidian and many other dominate original literary website since 2006, transferred to numerous unestablished literary websites/forums (sometimes pirated), and reached a broader and broader readership ever since then.

Many of the most-read time-travel fictions were first serialized at Jinjiang. *Menghui daqing (Dream Back to the Great Qing)*, which was released on July 1\(^{st}\), 2004 and completed at the beginning of 2007, built its reputation as a “most-read” at Jinjiang with more than 3,000,000 hits and 15,000,000 reading-points.\(^{46}\) The heroine travels back to the late 17\(^{th}\) century (during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor of Qing) when she gets lost in the Forbidden City, becomes helplessly involved in a romantic entanglement between two princes. Does time-travel romance take the time traveler’s love story as the only one focus to meet young women’s longing for romantic love? The response of early

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\(^{45}\) The Yongzheng Emperor is the 5\(^{th}\) emperor of Manchu-led Qing dynasty and the 4\(^{th}\) son of the Kangxi Emperor. His reign is from 1722 to 1735.

\(^{46}\) “Reading-points” is an overall evaluation of popularity of a particular fiction, considering readers’ clicking, reviewing and rating, both qualitatively and quantitatively.
time-travel fans shows their refusal to draw an over-simplistic conclusion. It is of great importance that the author makes more of an effort to elaborate the heroine’s life experiences and inner feelings. She might go through many trials and tribulations, sweetness and bitterness, but eventually, would transform from an ingenuous girl to an independent and stubborn woman who takes charge of her own life. Women’s self-realization therefore, becomes another crucial aspect that contributes to a successful Web romance.

Jinjiang played a crucial role in the proliferation of time-travel culture. In Chinese netizens’ words, “One could barely witness a time-travel event in hundreds of years, while Jinjiang witnesses it every single day.” Since 2007, Web-based time-travel series have begun to get a foot in the door of publishing and televising. As of 2007, Writer Publishing Office published “four marvellous masterpieces of time travel” with a contract of 12% royalty and the first print run of 100,000 copies, respectively. These 4 “masterpieces” were initially serialized at Jinjiang. Meanwhile, the general audience witnessed the resurge of time-travel storylines on television after a gap of 10 years when TV adaption of the earliest published time-travel novel, Xun Qin Ji, was on air in 2001. In the beginning of 2011, Hunan Satellite TV aired a 35-episode time-travel TV series Gong (Palace, a.k.a. Gongsuo xinyu, Palace Locked Heart by Hade), which tells a gripping story about a female traveler’s romance with several princes of the Qing dynasty, setting off an upsurge of time-travel TV series among the popular. It was subsequently rerun on various provincial TV stations. Almost simultaneously, a TV adaption of Web-based Qing-travel novel Bubu jingxin (hereafter, Bubu) first broadcast on Hunan Satellite TV. It has received over 400,000,000 hits at the dominant Chinese video-
sharing website Youku (www.youku.com) to date. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has decided to ban time travel on television, discouraging plot lines that contain elements of “fantasy, time-travel, random compilations of mythical stories, bizarre plots, absurd techniques, even propagating feudal superstitions, fatalism and reincarnation, ambiguous moral lessons, and a lack of positive thinking.”

Nevertheless, bans on dissident cultural productions never prevent Chinese netizens from writing, reading, diffusing and discussing them in cyberspace.

In contrast to the hostile reactions from the state, the time-travel fandom has become a phenomenon in Chinese cyberspace. The click rate of “time-travel” as a key word, reached “record highs” on literary websites in 2007. Other high click rates included “magic fantasy” (xuanhuan), “fictionalized historical story” (jiakong lishi) and “tomb-robbing fiction” (daomu). It is easy to see an instant link to “search for time-travel” at the most visited literary websites. At Jinjiang, “travel to the premodern period” is shown on the navigation bar (Figure 2.1). The amount of finished serial stories tagged “time travel” at Jinjiang, has reached 130,000.

Figure 2.1  Navigation Bar at Jinjiang Literature City


51 Searched on December 3, 2012.
2.3. Other Time-Travel Fictions

The popularity of time-travel genre is also obviously seen in many other literary websites. For example, the largest Chinese literary website, Chinese Magic Fantasy Union, now Qidian Chinese Literature Website, has a large male readership of time-travel fantasies. A quick search with the key word “chuanyue” 52 reveals that time travel remains to be one of the hottest genres at Qidian, with an amount of nearly 70,000 works “published.” These time-travel fantasies are also labeled by other key words, such as magic fantasy (29,315), fairy and swordsman (6,076), and history (7,668).

Works “published” at different websites have distinctly different features. A popular doggerel precisely pinpoints the key features of fictions written by Jinjiang authors and Qidian authors: 8,000 characters per day about lingerie at Jinjiang, while 100,000 characters per day on studs at Qidian.53 In terms of the speed of update, Qidian authors are much faster than Jinjiang authors, with a daily update of nearly 100,000 characters. Qidian authors are prone to provide their readers, most of whom are male, with instant gratification; whereas Jinjiang authors enjoy portraying physically attractive men. Even though the origin of the above doggerel cannot be identified, it is reasonable to presume that it first came from a female reader because the word “stud” is used to criticize the lack of characterization and narrative artistry in male-oriented time-travel fictions. The huge difference between Jinjiang and Qidian time-travel works have attracted authors to create playful stories: what will happen if a Qidian boy travels into a Jinjiang story, 54 and what if a Jinjiang boy travels into a Qidian story? 55 According to Jinjiang users’ description, almost all the heroes in Qidian works seek the lust of mind,

52 Searched on March 11, 2014.

53 See, for example, 1, “Jinjiang baqian xiao diaodai, Qidian shiwan zhongma wen” 晋江八千小吊带，起点四万种马文, posting to Chapter 32, in Nidanhuang, Dang Qidian nan chuanyue dao Jinjiang wen 当起点男穿越到晋江文 [When Qidian Man Travels to Jinjiang Fiction], November 15, 2009, http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?commentid=13904&novelid=575478&page=1.

54 See, for example, Nidanhuang, Dang Qidian nan chuanyue dao Jinjiang wen 当起点男穿越到晋江文 [When Qidian Man Travels to Jinjiang Fiction], last modified October 4, 2009, http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=575478.

wish to encounter and develop sexual relationships with as many beautiful girls as possible, and ultimately, pursue fame and power at painstaking efforts.\textsuperscript{56}

In the vast majority of male-oriented time-travel works, the hero’s journey is nothing but his conquest in both public and domestic sphere without sufficient description of the way in which he achieves the success, and the evolution of his love affairs with all of the heroines. His unprecedented triumph is always a result of his superhuman power, magic power, or modern techniques. For example, first released on November 8, 2006, Guanyue’s time-travel fantasy \textit{Huidao mingchao dang wangye} (\textit{Travel Back to Ming to Be a Lord}), ranked top on the best-read list for 5 month continuously at Qidian. The judge of the nether world sends the protagonist, Yang Ling, who is identified as a well-doer, back to the Ming dynasty, during the reign of Zhu Houzhao (1491-1521), when the country suffered from a long inconclusive series of wars against both domestic conspirators and foreign invaders. As a traditional intellectual in ancient China, Yang never makes advances to women. In this story, 12 young ladies, who have completely different personalities and backgrounds, coincidently fall in love with Yang at first sight, and maintain a polygamous relationship harmoniously. He also tries his best to help to save the declining country by the use of his modern political tactics and military strategies. Many other pure “stud fictions” tell stories of male travelers endowed with superpowers, who copulate with every woman they encounter. For male time-travel readers, the pleasure of reading is derived from the “instant gratification” associated with sexual desires (developing a polygamous relationship), power (dominating the country), and subjugation (both sexually and politically).

Not only criticized by female fans, male-oriented time-travel fantasies have also received detractions from academy, arguing that the magic elements in time-travel genre are totally against natural and social norms, and have resulted in chaotic values.\textsuperscript{57} This argument has met with opposition from Web authors of the fantasy genre. They claim that these scholars fail to see what is really happening in the fantasy, and misjudge their


\textsuperscript{57} See, for example, Dongfeng Tao, “Zhongguo wenxue”, 9.
works by applying the elite standard. Apparently, both female and male fans of time-travel genre are not satisfied with the current research, and appeal to new research methodologies that allow them to tell their own stories about their own online communities.

58 See, for example, Ding Xiao 萧鼎, “Jiujing Shi Shui Zai Zhuangshen Nonggui?: Hui Tao Dongfeng Jiaoshou” 究竟是谁在装神弄鬼？——回陶东风教授 [Who is the One Talking about Spooky Stuff?: A Response to Professor Tao Dongfeng], Ding Xiao’s Sina Blog, June 20, 2006, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_474f959d01000466.html.
3. A Space of Their Own: Jinjiang and Online Literary Communities

3.1. Jinjiang and Virtual Female Fan Communities

The topic of the Internet has been debatable, and received different responses from a wide range of social commentators and educators. Many hold pessimistic attitudes toward the Internet, as they believe that “the spread of the Internet is leading to social isolation [and] to a breakdown of social communication and family life.”\(^{59}\) Far from isolating individuals, other scholars argue that the Internet helps to promote new “patterns of sociability.”\(^{60}\) In recent years, more scholars in social sciences have identified virtual communities as a new research interest. The existence and realness of online communities has been a concern of scholars. In answering questions such as “can people use the Internet to find communities? Can online relationships between people who never see, smell, or hear each other be supportive and intimate?” Yang Guobin proposes a nonutilitarian function of Chinese online communities, including literary communities: “As a new spatial form, online communities are ‘spatial havens’ and sites of resistance as much as the rural communities are. […] Another frontier where citizens construct alternative identities, imagine new world, experiment with new organizational forms, and engage in new forms of resistance.”\(^{61}\) Indeed, the virtual cyberspace provides a new platform for expression to the public, especially subordinate social groups. For young Chinese women, the virtual space is more than a “spatial haven”, but a “home-like community” where they can voice their ideas and sentiments.


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 118.

freely, create all sorts of entertainment collectively and support each other regardless of geographic distance.

Of all Chinese literary websites, Jinjiang is a pioneer. It is further featured by its distinct female-orientation, alternative literary creation and aesthetics, and user-friendly environment. Originally a non-profit website for publishing literary works, Jinjiang was launched in Jinjiang, Fujian Province, in 1998. The rise of Chinese Internet users since 2000 allowed the website to open up discussion forums, user feedback forums and an e-bookstore. It nevertheless suffered from financial difficulties, brain drain, and barely survived.\(^{62}\) In 2007, Jinjiang finally found an investor in Shanghai Shengda Internet Development Cooperation (hereafter, Shengda), and changed its operation mode by charging a fee for access to “VIP” works/chapters. Another primary financial source of Jinjiang comes from advertisements. User registration is free, as is the publication of one’s work on this website. Advertisements provide an open and accessible platform for individuals who wish to publish their works, irrespective of their age, background, or occupation,\(^{63}\) absolutely free of cost. Today Jinjiang has developed into an elaborate literary organization consisting of 50,000 contract writers and 7,000,000 registered users, among whom 93% are females, ranking as the 6th largest literature website in China.\(^{64}\) After undergoing a series of reconstructions, Jinjiang developed into an original literary website dedicating to publish serialized fictions produced by almost exclusively amateur female writers. These fictions are further divided into two categories, romance and \textit{danmei}\(^{65}\) fan fiction (either based on film and TV, or \textit{manga}\(^{66}\) and animation).

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\(^{64}\) Anonymous, 关于晋江 “About Jinjiang.”


\(^{66}\) Comic strips as pronounced in Japanese language.
Jinjiang was not initially designed to be a female-centered literary community, but it is known as one of the earliest, largest and most influential women’s literature website with an almost exclusive female readership. Jinjian users are well known for their “enthusiasm, loyalty and power of articulation.” According to its self-introduction, 84% of the readership are women between 18-35 years old, with a majority coming from metropolises or urban areas like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and etc., and also a fair proportion living aboard. These urban young women, married or not, are not exclusively full-time housewives as people often imagine. On the contrary, they are mostly well-educated and financially independent white-collar women with distinctive qualifications. They go to work during the day and immerse themselves in reading and writing during off-work hours. It is reasonable to presume that the dual identity – daytime career women/housewife and nighttime literary creators – provides some form of required pleasure that seems otherwise impossible to be acquired in their routine life. Literary creation constitutes their main source of entertainment and expression. The registered user ID embodies a variety of their personalities and aesthetic tastes and pursuit. For instance, Woxiang Chirou and Tianlai zhiyuan are two well-known authors representing two different writing styles and ethos. The former ID indicates a sense of playfulness and jokiness with the meaning of merely “I want to eat meat”, while the later gives off an antique and mysterious, yet elegant taste with the meaning of “the sound of nature (tianlai) and the flying paper kite (zhiyuan).” Indeed, the former author’s works are basically satirical and humorous yet unconventional fictions, and the later author’s works focus more on the description and elaboration of antiquities or unknown ancient world.

Though Jinjiang has no limitation on the types of the literary works that can be published, authors and readers center on a collective interest in the genre of fantasy, usually a marginal literary genre in Chinese literary arena. Authors are able to explore different topics freely. Works on unconventional and controversial topics with respect to sexual and/or social consciousness of young Chinese women are proven to be enormously popular at Jinjiang. Jinjiang delicately categorizes its novel publications to

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67 Pumin Yin, “Web Writing.”
68 Anonymous, “About Jinjiang.”
offer users a clear and specific idea of what to read, nevertheless, it is easy to see the continual and predominant popularity of time-travel romance by simply browsing the rank list. However, as the overwhelming popularity of time-travel romance within the past decade, Jinjiang has been continuously monitored and filtered. Certain chapters, if deemed necessary, are blocked because of dissident voices, pornography and erotica. A small proportion of works disappear without warning. Nevertheless, creative and intelligent users are increasingly able to bypass the filters and work beyond the curtain of censorship in China by utilizing Internet technologies. Their tricks include simply separating two “sensitive characters” with hyphens and commas, using initials of Chinese pinyin phonetics or wholesale Romanization. Though repressed by the Chinese government, Jinjiang is supported by numerous female users, keeping its distinct features and authority on publishing.

Jinjiang attracts millions of users, both registered and unregistered, not only because of its “gimmick” of publishing unconventional works, but its user-friendly environment. Users claim that they are able to obtain a “sense of belonging” as they get involved in this online community. Motivated by the desire for self-expression, nonprofessional authors are able to write freely online, and get published within only a few minutes. Readers can also give their feedback instantly, and chat with each other across vast geographical distances. Interactivity, thus, becomes the most distinct feature of Web literature. Jinjiang readers are mostly women who spend a significant portion of every day participating vicariously in a fantasy world and virtual cyber community that they willingly identify as a place like “home” (wangshang jiayuan) where they find

69 Jin Feng, “Have Mouse, Will Travel: Consuming and Creating Chinese Popular Literature on the Web,” in From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 48-67. Four descriptors are addressed: 1) whether they are fan fictions or original works; 2) whether they feature heterosexual (including male-male and female-female) or homosexual relationship; 3) whether they are set in modern, premodern, or fictionalized historical periods; 4) whether they belong to the genre of romance, martial arts, horror fiction, legend or fantasy.

70 For example, “shui ru jiao rong,” a Chinese idiom, meaning “to be in complete harmony,” is not allowed to be posted at Jinjiang, as “rujiao,” meaning “mammary intercourse,” is one of the keywords being filtered. Web-writers would like to type it as “水乳交融,” rather than “水乳交融,” to avoid being “harmonized.”

71 See, for example, Puming Yin, “Web Writing”, Michel Hockx, “Virtual Chinese Literature,” and Julia Lovell, “Finding a Place.”
emotional nurturance, entertainment and creative impulses, and develop passionate and sometimes intense discussions. The most important work of feminist literary criticism in the 19th century, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* testifies that writing novels enables the freedom of mind for women, who are so often deprived of a room of their own in which to write because the possession of material things is of the utmost importance. She writes, “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.” The writing of novels thus is the easiest way in which women can achieve literary success because less concentration is required. While in the 21st century China, Jinjiang female authors’ creativity of novels also shines forth with its superiority over poetry or any other literary genres. The final discrepancy, however, does not prevent women from having a room of their own because the access to Web-based writing and publication is at minimal cost. Below is a general description of Jinjiang time-travel works, in particular time-travel romance, its online community and interactive features.

The Internet plays an indispensable role in cultivating virtual communities. Jinjiang’s agenda combines that of publisher and book seller in the print culture system, and moreover, that of discussion forum, bulletin board, instant message and online community. Its multifunctional feature is clearly presented at the homepage (Figure 3.1). Besides two sub-sites devoted to genre-specific literary publication and consumption, Jinjiang also provides “Publications and TV/film Adoptions” (*yingshi chuban*), “Online Game Centre” (*youxi yule*), “Jinjiang Marketplace” (*Jinjiang shangcheng*), and “Jinjiang Forum” (*Jinjiang luntan*). “Publications and TV/film Adoptions” offers substantial

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72 Congcong 匆匆, “Wo ai Jinjiang! Yixie guandian, jiao XDJM taolun” 我爱晋江！一些观点，交 XDJM 讨论 [I Love Jinjiang! Some Ideas, Sharing with Fellow Users], last modified June 9, 2004, Jinjiang Forum, http://bbs.jjwxc.net/showmsg.php?board=2&tid=53991&msg=%BD%FA%BD%AD%CE%C4%D1%A7%B3%C7%A1%FA%CD%F8%D3%D1%BD%BB%C1%F7%C7%F8%A1%FA%CD%F8%D3%D1%C1%F4%D1%D4%C7%F8.


74 Ibid., 66.
information about publications and remakes of original texts created by mainly amateur female authors at Jinjiang. With dozens of cooperative publishers, Jinjiang gives maximum opportunities for contracted authors to access to mainstream culture and to earn fame, reputation and perhaps money. This greatly encourages literary writing among registered users. “Online Game Centre” is an entertainment platform where users might find information about plenty of online games that are designed to cater to their specific tastes. Registered users are able to purchase a hardcopy of their favorite books at special prices at the “Jinjiang Marketplace” with varying degrees of discounts, as well as a limited variety of other goods, including maternal and baby supplies, small appliances, home decors, kitchenware, and electronic products.

**Figure 3.1**  *The Welcome Page of Jinjiang Literature City*


The most intriguing sub-site, “Jinjiang Forum,” is a discussion and chat forum for users to share their reading experience and thoughts about daily life. The homepage of Jinjiang Forum is set in a mild, graceful and comfortable color of pink. Traditionally such imagery evokes a feminine feature and creates a nurturing atmosphere. Affectionately called “little pink” (*xiao fenhong*) by Jinjiang users, this forum assembles threads on a wide range of topics – from literary creation to sexuality, cosmetics to diet, working experience to emotional distress, marriage to parenthood – everything with regard to Jinjiang female users is covered. The forum also frequently runs polls on some debatable current events closely related to young Chinese women’ concerns. For
example, the latest poll aims at exploring Jinjiang women’s attitude towards the “new” Marriage Law (the latest incarnation of the Marriage Law that intends to resolve real estate disputes in divorce, issued in August, 2011), which triggers “controversy over the premise that the deprivation of wives’ co-ownership of the couple's home will make them feel both insecure and unromantic.” Users are invited to make their voice by participating in the poll about this controversial topic anonymously on the front page of Jinjiang Forum. The tally at Jinjiang Forum (accessed August 22, 2013) indicates Jinjiang women’s incisive and undisguised unconventional attitude towards marriage and material life with 40% stating “we need to assess the husband and wife’s investment in their marriage fairly and synthetically” and 32% supporting the view that “Marriage Law is a depravation of modern civilization as it intends to protect the rights of extramarital women and illegitimate children.” Jinjiang Forum provides female users with a platform to exchange a wide range of ideas in all areas of young women’s lives.

3.2. Jinjiang’s Time-Travel Romance

Jinjiang’s primary objective is to cultivate an open sphere for literary production and consumption. Two sub-sites listed on its homepage, “Original Romance Site” (Yuanchuang yanying zhan) and “Danmei Fan Fiction Site” (Danmei tongren zhan) offer an instant access to genre-specific fictions to users.

In contrast to the time-travel fantasies published at most male-centered literary website, Jinjiang users have a persistent and unique appetite for unconventional romance stories, especially time-travel romance. However, “time travel per se is no longer a topic, but merely a plot device,” as Jinjiang author Xiao Chun claimed. Various new sub-genres have been covered at Jinjiang, among which romance has been proven to be the dominant and most popular one.

77 Junqian Xu, “Fantasy History is a Novel Idea.”
This is not the first surge of romance in Chinese society, but it is definitely a new phase in the production and consumption of popular literature in China. The vernacular fiction of Beauty-Scholar reached its peak between the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, reflecting the aesthetic pursuit of scholars of the lower rank. The revival of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly genre in the early Republican era (1911-1940s) came along with a nostalgic ethos for the splendour of urban life, signifying a revival of popular print culture and reading pleasure. It was condemned after 1949 by literary historians because of the “feudalistic”, “decadent” description of a bygone life. Through the 1980s to 1990s, Qiong Yao’s ideal romance dominated the popular book market and even television in mainland China due to the adaptation of her novels as TV series. The evolution of romance exclusively answers to the lived experience and social emotion in different periods of time. For example, the import of Qiong Yao’s romance is the result of the economic reforms and open literary market in the late 1970s. The 1980s witnessed the resurge of popular romance is a reflection of modern Chinese women’s longing for romantic life after 10 years of emotional repression and xenophobic isolation during the Cultural Revolution. They sought not only entertainment but also emotional fulfilment to “relieve the tension [in life].” Their belief in the very concept of love is also validated in

78 Beauty-Scholar fictions, or caizi jiaren xiaoshuo as in Chinese language, are about a young well-educated man and a beautiful and sometimes talented young woman, who are destined to be together, go through obstacles, and finally overcome difficulties and get married.

79 Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction, or yuanyang hudie xiaoshuo refers to the sentimental entertainment romance fictions which caters to the urban residents in China. “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” is labeled by New Culturalist who despised its lack of social engagement.

80 Qiong Yao’s novels and films has experienced extreme popularity in Taiwan and East Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, but were not able to enter mainland China till the 1980s when the literary market was opened, and the situation across the Taiwan Strait was eased.

81 Qiong Yao is a Taiwanese female writer who is well-known by her romance fictions depicting “one man-one woman” relationships. The heroes in her fictions are not only physically attractive but also royal to their lovers, while the heroines are mostly sexually innocent. They both believe in the ultimate triumph of love.

82 Jiandong Li李建东, “Jin Yong, Qiong Yao, Sanmao zuopin 20 shiji, 80, 90 niandai liuxing dalu de fansi” 金庸、琼瑶、三毛作品 20 世纪 80、90 年代流行大陆的反思 [Retrospection on the 1980s to 1990s Popularity of the Works by Jin Yong, Qiong Yao and Sanmao in Mainland China], Journal of School of Chinese Language and Culture Nanjing Normal University, no. 1 (2011), 92-97.

such fictions.\textsuperscript{84} As Radway argues, women benefit from romance reading, seek emotional nurturance in the process of reading, and consciously take it as a pleasurable and restorative leisure activity.

The majority of the most-read Jinjiang romances are by no means mundane literary works with broken tropes, vulgar language and absurd plots. The variety comes from the fact that there exists a fair amount of unfinished fiction written by amateur authors and a literary standard that varies from author to author. Different topics are discussed in the make-believe world. The validity and beauty of homosexual relationships (e.g. \textit{Fengba tianxia}, literally meaning “the phoenix dominating the world”), a gender-reversed society (e.g. \textit{Nü'er guo jishi}, literally meaning “stories in the female country”), the possibility of one woman-multiple men relationships (e.g. \textit{Meinan shi'er gong}, literally meaning “12 beautiful men in palace”), and domestic intrigues among women in a polygamous family (e.g., \textit{Zhifou, zhifou, yingshi lüfei hongshou}, literally meaning “how do you know the leaves are more than the flowers”), make up some of the previously unexplored new tropes in current literature. Some fiction contains two or more of the above elements. Few stereotyped romance storylines are seen at Jinjiang. By stereotyped romance, I mean the ideal romance occurring in patriarchal society depicting a romantic story between an “ideal heroine”, who is the incarnation of all the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, suffering, royalty and sexual innocence, and an “ideal hero” who is physically attractive, strong and charismatic. No matter how many difficulties and obstacles they come over, such stories are ultimately lighthearted as the triumph of love is always inspiring.

Time-travel fictions at Jinjiang are further categorized into two genres according to the sexual orientation: heterosexual romance (\textit{yanqing} in Chinese) and homosexual romance\textsuperscript{85} (\textit{danmei} in Chinese, mainly about homosexual males). The heroines in

\textsuperscript{84} It is also addressed in Radway’s research on female romance readers and their favorite romance fictions. She brought the concept of “ideal romance” to describe American women’s favorite romance about “one woman-one man” and their interest in the evolution of love. See Janice A Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance}, 119-56.

\textsuperscript{85} Jinjiang homosexual romances are mostly, but not exclusively about women’s imagination of boys’ love. There are also romance novels about homosexual females, called \textit{baihe}. The amount of \textit{baihe} is far more less than that of \textit{danmei}.
Jinjiang heterosexual time-travel romance are typically ordinary urban girls who are endowed with none of the above mentioned merits of an "ideal heroine" prior to travelling backward. Despite travelling to an ancient patriarchal society, women are extolled for their resistance, successful careers (women can take business, political and even military as their career), and the philosophy of pragmatism and individualism rather than the traditional virtues of Chinese women. Feng divides heterosexual time-travel romances at Jinjiang into four formulaic types: (1) the heroine travels back to the past in her own body, and becomes the object of passion and devotion of multiple powerful masculine figures; (2) the heroine’s soul travels back, reincarnated in the body of another man or woman, and as well attracts the opposite-sex; (3) the heroine comes over a series of difficulties, becomes a dominant public figure in a matriarchal society, and sets up a seraglio of attractive men regardless of whether or not she travels in her own body; 4) the heroine is reborn (chongsheng), and will awaken in her early childhood so that she could change her destiny and that of her family.86 Another crucial feature of Jinjiang time-travel romance is the physical and emotional ordeal that the heroine suffers. Fans call stories that trap heroines in suffering “nüwen” (emotionally abused narrative), and what they feel in the process of reading “nüexin,” literally “to torture one’s heart” or “emotionally abused.” Emotionally, the heroine is entangled in a triangular or multi-angular relationship. Physically, she simultaneously suffers illness and injuries in accidents, political persecution, sexual assaults and force majeure. In spite of the prevalence of emotionally abused romance (nüwen) at Jinjiang, authors also explore alternative avenues to make their voices heard. Matriarchal narrative (nüzun fictions) is one of the best examples. It focuses on describing and validating a society dominated by women. It goes without saying that this notion is at odds with the current male-dominated world. The heroines from the patriarchal society always achieve their ambitions: becoming a successful politician, a business owner, a manager of a prominent family, or an honourable and respectable lord.

On the other hand, Jinjiang’s homosexual romance tells more about the aesthetic value of Chinese young women. Danmei, “addicted to beauty” in Chinese, refers to romances of an idealized homosexual nature among physically attractive and effeminate

86 Jin Feng, "Have Mouse,” 50.
The emergence of danmei genre at Jinjiang attributes to the import of Japanese manga (comics) and literature about homosexuality in 1991 and 1992 through the conduit of Taiwan. It has been observed that the theme of danmei, or tanbi as pronounced in Japanese, appeals to girls and young women more than men in Japan because of the social constraints placed on women, and “the characters are free if they are male, both socially and sexually”\(^{88}\). Likewise, homosexual romance at Jinjiang are mostly about males. The consumption of danmei works by no means represents a young woman’s true identity or sexual orientation. As homosexuality has been considered taboo, and stigmatized in Chinese and Japanese society, gay characters have to overcome many obstacles, making their love more “real” and appealing. The writing and reading of danmei at Jinjiang is closely affected by the social and cultural context in contemporary China. Fans claim that they read danmei for various purposes: the pursuit of true love, to satisfy their sexual imagination or desire, to escape the constraints of heterosexual relations, or simply to seek novelty because they are bored by clichés in heterosexual popular romances.\(^{89}\)

Most popular and well-written works at Jinjiang, thus, can be addressed as a mixture of “affection” and “beauty.” Affection, love, friendship, intimacy are the main focuses of narratives. “Beauty” is another aesthetic preference of Jinjiang literary writing – beautiful characters, idealized romance, and purest love.

Jinjiang women challenge simple plots and stereotyped characterization deployed in many other existing popular culture products in print and on TV. One of their rivals is the male-oriented fantasy depicting male travelers who are endowed with supernatural capacities conquer not only the world, but also every beautiful girl encountered. Such men’s fantasies are unsparingly criticized as “stud fictions” (zhongma wen) by Jinjiang women users because the male authors spare no efforts in bluffing how powerful and attractive the protagonists are, as if sexual relations were the only purpose

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\(^{89}\) Jin Feng, “Addicted to Beauty,” 4-7.
of a trip back. From women’s perspectives, such fantasies are flagged for their unsophisticated plots, simple characterizations and mundane language. This goes to show that established Jinjiang authors are very cautious about the rhetorical aspect of their works. They wrestle over the words and phrases to make them quaint, poetic and tasteful. In respect of the ethos of literary works, certain elements of fantasy are proven to be the essence of popular romance in cyberspace. A combination of fantasy and history allows the authors to subvert the literary tradition of post-1930s socialist realism and post-Mao neo-realism.

Even though Jinjiang women emphasize the importance of “love” in Web-based romance, they also unflatteringly express their dissatisfaction with the idea of “love supremacy” as addressed in Qiong Yao’s romance. Qiong Yao’s romance fictions have attracted criticism for her belief in the ultimate triumph of love, the traditional morality of endurance, sacrifice and innocence, and the notion that marriage is the one and only way to success and happiness. “Anti-Qiong Yao fanfics”90 flooded Jinjiang in the past decade. They frequently parody the melodramatic dog-blooded91 (gouxue) narration and the idiotic (naocan) characters who might hurt their families and friends under the pretence of pursuing true love.

Well-written works embrace a variety of topics concerning the living conditions of Chinese young women within the frame of romance. Jinjiang romance differentiates between many existing popular romances by its noticeable features and rhetorical eloquence, which I will elaborate on in the next two chapters.

3.3. Multi-local and Multi-level Communication

Authors’ novelty creations are guaranteed by Jinjiang’s unique operational mode: the webmasters/moderators, the readers and the authors, each perform their own functions both in a collective and independent way, dedicating to the production and

90 More on “anti-Qiong Yao fanfic” in Jin Feng, Romancing the Internet, 126.
91 “Gouxue,” literally “dog blood,” is used by Chinese netizens to describe clichés in literary, televisual works.
consumption of serialized fictions, and more importantly, an open and free communicative space. Features like accessibility and anonymity enable female readers not only to produce and consume literary works, but also facilitate open communication and frequent interactivities.

Compared with the commercially successful, male-centered literature websites like Qidian, Jinjiang shows more hospitality to users than other profit-making literary websites. Originally the hard-core members of Jinjiang and now the maintenance crew, censors, webmasters and moderators offer a variety of services to guard and monitor the publishing of works, recommend selected popular works, instruct the authors to improve their writing skills to achieve more attractive stories and moderate the relationship between the authors and readers. The webmasters offer a well-classified collection of fictions so that users can easily and efficiently browse and select their favorite genres. After finding the investor Shengda, Jinjiang’s re-institutionalization which aims at making more profit to maintain its daily function does not make it a duplication of Qidian. The consequence of this is a more sustainable, gender-specific and hospitable environment that attracts more female readership and authorship.

The layout of the website constructed by the webmasters creates a user-friendly experience for readers and authors alike. The home page (Figure 3.2) is comprised of strongly-recommended latest published serials, VIP serials and must-read stories. A swift search bar is located at the top that allows users to find their favourite sub-genre by simply indicating their gender-preference, time-preference and so on. It also allows one to search specific works by inputting the name of the author, protagonist, supporting role and even keyword.
Each webpage of Jinjiang is vertically divided into two sections: the upper one shows the text of every chapter and a list of “Author’s Recommendations” (zuozhe tujian) of other works that the author published at Jinjiang, while the lower one shows the comments related to this chapter posted by users. The author is also able to post some reflections, either related to this text or not, at the bottom of the upper block, entitled “Author’s Words” (zuozhe youhua yaoshuo). Albeit inconspicuous, the space beneath “Author’s Words” is taken up by the webmaster to recommend analogous fictions. As indicated in Figure 3.3, the author, who calls herself “some-meat” as her ID is “I want to eat meat”, first apologized for her late update as a result of revision and embellishment, then reported her recent schedule and the coming update. At last, she asked for professional suggestions from her fans to figure out further plot development. 

Elsewhere, authors post their personal understandings of certain literary canons as they relate to their own creations, annotations of certain terms and historical facts, and explorations of disputable academic issues. A fan’s comment claims that “Author’s
Words” carry great weight. She noted, “It is because of this section that I decided to pay for my VIP service […] the author’s (Guanxin ze Luan) study and understanding of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is remarkable.” The “Author’s Words” section thus, constitutes a crucial space for users to exchange ideas not only on daily issues, but also literary creation and appreciation.

Figure 3.3   **Text, Author’s Recommendation and Author’s Words**


The lower block shows readers’ commentaries attached to a particular chapter. The commentary space is further horizontally divided into two columns: comments posted on the left side also receive further comments from other readers. These words illustrate the interactions among Jinjiang users. Comments listed on the right narrow column are “Comments of the Author’s Choice” (*zuozhe jiajing pinglun*), which are most appealing and feature digest posts highlighted by the author. Figure 3.4 illustrates readers’ response to the above author’s survey on the plot development. The commentary posted by Ray suggested to detail background information; while another reader suggested the author to arrange a childbirth for the heroine, which is supported
by other readers. For example, user Bingxueyou said, “Please write more about the heroine~” With different ideas from a wide range of fans, the authors are able to create storylines based on readers’ preferences. Furthermore, the daily communication among fans and authors nurtures and consolidates their virtual friendship. As fans of a particular literary genre, readers and authors of other texts take active part in the writing process of a serialized work. They post suggestions on characterization, the development of plots, wording and phrasing. The productive readers often express their satisfactions and dissatisfactions with a certain character and suggest ways in which the author can fix these up. In other words, readers are able to get involved in the process of creation by taking advantage of the opportunities for interaction. The negotiation over plots and characterization as a unique form of “participatory culture,” 92 or “presumption,” 93 thus, constitutes one of the main features of the Jinjiang community.

Figure 3.4  Users’ Comments


93 The term of “presumption” was initially proposed to describe what is happening in a pre-industrialized society, where it is very common to see people consume the food they produced. In 2008, Tapscott and Williams utilized the term “prosumption” to define a new model of digital economy, “where customers participate in the production of products in an active and ongoing way.” See Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, Wikonomics: How Mass Collaboration Changed Everything (London: Atlantics Book. 2008), 127.
Jinjiang’s reader-writer interactivity and user-friendly environment mirrors “the power dynamics among the various literary agents.” On the one hand, traditional editors have been disempowered with hardly any access to the formation of a literary commodity; while on the other hand, authors and readers “have been centralised as the core of presumption,” where the production and consumption of a media text can be interweaved or merged. This model of presumption is considered one of the traits of Internet-based participatory culture because there is a great possibility that the customers could change their roles to be producers – their participation, suggestions, emotional involvement and criticism are integrated into the process of production. The creation of fanwai (bangai in Japanese) is an interesting device that Web authors use to account for readers’ feedback. Authors follow up fans’ commentaries and feedbacks, and insert certain chapters (fanwai) during the serialization or after the completion of the whole book to make up for a fatal flaw in the previous chapters, or write a supplementary biography from a different perspective other than the focal narrative. Readers are involved in the creation of literary works, while authors’ creation is affected and oriented by fans participation. The literary creation in cyberspace, therefore, becomes a process of negation and refinement.

The boundaries between reader and author are considerably blurred as the nature of Web-based serialized fiction maximizes fans’ participation. A fan can remain invisible if not participating in online interaction, but can also cross in between the boundary of reading and writing, switching her role of a reader and a writer. Conversely, the author of the fictional text at the same time, is a reader of other texts. Her creation is in turn, influenced by reading other texts and readers’ comments. Different degrees of authorship/readership have generated from in between. While the interactive exchanges rebalance the power relations between readers and writers, inspire users’

95 Ibid.
97 I own this argument to Dr. Lena Henningsen who in my thesis defence pointed out the dual role of readership and authorship.
productivity, and facilitate collective interpretation; fans are also empowered by the bonding between each other in a supportive environment.

Like any other media fans, their fondness of the texts and their intensive interactions with each other eventually lead toward “the creation of new texts.” 98 Jinjiang fans’ creative reworkings involve a variety of multimedia texts. They utilize certain audiovisual elements (such as photos, comic strips, music, movie clips or a combination of all) to enhance their reading experience, enliven their discussion, and “make texts become real.” 99 Sometimes fans’ creations serve to complete, or add color to their favorite literary texts. For example, a fan of Meinan shi’er gong (12 Beautiful Men in Palace) created hand-painted comic profile pictures for all the 12 beautiful heroes in the fiction to express her deep fondness of every one of them. 100 More sophisticated creations such as movie clips (see Figure 3.6), require fans’ intensive interactions and collective wisdom beyond the base of the Jinjiang site. Web fans’ preference for the visualization of interpretation and expression corresponds with the Chinese Net generation’s general reliance on multimedia techniques and texts.

99 Ibid., 50.
Figure 3.5  Music video for Meinan shi’er gong


On the other hand, each of the fan communities at Jinjiang is not only bundled up by a particular genre of literary texts, but also by the daily communication between people who barely know each other primarily in real life. A fan of Bubu jingxin told truthfully in the commentary space immediately after the author updated the last chapter:

It has been almost one year since I became a fan of Bubu jingxin in the last year. This experience is unforgettable. I kept myself online, waiting for the updates, reading reviews, and discussing with Zitian, 33, Jiaou and many other friends. I also have experienced significant difficulties, twists and turns in my life. After reading the end of the novel, [...] I feel my life in this whole year is also like Ruoxi's, with both the highs and the
lows. Thank you Xiaosan (the nickname of the author) for writing such a good novel.\textsuperscript{101}

Users are able to post comments under their net names or even without registration, however, an IP address can be traced. A fair portion of users have many net names registered (all the other non-primary net names are called \textit{majia}\textsuperscript{102} in Chinese). Under the cover of \textit{majia}, users discuss topics like homosexuality, polygamy and sexual assault that actually happen in their daily life.

Though commentaries related to literary appreciation, personal interpretations, and suggestions on literary creation are encouraged at Jinjiang, commentators’ behaviours are supervised and restricted by the webmasters and moderators. Plagiarism, spam, random chatting, and adding/repeating meaningless words are all strictly prohibited. This regulation guarantees the opinion-based fans’ negotiation and interpretation of literary works published at Jinjiang. Non-literary threads go on Jinjiang Forum as opposed to threads designated to specific works. Users share worries about their day-to-day existence, talk about their job situations, personal affairs like marriage crisis, sex craving and pregnancy, and even spam the forum with nonsense.

Jinjiang community surpasses not only conventional publishing houses but also many other literary websites by its versatility and hospitality. The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet makes Chinese \textit{netizens’} online activism possible, and in doing so democratises literature. As Yang demonstrates in \textit{The Power of the Internet}, the Internet enables Chinese people to create “a world of carnival, community, and contention” and within this process “they have transformed personhood, society, and politics.”\textsuperscript{103} The literary texts on Jinjiang not only provide readers with a wide range of entertainment, they also lead to sophisticated discussions on their daily concerns, unconventional topics and even taboos. Time-travel fans’ online discussion and


\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Majia}, is literally “vest” in English. Typically, Chinese \textit{netizens} use “the vests” to make comments on “politically sensitive” topics, online contentions, taboos, and personal affairs.

\textsuperscript{103} Guobin Yang, \textit{The Power}, 1.
communication account for another crucial aspect of my research – the communicative space cultivated in cyberspace.

I chose Jinjiang as my primary source because, on the one hand, several of the most influential time-travel works, especially female-oriented ones were published there first; on the other hand, the active and in-depth online interactions among Jinjiang users provide an invaluable resource for research to pinpoint the characteristics of time-travel romance and the essence of cyber culture in contemporary China. I argue that Jinjiang literary works change the shape of Chinese popular romance significantly, demonstrate a new form of literary reception, consumption and interpretation, and more importantly, indicate a new kind of social bonding and communication in the process of reading, writing and sharing online. Examining Jinjiang readers’ conscious beliefs about the benefits of reading reflects the use of the Internet in voicing contemporary Chinese women’s premier concerns.

In the following two chapters, I examine a most-read, well-established time-travel romance, *Bubu jingxin* (henceforth, *Bubu*), to provide insight into the key features of Web-based time-travel texts. As a new literary and cultural symptom, time-travel romance involves in both historical elements and romance narratives. It differentiates itself from any other existing cultural product. Various texts published at Jinjiang provide female users with an invaluable source for a collective creation of meaning, through their involvement in online affective communication and interaction.
4. History or Romance: Understanding *Bubu jingxin* in Chinese Cultural Context

At first sight, one might argue that time-travel romance is nothing more than a mixture of the traditional historical narrative and popular romance. Jinjiang fans would refuse such a simplistic and arbitrary assertion. In this chapter, my concern is how Jinjiang time-travel romance stands out among and differentiates itself from all other popular cultural artifacts in the Chinese cultural context. Is it merely new wine in the old bottle, or simply a mixture of historical facts and romantic elements? Do Web authors use time-travel as the new flavour of romance to tickle women’s palate without providing any new elements?

4.1. From Temple and Court to Back Palace: Historical Orthodoxy vs. Web Romance

Historical fiction has a long history in China. It initially existed as a compensatory history, and later developed into a literary subgenre that tells a story about a particular historical figure or event that is set in the past. The most well-known historical fictions, including *Three Kingdoms, Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, and *Water Margin*, all contribute to the tradition of male social historical narrative about kings, marquises, generals and ministers (*wang hou jiang xiang*). Today, Chinese people’s nostalgia for history remains prevalent whether it be print, TV, or Web-based. One of the most representative phenomena is the domination of Qing dramas. Dramas such as *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1999), *Kangxi Dynasty* (2001) and *Qianlong Dynasty* (2003) have been on primetime television in China since the mid-1990s. Chinese people’s reading and understanding of officially sanctioned cultural products transforms gradually. The broadcast of numerous historical TV dramas, depicting the court politics of imperial families, came on the heels of *Yongzheng Dynasty* in the early 2000s and won enormous popularity among audiences. The Qing-drama craze aroused the appetite of
young history-readers. With the spread of the Internet at the turn of the new millennium, more and more Qing-history fans, especially young women, were able to voice their dissatisfaction with the existing dominant mainstream grand historical narratives of nation building, and started to create their own favourites.

Michel de Certeau has described everyday reading as “textual poaching”, the way in which the subordinate group (the marginal majority)\(^{104}\) invests new meanings in text, and appropriates mainstream culture in order to rewrite, challenge, or negotiate with the cultural orthodoxy produced by the relatively powerful group.\(^{105}\) The comparison between an officially sanctioned historical TV drama *Yongzheng Dynasty*, and a most-viewed Jinjiang time-travel romance *Bubu* (by Tong Hua) below, serves as an excellent example of Web literature’s connection to and breaking away from officially sanctioned cultural products. Jinjiang women’s literary creations reveal that they “turn away from social and historical concerns to emphasize personal and domestic life.”\(^{106}\) The 1980s has witnessed an “inward turn”\(^{107}\) among a considerable number of elite literary works that feature personal stories and feelings. Decades later, Chinese cyberspace has seen the overwhelming popularity of Web romances that focus on domestic life rather than the public sphere. While male writers directly address their desire of power and sexuality in their Web-based fantasies, female romance writers’ retreat into the interior self has a strong emphasis on gendered experience. My study below reveals that Web authors are mostly concerned with their “personal history” and romantic experience, while still keeping an eye on history.

Between 2005 and 2006, several “masterpieces” of Jinjiang romances that feature the trope of time travel to the Qing dynasty, i.e. *Bubu, Yaohua, Menghui daqing*,

\(^{104}\) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 165-76. Michel de Certeau argues that “Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive. […] the non-producers of culture, […] [a] marginal group has now become a silent majority.” In contemporary China, the subordinated/marginal cultural group, the “non-producers of culture” is also the majority of the mass.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

\(^{106}\) Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 104.

\(^{107}\) Ibid. In Dr. Kong’s *Consuming Literature*, “inward turn” is used to emphasize some elite writers’ breaking away from the literary tradition of socialist realism in the 1980s.
marked a milestone of the upsurge of time-travel genre on the Web. One of the most influential and broadly-viewed works is *Bubu*. It is one of the earliest Qing-travel stories and has been serialized at Jinjiang since 2005, published by Ocean Press, National Press, Huashan Arts Press, Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House and Yeren Culture Publishing successively, and hereafter a remake of TV drama (produced by Chinese Entertainment) aired on the Hunan Broadcasting System (HBS) on September 10, 2011.

The story revolves around an ordinary young Chinese woman, Zhang Xiaowen who dies in an accident in the modern world. Her soul then inhabits the body of a young daughter of a Manchu aristocrat, Ma’erTai Ruoxi (1706-1726), whose sister is one of the concubines of the 8th prince of the Kangxi Emperor. The story mainly describes Ruoxi’s love life influenced by the harsh political conflict during the late years of Kangxi’s reign. At the beginning of her trip, she finds it extremely hard to blend into the life of imperial family. Her misbehaviours and disobedience do not fit the expectation of her age nor social status. She is by no means viewed as acceptable or attractive in feudal society. Yet surprisingly, she attracts all the princes. In the eyes of her family, it is the result of the temporary amnesia caused by the accident, and could possibly be cured. She soon realizes it is impossible to travel back to the modern world after several unsuccessful attempts and decides to create a life in her current surroundings. During her early life in the mansion of the 8th Prince, Ruoxi establishes a solid friendship with the 10th, 13th, and 14th Prince. At the age of 14, she has acquired imperial etiquette, and is selected to be one of the maids to serve the Kangxi Emperor. Her intelligence and wisdom acquired in the current time enables Ruoxi to win the emperor’s favour and she becomes his lady-in-waiting. This results in her being able to witness nine young princes’ fight for the emperor’s throne during the late years of the Kangxi Emperor.

During her stay in the Forbidden City, Ruoxi falls in love with her sister’s husband, Yinsi (the 8th Prince), attracted by his wonderful personality and persistent infatuation

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108 In Qing Dynasty, all the Manchu women between 13 and 16 years old were required to present themselves at the Forbidden City for the *xiuniu* selection every three years. *Xíuniù*, as “beautiful females” or “elegant females” from the families of high-rank officials and the social elites, compose the primary marriage partners of the imperial family for the purpose of consolidating the power of the ruling house.
with her older sister Ruolan. Any young girls with a strong yearning for true love would love a man like Yinsi. He is charming, intelligent, cultivated, caring and sympathetic. With the historical knowledge she acquired during her pre-life, she is clearly aware that it was the 4th Prince, Yinzhen, who finally won the fight for the throne, and Yinsi, even though regarded as the most competitive contender for the throne at that time, was expelled from the imperial household after a series of unjust accusations and died of illness in jail. Ruoxi tries to persuade him to quit the fight for the succession to the throne, but unfortunately fails. Ruoxi then warns him to be wary of Yinzhen – giving him a list of those who would support his ascension. A few days later, she is honored to serve Kangxi on his way to Mulan Hunting Ground. The 4th Prince, later known as the Yongzheng Emperor in succession to the Kangxi Emperor, is also invited. During this trip, Yinzhen and Ruoxi develop a mutual affection.

Yinsi and his supporters, acting on Ruoxi’s advice, frame Yinzhen for plotting against the Crown Prince. Yinzhen’s staunch supporter, Yinxiang, voluntarily takes responsibility and is sentenced to house arrest. Meanwhile, Yinzhen buries himself in his residence and devotes himself to farming to keep out of a severe political storm. This event also results in Yinzhen’s loss of competitiveness in the fight for the throne. Consequently, the 14th Prince, Yinti, finds favour with Kangxi and is offered marriage to Ruoxi. Ruoxi boldly disobeys the order, and is demoted to being a laundrywoman for the eunuchs. The result is her tremendous physical suffering in the coming 6 years. Albeit controversial and disputable, with the support of Longkodo, the general commandant of the Beijing gendarmerie, Yinzhen is finally able to succeed Kangxi for the throne; while his most competitive contender, the 14th Prince, who is titled the border-pacification general-in-chief, is at war far in the northwest. Even though finally absolved by Yinzhen after succession, Ruoxi is not able to recover from both physical trauma and long-term emotional anguish. Immediately after Yinzhen’s succession, he proposes to Ruoxi and cohabits with her in the Forbidden City. To consolidate his regime and eradicate political enemies, Yinzhen puts his full brother, the 14th Prince, under house arrest at the Imperial Tomb. His rival not only in the temple court but also in romance, the 8th Prince, is stripped of his title and forced to rename himself as “Akina” (means “pig” in Manchu-language) and languishes in prison till death. Ruoxi also witnesses Yinzhen’s public execution of her favorite maid-in-waiting Yutan, who is steamed to death because of her
long-term spying. Ruoxi soon perceives the change in his characteristics and loses faith in their relationship. After she is told that her old lover Yinsi’s loss of political power and her childhood playmates’ miserable fates all result from her foresight of history, she cracks up and miscarries a baby. She moves out of the Forbidden City with the assistance of the 14th Prince while she is still not fully recovered from her physical and mental suffering. She dies from disease and self-condemnation at the age of 34 without ever marrying the Yongzheng Emperor.

_Bubu_ received enthusiastic responses from hundreds of thousands of readers at Jinjiang since it was first serialized, and then from a broad range of viewers since its TV adaption was broadcast on HBS. The televised version attracted more and more of its audience to seek out the original text. It also attracted new fans of existing time-travel works. Time-travel romance flooded the country, both newly created series and the adaptations of previous stories published online, particularly, the Qing-travel fictions. Fans still insist that _Bubu_ is different from other mediocre time-travel romance even though they share the same topic and historical background, identical literary tropes and similar storylines. They claim that the author Tong Hua’s delicate description and deeper understanding of human nature make it a successful and touching story involving political conflicts in the imperial court, the complexity of humanity, companionship and romantic relationship. Readers have produced various interpretations. Some such responses are controversial, and intensive interactions among fans began from the moment it was serialized at Jinjiang to several few month after it was aired and rebroadcast.

Interestingly, the author Tong Hua was very surprised at the popularity of _Bubu_, confessing that she wrote this story for the purpose of killing time during the first few months she moved to the United States, and didn’t expect publication. Although it was not created as a fan parody of the popular TV drama _Yongzheng Dynasty_, fans still incline to compare them with each other from a variety of aspects, expressing their disfavour of historical orthodoxy (lishi zhengju) and favour of tragic romance. Tong Hua

also asserted that she intentionally differentiated her story from the dominant popular romances at that time which are often referred to “ice cream” in Chinese because of its lighthearted tone, and maintained her belief in describing “the feeling of emotionally abused” and tragic ending. These ideas make Bubu a rich and intriguing text as opposed to two dominant popular cultural genres in contemporary China – the historical orthodoxy and the lighthearted popular romance.

Below is a comparison of Bubu and Yongzheng Dynasty. It helps to answer the following questions 1) why time-travel romance has become one of the most popular literary genres in recent years, 2) the way in which it differentiates itself from existing cultural products, and most importantly, 3) the communicative space it has opened up for its readers.

In 1999, China Central Television (CCTV) aired a historical TV serial Yongzheng Dynasty – a remake of the historical novel, Yongzheng huangdi (The Yongzheng Emperor), in prime time every day during the Chinese New Year period. The original text is written by a male writer Eryue He, who is known by his alternative, unconventional literary recreation of Qing history. There has long been a stereotyped image that the Yongzheng Emperor is a “cold-faced, cruel, and ferocious ruler” because of his disputable succession, iron hand ruling, and the foundation of the intelligence agency which aims to train a large number of murderous spies to discriminate against the dissidents and maintain his reign. While the writer holds conflicted opinions toward the Yongzheng Emperor’s legendary life, he praises his commitment to an unremitting struggle against political and emotional isolation, and his strong will-power to build a prosperous dynasty and a peaceful land for his people without overemphasizing his achievements as a national leader. Eryue He’s revisionist representation of an engaging emperor, creates an alternative path in the writing of history. Instead of setting the

Ibid.

I use “lighthearted romance” to refer to the Cinderella-like romance fictions that are featured by comic language, cheerful plots and happy ending. For examples, Huanzhu Gege (Princess Pearl, by Qiong Yao) and Shangcuo huajiao jiadui lang (Wrong Carriage, Right Groom, by Xi Juan).

national interests as a starting point, he digs into Yongzheng's personal desire and ambition.

Yongzheng Dynasty is a remake of Eryue He’s work. It tells the history of Yongzheng’s reign, including his fighting for the throne, the political reform, the enhancement of strict autocracy rules, and the social and economic transition which helps to make the Qing dynasty a great power in Asia. In contrast to its original text, the TV series spares no efforts to mould Yongzheng as a national hero and exemplary ruler by detailing his achievements in anti-corruption and financial inspection, using confiscated assets and properties from corrupt officials to finance disaster relief, the military campaign with the northwest and territorial expansion, featuring the Yongzheng Emperor as a wise leader who makes painstaking efforts to serve his people and propel society forward. His sudden death in the thirteenth year of his reign is described as the result of purported over-exhaustion and his diligence in government affairs. The TV series concluded with a well-known Mencius saying: “he who wins the hearts of the people gains the empire”, which is also assigned to be Yongzheng’s motto in the TV drama.

Though it deviated from the author’s core theme, the TV remake won unprecedented popularity shortly after it aired. Coinciding with “China’s overall spiritual and cultural liberalization movement,” it has also been praised by official media, academicians, and mainstream critics for advocating proper ideological messages and cultural values. It is a reflection of the “new nationalist sentiment and cultural identity born out of China’s rapid rise and aspirations to become an economic and political superpower.” With significant stress on “the macrolevel, the level of the Party-state” in almost all of the government-sponsored version of nationalism, a question then needs to be asked: what does it mean, and how does it touch ordinary Chinese people?

113 Ibid.
Though set in the same period of historical background, *Bubu*, as my representative of online time-travel romance, is greatly different from *Yongzheng Dynasty*. Although the author of *Bubu* denied her work to be a parody of the *Yongzheng Dynasty*, it is nevertheless true that she intended to rewrite the history of that particular period in her own way, and thereby produce alternative meanings outside officially sanctioned interpretive practices. Empowered ordinary people actively appropriate, parody and spoof (*e’gao* in Chinese) existing mainstream cultural to create playful rather than pedagogic meanings. The following close analysis on the texts – the one created and favored by Jinjiang users and the one sanctioned and praised by authoritative media – may shed light on the essence of time-travel romance. It may also illustrate the turn from grand narrative to personal narrative in the reception of popular cultural products. My concern here is what and in which manner do the female authors “poach” existing historical narratives, and what kind of alternative meanings do they create?

The two posters below (Figure 4.1) visualize the difference in representing Yongzheng in *Yongzheng* and *Bubu*.

![Comparison: Yongzheng Dynasty and Bubu jingxin](image)

**Figure 4.1  Comparison: Yongzheng Dynasty and Bubu jingxin**

Note. Poster of *Yongzheng wangchao*, created by Beijing Tongdao Culture Development Inc.; Poster of *Bubu jingxin*, created by Tangren Media Inc. (Shanghai).
The Yongzheng Emperor stands still in front of the magnificent Forbidden City in the poster for *Yongzheng Dynasty*. In his black court dress, the actor, Tang Guoqiang, best known for playing historical figures (including the Emperor Taizong of Tang, and Mao Zedong) in film and television, is gazing forward. His clear glance and serious facial expression are enhanced by the glamorous dragon intertwined in the center of the picture. The focus of the poster for *Bubu* is the heroine not the hero. The heroine is placed at the centre with all male figures surrounding her. The different facial expressions of the male figures seem to implicate different relationships with the heroine. Yongzheng is the one looking down, as if there is sorrow in his heart, and deep thoughts in his mind. The poster hints at the court struggle over the throne from the perspective of the heroine. Although short-lived, the Yongzheng Emperor’s reign is known as one of the most tyrannical. The dynasty survived the fight of nine princes for the emperor’s throne. This is partly because the Kangxi Emperor had the most children of all Qing emperors during his reign, the longest in Chinese history (i.e. 24 sons and 12 daughters officially, which is always the topic of curiosity and speculation). The precariousness of the situation attributes to the popularity of the historical novel *Yongzheng Emperor* and its TV adaption *Yongzhen Dynasty*. The reading and watching of Qing-history provides Jinjiang time-travel authors an opportunity to poach the pleasurable elements, and use historical figures and stories to serve a subversive purpose of writing romance.

One of the most attractive aspect of time-travel romance is the affairs between “handsome”, “powerful” and “sentimental” princes and the desperate urban female office worker who inhabits the body of a woman living in the long-gone age. Compared with *Yongzheng Dynasty*, where the producer eschews the private life of the emperor and focuses on the politics of the imperial court, Jinjiang writers wisely combine romance with history to tickle the palate of young women. Web-based Qing-travel fantasy focuses on affairs that happen in the back palace instead of temples and courts. As the narrator is the protagonist herself, almost all events told from her mouth are set in the prince’s mansion, the emperor’s back palace, and a limited number of private locations outside the Forbidden City. Even women born into families of high-ranking government officials, have no access to the political realm. A careful selection of a particular period of history is very important for time-travel romance. The Tang and Qing Dynasty are two of the
most prosperous periods in Chinese history, which are perceived as the most peaceful, liberated, and economically free times. These two dynasties left numerous romantic legends and tales. Meanwhile, the Qing princes and princesses also left a legacy of romantic tales for the netizens to imagine and rewrite.

_Bubu_ and _Yongzheng Dynasty_, have different tactics in narrating history. In _Yongzheng Dynasty_, Yongzheng’s decision-making, statecraft, and political struggle in the imperial court are the main focus of the narration, while his personal affairs with women both inside and outside the palace is marginalized or even omitted. From the perspective of an orthodox historian, the TV drama microscopically sketches out how Yongzheng consolidated his reign, ruled his country and enhanced the prosperity of Kang-qian. Comparatively, in _Bubu_, Ruoxi’s love affair is the main narrative thread, despite the fact that it is closely interweaved with the political developments. These include a shift in the balance of power of Yinsi’s group and the Crown Prince’s group, the ascension and descension of Yinzhen’s group, and the surge of Yinti’s military strength.

Male-dominated politics in the imperial court which function as a metaphor for masculinity are less addressed in Tong Hua’s narrative. Rather, the emotional aspects of her torrid affairs with the emperor’s sons are a crucial part of the story. This helps to enhance the emotion released in the process of reading. Travelling back to the Qing dynasty, especially during the late years of the Kangxi Emperor, who had the most children of all Qing emperors, offers the modern female traveller a great opportunity to fall in love with princes with different characteristics. For example, in _Bubu_, each of the princes is unquestionably attractive. Endowed with modern thoughts and unconventional ideas, Ruoxi easily stands out among all the princesses and daughters of the high-ranking officials. She attracts the 10th, 8th, 4th and 14th sons of Kangxi one by one from her childhood to late age, while simultaneously, developing a profound friendship with the 13th Prince. Two of the princes propose to her, and two others, including the Crown Prince, request a marriage with her from the emperor. Aiming at establishing and consolidating the relationship with Mongolia to aggrandize his strength, the Crown Prince requests to marry Ruoxi as she has a close relationship with the Mongolian princess, and is favored and treasured by Kangxi. Kangxi declines his request and offers Ruoxi to marry his favourite son Yinti years later. Her disobedience results in her
demotion and years of separation with her lover, Yinzhen. This “multiple men-one woman” romance offers a tense and complicated emotion: the happiness of being loved and the anguish of being tortured by love. On the one hand, the protagonist receives great affection from most of the male characters encountered; on the other hand, she also receives tremendous suffering, both physically and emotionally, as she has to own her affection to only one of them and must refute the others.

In the inner court, an intense fight persists amongst two pairs of sisters from different families, the Ma’ertais and the Guoluoluos. Ruoxi’s sister, Ruolan and the elder daughter of the Guoluoluos, Minghui both married the 8th Prince, Yinsi – the later ranks higher than the former. Yinsi’s fondness for Ruolan triggers Minghui’s jealousy. In pursuit of her husband’s affection, Minghui uses every means to repress Ruolan. She even asked her son to humiliate Ruolan and Ruoxi by making use of their higher domestic ranks. Ruolan, the concubine of the 8th Prince, is a victim of polygamy. She is forced to separate with his lover Qingshan and marry Yinsi by order of the Kangxi Emperor. Suffering from her separation with Qingshan and Minghui’s surreptitious torment, she loses her interests in secular life, and devotes herself to Buddhism. Soon after, Minghui’s sister, Mingyu marries the 10th Prince. Taking Ruoxi as her rival, Minghui’s anger is an addition to her sister’s hostility towards the Ma’ertai sisters early in the story. At the end of the story, Minghui’s longings again play a crucial role in isolating Ruoxi and her lover Yinzhen. She tells the truth that it is Ruoxi’s early act that induces a tragedy. Except for the romantic life of the heroine, this romance also goes to painstaking length to describe the relationships among the women in inner court and different princes’ palaces. Stories about every single female character in the fiction evoke sympathy. Each reader is left to identify the elements of a romantic relationship and interpersonal occurrences, and relate them to their own emotional world.

The popularity of Qing-travel romance indicates an “inward turn” of popular culture in the past decade: the historical narration has turned from the male-dominated imperial court to the female-dominated imperial back palace. The focus of storyline has retreated from the masculine politics of imperial court (miatang zhengzhi) to the feminine politics of back palace (shengong zhengzhi), and the emotion of narration is more sentimental and polysemantic. As claimed by some scholars, it is also a reflection
of the intention of females to “break free from existing spatiotemporal principles and create an alternative historical writing style as opposed to the officially sanctioned one.”

Of course, it is never wise to over-emphasize Web romance’s detachment from existing mainstream cultural products. History is rewritten in time-travel romance and in doing so it becomes the ongoing product of people’s appropriation of existing hegemonic culture. It has been argued that this is done “in their attempts to represent their own experiences, to speak in their voices rather than in the hegemonic code.” It is also inappropriate to take the writing of time-travel romance as “historical writing” as the story is built on the basis of fantasy and imagination in the first place.

4.2. Truth in the Historical Imagination of Time-travel Romance

Paradoxically, the accuracy of historical elements is one of the required, and probably the most crucial aspects of time travel at Jinjiang. As Jinjiang fans claim, they find it disrespectful if the protagonist changes history as portrayed in male-centred fantasies. “Making up a story doesn’t mean that we are allowed to distort history at our sweet will”, as put by a Jinjiang writer, Xiao Chun (Little Spring), whose novel *Bufu rulai bufu qing* (*Can I serve both God and Venus?*) has been described by readers as “more informative and factual than history books.” They believe that the history represented in officially sanctioned cultural products is relatively “inaccurate.” The truth might have vanished, been altered or even erased due to political reasons, while the creation and consumption of time travel allows them to discuss their favorite historical mystiques, and imagine or discover the truth. During Tong Hua’s writing of *Bubu*, she engaged in the historical research of the Qing dynasty by frequently visiting Jigu youwen (literally


119 Junqian Xu, “Fantasy History is a Novel Idea.”
meaning to investigate the antiquity and encourage historical compilation, http://www.ourjg.com/bbs/), a BBS dedicated to exploring and demystifying the history from Kangxi to Yongzheng’s reign, to guarantee that her description of history is as informative and accurate as possible. Female time-travel fans’ poaching and appropriation is not merely a copy of existing public knowledge, but a creative rewrite of history, an integration of historical mystiques and even an intellectual exploration. This leads us to the question of the instructional function of time-travel romance reading.

Female time-travel fans seem to be unenthusiastic about disseminating pre-given historical knowledge, which typically wipes off the disgraceful conduct of emperors in different dynasties. Ruoxi tries to keep herself from being affected by pre-given historical knowledge, and attempts to uncover the myth of Yinzhen based on her everyday experience. One example comes from Yinzhen’s disputed succession, which has caught the attention of both scholars and Web writers. Major opinion identifies his legitimacy to succeed the throne though certain political and military maneuvering. In other words, it was deemed to be necessary by the situation. Others point out that his succession to the throne didn’t come from the will of his father but through an usurpation. The TV series Yongzheng Dynasty, as many Jinjiang fans assert, deliberately whitewashes Yongzheng’s act of usurping the throne as the perfect choice of the nation at a critical and difficult moment and papers over his atrocity and cruelty as a feudal emperor with an excuse of political reform. In contrast to Yongzheng Dynasty, where Yinzhen succeeds the throne at the will of his father despite of the voice of dissension, Tong Hua gives an open-ended answer to his legitimacy of succession. When the Kangxi Emperor lingers on his sickbed in his late days, Ruoxi serves him with his favorite refreshments, and witnesses his frequent meeting with Yinzhen and Longkodo. She tries to uncover information surrounding the succession, but is warned to behave herself by the Head Eunuch. She is not able to obtain any non-public information. In Ruoxi’s narration, Yinzhen is finally able to take charge of the Forbidden City and block the news of Kangxi’s death with the assistance of Longkodo and the Head Eunuch. Longkodo then announces that Yinzhen will succeed the throne at the ex-emperor’s will. Still doubting his legitimacy, she has no choice but to bow to Yinzhen, showing her support for the decree. The author doubts both the above two clichés. According to Ruoxi’s description, the imperial decree indicates that Yinzhen is chosen to succeed to the throne, but all the
other signs imply that the Kangxi Emperor also considers making Yinti an heir to his throne. Her investigation of Yinzhen’s behaviour implies his intention for usurpation with the use of force, and there is a great possibility that he changes Kangxi’s will. There are also clues for the folk history surrounding the death of the Kangxi Emperor: whether he died from disease or other unnatural cause, for example, poison. All these suppositions make the history enveloped in a shroud of mystery, setting off a counter-image against the official recording and authorized narrative. It opens up a communicative space for female Qing-history fans to discuss and share their opinions on particular historical figures, events, culture, customs and social features, and furthermore, acquire factual “knowledge” through reading and discussion. Though ambiguously addressed in fans’ response, the “instructional activity”¹²⁰, in Radway’s words, manages to entertain the readers with compensatory knowledge.

In time-travel romance, the heroine tells most historical events in first-hand accounts. She is not only an spectator of history, but also participates in the evolution of it. She is able to witness, experience or at least hear of the historical events happening during her time-travel trip. In populating their imagination and speculation with mysterious and attractive figures found in romance, young women legitimize their acquisition of historical knowledge, and further alter the tone of historical narrative. The heroine’s interior monologue contributes to a feminized and personal narrative rather than a historical grand narrative. A noticeable feature of Ruoxi’s narration is that she often jumps out of the historical event itself to express her own opinions, comments and feelings. At the sight that Yinzhen walks solely down to his palace after his father’s death, Ruoxi expresses her mixed feeling towards his succession: on the one hand, she feels happy for her lover because he finally attains his ambition after years of preparation and restraint; on the other, she cannot help worrying about the foreseeable tragedy as a result of consolidating his reign. From a female’s perspective, Ruoxi not only keeps an eye on court politics, but also shows her compassion on each of the historical figures.

Tong Hua’s rewrite of Yongzheng’s history, as a result, on the one hand, caters to readers’ appetite for a relatively true (according to their knowledge), or demystified

history (which is different from the officially sanctioned assertion), providing a communicative and discussible space for the subordinate cultural group, especially women, who found it extremely hard to be involved in historical narrative and discussion years ago. It also replaces the masculine court politics with female’s inherent sensibility and compassion.

4.3. Good Time-travel Romance

The above diversion from the officially sanctioned cultural product, as scholars point out, represents young Chinese women’s challenge against the masculine historical narrative. It has also been described as a will for cultural legitimacy which serves urban middle-class young women in contemporary China.\(^{121}\) This cultural-political analysis sheds light on the resistance of female cultural consumers, however, it overlooks the emotional aspect in their silent process of reading and writing. People might be surprised that writing thousands of words per day, which is rarely achieved by professional writers, is very common for Web-based authors. As fast as the above writing speed is, it cannot even satisfy Jinjiang readers’ reading need. The passion and perseverance of reading and writing among time-travel fans are often referred to negatively as “escapism” and “utopianism.” They believe that the reading and writing of time-travel romance provides fans with a safe haven so that they can take a break and enjoy a temporary relief from the overwhelming relationship problems suffered by many urban young women, just as video games might do for young men. While the above understandings of the cultural and social function of time-travel romance are valid up to a point, both fail to address the emotional aspect of time-travel romance. They inadequately address why young Chinese women are indulged in the romance genre more than any other popular cultural products in contemporary China.

The pursuit for historical accuracy among Jinjiang authors and readers doesn’t make the works pure historical fictions because history is only deployed as a narrative background and plot device. Though the stories contain actual historical persons, they

\(^{121}\) See arguments on the gender politics in the latest TV serial Gong in Limin Dong, “Xingbie.”
are primarily constructed on the basis of fantasy and imagination with a preponderant focus on the romantic life between the heroine and several heroes. In the following pages, I examine the characterization of both heroines and heroes of Jinjiang romance fictions to identify the key features of Jinjiang Qing-travel romance in the context of the evolution of Chinese popular romance novels.

In Janice Radway’s research on romance reading among American middle-class women, she found that the romance readers of the Smithton community distinguished good romance from bad romance on the basis of three different aspects: “the personality of the heroine, the character of the hero and the particular manner in which the hero pursues and wins the affections of the heroine.” My close examination of this “classic” time-travel work, Bubu, addresses the following questions: what aspects of the heroine’s personality resonates and justifies the identity of young Chinese women? What kind of emotional replenishment and entertainment are acquired through time-travel imagination, and why does this unique narrative form contribute to a form of pleasure which is otherwise hard to obtain in their everyday routine life?

4.3.1. The Heroine’s Dual Identity

In Chinese cyberspace, romance literature is further categorized according to the subject, plot development, characterization, and aesthetic interests. Jinjiang time-travel romance novels are first and foremost stories about women. Although the first-person narrative is deployed in the majority of works, there is no requirement that romance be told solely from the perspective of the heroine. The deployment of first-person narrative is obviously less in all the other genres of Web literature because of its limitation in storytelling, characterization, plot development and so forth, compared with the omnipotent narrator, which is vastly used in male-centered Web-based fictions. Jinjiang romance fans’ taste in narratives is also reflected in their identification with the

122 Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance, 77.
heroine. While female authors often project their own personalities, identities, and life experience onto the heroines, readers are also able to project themselves into these stories. As Feng Jin puts it, “readers tend to adopt a biographical or autobiographical way of reading.” It is also very common to see an author jumping out of the narrative, addressing what was missing in the previous text, predicting what is about to happen on behalf of the heroine, and even voicing her own sentiments. The prevalence of first-person narrative is due to the lack of literary writing skills and expertise. It is nevertheless consciously maintained so that readers can better identify with the heroine. Readers are actually able to “comprehend, anticipate, and deal with” everything that is assigned to the heroine.

An examination of the character traits of Jinjiang romance heroines precisely reveals why readers’ identification with the heroine is so important and enjoyable. In Qiong Yao’s novels, the heroines are sexually innocent, aesthetically poetic and emotionally sentimental. Other lighthearted popular romance novels, i.e. “ice cream” literature (bingjiling wenxue) are more prone to depict intelligent and extraordinarily beautiful women who inevitably fall in love with handsome guys with supersensitivity. Different from both the above formulas, heroines in Jinjiang time-travel romance are often ordinary urban white-collar women who are far away from ideal, both in ancient and contemporary China. Though reincarnated in the body of women with a more attractive appearance, they are extolled for their personalities rather than physical attractiveness.

The principal characters of Jinjiang time-travel, heroines are represented through a dual identity as women living in ancient China with memories and values acquired from modern world. Modern female identity is inherent in the heroine’s thought process. She is typically independent, practical, calculative and even aggressive. A duality develops when she also learns the virtues of guixiu (elegant and beautiful women): piety, chastity, dignity and magnanimousness. Her dual identity is that of a modern white-collar woman

124 Jin Feng, Romancing the Internet, 148.
126 Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance, 64.
and of a young girl living in ancient days. This not only contributes to the heroine’s uniqueness, but also testifies to her individuation and self-realization through intense struggles over her identity.

As pointed by Cheng Lu, a Beijing-based publisher, “authors take aspects of modern women’s characters, such as independence and perhaps aggression, which are usually taken for granted or even despised in current times, and produce an ‘exotic charisma’.” The heroine’s ignorance of traditional Chinese virtues is proven to be essential to her attractiveness. In *Bubu*, Ruoxi makes her mark in the Forbidden City after her fearless fight for her sister’s dignity with Mingyu, the daughter of a Manchu aristocrat. She is thus nicknamed “Daredevil Thirteenth Sister.” In another well-known time-travel romance, *Menghui daqing*, Yinxiang has a crush on the heroine Mingwei merely because he sees her dabbling in water with her naked feet. It was regarded as a taboo to expose any naked part of women in public during that period, yet it triggers the curiosity of several princes. Her ignorance, “weird” thought, “irregular” behaviour and compassion, inherited from modern life, make her an unique girl who provides her lovers “warmth” as opposed to “indifference” and “coldness” in the imperial family. The heroines’ initial rejection of conventional ethical and moral codes, and to a certain degree of resistance against the unjust, are essential to her characterization. A fair portion of writers further enhance their heroines’ refusal of conventional codes by assigning them male-like characteristics and/or masculine occupations. For example, the heroine in *Wan Qingsi* (*Coiling Up Black Hair*) is able to survive abduction and rape, and finally achieves her ambition in a variety of careers, including business and politics. The heroine’s independence, intelligence, and control of her own life is extolled by both the author and readers.

The heroine who swaps her soul with a much younger girl in a different world is able to keep her memory in pre-life. The heroine’s emotional maturity and knowledge acquired during her pre-life, technologically or ideologically, contribute to her

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127 Junqian Xu, “Fantasy History is a Novel Idea.”

128 “Pinming shisan mei” in Chinese. It is a parody of “Daredevil Thirteenth Brother,” the nickname of the fictional character Shi Xiu in *Water Margin*. Shi’s nickname annotates his personality: bravery, daring, and a strong sense of righteousness and justice.
attractiveness as well. Nearly all of the heroines in time-travel romance are able to utilize certain modern skills and knowledge to assist others, overcome difficulties and even consolidate their interpersonal relationships. Ruoxi, for example, conquers the appetite of the emperor and his sons with modern refreshments. She sings a classic Chinese folk song, “Jasmine Flower” (Moli Hua) to celebrate Yinsi’s birthday, and teaches the Mongolian Princess Minmin to perform a pop song, Yi Jian Mei (A Twig of Plum) for the imperial families and high-ranked officials, which proves to be favoured by all. She also assists the Yongzheng Emperor in calculating public revenue effectively in a debit-credit accounting method. The above skills are common knowledge in contemporary China but incredible to those living in the Qing dynasty. These playful elements also echo the everyday experience of Chinese young urban women, and add to the playfulness of the historical text.

Other modern characteristics of modern women, such as calculation, pragmatism and so forth, are also displayed in a vast majority of time-travel works. In Bubu, Ruoxi’s identity as an urban office worker allows her to treat the Forbidden City as a real modern society in miniature. Ruoxi takes to life in the Forbidden City after realizing that it is impossible to travel back. She is able to foresee the future, avoid harm, and cater to many different tastes, just as if she was still a white-collar woman navigating her career in contemporary China. Her self-realization during her trip back is not only represented in her career achievements, but also, in her romantic life. Her romantic relationship with the 4th Prince is considered as a tactic for survival – because she needs “a strong branch” to protect her – rather than purely innocent love, according to fans’ arguments. Though it is proven that Ruoxi loves the 4th Prince more than any of his rivals, including the 8th Prince, fans still find that initially, Ruoxi approaches him simply because she is afraid of death and clearly knows that he is a “strong branch” able to protect her.129

Ruoxi’s personal choice among multiple princes sparked great debates with respect to young Chinese women’s ideas of love and reality. Questions that were raised

in online discussion included: Is love the most important matter that a woman should care about? And what is the right choice to make when love conflicts with irrefutable mental, emotional and physical obstacles? In Ruoxi’s words, “I just want to live my own life, spending my life with someone who genuinely protects and treasures me, rather than who treats me as a plaything. I’m not something bestowed to anyone! I’m not a thing, am a person!” Jinjiang women unequivocally advocate a modern view of love and gender equality in their time-travel works. As the author Tong Hua emphasized, Ruoxi “is really the soul of modern girl Zhang Xiaowen. And modern people are the ones who are practical, realistic, not the type to love and lose at such a grand gesture.” The author’s deliberate display of Ruoxi’s mental activity precisely reflects young Chinese women’s negotiation between a dilemmatic reality and their expectation of romantic life:

Isn’t the true love beyond everything including life and death? Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtaī, Romeo and Juliet, and many other fascinating romantic stories, moved me to tears. When the critical moment comes to me, I cannot make the move. Do I love him? Do I love him [the 8th Prince] as he deserves? Or is it just because of sympathy, because that I merely wanted to protect him from harm, without considering to take him as my true love through best and worst? Or both? I cannot tell my heart, nor my feeling.

The heroine’s calculation accounts for one of the most crucial factors as to why she chooses the 4th Prince over the 8th Prince. It also results in her absolute rejection of the social norm of polygamy in patriarchal society:

Would it be better, if I were not as persistent and upright as such, if I pursued less, and even if I accepted to share the same husband with

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132 Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtaī, abbreviated to be “Liangzhu,” or “the Butterfly Lovers” is a Chinese legend of a tragic love story of a pair of lovers. It is often regarded as the Chinese equivalent of Romeo and Juliet.

other women? Would it be much better, if I were unsophisticated enough to believe that I’m the only woman that he loves?  

“Sisters-marrying-the-same-man” is still considered as a romantic story for them [the princes], whereas prickles my heart like a throne.  

I don’t pray for a post in concubinage at the cost of dignity disregarding my gain and loss. Neither am I able to court him affectionately while coping with the other concubines, including my blood-sister.

The heroine’s ultimate desire to control her love life is justifiable from her modern perspective. The heroine further stresses the importance of self-realization. According to Ruoxi, “individuals have the right to pursue happiness.”

The modern identity of time-travel heroines is one of the essential factors that distinguish Jinjiang romance from other existing popular romance in China. Jinjiang women, nevertheless, still identify with certain characteristics that are inherent in the traditional image of Chinese women. The heroine is also quite capable of maintaining traditional skills, namely, etiquette, culture, painting and writing. Certain aspects of her characteristics are despised, or even criticized by the majority in current time. Instead of identifying themselves with either the traditional model or the modern model, readers of time-travel romance are able to incorporate both of them in reading. With the heroine’s entanglement of memories and struggle arising from her dual perspectives, the writer portrays a model of an idealized modern female in time-travel romance.

4.3.2. Multiple Heroes and the Ideal Man

When top-ranked time-travel romances are compared with their predecessors, an essential difference becomes evident. Of all the predominant pieces of Qing-travel romance, one of the most important yet controversial aspects is their description of

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“multiple men-one woman” relationships. Almost none of the heroines in the three predominant masterpieces of Qing time-travel fictions is involved in a monogamous relationship. Just as Ruoxi (in *Bubu*) suffers from her everlasting emotional anguish, Mingwei (in *Menghui Daqing*), and Yaohua (in *Yaohua*) both exert their modern identity by developing their romance with more than one male pursuer. It is justified to make a choice among several virtuous princes. As elaborated in Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, there is a “resolute focus on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero,”¹³⁸ in other words, the evolution of love between one man and one woman, is what essentially attracts Smithton readers’ interest in romance reading. Rather than portraying an ideal man, who is characterized by the “purity of maleness” and the “affectionate and tender soul”¹³⁹ hidden behind his exterior as opposed to his rival, time-travel readers prefer an assembly of various heroes in one story, and their love entanglement with the only one female protagonist.

*Bubu* is full of vivid characterization of each son of the Kangxi Emperor: the 8th Prince Yinsi, who is intelligent, genteel, and virtuous, the 10th Prince Yin’e, who is unsophisticated, and irresponsible but ambitious, the 13th Prince Yinxiang, who is energetic and unconstrained, the 14th Prince Yinti, who is faithful, kind-hearted and compassionate, and the 4th Prince Yinzhen, who is reserved, aloof and incisive. A public opinion poll on “Your Ideal Hero in *Bubu jingxin*” conducted by Sina Weibo in September, 2011, after the TV remake of *Bubu* was aired, revealed that each of the heroes were favoured by a fair portion of audience. The 4th Prince was favoured by most (40%), followed by the 14th Prince (20.6%) and the 8th Prince (19.9%). (See Figure 4.2)

¹³⁹ Ibid., 128.
Figure 4.2   Your Ideal Hero in Bubu jingxin


The result revealed in Figure 4.2 is more or less determined by the attractiveness of each actor. A close examination of the vivid characterization of heroes in Tong Hua’s original work may shed light on the ideal heroes in young Chinese women’s romantic fantasies.

In Bubu, Tong Hua mainly creates three different models of heroes, the 4th, 8th and 14th Prince. Ruoxi falls in love with the 8th Prince and the 4th Prince in succession, but eventually marries the 14th Prince in name only. Preference for the heroes’ personalities differs among female Chinese readers. Though endowed with different characteristics, all three heroes, more or less, share the key markings of the ideal hero as described in Feng’s words, “a hybrid of traditional and contemporary, Chinese and Western virtues.” 140 These include the propensity towards unconditional love, “a metrosexual look”, “superior intellectual powers, practical skills and physical strength.” 141 The result further confirms that, to the vast majority of the audience, the ideal hero is a mixture of handsomeness, affectionateness, and traditionally held views of masculinity.

140 Ibid., 145.
141 Ibid.
Young Chinese women demand a strong commitment in their relationships from the hero. Affectionateness alone does not contribute to an ideal hero. Some readers also demand a heavily masculinized hero, which is characterized by intellectual power instead of a focus on bulging muscles common in a Western hero. Their refusal of the masculinity embodied in the strength of physical power is further revealed in their visualization of heroes. He often appears to look, what some may call, “girly”, but must not be heavily muscled. It goes without saying that the manifestation of Web romance heroes varies in different work. There are, however, some commonalities.

The hero’s masculinity, first and foremost, is characterized by his aggressiveness and ability to protect the heroine from harm and persecution. He could even be misogynist and brutish. The 4th Prince, who was once portrayed as a dedicated governor in Yongzheng Dynasty, keeps his unbending and extreme characteristics in Bubu. It is speculated that he has a crush on Ruoxi as early on, however, Yongzheng reserves his feelings until a trip to Mulan Hunting Ground. There he enjoys a kiss from Ruoxi. As a man of constraint, he owns his affection to Ruoxi in a sudden, energetic and more or less, violent manner, while Ruoxi initially repels his advance but finally abides in his love:

Quick as a wink, I felt his ice-cold lips stamping on my lips. I tried my best to bend over my head backward and push him away to get rid of him, but it was in vain. After all, he surpassed me in strength. Whereupon, I pressed my lips together as a disapproval to lip-to-lip contact. He had no choice but to quit and raised his head. Ashamed into anger, I slapped in his face by imitating the reaction when a girl is sexually assaulted in Chinese TV drama. [...] He dodged my attack nimbly and pinioned my arms together behind my back, banteringly said, “You have spent so much time seducing me, and now you are playing ‘hard-to-get’”, his lips were still on my cheek, “I have to say, your scheme came off.”

I glowered at him, seeking for any evidence that I could use to refute him, but I was too annoyed to think. “Get away from me!”, I shouted at him. “If you want to be one of my women, I will request a marriage from my father”, Yinzhen whispered in my ears flirtatiously, clinging to me even closer……

He leaned forward slowly, teasing, and kissed me again. I couldn’t avoid it in spite that I struggled to lean back. The coldness was swiftly conducted through his lips to my deep heart, freezing every inch of my body. I closed
my eyes, thinking, “Damn! Damn it! Combat-poison-with-poison doesn’t work on him!” 142

The above detailed descriptions of their first non-consensual physical contact is presented from the perspective of the narrator and protagonist Ruoxi. Although the author keeps repeating “cold”, “coldness” and “freezing” to highlight Yinzhen’s characteristics: quiet and reserved, it is easy to see his yearning for affective intimacy. Rather than conveying his feelings in words, he decides to act out aggressively. The hero’s sexual aggression and physical violence, intriguingly, do not impede his attractiveness. Rather, they add to his masculinity. Indeed, every image of the 4th Prince is dark, cold and emphasizes his aggressive and uncompromising character. The 4th Prince’s charm is further established by a wariness that is hidden behind his cold and tightly wound exterior. “Cold outside, but warm inside” (waileng neire), as concluded by readers, is regarded to be his predominant characteristic.

The author must be able to exploit, in addition, a hero’s genuine attempt and capacity to protect the heroine out of his innocent love. Under the suspicion of slander against the Crown Prince, Yinxiang is made a scapegoat for his brothers’ fight for the throne. He is kept in captivity at Yangfeng jiadao, where the environment is cold and wet. Yinzhen is also implicated and restrains himself in his mansion, keeping himself far away from the imperial court. To assist Yinxiang’s soul mate, Lüwu to get into the jail as a servant girl, Ruoxi says that Yinxiang needs to be taken good care of in such a harsh environment. She explains that there is a girl from the brothel who loves him and is willing to serve him in bad times, while pleading for leniency from the emperor. She is also condemned by the emperor. The emperor then forces her to kneel in the Imperial Garden overnight. The next day is stormy, and Ruoxi is exposed to the wind and rain:

I had no idea of how long it has been, but I stooped my back with my elbow on my knees, holding my head with my hands. My body was so numb that I could hardly chill. Suddenly, I was able to feel an intent gaze on me. Struggling to raise up my head from unconsciousness, I saw the 4th Prince standing alone in the rainfall, holding a black bamboo umbrella. This was the first time that we met since Yinxiang was kept in captivity.

The rain blinded our eyes so that we could not read the facial expressions of each other, but I could feel his sorrow, astonishment and anger. We gazed at each other without saying a word. Coal-black umbrella, leaden gown, and the gruesome paleness of his face, in the endless darkness.

Throwing away his umbrella, he stepped towards me mutely. I stared at his umbrella swinging in the wind and rain, mutely. Time passed by, and the rain was as hard as before. The wind blustered around and blew the rain, lashing everything in the universe furiously. Though as cold as freezing, a warm glow lighted my heart. At least, there was someone standing with me through suffering and bitterness.

I dragged his gown. Down on his knees, he combed through my wet hair on my face with his fingers, fondly and gently. His gloomy eyes, looked as cold as the bad weather. “Go back! I understand what you feel!” I said with assertion.143

The author uses a variety of images – the dark sky, the fierce wind, the heavy rain, the black umbrella, the leaden gown and the pale face – to create a miserable atmosphere. The harshness of the natural environment and Yinzhen’s cold exterior are set in contrast to the gentleness of his inner nature. Though the 4th Prince may not be an ideal husband because of his habit of self-control, lack of sense of humour, and self-protective aggressiveness, but still, time-travel readers are obsessed with him, stressing the importance of his genuine attempts to protect his woman, his ultimate control of everything under difficulties, and his underlying capacity for affectionateness.

“The combination of this self-protective aggressiveness and the fleeting revelation of his underlying capacity for gentleness”144 characterizes the ideal hero for the Smithton readers, as described by Radway. Any notion of that there is only one ideal hero is far from Jinjiang readers’ expectation. All the three princes who have a crush on Ruoxi are masculine and affectionate. They nevertheless have minor differences in characteristics. Compared to the 4th Prince’s coldness, the 8th Prince is depicted as a charming scholar and gentle lover. Whatever readers cannot find in the 4th Prince can be traced onto him. As a counterpart of the 4th Prince, he is bestowed with a number of opposite features such as refinement, gentleness, being well-rounded in his interests,

144 Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance, 129.
open about his emotions, communicative, etc. He might be an ideal husband or an ideal romantic hero in most popular fantasies; yet, Web romance readers expect more. According to the author, neither the 4th Prince nor the 8th Prince is a perfect husband. It is the 14th Prince who is the perfect balance – honourable and courageous, and with the emotional intelligence to be able to let things go. Indeed, Ruoxi eventually marries the 14th Prince “in name” after knowing that “only in solitude, away from the madding crowds, away from the guilt and the politics could she love [the] 4th [Prince] entirely without doubt or hate or anything complicated.” Regardless of whom the heroine marries, each on the main male characters is equally attractive to readers. As illustrated in their comments of chapter 44, where Ruoxi makes up her mind to terminate her relationship with the 8th Prince, even though a fair proportion of readers protest against the author’s “dislike” of the 8th Prince, we still see other readers testifying that the 4th Prince is even more adored, and deserves the heroine’s deep affection. Fans undisguisedly show their affection for each of the princes in the novel, especially two of the princes who develop a reciprocal affection with Ruoxi. In “Those Couple of Men Who Impressed Me”, a long commentary created by one of the hard-core fans, Bingshe, on September 30, 2005, she revealed the lovely characteristics of main male characters in the novel, expressing her deep fondness of them. She declared that she would not regret a thousand deaths to die like a moth flying into a flame if she were loved by someone like the 4th Prince. Fans consciously classify themselves into two groups – siye dang (Party of the 4th Prince), those whose favourite character is the 4th Prince, and who support his legitimacy of succession to the throne, and baye dang (Party of the 8th Prince), those who support 8th Prince as the most intelligent son of Kangxi.

Fans’ constant debates over Ruoxi’s love affair push us to ask what makes the display of multiple heroes so important in time-travel romance if they are equally attractive and idealized regardless of minor differences in their personalities. As discussed before, the female author projects contemporary young Chinese women’s identities into the characterization of the heroine. Considering the participatory aspect of

145 Anonymous, “Interview – Tong Hua on Bubu jingxin.”
Web-based literary creation, the romance writings also come from the readers. Jinjiang women “project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her surprise and slowly awakening pleasure”\textsuperscript{147} as pursued and protected by multiple men. Their emotional and affectionate needs are satisfied in their cautious description and selection of an ideal man among those provided in the romance. Jinjiang fans claim that reading “multiple men-one woman” romance is about encountering their own ideal hero through reading romance. The identification of ideal heroes varies from person to person, on the basis of a comprehensive comparison of the personality, ideology and romantic expectations of the heroes with those of themselves.\textsuperscript{148} Different from male-oriented time-travel romance fictions, where the hero is typically indulges the whole-scale conquest of idealized female sexual partners; the heroine’s achievement of mutual love is achieved through an evolving course with each of the heroes. The failure in accomplishing this goal, in female fans’ words, results in \textit{yiyin}\textsuperscript{149} (lust of the mind), or the acronym of YY, which is considered as the key feature of “stud fictions” because the hero keeps flirting and copulating with beautiful women during the trip of time travel and has received numerous critical opinions from female readers.

\textit{Bubu} is one of the most-viewed and earliest-established time-travel romances at Jinjiang. The close textual examination of \textit{Bubu} illustrates the general features of heterosexual time-travel romance. More current trends need be addressed in the following chapter because Jinjiang authors always keep themselves informed about the latest hot topics and formats. While defending their own aesthetic and cultural tastes, Jinjiang women are open-minded to all sorts of new trends of popular culture. With an eye on their ultimate concerns for gender-specific issues, they keep adjusting their ideas to cater to the diversified tastes of the popular. In the following chapter, I connect the lived experience of the post-1980s generation, especially, young women, to the most

\textsuperscript{147} Janice A. Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance}, 67.
\textsuperscript{149} Initially used in Cao Xueqin’s \textit{Hongloumeng (Dream of the Red Chamber)}, “yiyin” is introduced by the Fairy of Jinghuan during Baoyu’s oneiric journey to the Land of Illusion, in an attempt to define his particular “lust,” or “romantic infatuation,” as she states. The word is also translated as “lust of the imagination,” “inclination towards lust,” “desire for lust,” etc.
popular topics and new trends of heterosexual time-travel romance fictions at Jinjiang. I answer what matters most, and why it matters in young Chinese women's romance reading.
5. Affective Space

The study of time-travel fandom at Jinjiang requires an approach that is different from traditional literary studies because fans’ literary practice involves a complex process of reception, ethical and aesthetic judgement, and interactivities. As discussed in Chapter 3, readers can provide instant feedback to authors through online communities and participate in the discussion of the creation of works. Every now and then, authors recommend other author’s works to her readers based on her reading experience. It is also common to see readers share their general reading experience, create a wide variety of spinoffs, and communicate their experience in real life. Literary communication and daily interaction enrich the reading experience of readers and facilitate literature-based virtual communities. To study time-travel fandom as a cultural artifact means to look deep into not only the text, but also the space in between the text and the context. Culture should be understood as a process, or a set of practices which requires the attention to how meanings are made in a given moment. Stuart Hall writes, “culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas.” Lawrence Grossberg goes one step further, suggesting three guiding principles for cultural studies: radical contextuality, strategic political intervention, and relationality. His concern here, works as the theoretical framework of the following examinations. I look into (1) the historical and political context which shapes the time-travel romance and its fandom; (2) the involvement of issues of power, dominance and resistance acted by certain subordinated social groups that based on class and gender; (3) a whole way of life that is in conjunction with context and power. Specifically, I examine the postsocialist living conditions of the post-1980s generation, their lived experience of everyday life, especially that of the young urban women, and in which way they handle the social


tension in their lives. In other words, the text and context are reversible through the mediation of the affective space in between them. In order to explain the significance of rock and roll, Grossberg describes the space between music and fans by bringing in “the production of a network of empowerment”, or in other words, the concept of “affective alliance.”152 Rather than using “emotion” or “feeling” to address fans’ involvement in time-travel reading and writing, the concept of “affect” describes what matters most. It is “what gives ‘color,’ ‘tone,’ or ‘texture’ to the lived”153 in their everyday lives. The affective space and alliance surrounding time-travel fandom in Chinese cyberspace, as Grossberg used to address the apparatus of rock and roll in the postmodern world, “functions to provide [fans] strategies for escaping, denying, celebrating, finding pleasure in – in other words, for surviving”154 – within a constantly changing and highly competitive society.

A close observation of the Web-based fandom surrounding concrete texts will shed lights on the lived experience of young Chinese women, their engagement into reading practices and sharing belief in gender-specific issues.

5.1. Habitus and Status quo of the Post-1980s Generation: Manly Women, Leftover Women and Married Women

As scholars have pointed out, “the sustained fascination with communication and expression online […] reflects a yearning for social connection in times of great social transformation”, and it is articulated with current “social and political conditions.”155 It is extremely hard to identify a specific event of social transformation that exclusively and directly leads to their emotional oppression and abandonment. Rather, it is the overall situation of socioeconomic transformation that entails the configuration of habitus of

152 Lawrence Grossberg, Dancing, 44.
153 Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 81.
154 Lawrence Grossberg, Dancing, 44.
China’s young generation. The first chapter of *Bubu* offers us an access to the daily life of urban young Chinese women:

2005, Shenzhen.

The streets look lovelier when the evening lights are lit. Bathed in the dim yellow light, Zhang Xiaowen appeared exhausted in her mazarine suit. It suddenly came into her mind that the bulb in her bathroom had gone when she entered the lobby. She turned around hastily, heading to the convenience store besides her apartment.

Door open, light on, shoes off, bag down. All at once. Zhang Xiaowen inched the ladder from the balcony to the bathroom. After making sure the ladder is balanced, she stepped up scrupulously. “Ouch!” She slipped and fell heavily down to the tile ground, as still as death.\(^{156}\)

The above paragraphs depict a typical after-work scene of urban white-collar woman, living in a metropolis with rapidly developing economies. Their lived experience is often described as “busy,” “exhausted,” “oppressed,” “helpless,” “boring,” and the list goes on. The common social feeling of “boringness” and “vapidness” is prominent in the generation born around/after 1980 as a result of One Child Policy in mainland China. Born in the 1980s and raised in 1990s, the “post-1980s generation,” roughly 200 million young Chinese,\(^{157}\) suffered/is suffering enormous difficulties caused by dramatic social transformations: educational reform, enlargement of university enrollment, less working opportunities, health care reform, soaring house price, money-oriented individualism and capitalism. The insipid routine life of office workers, working pressure, social competition, deficiency of love and friendship, and parents’ high expectations, deprive the living and emotional space of China’s young generation, especially the young women, compelling them to “search for identity and belonging”\(^{158}\) elsewhere, rather than from real life.

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\(^{158}\) Guobin Yang, “The Internet,” 113.
The “suddenly-found self-identity”\textsuperscript{159} is also justified by members of the post-1980s generation. This monolithic group of people – different from their parents, most of whom were born in the 1950s/1960s and have experienced the bitter persecutions of the Cultural Revolution and extreme shortage of materials, as well as those people in their thirties and forties who were inspired and enlightened by the western-style democracy and freedom before 1989 – find that they have very little to inherit from their parents spiritually. Sociological surveys also have found that earlier generations’ assessment of the post-1980s generation differentiates from that of themselves, seeing them as superficial, self-centred, and materialistic.\textsuperscript{160} Indeed, the belief systems and values of this generation, and even the next generation, the post-1990s youth, are different from the previous generations. A survey conducted by the World History Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) revealed that “individual struggle” dominates their belief system.\textsuperscript{161}

Young post-1980s’ scholar Shi Hongshen noted: “the same pressure of life, from both life and work, especially given the high housing price nowadays that most of us need to be able to get married”, and “the fact that we not only have to work hard to afford all the mortgage we carry, but also have to build our own spiritual world, after we have come to realize how barren it has been, from scratch, which has brought both elation and disillusion.”\textsuperscript{162} The way that these diverse and highly individualistic young people react to the radical changes and heavy pressures, and to the successes and uncertainties of their country, vividly reflects their pursuit of new values and moral meanings. Many popular cultural artifacts have addressed a wide range of problems confronting this generation. Coincidentally, their shared concern focuses on the


\textsuperscript{160}Fangbing Jiang 蒋方炳, “Dui ‘baling hou’ yidai juese piancha wenti de tiren yu fansi” 对“80 后”一代角色偏差问题的体认与反思 [Views and Reflections on Role Deviation of the “Post-1980s” Generation], Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu, no. 6 (2007): 25.


\textsuperscript{162}Hongshen Shi, quoted in James Fallows, “Voices.”
“struggles” of China’s post-1980s’ generation, and how little there is to achieve for their dreams in reality. For example, a recent TV series, *Dwelling Narrowness (Woju, 2009)* represents two different ways that young urban middle class women struggle to settle in a big city.\(^{163}\) The life path of the well-educated older sister represents those who strive for a better life through a hard way: she saves every penny she can, spares painstaking effort to work extra hours, and temporarily lives with her husband in a shabby rented room. The younger sister, on the contrary, represents those who take a shortcut to achieve material wealth: she becomes a mistress of an influential government official who in turn affords her luxuries and big house. This TV series stirred up hot debates on the predicament of Chinese young generation by displaying many social problems in postsocialist China, including the increasingly high house price, home mortgage slaves (*fangnu*), extramarital affairs (*xiaosan*), and material girls (*baijinnü*).

The Internet enables individuals who have the same identities and concerns to get in touch with each other, and most importantly, voice their “‘assembled’ opinion even though, in the physical world, they remain atomized in front of computer screen.”\(^{164}\) The Internet has become a field where China’s young generation seeks unique identities including a space of communication. Over 50% of Internet users in China are in the range 10 to 29 years old.\(^ {165}\) The surplus of Web literature is directly affected by the social and cultural changes in contemporary China, despite the fact that “Internet usage, gaps of class, education, and gender have diminished” since 1997. As in Yang’s research shows, as the result of the rise of a middle class, along with the urban consumer revolution, the excess of Web literature is a clear evidence of China’s “Net Generation”,\(^ {167}\) a generation that was born after the beginning of economic reform in


\(^{166}\) Jin Feng, "Have Mouse," 48.

\(^{167}\) Guobin Yang, "Chinese Internet Literature," 341.
mainland China. The “Net Generation” is marked by “its own technologies of expression”\textsuperscript{168} and the willingness to express.

Even though the Web authors are not prone to portray the actual social condition in their works, neither do they propose a blueprint for the foreseeable future. Instead, they shed light on the unsatisfying social reality of contemporary China, which speaks to why young Chinese women take time travel as such an important element of daily entertainment and their desire for empowerment. In the beginning of the matriarchal time-travel romance *Xiaoyong jiangshan meinan* (*Dominating the World, Conquering the Men*, hereafter, *Xiaoyong*), the author depicts a gloomy picture that the 28-years old heroine wandering on the bridge across a river after midnight, drunk, smoking and nostalgic. She is rich, but has a lack of affection as her parents both died years ago. Cheated and dumped by several boyfriends, she loses confidence in her romantic life. In her words, men approach her merely for the purpose of money or support in their careers: “I don’t believe in men any more”, “Go to hell! You asshole”, “I’ll be damn ugly and fat if marrying a man flashes through my mind again ever”\textsuperscript{169} are the last words before she dies in the accident. She brings these ideas with her to the underground and appeal for a restoration in a world where females rule and males submit. The author weaves her fiction with the unsatisfying reality.

In a similar vein, strong and independent women have become more common in China’s major cities and entertainment industries both on and off line. A Web-originated term “nü hanzi” (manly women), literally “female man”, referring to members of women who are independent, candid and strong as opposed to the traditional Chinese criteria of female virtues, is favored by most of young Chinese women.\textsuperscript{170} It is by no means a reflection of one’s appearance or fashion sense, but about one’s thought and behaviour. Despite of her fashion style – she might dress in a feminine style – her masculine acts nevertheless help to justify the fact that she is a genuine “female man.” Perhaps

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{170} See more in Wei Xu, “These Boots Are Made for Walking,” *Shanghai Daily*, November 22, 2013.
disfavoured by women in their 40s or above, most of young urban women in their 20s enjoy being labeled, and even feel flattered by “nü hanzi.” The popular trend of “manly women” is perfectly concluded by a slogan which vividly describes “China’s new superwomen”: she is able to manage her household as well as her career; she is able to remove computer virus as well as to cross over “the great firewall”; she could afford a luxury sport car as well as a good house; she is able to beat a home wrecker as well as a gangster. Chinese television has been flooded by more and more “manly women” in recent years. A light-hearted romance TV series Mop Lady’s Spring, which depicts the daily life of a young female automobile mechanic, stirred a heated discussion among the public in early 2013. The heroine’s nickname, Xiaocong (green onion), manifests her tough personality and grassroots spirit. She is labeled “female man” not only because of her loud voice, preppy short hair, face without makeup and loose pants, but also because she is straightforward, less interested in material possessions, and never sheds tears in the face of difficulties. From Web to screen, the prevalence of “female man” proves that young Chinese women are capable of handling a variety of matters physically and emotionally, within relationships and in career. A spontaneous consequence of the rise of “female man” is the emergence of “fake ladies” (weiniang) and “flower boys” (huameinan). This trend more or less, answers to young women’s belief in their capability as an equal to, or even larger than men.

Paradoxically, these young Chinese women’s independence and capability is not extolled by the general public. One would be ruthlessly labelled as a “leftover woman” (shengnü) by the public if she is over 27, unmarried, urban, well-educated, probably holding a professional position and earning a handsome salary. State-run media started using the term shengnü in 2007, and “have aggressively disseminated this term in surveys, and news reports, and columns, and cartoons and pictures, basically stigmatising educated women over the age of 27 or 30 who are still single.”

A BBC article published early 2013 elaborated the issue of China’s “leftover women” by

171 上得了厅堂下得了厨房，杀得了木马翻得了围墙，开得起好车住得起洋房，斗得过小三打得过流氓，

Originally a profile of a netizen’s Tencent instant message account, circulated at Renren social network (the Chinese version of Facebook).

interviewing Huang Yuanyuan, a 29-year-old female radio news editor, and has received nearly 700 comments made by the netizens from various countries.\textsuperscript{173} Western netizens consider this stigmatized label as a reflection of male chauvinism in China, while many Asian female netizens (including Chinese women) expressed their similar concerns and anxiety. The public attitude towards the thin line between women’s independence and disgrace sometimes confuses and terrifies young Chinese women. The pressure of “getting married before 30” not only comes from the society, but also their parents, who are as well the victims of One Child Policy, and afraid of their one and only daughter to become “out-of-date” after 30, according to their conventional point of view towards marriage and life style. On the other hand, most young women would like to address the term “\textit{shēngnǚ}” as an equivocal, because “\textit{shēng}” also signifies “sacred” (圣) according to its Mandarin pronunciation. Being “left” behind doesn’t mean they will rush to marry a “D-quality” man. Regardless of the public discrimination, a fair proportion of the “sacred women” still claim to live a happy and fulfilling life. Some even assert they choose to be single for now because they are satisfied with their current life style.\textsuperscript{174} The emergence of so-called leftover women is a product of an accelerated pace of life, particularly, the intense career pressure, heightened social mobility, and loosened social bonds.\textsuperscript{175} I argue that the phenomenon of “leftover women” indicates a complex structure of feeling among young Chinese women in their late 20s and early 30s. As concluded by Shuyu Kong, there exists a sense of “inner conflict between two powerful interlocking emotions – a desire for the kind of affluent life that they can see others leading, and a fear of losing everything in the extremely competitive and ruthless social environment.”\textsuperscript{176} In a sense, they have a strong desire for affection, but are not prepared to run the risk of losing their personal life.


\textsuperscript{174} Minji Yao, "Choosing to be Single (for Now)," \textit{Shanghai Daily}, November 9, 2011, sec. B1, B2.

\textsuperscript{175} Shuyu Kong, “Are You the One?”, 127-148.

If one is lucky enough to meet and marry her “second half” in her early twenties, however a carefree life is not guaranteed. On the one hand, she has to sacrifice her personal life for her family, dwelling amongst the relationship with her mother-in-law and/or sister-in-law, housework, child education, etc. Some claim that they are deeply concerned about how to accommodate their way of life (when she was single) to their post-marriage families. While others have to undergo a difficult transitional period from a professional woman to a housewife because it is traditionally perceived that women should sacrifice themselves for their families. Furthermore, she also worries about all sorts of potential disturbances in the bond of marriage, particularly, an extramarital affair of her husband.

Jinjiang fans’ engagement with time-travel text has taken place within this complicated social emotional environment. With this societal background in mind, it is not hard to understand why young Chinese women indulge in online literary practices and are involved in virtual community life.

5.2. Time-Travel Fans’ Utopian Realism

Scholars have examined the space of tension between fantasy world and fans’ real life. Henry Jenkins’ study shows, media fans “blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore.” Matt Hills challenges the above diagnosis, arguing that fans are actually able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and “play with (and across) the boundaries between ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’” with certain awareness. He writes, “Texts can be used creatively by fans to manage tensions between inner and outer

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180 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 106.
worlds.” Scholars of media studies have examined the space between female fans’ living experience and their favourite media texts, asserting that the concrete situations and complications in media texts represent American women’s “general living experiences: quarrels, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery.”

In the realm of Chinese literary studies, David Wang has used the concept of “heterotopias” to describe the cultural implication of social imagination in recent popular Chinese science fictions. As for Internet-based activities, Yang Guobin has noticed “a critique of the present and a yearning for a better world” which “originates in discontents with social reality.” It is for the reason of discontents that Chinese netizens seek an outlet to express their thinking in cyberspace. All of the previous research sheds light on the “affective space” between texts and context, fantasy and reality. Janice Radway writes in “Zines Then and Now”: “even the practice of reading itself, […] is far more complex and contingent as a practice than it is sometimes portrayed […] At the same time, they treat them as occasions for participating in different kinds of activities or performance, including the solitary work of meditation and the more social, intersubjective activities of conversation, discussion, recommendation, and evaluation.” My examination of the interaction between romance texts, fans and authors shows that, reading and writing online provides female time-travel fans, especially those who have experienced difficulties, frustrations and depressions in their own life, an outlet to voice their feelings and discuss their views on romantic affairs, job situations, domestic problems and gender-specific issues publicly, collectively, and interactively. In other words, time-travel text and the associated virtual community help them to negotiate between reality and fantasy.

181 Ibid.
184 Guobin Yang, The Power, 156.
5.2.1.  *Nüe and the Pleasure of Weeping*

Romance readers’ engagement in the reading is characterized by their emotional involvement. The light-hearted romance satisfies female readers with single, developing and faithful mutual love, providing them with emotional indulgence as a sort of compensation.\(^\text{186}\) In the context of Chinese Web literature, a fair amount of the consumption of male-oriented time-travel fantasies further confirms the compensatory function of cultural products. Compared with both its predecessor and current counterpart, Web-based Qing-travel romance established its reputation by the distinct deployment of emotionally abused narrative. The ancient setting does not make time-travel romances pure fantasy; instead, it maximizes the possibilities of experience. Specifically, the heroine often encounters numerous obstacles and difficulties on her trip backward, both emotionally and physically. She must seek a way out. This narrative strategy entertains young women in two main ways: First, women’s self-realization, i.e. how to survive in a patriarchal environment, and how to manage their emotion and martial life. Second, it provides them with an outlet to voice their sentiment concerning the above questions.

Julia Lovell uses the term “escapist” to generalize the time-travel storylines, in which “the hero or heroine is reincarnated in different periods of Chinese history (often undergoing sex-change) and embarks upon a series of lurid adventures.”\(^\text{187}\) The single word “escape” seems to be of significant importance for the reading behavior of China’s cyber-savvy generation. From Radway’s 1984 study to today, scholars have come to similar conclusions: “the lack of similarity between events in the fantasy realm and those in the real world seems to guarantee a reading experience that is ‘escapist,’ emotional identification with the central character also insures that the experience will be an affectively significant one for the reader.”\(^\text{188}\) Rather than seeking an “instant gratification” or “refuge” in male-oriented time-travel fantasies, young Chinese women appear to be making a detour to release tensions, frustrations and emotional deprivation to respond to the predicaments in their real lives. More than a guarantee of gratified social and

\(^{186}\) Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 85.
\(^{187}\) Julia Lovell, "Finding a Place," 11.
\(^{188}\) Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 98.
emotional life, the mental and physical ordeal that the heroine must go through is also a reflection of the daily experience of the readers and authors. For example, in order to answer to fans’ question about why the heroine’s romantic life must go through so many difficulties in *Menghui daqing*, the author claims at the end of a chapter:

[...] Why do fairy tales always end up with “The prince and the princess lived happily ever after”? It is because the real life is the most wounding. Without the twists and turns, how could one taste the real happiness? If one drinks the sweet water on a daily basis, the sweet water then would become tasteless. Therefore, the conclusion is, I’m not the one who tortures the heroine…

Most fans claim that they wept profusely in the process of reading *Bubu*. Jinjiang yields a number of autobiographical posts in which readers make themselves the subject of their own life stories provoked by Ruoxi’s ordeal. For other readers, they are equally touched despite not having experienced similar ordeal. A reader’s comment to *Bubu* describes young Chinese women’s general outlook on survival in contemporary China, and answers to their indulgence in reading:

Ruoxi is tragic merely because she comes from the modern world. She is integrated with urban women’s strength, calculation and kindness. In order to protect herself from harm, her realism does not annoy us, because we are exactly one of Ruoxi’s group. We urban girls work very hard from childhood to achieve higher social status, get a decent job with a moderate income, and have a cozy home. We do not expect melodramatic love, but desire ordinary happiness. Neither do we pursue wealth, but try to avoid poverty. So does Ruoxi. She is not able to accomplish her dream simply because of her modern identity. Tong Hua’s *Bubu* makes you to enter into that world, and beats any other novels by its realness.

The tragic romantic lives of all the female characters, including the heroine, thus forcefully provoke readers’ sympathy, and give them “a good cry” associated with affection, attachment and commitment. They claim:

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I shed tears each time reading *Bubu*.191

I’m crying all over my self, for very single miserable life!192

I wept my heart out when reading the end of the story.193

I feel so sad, and cannot help shedding tears with Ruoxi either in a good or bad mood.194

Their stories seem to resonate with young Chinese women’s own romance/marriage/family lives, job situations, interpersonal relationships, and living conditions in a contemporary Chinese society. Fans’ emotional attachment to the characters’ tragic lives in the fiction also leads them to compare their own affective life with the novel ones. A commentary attached to *Bubu* represents such an interpretation:

Though time travel is a novel idea, we are able to identify similar situations in real life. For the most of cases, there is nothing that I can do in spite of the fact that I know something is wrong, and result would be really bad…. Reading, brings me to think about the helpless of life. “Flowers fall to go, familiar swallow to return.” Except for picking up flowers and forcing a smile, what else can we do? I just broke up with my boyfriend today. He dumped me without a little bit hesitation after five-year relationship. I cried and asked for a reason. It is exactly the same as I speculated! I didn’t believe in fate, thinking that as long as I try hard, we can make it better. I had the destination, unfortunately, he didn’t want to wait. At this moment of time, reading your novel makes me to feel the taste I cannot breathe out.195


The taste as the commentator addressed above can also be found elsewhere, commonly interpreted as “grief”, “suffering”, “sorrow” or “nüe” in Chinese language, to borrow the term from fans’ interpretation, a heavy-hearted feeling achieved in the process of reading is directly opposed to “instant gratification” identified in male-centered escapist historical fantasy. According to readers’ arguments, a romantic relationship in real life is definitely a combination of mundane elements: appearance, family background, education and wealth all contribute to the complex romantic relationship. The feeling aroused in their process of reading is a reflection of an inner struggle against the unsatisfying reality of modern life, which is projected on the fictional time traveler. Others also take the reading of such novels as a good reason for crying out in a highly competitive social environment, especially when confronting sexual frustration, as addressed in the above comment.

For the above readers, time-travel romance offers a form of emotional catharsis. They believe that a “classic” romance must have a tragic end: “Though the fiction is a tragedy, and I was crying badly when reading, but I have to say, tragedy is the best end for them (Ruoxi and the 4th Prince).”196 “This is a classic Qing-travel work. Every time I read it, I feel touched, and cannot help weeping. [...] Sometimes, imperfection is also a kind of beauty.”197 While other readers hold opposite opinions: “The ending is so disappointing!”198 “I cannot accept this ending!”199

In response to the “unhappy ending” of Bubu, there is an enthusiastic creation of spinoffs or parodies of fans’ favourite works published at Jinjiang, usually as sequels to

the original. Completed works such as *Xu Bubu jingxin (Sequel to Bubu Jingxin)* by Yu Duoduo, *Bubu jingxin zhi bubu zhenxi (Startling by Each Step, Treasuring by Each Step)* by Chenyuanhuanxue, *Junsheng wo weisheng (You Were Reborn, I Was Not)* by Lingsu, and numerous incomplete sequel works started since the TV remake was on air, provide alternative “feel-good” endings to the original novel. For instance, in the earliest sequel work *Sequel to Bubu Jingxin*, the modern traveler Zhang Xiaowen is retransferred to the Qing dynasty after the death of Ruoxi. She reunites with the Yongzheng Emperor, spends 13 years with him in cohabitation, and gives birth to one son and one daughter. Yongzheng eventually escapes from the Forbidden City after his 13-years reign, and lives with Ruoxi and their children like other ordinary married couples. However, these works are often criticized as “a wretched sequel to a fine work.” Even though they try to maintain the “emotionally abused” tone of work, assigning many miserable situations to Ruoxi’s life, e.g. the risk of being murdered, stabbed and poisoned, vaginal bleeding during early pregnancy and suicide, fans still argue that a happy ending is incongruous as it weakens the massive historical sense of the original work, and results in an ordinary light-hearted romance story. According to more sophisticated fans, they love time-travel romance because they can see the most realistic romantic relationship in this novel, rather than typical “Qiong Yao-style” romance depicting the ideal heroine with inherent innocence both sexually and socially, capacity of suffering and faith in the ultimate triumph of true love.200

Yu Duoduo, starting as a fan of *Bubu*, and later a fanfic writer, was able to continue her literary creation at Jinjiang over years. After *Sequel to Bubu Jingxin* (2007), she has completed two romance fictions and been working on a handful of other fictions. Her latest publications include *Bihun (Marry-Upon-Graduation)* and *Aidao youshang (I Love You So Bad)*, both of which are urban romance. Her success can be attributed to her active participation as a fan-author. The authorship of Jinjiang therefore, should be re-defined according to different degrees of involvement. Contract authors’ writing practice is profitable. They barely get involved in online interactivities. Fan-authors are

those who write a considerable amount of fictions and identify themselves as fans and authors simultaneously. Author-fans are fans of a particular genre/genres, but also post creative literary works out of interest.

With majority of authors identifying themselves as fan-authors, Jinjiang's authorship is keen to cater to a wide variety of readers’ tastes. Jinjiang users’ controversial opinions towards a happily ended romance story have inspired many fan-authors to create various by-products.

Except for connecting their daily experience with the ordeal that the heroine suffers, fans claim that Web-based romance reading functions in a similar way as conventional romance – the purpose of “escape.” Other popular cultural artifacts which address similar living conditions of young Chinese women are of no interest to the majority of Jinjiang fans because otherwise romance reading would be too depressing. A fan of Bubu explained her sympathy for each of the princes in the novel, then went on to elaborate the burdens that she, and almost everyone in her age is experiencing:

Despite of the fact that the modern society makes human rights, liberty and equality possible, the fact that it also enables women’s equal status in education, outdoor activities, and employment – not to mention women’s privileges, and the surplus of materials that we could take advantage of, modern people are still under the stress of unfair income, career development, medical care, education and house price... Thus I enjoy reading, indulging in the remote period. I’m fully aware that historically, it is not the true story, but a fantasy. After all, it is the dream of a young girl. In the eventful time, I could visualize every one of the energetic, ambitious young men, and the young women behind them. I wish I could be one of the girls in the wealthy family, favored by so many young men. I wish I could marry the 13th Prince in Menghui daqing and Huangran rumeng, the 8th Prince in Yaohua, the 9th Prince in Dangni taru qingchao, or even the 4th in Bubu jingxin. 201

Romance reading, therefore, engages fans’ attention. It enables them to deny their physical presence in an environment where daily burdens are so onerous to bear. At the same time, the display of a variety of heroes fulfills their affectionate and emotional

need. By carefully choosing a good romance, they also escape into a fairy tale where the possibility of developing romantic relationships with powerful, wealthy and masculine men is maximized. Their emotional needs, otherwise, could not be adequately met. The world where the modern girl, Zhang Xiaowen reincarnates is regarded as an exotic utopic society where they can enjoy the best of the world.

Peter J. Rabinowitz has suggested a turn of reading strategies that “readers use to process texts.” He argues that “reading’ is always ‘reading as’. A time-travel romance text will reveal different meanings, generate different pleasures if read as a classic romance which, according to Tong Hua, must end tragically; as a more contemporary romance which promises a happy resolution to different dilemmas; as the saga of a utopian society; as an adventure story about a time-traveler who struggle to survive in difficulties (as discussed in 4.3.1); or as a compensatory historical text (as discussed in 4.2).

5.2.2. Life Is Not All About Love!

Female fans’ reading of time-travel romance novels entails various interpretations depending on the specific aspect that individuals are interested in. As their concerns change with time, Jinjiang women’s reading interests and strategies change too. New trends in more recent time-travel works indicate that young Chinese women’s concerns are not all about their romantic life. In the reading of early time-travel romance novels like Bubu, fans’ constant emphasis and controversial ideas on the heroine’s growth along Ruoxi’s trip has implied that reading the romance could provide them with instructions for their real life, convincing that one of the essential impulses of their time-travel romance reading is the realization of an intentional self. The recent trend of “farming” (zhongtian) fictions and “domestic intrigue” (zhaidou) fictions shows young

203 Ibid., 421.
204 Jenkins applied Rabinowitz’s reading strategy to analyze fans’ reading of Star Trek, and developed similar interpretations. See Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers, 132-135.
urban women’s dilemma: how to overcome obstacles, and how to solve problems in their pre-marriage and post-marriage life.

Recently, Jinjiang also yields a great amount of “farming” (zhongtian) fictions, where the heroine is from a low class, but works diligently, manages the triviality of her daily life, and eventually achieves happiness and success. Her capability is by no means at the mercy of the “golden finger” (jin shouzhi), but a result of her hard work. Rather than seeking shortcuts, the heroines in “farming” fictions have faith in individual struggles. The living condition of the post-1980s generation is reflected in “farming” fictions. For example, in the introduction of Chuanyue zhongtian zhi pinjianù (Woman In Poor Household, serialized from 2012), the author relates that the poor heroine “traveled through time to a family in extreme poverty; she was raised up while her families could barely support themselves; she was engaged to a guy who doesn’t love her at all; she thought maybe that’s what life is supposed to be, and resettled in a city; she didn’t realize how hard her life was till she met another time-travel women in the new city.”

Clearly, the author’s main concern is not simply a heterosexual relationship/marriage in a make-believe world but “how to realize a more mature self and how to achieve emotional fulfillment” in a society where such goals are hardly achieved.

Moreover, the authors of “farming” fictions rarely set their stories in a modern society as a strange and distant time allows for more possibilities of success and achievement. Competing voices are frequently heard in the pluralization of Chinese society. But it seems to be a common view that contemporary China has become “a society in which financial inequality and even sexual frustration seem directly linked to poor family backgrounds, undesirable native places, and age.” Like the faithful tilling of the farmer in agricultural society, readers of “farming” fictions believe that if she works

205 It originally refers to a “cheating tool/program” used in online gaming. It enables the avatar to enjoy the best of the gaming world, which is importable to the average players.


207 Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance, 139.


hard, a low born young woman can achieve a good life, even though they might be labeled as “leftover women” or “manly women” in real life.

Since the phenomenon of “extramarital affairs” became a major social issue, intrigues in the domestic sphere has become a popular topic and important aspect of Jinjiang heterosexual romance novels. Rather than mainly focusing on the evolution of mutual affection between the heroine and her Mr. Dreamy in traditional popular romance, recent Web romances spare equal efforts on the time-travelers’ pre-marriage and post-marriage lives. The latest upsurge of romances that depict “domestic intrigues” or “household intrigues”, for instance, "Hougong Zhen Huan zhuan (The Legend of Zhen Huan)", a Chinese TV remake based on the Jinjiang romance of the same name, further reveals Chinese audience’s interests in one’s self-realization. The heroine in a Qing-imperial romance is usually involved in the polygamy, typically, in an imperial family. The heroine’s self-realization and the ultimate triumph of her “post-marriage” life, as in the case of "The Legend of Zhen Huan," “allows the female audience to project their desires onto Zhen Huan,” and “justifies women’s independence.” If not lucky enough to get involved in an imperial family, the heroine’s life is even more miserable. She will fight with her mother-in-law, or sister-in-law, or most commonly, other concubines of the same man for the interest of her son(s)/daughter(s), or the man’s favor for herself. Except for the heroine’s love affairs, Web romance spares no pains to depict her wisdom when confronting challenges and obstacles. She is not an appendage to her husband, rather an independent person who is strengthened by strikes.

Fans’ discussions on the household intrigues further reveals the instructional function of romance reading. She uses all means to approach to her husband, and defeat any “home wreckers” (xiaosan), or in fans’ words, the “little white flower” (xiao baihua), who appears to be vulnerable but crafty enough to curry favor with her husband. She is also able to acquire a variety of techniques to manage domestic relations within a multigenerational household. In the Jinjiang discussion forum, a

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210 Danyuan Jin 金丹元 and You Xi 游溪, “Cong Zhen Huan Zhuan de rebo tan guzhuangju dui lishi de chongxin xiangxiang” from 《甄嬛传》的热播谈古装剧对历史的重新想象 [The Re-Imagination of History in Historical Costume Dramas: A Case Study of the Legend of Zhen Huan], Journal of Zhejiang University of Media and Communications 20, no. 3 (2013): 93-94.
considerable number of posts seek support for or solution to their domestic problems. They also reflect young Chinese women’s concerns about their real lives. A fan of Zhifou, zhifou, yingshi lüfei hongshou? even claims, “after reading this novel, my I.Q. boosted up to 250.” Other fans address it in a more direct way:

The story provoked my complex emotions, including anger, grief, frustration and struggling [...] I easily project myself into the story, which triggers my co-feelings, which further render my self-reflection, so that my real life could actually benefit from the reading [...] There has been quite a few times that the author’s life experience, which is told through the mouths of the characters, brought me new ideas, and gave me strength to face the new challenges in my real life.

As Shao Yanjun points out, the focus of readers’ reception has shifted from the model of “Cinderella-fantasy”, or “Snow White-dream” to the growth of a “Evil Queen.” With the instruction from the morally ambiguous “Evil Queen”, Jinjiang women can practically – albeit temporarily – manage the domestic and trivial issues.

5.2.3. Why Do Women Suffer?

More recent heterosexual time-travel romances seem to represent a more radical break from patriarchal social norms and conventional cultural codes. While romantic relationship remains to be dominant in Jinjiang time-travel works, authors seek alternative paths to women’s empowerment. As the ordeal that female protagonists undertake during their time-travel journeys force them to strengthen themselves, the image of the powerful female traveler is more and more prevalent in recent years. Almost generated at the same time as “emotionally abused narrative” (nüewen), the
“larger-than-life” heroine has been favoured by fans as well. Matriarchal narrative, as the name suggests, offers a fictional matriarchal society where women rule and men obey as opposed to the patriarchal status quo. Such fiction advocates “female supremacy” and further challenges the patriarchal norm. Within this context the excess of nüzun fiction (matriarchal narratives) becomes more illuminating.

Jinjiang’s matriarchal narrative is not a debut of feminist utopian fiction depicting the female-dominated world in China. As early as in the late 18th century, Li Ruzhen’s Jinghua Yuan (Destiny of Flowers in the Mirror) represented such feminist ideality: the earthly realm (ruled by the first and only female sovereign in Chinese history, Wu Zetian) and the supernatural realm (ruled by Queen-mother of the West, Xiwangmu). Two male characters in the earthly realm, Tang Ao and his companion Lin Zhiyang experience exciting adventures, encounter various strange characters, and discover exotic cultures during their trip overseas to search for the flower fairies who are banished from heaven to be incarnated on earth because that they upset the natural order to let the flowers bloom for Wu Zetian in winter. One of the most intriguing countries that they experience is the Country of Women (nü'er guo), where two sexes are completely reversed: women govern the country and run all businesses; while men are confined to domestic space, rouging and powdering, binding their feet, and dressing up to satisfy women’s pleasure. Considering the social and historical background when the fiction was written, some scholars believe that Li’s work is a true pioneering step in China’s feminist history. It satires many patriarchal mistreatments of women, such as forced marriage, foot-binding and polygamy, and advocates for gender equality. Others also point out that it is barely a feminist work as the gender swap in Country of Women is totally based on “Confucian morality and Taoist wisdom” as traditional feminine virtues are completely assigned to the subordinated sex, in this case, men. Although Li’s imagination and representation of a gender-reversed country is just a flash in the pan in Chinese

214 Jin Feng, “Have Mouse,” 56.
216 More intellectual debates on the feminist interpretation of Destiny of Flowers in the Mirror, see Qian Ma, Feminist, 160.
patriarchal history, it indeed reflects women’s oppression under patriarchy, and provides “imaginative alternatives for women to the patriarchal status quo.”

Similar to *Destiny of Flowers in the Mirror*, Web-based matriarchal narratives also focus on depicting the power of females vis-à-vis males in the imaginative matriarchal world. Social and moral constraints that modern women suffer are transferred onto men. Females enjoy and celebrate their power and wholesale control over men. For instance, one of the earliest and classic matriarchal novels published at Jinjiang, *Sishi huakai* (*Flowers of Four Seasons*) borrows the setting of Country of Women in *Destiny of Flowers in the Mirror* to tell a story between one woman, who is intelligent, rational, and strong, and her four husbands, who are not only physically weak, but also emotionally vulnerable. The story is told through the erotic romantic affairs between the heroine and her jealous lovers. What attract the readers are the extraordinary experiences of male menses, childbirth, breast-feeding, and unusual sexual intercourse. Later matriarchal fantasies tend to either exaggerate the illusion of “female supremacy” (for example, women are endowed with supernatural powers and of high social status; while men are enslaved), or extoll the supremacy of feminine nurturance rather than masculine aggressiveness (for example, a heroine is able to achieve the ultimate triumph because she is introverted, accompanying and compassionate).

Xiaoyao Hongchen, a Jinjiang-based author of matriarchal romance, is well known for her interests and “achievement” in *nüzun* fictions. Similar to her predecessors, her fiction *Xiaoyong* depicts a reversed patriarchal society where women participate in the activities originally assigned only to men in traditional and even contemporary China. The narrative starts with the transmission of the heroine’s soul from contemporary China to a gender-reversed world after her death in an accident. She wakes up in a country called Hongyu (Country of Red-plumage), finding herself reincarnated in the body of the empress, Qingyan, who has four husbands. Her country Hongyu, along with three other countries Lanling (blue-feather), Biying (jade-shadow) and Ziyan (purple-flame), exist in a parallel world where there is only one female born for every five males. The imbalanced sex ratio results in the ruling of women. This story tells the whole process

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217 Ibid., 6.
that Qingyan consolidates her reign as a powerful female sovereign, and conquers all her husbands as a commanding spouse. Its name, *Dominating the World, Conquering the Men*, straightforwardly asserts that it is a female-oriented matriarchal story, which might be disfavored by male readers.

The most disputable challenge against patriarchy of such matriarchal narrative is the gender-bending setting. Men are confined into domestic space, not only because they are physically weak, but also because they take the responsibility of childbirth. According to the author's description, after sexual intercourse, the fertilized egg is implanted into the male body. The duration of pregnancy is approximately ten months. Men are able to deliver a baby through his birth canal which is temporarily formed in labour and will heal shortly after the delivery. A similar male childbirth is represented in *Flowers of Four Seasons*: men have to take a rare fruit called *qiongguo* (milky white, semitransparent, tasty, beautiful in appearance, and only available in summer) before sexual intercourse in order to get pregnant. The fresher the fruit, the greater chance that he can give birth to a girl (who is considered to be superior to a boy). As the price of such fruit is very high, most ordinary people cannot afford fresh one, which results in the unbalanced sex ratio in this country. If a man is pregnant, he will see a red sprout coming out of his skin in his chest. It will be taken out after three-month carriage. The embryo is then transplanted onto the tree where the rare fruits are produced until the baby's organs are fully developed. Male childbirth in *Flowers of Four Seasons* is indeed miraculous as the proliferation of human being becomes a combination of clonal and biological sexual reproduction. The male childbirth plays a crucial role in evoking fans' feminist consciousness to subvert the patriarchal *status quo*. As one fan claims:

> As long as it is still women who take the responsibility of childbirth, gender equality cannot be achieved. I feel it deeply! I think it is very creative that the author assigns such a mission to men rather than women. Whereby should women suffer the bitter of ten-month pregnancy? Whereby should women experience the pain of childbirth? It is the day when men go through the bitterness of contemporary women! Especially
in our rural areas, there are still many people who regard men as superior to women, which is obnoxious, lamentable, and regretful.\textsuperscript{218}

Although the process and pain of male childbirth is less discussed in \textit{Xiaoyong}, the author emphasizes that the husbands’ longing for children and the obstacles that men have to go through before they are eventually allowed to be pregnant in the imperial family. According to the domestic discipline made by ancestors, no subordinate husbands are allowed to be pregnant and give birth to children before the highest-ranked one. Any husband who “serves” the empress has to take a particular medicine for abortion, which is harmful and might result in male infertility, as the heroine presumes in the story. Pregnancy is further believed to be risky and even fatal for men who are physically weak. This is the case for one of the imperial husbands, Ruoshui. Ruoshui (water-like), as the name indicates, is physically weak, emotionally sentimental and sexually incapable. Though “married”, Qingyan intentionally “protects” Ruoshui from sexual intercourse until he is fully recovered from long-term sickness, regardless of his begging.

The matriarchal culture in Country of Red-plumage not only reverses the roles in the domestic sphere, but also the gender-based division of labour. Women are proven to be equally intelligent, rational and strong, and are designed to become government officials, soldiers, captains and generals in military service, merchants, doctors, swordswomen and do other forms of physical labour. In addition to the heroine’s capability of protecting her family from harm and danger (though sometimes with the assistance from others), she is also capable of political activities. From Chapter 20 to 40, the author sketches a picture of how the new empress knocks down the domineering female Prime Minister, Bai Xiuzhu, consolidating and enhancing her reign with political and military intelligence.

Men’s subordination is also manifested in the imaginative virtues of men corresponding to the traditional virtues of Chinese women: morality, proper speech,

modest manner and diligent work. The author even creates the *Admonitions for Men*, as opposed to Ban Zhao's earliest text *Admonitions for Women*, for men's moral cultivation. It appears to be used to cultivate a male servant when she offends the empress's husband, which is regarded as an improper male's manner. Other Chinese ancient virtues are imposed on men in Country of Red-plumage, particularly, chastity. Confronting sexual assault, Ruoshui is so ashamed and humiliated that she attempts to commit to suicide to defend her chastity and the dignity of imperial family, though finally saved by others.

In matriarchal fictions, various restrictions that young women are wrestling in their real life are placed onto men. It allows readers to challenge, alter and subvert the patriarchal hierarchy. It is also noticeable that the whole piece of work is projected as a fictive fantasy rather than a realistic solution to actual social change though delivering a feminist voice advocating the supremacy of female. Firstly, in the fictive world, the author creates a patriarchal society that is reversed. Gender hierarchy, labour-division, biological and mental characteristics are completely reversed. Gender inequality is not yet eliminated. Women conquer the world with power, strength, aggression, tactics and rationality, those believed inherent in maleness, rather than emotional nurturance, compassion and tolerance inherent in femaleness. Though the author deliberately portrays the heroine as a "male-like" woman with fragility and refinement, masculinity is yet if not indispensable, but necessary for her to build her empire. Secondly, the female-dominated world is illusionary and exotic. Though time travel allows the heroine to create a female-dominated world where she enjoys the best of the world, the opportunity for her reincarnation is based on accidents and coincidences. The transformation to a matriarchal world is not guaranteed. For example, in *Xiaoyong*, her travel to the matriarchal country is the result of the king of the underworld taking her soul away by mistake when she still has 60 years to live. She is then compensated for the loss of her earthly life. In *Flowers of Four Seasons*, the heroine is delivered to a matriarchal world because she “wins the lottery” in the underworld after death. After the heroine is revived in the fictive world, certain fantastic elements are proven essential for the construction of an exotic feminist ideality. Four countries constitute the matriarchal world in *Xiaoyong*: Red-plumage, Blue-feather, Purple-flame, and Jade-shadow. All the four names derive from *Xunxian* (seeking the fairies), a Chinese online game created on the basis of
Chinese traditional fairy tales, which further indicates that the feminist ideal that the author depicts is not grounded on the reality, but proposed as a temporary, game-like fantasy.

Matriarchal fantasies, therefore, directly express women’s desires and address their grievances. The utopian dimension of popular culture, as a result, guarantees the pleasure of reading and discussing. Women can have fun and share ideas on many taboo topics and contradictions inherent in contemporary Chinese society. Women are praised by their fondness of male beauty and ability to conquer the opposite sex, which is yet considered stigmatized in contemporary China. In most nüzun romance, males are born to be not only introverted, accommodating and sentimental, but also physically attractive: willowy waist, slender legs, soft and glossy skin, crystal-like eyes and sleek long hair are the common features of a beautiful man, which are commonly believed to be feminine charms. Just as modern males appreciate, desire and enjoy female beauty, feminized male beauty is deemed equivalently, if not equally, important in matriarchal society. Female’s masculinity vis-à-vis male’s femininity gives matriarchal fans a sense of pride and power. Furthermore, the womanized/feminized male beauty, as opposed to masculinity inherent in men, are essential in most of nüzun romances, and almost all danmei fictions at Jinjiang. The author of Xiaoyong also intends to legitimate women’s sexual desire with the heroine’s self-mockery: she is called “a lustful fatuous empress” (haose hunjun). One of the key features attributed to this work’s popularity, as the author confessed, is its graphic sex depiction, or in Chinese netizens’ word, H, the acronym of the Chinese word huang, literally yellow in English.219 It is perhaps very rare in real life, but very common to see young women’s unequivocal declaration of female’s aesthetic attraction to beauty, fondness of beauty, pursuit for “sexual gratification and social position.”220

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219 See fans’ commentary at http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=276154&chapterid=87, accessed October 23, 2012. Some fans hold a different opinion about the origin of H. It is believed that H is the acronyms of the Japanese word “hentai,” short for “hentai seiyoku” (a perverse sexual desire), referring to the genre of anime and manga pornography.

220 Jin Feng, “Have Mouse,” 51-52.
These works promote female supremacy in the public as well as domestic world by fantasizing women’s ascent to power, usually at the expense of men. The readers also find it entertaining and liberating. As a response to a male reader’s criticism, the author Xiaoyao Hongchen refuted to equate her work as a duplication of male-centered time-travel fantasy with merely a swap of gender role, boldly despised him as “a male chauvinistic pig.” Moreover, she asserted that just as male’s lust of mind is acceptable, women also has the autonomy to construct their own gender-specific fantasy with the trope of time travel\(^\text{221}\). Due to internalized social structure and cultural norms, Chinese women are still considered to be the subordinated group regardless the fact that they are becoming more and more competitive in society. The utopian impulse of Jinjiang female users do not impede their critique of the unsatisfied reality, in which “gender discrimination in education and employment is still rampant, and family burdens fall on women’s shoulders whether or not they have career outside the home.”\(^\text{222}\)

Jinjiang fans’ indulgence in the literary practices is a reflection of the unsatisfied social status quo, and a more general feeling about life. It is of greater significance to understand the reason that particular texts (i.e. nüewen, zhongtian wen, nüzun) are important to female fans. There exists an affective space between the literary texts and the context in which they inhabit. By employing “a reciprocal reading strategy of extrapolating from life to fiction and vice versa,”\(^\text{223}\) they are able to empower themselves – though temporarily and virtually – or at least address their life concerns in a less depresssing way.


\(^{222}\) Jin Feng, “Have Mouse,” 64.

\(^{223}\) Jin Feng, Romancing the Internet, 169.
6. Conclusion

The rise of the Internet and numerous virtual communities in Chinese cyberspace, has caused a proliferation of new interesting cultural products and types of entertainment. The previous chapters have focused on the heterosexual time-travel romance genre at Jinjiang Literature City, and its cultural and social significance for young Chinese women in the context of postsocialist China. My study has addressed some basic questions concerning the proliferation of time-travel romance and its female readership. Besides entertainment and companionship, these young, well-educated urban Chinese women seek to construct their literary identities, realize their desires, produce gender-specific fantasy, and even propose resolutions to their real life situations. As a virtual community like “home,” Jinjiang has cultivated various popular literary genres, nurtured hundreds of amateur Web authors, and added color to the daily life of countless users – both registered and unregistered.

The political, economic and social changes experienced by China and its new generation over the past decade have, in turn, “been mirrored by the transformations in the literary realm.”\(^{224}\) In resonance with the “utopian realism”\(^{225}\) of Chinese cyberspace, the literary practice of young Chinese women originates from their dissatisfaction with the postsocialist environment. It is also closely linked to their everyday experience in an increasingly competitive, and rapidly changing society.

It is apparent that the Internet has effected how literature is produced, consumed, and evaluated. Web writing helps ordinary Chinese people to realize their literary dreams. They are able to get involved in literary creation and “criticism”, legitimate their cultural authority, and appropriate, challenge, and undermine the established cultural

\(^{224}\) Julia Lovell, “Finding a Place,” 7.

\(^{225}\) Guobin Yang, *The Power*, 156.
orthodoxy. Some have successfully transformed from amateur “Web authors” into professional “writers”, and gained in both fame and wealth. Most of them are still crossing in between the traditionally defined concept of readership and authorship, transforming the old reader-writer relationship. In doing so, they are able to create stories that cater to the taste of specific groups of readers. As fans of other fictions, they are also able to provide inspiring ideas to others’ creation – overtly or covertly – by participating in the interactivities with the authors. Immediate access and interaction become a key trait of online literary practices.

Literary websites as a new form of virtual community, has inevitably changed how people express their ideas and how they communicate with each other. Aside from their actual identities in the real life, this cyber-savvy generation also explores their virtual identities in beloved virtual communities. Despite the fact that “free expression” is no longer the only pursuit of Web writers as more and more literary websites started to fit into the trend of commercialization, Web literature is “the true literature of humanity.” It is about “sharing”, “understanding and tolerance.” The most popular Web-based literary genres, including the time-travel romance genre discussed in this thesis, is a reflection of the rise of popular fiction, which used to be marginalized and/or devalued in traditional literary criticism. Literary production is becoming more and more reader-oriented, rather than “the careful planning of intellectual elites or the force-feeding of ideology to the public.”

The sudden rise and large amounts of various Web literature genres have drawn the attention of many critics and scholars. Scholars have been seeking the best methodology to study the phenomenon of Web literature and other Web-based fan creations. Various common bias and misunderstandings still exist in traditional literary studies. They include the “simple equation of the technological features of the Internet

226 Zhao and Jiang, quoted in Shuyu Kong, Consuming Literature, 176.
227 Ibid.
228 Yongqing Zhang, “Reflecting on Online Literature,” 183.
229 See, for example, Yanjun Shao 邵燕君, “Miandui wangluo wenxue: xueyuanpai de taidu he fangfa” 面对网络文学：学院派的态度和方法 [Approaching Web-Literature: The Attitude and Methodology of Academism Scholarship], Nanfang Wentan, no. 6 (2011): 12-18.
with the features of online literature, misconceptions about online literature, inability to distinguish between the basic traits of online and traditional writing and inability to understand the fundamental theoretical differences between online literary texts and traditional literature.”

The traditional, elite methodology such as pure textual analysis, is apparently inadequate to study multidimensional literary products, and the intensive and multi-local interactions between a new literature genre and its fandom. It artificially sets it apart from the context in which the Internet media fandom is “lived, experienced, felt, and resisted.” A close examination of the readership and the communicative space between the text and the reader must be taken into consideration.

My detailed description of the time-travel romance and its fandom at Jinjiang proposes a possibility of research methodology in the studies of Web literature, especially gender-specific genres. It seeks better ways to study this new literary genre and questions pure literary analysis that only allows research from a remote distance. I have attempted a multi-presentation that draws on both my participation as a fan and my research as a scholar. In Fan Culture, Matt Hills argues that the “imagined subjectivity” is what leads to the clash between academics and fans, and produces a situation in which fandom tends to be consistently devalued in academics discourse. This thesis argues against the elite criticism that dominates Chinese-language academia. It is also a refusal to over-rational contextual studies which deprives fans of their textual possession/ownership.

This methodology calls for further discussion and refinement. On the one hand, my familiarity with the material pertaining to the subject of this project obviously benefits from my role of both a fan and a scholar, as that of a young woman belongs to China’s post-1980s generation. The idea of “scholar-fans” and even “fan-scholars”, as discussed in Matt Hills’ Fan Culture, always reminds us of how important it is to reflect on one’s own research while criticising others’ theories as neither of them are infallible. As a fan, I have passion and enthusiasm for the text that I study and interact with the text that I

230 Yongqing Zhang, "Reflecting on Online Literature," 182-190.
232 Matt Hills, Fan Culture, 5.
enjoy reading. On the other hand, objections to this research methodology may question my lack of consideration for the broader picture and objectivity when the subject of the project is affected, or even tainted by my personal tastes. The questions of how to cope with a scholar-fan's own sympathy vis-à-vis the subject studied, and must scholars disregard personal tastes and feelings in order to understand those of fans remains to be disputable in fan culture studies. My understanding of media fandom studies is one that allows the possibility to explore our own human experience, feelings and perceptions. My research has examined “historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth - what is possible to speak at a given moment.” 233 If time and space permits, further research would benefit from a more in-depth ethnographic approach which will better situate this cultural phenomenon within the relevant social issues.

It is a rich research field to study Web-based literature as an empirical cultural and social phenomenon. Jinjiang heterosexual time-travel romance is just a small evident piece of their interests, while most are still hidden, and left to be examined. Their literary creation, from heterosexual romance (including – but not limited to – bitter emotional stories, matriarchal narratives, farming fictions, intrigue stories, etc.) to more taboo topics like pornography (rou wen) and homosexual romance (including danmei and baihe), directly addresses their “structure of feeling”234 in a larger sociopolitical context. The gender crossing and transgender topics, female masculinity and male femininity appeared in heterosexual romance also call for further research. The sexual presentation in Jinjiang homosexual romance further reveals the social anxiety around particular kinds of sexual practices. To further the research of Web-based practice, a closer ethnographic examination should be carried out because we have to look at the information absent from textual presentation due to different kinds of censorship and moderation. This project sheds lights on the relationship between web literature and conventional literature. There also exists a strong connection between Web publication and popular media such as television and film industry. It is very obvious that TV/film


adaptions have allowed Web texts to reach a wider audience and stirred far-reaching public discourses. To further my current project, the exploration of the relationship between various forms of new media, such as Internet and TV, is definitely a must.

It remains to be explored how the Internet will continue to represent young Chinese people’s cultural and social interests, mediate fans negotiation between fantasy and reality, cultivate virtual social bond and generate vehement public discourse. Yet it is inappropriate to study an emerging cultural phenomenon in isolation from articulation with the context and its fans, its counterpart and predecessors. Even though a fair number of immature works are still despised, criticized, devalued or even stigmatized by some scholars in literary studies, they are indeed a reflection of their cultural tastes, lived experience, daily concerns and shared beliefs.
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