Fandom and Coercive Empowerment:

The commissioned production of Chinese online literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the relationship between consumers and producers of cultural products is shaped by the proprietary nature of digital platforms. Drawing on four years of online observation and analysis, we examine the relationship between the producers of online Chinese fiction, amateur writers, and their consumers, i.e. the fan communities of readers who respond to their work. Enabled by Chinese literary websites, readers act like sponsors who provide emotional and financial incentives for writers to produce online fictions by commenting, voting, and sending money. Readers become actively involved not just because of the content of the stories, but because they form strong commitments to stories and their writers, and gain reciprocity and a sense of self-determination during the interactional process. We argue that although writers are freer from state control online, they are still beholden to the whims of their fans because of what we call the commissioned production of fictions. We contribute to fan community studies by analyzing how commercialized website settings structure the strategies available to participants, how these settings affect the content of the cultural products, and how the Chinese historical and cultural contexts impact the dynamics of the online community.

KEYWORDS

online literature, fan community, power dynamics, production of cultural form, consumption,

empowerment, China

Introduction

A curious phenomenon recently emerged within Chinese cyberspace—the production and consumption of online literature. Every day millions of netizens in China either write or read online literature, which began appearing in the early 1990s and proliferated around 1997. Currently, there are over 500 websites for original Chinese literature whose settings (landscape, culture, time, politics, etc.) are based in China. A large literary website may receive thousands of original submissions daily (Ouyang, 2011). In the year 2014, around 45 percent of Internet users in China read online literature (CNNIC, 2015). The producers of this literature are largely unknown amateurs capable of attracting numerous readers (Zhang, 2011), many of whom are devoted fans. Fan loyalty is reflected not only in the time they spend reading and commenting, but also in the considerable amounts of money they invest (CNNIC, 2010) by purchasing monthly memberships or online credits to pay for reading, sending money directly to authors, etc. How are amateur online writers able to attract so many Chinese readers of 'digital fiction'?

The digital fictions we examine in this paper target a reader/fan base comparable to other online fan communities and subcultural communities (e.g. Jenkins, 2013; Thomas, 2011; Williams and Copes, 2005). Following Jenkins' (2013 [1992]) seminal research, scholars perceive fans as actively engaged in the cultural products they devotedly consume. In a study by Baym (2000), online fans of American soap operas watch them not just for the content itself, but for the chance to engage with other fans to discuss and debate plot lines. Similarly, fanfiction (fanfic) websites offer interactive affordances that promulgate a fanfic 'review culture', 'whereby the roles of authors and readers become virtually interchangeable' (Thomas, 2011: 209). Yet as we will show below, there are some important differences between these online fan communities and the fan-base of Chinese online fictions.

Existing studies of online interaction and virtual community show that technology and internet settings influence the way people perform online (Hughey, 2008; William and Copes, 2005; Varik and Oostendorp, 2013). Chinese literary websites feature a monetary reward system that is absent from fanfiction websites in the West. This feature supports the production of online fictions, but the design and proprietary nature of the commercialized digital platforms also engender new forms of constraints for the writers, forcing them to maintain rapidly released updates and write lengthy genre fictions that provide happy endings. Thus the monetary reward system and its effects on an author's actions make online literatures an intriguing field site. More specifically, the Chinese producers and consumers of online fictions offer a strategic new context for the next stage of research in fan communities because it considers how technical settings impact power and competition between, in this case, online writers and readers, whose strategies in turn sediment a structure that both sustains and constrains actions.

Based on four years of exploratory qualitative inquiry, this paper explicates how online readers have agency over fiction writers that forces them to produce stories in line with their readers' desires. We also address writers' attempts to influence the demands placed upon them by their fans. We find that because of the characteristics of Chinese literary websites, writers and readers are drawn into a dynamic power relationship in which writers are worshipped by readers, but are simultaneously under considerable pressure to appease them. We describe this form of literature production with the term 'commissioned production' in order to highlight the role played by readers as sponsors who pay particular writers for updates. In addition to their love of the stories, readers are drawn to online fictions because the reading process becomes a unique experience in which they have the power to influence both the development of the story and the fate of the writing. We contribute to the studies of fan communities and the relationship between

fans and producers in the digital age by exploring a context of digital fiction production that has a different history and 'contextualized practice' than occidental regions (cf. Page and Thomas, 2011: 3).

In the following, we will first provide a review of relevant literature on fan communities and compare fan communities of online literature in China with Western online fan communities. We will then provide an overview of Chinese online literature as a cultural form and how it relates to the established institutionalized and marketized literature. Next, we will present data collected online, focusing on the unfettered production process of this cultural form and the impacts on both the frequency of posted content and the plots of online fictions. We argue that the commercialized Chinese literary websites turn readers into mini sponsors that support and direct the writing process. We conclude that the reciprocal relationship and commitment created by the interaction between the writers and readers of online literature both sustain and constrain the production of Chinese online literature.

Fan Communities, Fanfiction websites, and Chinese Online Literature

It is useful to compare Chinese digital fiction and fandom with fan communities in other parts of the world because the tension between consumers and producers of cultural products is universal. Abandoning the early stereotyped impressions of fans as passive receivers of cultural products, Jenkins (2013) points out that fans are actively engaged in the cultural industry. Drawing on the metaphor of poaching, Jenkins (2013) characterizes fans as active participants who struggle for control over textual meanings with producers (24).

With the wide use of Web 2.0, there has been 'a phenomenal growth in the scale and scope of these fan communities' (Thomas, 2011: 205), and an increasing prospect of fan agency

in influencing the production process (Pearson, 2010). This active participatory perspective is most represented by the term 'produsage' or 'prosumer,' indicating the mixture of producer and consumer of cultural products (Jenkins, 2013). Indeed, the internet has increased the speed of fan communication by exposing fans to a wider networked audience (Jenkins, 2006, 2007). As a result of these changes, fans are empowered to more effectively organize to resist and shape cultural products (Costello and Moore, 2007; Andrejevic, 2008). For instance, Baym (2000) examines the solidarity engendered among online soap fans, for example, through their criticism of episodes and evaluations on message boards. Jenkins (2006) shows some evidence of how television producers adapt and respond to fan feedback posted to online message boards. Similarly, Watson (2002) discusses how Phish's online fan community has influenced the band's album content on at least one occasion.

However, this optimistic view of fan empowerment through digital technology has been questioned by other scholars who claim that this perspective might underestimate the power of media producers (Bird, 2011). Indeed, there is little evidence that fans are actually able to change producers' or writers' minds (Baym, 2000). While Jenkins (2013) does discuss how fans pressure television show producers, and on some occasions fan communities might influence the closure or continuation of a TV series, he indicates there is no evidence that producers are ultimately swayed to adopt fan input (38). Similarly, Costello and Moore (2007) argue that while some fans are interested in having an influence over the program and hope that producers and writers will read their comments and respond, direct influence on the actual content of a series is rare. Moreover, other researchers point out that while new digital technology encourages fan activism, it could also increase the control of media producers because it allows producers to better monitor and discipline supportive viewers (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009; Bird, 2011).

Given this unsettled relationship between fans and producers, we need more scholarship on how audiences, whether 'produsers' or not, negotiate and manage the complex relationship between producers' power and individual/community agency. Despite the fact that fans can become more actively engaged, studies suggest that their agency still lies largely in carving out a space apart from the text where fans go to generate a sense of community and interactivity, rather than influencing the actual production process.

These complex negotiations described above are also prevalent in the worldwide genre of fanfiction, which involves a participatory process comparable to the Chinese online literature analyzed in this study. According to Thomas (2011), fanfiction (fanfic) is a participatory process in which users expect to be able to interact with the producers of websites, and they expect that their comments will elicit replies from writers. While fanfic websites do share some important similarities with Chinese literary websites, such as interactivity, the importance of reviews, etc. (Baym, 2007; Black, 2009), there are major differences. In fanfic, readers carve out their own niche and write a text that complements a still monolithic production process (Thomas, 2006). But fanfic writers hardly ever change their stories in light of readers' comments (Pugh, 2005). However, in Chinese literary websites, readers actively manipulate writers, which creates a malleable production process.

While China also has fanfic communities, these are separate from the online reader communities we will be analyzing here. In Chinese literary websites, readers get involved in the production process by *providing emotional and economic incentives* to writers, which the online platform enables them to do. Through this platform, readers urge writers to give them what they want. Indeed, readers of Chinese online fictions are empowered in a different way than the readers of the fanfic community as discussed in extant literature. This empowerment has a lot to

do with the unique affordances of the commercialized Chinese literary websites, such as the paying system that allows readers to send money directly to writers along their production process. Exploring these comparisons between Chinese online literary communities and fan communities in general contributes to the current debate on how technology influences the power dynamics between consumers and writers during the literature production process, a process that is embedded in the Chinese historical and cultural context, a subject we now turn to.

The emergence of Chinese online literature as a cultural form

After the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, the government took great pains to control writers and ensure that all literature strictly adhered to party ideology and to serve politics (Link, 2000, chap. 1). In fact, the Communist party had always used literature and arts to serve political ends, which was underscored in Mao Zedong's 1942 speech during the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art (Apter and Saich, 1994). From then until the reform era, all writers (also called 'literary workers' by the government) were incorporated into the state-run Writers' Association[1] and various other government entities (Link, 2000, chap.3). Since being a member of an official institution remains an indicator of status and recognition amongst both the writers and the general population, these writers are usually called professional or elite writers. In this system, it is impossible for 'free writers' (i.e. writers who did not belong to any state entity and relied on royalties for a living) to survive. As a result, writers act as part of the propaganda apparatus. These state-approved writers are expected to use literature as a political tool, helping disseminate the Communist party ideology and promote 'thought work'. The work they produce is usually considered mainstream elite literature.

This mainstream elite literature is structured around literary journals and major publishing houses in which editors or publishers decide what to publish (Li, 2012). Because the mission is to promote Communist party ideology, censorship plays an important role in publishers' decisions. The restrictions in the traditional print-publishing system such as strict censorship and the usually long and tedious publication process create obstacles for unestablished or nonprofessional writers who wish to make their work accessible to readers (Link, 2000).

Despite the Communist Government's efforts to control writers and use them to propagate party ideology (see Link, 2000), since the reform era in the late 1970s, market-driven publications have enabled popular culture to flourish. Market trends and readers' preferences have become important to publishers (Lynch, 1999: 53-55) who need to foresee trends and look for best-sellers that will maximize profits. Because of the profit-driven activities of the market, popular fictions and other forms of popular culture began to thrive (Link et al., 1989). For example, martial arts fictions and romance fictions became very popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Cui, 2011).

The rise of these market forces in literature production challenged the dominance of institutionalized forms of literature. As noted by Lynch (1999), the post-Mao Chinese state lost a significant degree of control over 'thought work' due to political, economic and technological changes. Many less established writers, for example, those based in Hong Kong and Taiwan, were able to get their work published in the market-sector of the literature world and were received very well by Chinese readers. Nevertheless, publishers retained huge power in deciding what is publishable. The process of publication is usually long and intimidating, especially for young and unknown writers. Also, direct communication between writers and readers was rare .

Reader feedback, usually in the form of letters, was sent to the editors, who then forwarded the letters to the writers.

In the late 1990s, online fictions became popular as the internet provided a platform for unknown writers (Hockx, 2005; Ouyang, 2011). This new cultural form has been praised for being less utilitarian, more egalitarian, more artistic, and for promoting greater freedom. This freedom is reflected in two aspects: first, online fictions exist outside the system controlled by the Communist party because unlike traditional print publication, state issued "book numbers" are not required. Second, the writers can upload their work to the internet without going through the "check" of editors as censors (Hockx, 2015). Because of these changes, some claim that, with online anonymity, authors are able to say whatever they want (Ouyang, 2011). While this argument might be too optimistic given the systematic internet censorship and monitoring in China, and the fact that it is impossible to retain full anonymity online, it is fair to say that online writers do *feel* a greater sense of freedom.

To be sure, state regulations still govern Chinese online literary websites. For example, Hockx (2005) shows that there are rules of submission to online poetry sites. Taboo topics, such as pornography and criticism of the censors, are restricted across all portals. However, writers on literary websites do enjoy a much higher degree of freedom compared to the strict state control of official literature and the high barriers of conventional publications (Hockx, 2015). For example, in addition to bypassing state regulations and complex publication processes, writers can publish their work simultaneously on different platforms and various literary websites that are competing for attention. In this sense, we do see the democratic potential of the online venue in China because it allows citizens to break through repressive government controls (Bird, 2011). Nevertheless, in the Chinese context, the democratic potential is not fulfilled given a habitus of

self-imposed censorship in the face of overwhelming online surveillance and control (Yang, 2009).

Even though the early online writers might have written for self-expression rather than fame or profit, the situation soon began to change. Around 2003, a huge amount of capital was invested in literary websites, which turned online literature into a market-led, profit-driven cultural industry (Li, 2012). After that, contracted writing and a 'pay before you read' policy became the rule of literary websites. The marketization and commercialization of literary websites pose a great challenge to the previously assumed non-utilitarian nature of online literature. The commercial interest of network operators replaced the laissez-faire mode of writing embraced by early online writers (Li, 2012). This commercialization also impacted content. Fictions gained absolute dominance, especially long fictions, which became synonymous with online literature.

Enabled by the technological settings of commercialized Chinese literary websites, readers have increased their participation in the online publication process compared to traditional literary production. In later sections we will look at the production processes of this cultural form and focus on the ongoing interaction between writers and readers, but first we will discuss our methodology.

Data and Method

To understand writer/reader interaction regarding Chinese online literature, we combine four years of online observations with textual analysis of online posts. Members of literary websites may have some offline contact, but the majority of their contacts and their primary experience of

that setting are online. Thus, it is appropriate for this study to limit the research setting to online phenomena (see also Lysloff, 2003; Hooley et al., 2012).

The first author has been conducting online observations since 2009. As of December 2010, there were 195 million active users of Chinese online literature out of the half billion netizens in China (CNNIC, 2010). She visited all the major literary websites in China (around 50 of the most active websites out of a total 500), such as Huang Jin Shu Wu, Rong Shu Xia, Hong Xiu Tian Xiang, Qi Dian Zhong Wen Wang, Sina Reading, and Jin Jiang Wen Xue Cheng, to observe the production processes of online fictions. On average she spent five hours per week on those websites, and read both the famous and lesser-known fictions produced there. The approximate number of fiction stories she viewed is around 900. She read some work that had been finished, some that was halfway done, and some that was just starting to be written. She witnessed how writers adjusted their writing plans according to readers' feedback, and she followed the online discussions between writers and readers and among readers. She also joined various reader discussion groups online, such as various QQ (a popular Chinese social media) groups, online discussion forums, etc.. But like Walstrom (2004), she obeyed the rule of non-intervention in observing the natural atmosphere of the virtual field (Garcia et al., 2009).

The approach is similar to that of Schaap (2002), Shoham (2004), and Hu (2005), whose observations are centered on the purely textual and who did not meet any of their informants offline. Making use of the rich social interactions in the online context (Dominguez et al., 2007), the first author felt in-depth engagement in the online production culture and got to know the motives of both the writers and readers (Hine, 2008). While this study may not therefore be a 'full' virtual ethnography (Beaulieu, 2004; cf. Marciano, 2014: 829), its exploratory nature nevertheless reveals an iconoclastic glimpse into new virtual territory.

Detailed notes (both descriptive and reflective) were taken on the organizing structures of different literary websites: how a contracted writer for a website gets signed, how a writer or a particular work is rewarded, the criteria for designating certain chapters visible to VIP members only, the process for adapting online writing into printed books, movies, or online games, etc. Notes were also taken on the date and time of updates and comments, and the patterns and frequency of interactions between writers and readers. She paid special attention to debates regarding critical moments such as the beginning of a story and conflicts about the development of story lines. In particular, she noted readers' reflections regarding why they want to read online fictions, and why they prefer to follow one author or story over others. Digital copies of the comments sampled for the study, such as episodes of ongoing interactions between writers and readers and among readers, were saved as screenshots.

The data analysis proceeded alongside the online observation. Analytic induction (Katz, 2001) was used to identify patterns of relationships between writers and readers. In particular, we focused on identifying the 'typicality' of events (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006) related to the setting of the website by counting the frequency of observed occurrences such as strategies deployed by both readers and writers. Major analytical insights are drawn from both typical and critical events. Typical events include the daily back and forth interaction between writers and readers, and critical events refer to readers' occasional conflicts with writers about the next moves of the story.

Finally, based on the online observation data, we selected episodes of writer/reader interactions and conducted textual analysis of those exchanges. The episodes presented here include both 'typical' moments of interaction, which represents the daily encounters between readers and writers across all literary websites, and some critical moments in which readers and

writers engaged in conflicts. 'Typical' writer/reader interactions occurred most frequently across websites and fictions. For each sampled fiction, we counted how many times the authors asked for more votes, more recommendation tickets, etc. We also counted how many times the readers asked for more content (e.g. more updates, longer chapters), or urged the authors to change the directions of the stories (e.g. whether protagonists should or should not have a romance, die, or not die, etc.). We developed coding schemes along these lines and counted the frequency of key words appearing in the comments section of the fictions, such as *qiu yue piao* (求月票，please send tickets), *qiu tui jian* (求推荐, please send recommendations)，*cui geng* (催更, please upload more chapters), etc.. The examples we show here are from the main literary websites in China mentioned above. Most are related to influential online fictions, but we include some less famous ones as well. All posts were originally retrieved in Chinese and translated into English by the first author.

Taken together, these various types of data reveal the production processes of this cultural form in this unique online setting. They allow us to understand how the online context influences commitment and negotiation as well as power dynamics between writers and readers, and its subsequent influence on the content and format of the final products.

Commissioned production and content impact

Originally, online writing was touted to promote writers' freedom to finally write what they want on their own terms (Zhao, 2004). However, with the newly achieved freedom there came constraints brought by the proprietary nature of literary websites. In this section, we will show how online settings turn readers into sponsors who provide both motivations and constraints for writers.

Worshipped Writers: Emotional Bonds and Commitment

The interactions between readers and writers on Chinese literary websites engender intimacy, and they are a reliable way for writers to win over their die-hard fans. A sense of close virtual community is formed both amongst readers and writers and between readers of online fiction.

First, there is instantaneous feedback from readers to writers, which writers can't ignore because similar fictions are being updated every day on the same websites, which readers compare and discuss. Once uploaded to the internet, a work can draw instant reader responses. On literary websites, the fiction content is usually followed by comments on the same webpage. Feedback includes not only comments written by readers, but also the number of views, the score (readers can numerically score the chapter after reading), and the number of recommendation tickets. Readers have a certain number of recommendation tickets that they can send to writers as rewards for their work. There are some instant ranking lists of fictions on the website, such as by the number of recommendation tickets they received, by the numbers of views, and by the accumulated scores. The visibility of the ranking lists allows readers to decide the 'fate' of the work through viewing and sending recommendation tickets.

Second, readers are able to financially sponsor online writers by purchasing access to stories and even whole works. For example, while the first 100,000 words are usually read for free, the majority of literary websites have a 'pay before you read' policy. Moreover, after writers sign contracts with literary websites, their work could be put on the 'shelf' for sale. Then readers have to pay ¥0.2-¥0.6 (US$0.03-US$0.10) per thousand words to continue reading. The writer and the website will share this income. Some websites reward writers who post every day.

For example, writers called 'contracted writers' receive a fixed monthly salary as long as they update a certain number of words daily.

Literary websites also allow readers to give money directly to specific writers. Readers may send gifts (as online credits transferable into real money) to the writers to show their appreciation. The amount of money varies from a few yuan to thousands (hundreds of US dollars). Finally, writers can also have their works published as printed books or adapted into movies, TV dramas, or online games and profit from the royalties. Because of the reward system, it is possible for some writers to make a living just by writing fictions online. As of 2011, there were 30,000 such professional online writers (Ouyang, 2012); some even become millionaires (US dollars).

Third, due to the constant updates, readers and writers fall into a routine of giving and taking. Online writers do not usually finish the whole story at once. Instead writers provide updates daily or weekly. In this way, readers have to check for updates regularly, and reading becomes a routine activity. Readers take the opportunity to talk to other readers about both the story and their own lives. With interactions like reading, prodding, praising, and posting comments, readers slowly develop a close relationship with writers and other readers through impressions projected and received. These social exchanges are rooted in the symbolic value accorded to writers by reader posts, which often carry with them strong emotions.

As a result, in the online community of literary websites, it is common for readers to worship writers. Authors of stories are admired and respected, and readers expect them to exert an authoritarian role in writing the story at hand. Many writers are able to attract extremely loyal fans who idolize them (Cui, 2011). Online writers are often addressed by their followers as big big (*dada*), an abbreviated version of big brother (*dage*), big sister (*dajie*), big aunt (*dama*) or big

uncle (*dashu*). This familial reference suggests that the online literary community has appropriated Chinese cultural values that focus on the importance of family and respect for seniors. This can be read as a process of cultural interpellation, with these cultural categories rooting the meaning and participant understandings online (Yuan, 2012: 674).

Active fans demonstrate their commitment to writers through constant interaction with the authors. Some of the usual activities include writing comments, ranking, sending virtual flowers, making recommendations, fighting with anyone who criticizes the writer or their work, and establishing various online groups to worship the writer. The relationship becomes personal with a high degree of loyalty and strong attachment. Here is an example of interaction between an online writer and one of her followers:

Reader rating 2/2, 2013-02-10, under chapter 44

I know from the news tonight that northeast America was attacked by a snowstorm and I'm a little bit worried. Hope everything is good with you and your family. Today I came here to say Happy New Year to you when I happened to find this sequel. I haven't read your story for a long time. Wish you a Happy New Year and good luck.

Writer's reply, 2013-02-11

I found this post when I was checking new comments. I was deeply touched! Thanks [reader] for your kindness. Everything is fine with my family. Electricity supply wasn't cut off this time. Schools were closed on Friday and all after-school activities were stopped.

...

Dealing with snowstorms is a routine winter activity for northeast America. As long as the electricity supply is fine there's no problem. Wish you a Happy New Year! May everything be fine with you!

This writer currently lives in New York City and is known for writing time-traveling fiction on a popular literary website. Even a couple of years after she finished her story, she received this greeting from a reader, which shows that, once emotionally invested, fans can be very loyal.

Readers as Sponsors: Providing Supports and Constraints

The adulation that fans express provides writers with emotional motivation and the fans begin sponsoring writers in various ways, which will be shown to greatly impact the writer's production of content. First, fans' instant feedback provides the most important motivation for writers. Writers usually do not publish their whole stories at once; they may stop writing, or abandon current projects and start new ones if they do not get enough positive feedback. This leads to enormous volumes of unfinished stories. In fact, 70% of fictions written on a major literary website remain unfinished (Su, 2008: 37). Writers are aware that positive reader feedback sustains their productivity.

Due to the instant payoff system, readers have a huge influence on how much profit the fiction can bring to the writer. Those fictions that end up with higher rankings will be recommended by the website administrators to its visitors, thus becoming more visible and more likely to make a profit. In the comment sections of the fictions, many authors confessed that the number of views and the rankings are important incentives that keep them writing.

In addition to sending online credits to their favorite writers, some readers even try to support particular writers by lobbying other readers to manipulate the rankings. Because there are many works of fiction being produced at the same time, readers want the work they support to be successful so they can be on the winning team. For example, a fan encouraged other readers to vote for his favorite work so that it could get a higher ranking:

> Emergency! Please hurry up and help! We are behind in recommendation tickets. We are now not even in the top three and we might lose the position of No. 4 soon. Please send more recommendation tickets! Please give power![2] Please! Please!!

This fan defined the situation as 'urgent' because the work he supported was losing popularity compared to other fictions on the same literary website. Manipulating activities like this is common on literary websites and readers use many strategies to call up support for a particular work. This behavior indicates how readers make efforts to sponsor the writers of their choice through spontaneous manipulative practices online.

As shown above, readers sponsor writing with various forms of support; however, readers can also constrain authors by forming a community that pressures writers to give them what they want. Readers urge writers to post additional content or to post more frequently. Readers feel that the writers need to repay their loyalty by updating regularly and frequently. Thus, an unwritten agreement appears to exist between readers and writers; readers become angry when writers fail to deliver expected updates. For example, Dang Nian Ming Yue (Moon of that Year) is one of the most successful online writers and wrote a historical fiction about the Ming Dynasty. Starting in 2006, he wrote his book, *Those Ming Things*, online. He usually updates every weekday, but not on weekends. When he does not update, he leaves an away message on his site:

Leave of Absence (2009-03-12 21:42:24)

Dear Friends,

Lots of things have piled up today, so I'm afraid I can't post an update. Please allow me to take one day off, and tomorrow everything will go back to normal.

Thank you for your understanding.

<div align="right">

Ming Yue

2009-03-12

</div>

Comments:

(1)   Reader 4, 2009-3-12 21:59

You have my support, Ming Yue. If you feel like having a break, do it.

(2)   Reader 10, 2009-3-12 22:01

Objection! I have been waiting here all night!

(3)   Reader 18, 2009-3-12 22:07

I understand. Rest well and keep working!

(4)   Reader 28, 2009-3-12 22:28

Just when I start to love it…here comes the leave of absence AGAIN.

If you try this at work, watch out for your wages. But of course you can do whatever you want because we are in your territory. You are the boss, whatever.

(5)   Reader 29, 2009-3-12 22:29

Not AGAIN. Darn.

(6)   Reader 36, 2009-3-12 22:34

Sure he can do this NOW because he is famous. Back when he was nobody, we were treated like god; he wouldn't dare ask for a leave of absence.

(7)   Reader 44, 2009-3-12 22:41

Don't make this a habit. It is not good!

The posts, displayed in chronological order according to timestamp, further indicate how some readers are consistently loyal to writers. Nevertheless, we see that while some readers show understanding, many are unsympathetic. Readers become furious and express their sense of betrayal when the writer fails to meet their expectations. They urge the writer to write and update more regardless of Dang Nian Ming Yue's personal circumstances. This expectation is reproduced through reader posts as a social process, which settles, over time, into a wider culture of online writing production.

Thus, while writers are worshipped by readers, this worship comes at a cost: they are simultaneously beholden to their fan base. Many writers feel enormous pressure to provide regular updates and express their frustration over not being able to update as often as requested by their readers, as shown in the following example:

Writer, 2006-03-20, under chapter 9

So many readers blame me for not posting new chapters. This is unjust! I cannot write every day for I have my own difficulties. Some days ago, when I had some free time, I was very hard-working, remember? Despite my slow typing, mistakes revising and little free time, I still manage to post roughly one chapter a week. You guys know there are some ten thousand words in a chapter, which is not a small number. I'm glad some of you like the story.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of readers who consistently showed little sympathy for this writer's plea, there was little to negotiate:

(1)   Reader, 2006-03-24, under chapter 9

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> Don't go out this weekend and finish the whole story!

(2)   Reader, 2006-03-24, under chapter 9

> I beg you, please continue posting new chapters!

(3)   Reader, 2006-03-24, under chapter 9

> Please post something new…I'm writing to urge you.

Readers, being financially invested, feel justified in urging writers to post more material and in voicing complaints when writers take time off for their personal life or do not do what they ask. Therefore, writing online fictions in China is perceived as a career, rather than a hobby as in fanfic websites. In fact, many writers acquiesced to readers' barbed goading and maintained a fast pace of updating. Indeed, many do succeed financially. For example, online fiction writer Fei Xue Liu Nian said to the *Beijing Youth Daily*,

> Every day I am consumed with writing at home. I start to write as soon as I wake up. And I would probably stay at home for a month without going out…. Having signed a contract with the literary website, I have to post about 6000 words every day. No post or not enough words are breaches of contract. Sometimes I have nothing in my mind but still need to write.[3]

Here, writer Fei Xue Liu Nian confesses that he was facing multiple pressures. Apart from his readers pressuring him to deliver new chapters quickly, as a contracted writer, he also faces pressure from the websites themselves because of the contractual relationship. Another author profiled in the article, Tang Jia San Shao, is a famous online fiction writer. Having earned ¥33 million (around US$5.5 million) in five years, Tang Jia San Shao is the wealthiest writer of Chinese online literature. He comments, 'my record is 4 million words a year. …I could also write continuously for an hour with a speed of 140 words per minute. I remember that on my

thirtieth birthday, when I had a high fever of 40 degrees Celsius, I still wrote 6000 words after I felt better.'[4]

Writers are well aware of the importance of economic incentives. In fact, it is conventional for writers to actively ask for more credits from readers in all forms such as more votes or higher ranking. They feel warranted to do so especially when they post more chapters or words. There is constant power bargaining between writers and readers that is negotiated in perpetuity. When writers deliver more content, they have relatively more power, though this ironically constrains them at the same time. Here are some comments posted by a writer of an online fiction, which reveals her writing process in relation to readers:

> Thank you for reading my fiction, leaving comments and sending me flowers. Thank you for your support…please let me know what I did wrong so I could improve next time. *Sad face*

> Here goes the third update. I really appreciate you working so hard to vote for me. The fiction will be on the shelf tomorrow, and I will write more for the new chapter. Hope I still get your support!

We can see that the writer was actively seeking more credits in all forms from the reader (e.g. commenting, sending virtual flowers that can eventually be converted into cash, voting that will lead to higher ranking, etc.). Writers actively try to initiate interaction and proactively elicit readers, rather than passively waiting for responses. While this is in accordance with Thomas' (2011) findings that some authors of fan fiction actively solicit reviews, in China it is the expectation for real monetary rewards that sets online fiction writing apart.

Impacts on Content

The pressure upon writers to produce timely updates is also related to the content itself. Because of the power dynamics outlined above, writers consider their readership when they decide on topics, characters, outline, and structure before they even start writing. They do so to satisfy their readers and to avoid animosity or negativity from readers in the comments. Additionally, during the writing process, they often interact with readers and modify their plans according to readers' feedback. In fanfic websites, sometimes writers may release a story to a select member of the fanfic community (aka 'beta reader') before making it available to the general readership, even though there is no obligation for the writer to incorporate beta reader feedback (Karpovich, 2006). In this 'beta' stage, feedback is limited to a small number of entrusted readers, and most importantly, usually given in private messages rather than being exposed to all the readers online.

While writers often solicit feedback on content during the writing process, it is also common for readers to directly influence the content against writers' original plans. This is best illustrated with the following example, where a writer was forced to write multiple endings for her fiction because of reader requests:

Writer, 2007-12-20, under chapter 22

I did have more than one ending for this story, but didn't include this one. My age, thoughts and wisdom make me reject this one. Although the characters are together, they are not necessarily happy. This is just a superficial 'happy ending', which is actually cruel to both female and male protagonists.

Long before I posted the reference of some historical events in this story, I had been trying, step by step, to make you accept the result that was sad, but most reasonable. I've done a lot, only to find failure. Many of you have figured out the ending. But some of those people who had praised me for reasonable plots, urge or even threaten me to write a 'happy together' ending.

The Spring Festival is approaching and there are all these people asking me to make you happy. But nobody wants to make me happy. I was really unhappy! ...I suffered a lot writing this story. My life shouldn't have gone through this. I paid a lot, but gained little. This is an unjust thing to do. Those characters you did not want to die, have been kept alive. Those you wished were happy together, now are….The reason I call this ending 'ending A' is because it's not the one I planned.

Despite considered reluctance and protest, the writer was forced to provide a happy ending by her readers. As someone who had been writing online and interacting with her readers for a while, she felt an obligation to entertain her readers' requests. In fact, this is a strategy used by many online writers to deal with power dynamics. This writer also claimed that the relationship should be a reciprocal one where the readers also need to take care of the author and her happiness. However, many readers did not take the writer's satisfaction into account. Instead, they acted like consumers and felt that the writer should deliver what they want because they paid for it. When not satisfied, some readers leave harsh criticism in the comments. One writer complained in response to such criticism: "Some of the readers feel like they can say nasty things to me because they paid a few yuan for this story."

Reader-oriented writing is indeed an important reason for online fictions' popularity. However, writers do not just strictly follow readers' advice for story lines. They are also expected to provide plot twists. Readers try to predict the upcoming story and post their answers online, while writers make up some unexpected turnarounds as a surprise. It is a dialectical, interactive writing process. As a result, many digital fiction writers do not begin with a well-structured plan, and even if they do, their original thoughts can be greatly altered in response to readers' criticisms.

For example, one writer, aware of her readers' discussions of potential story lines, posted a comment: 'There are lots of twists and turns coming, I wonder if they are what you have speculated.'[5] This interactional process becomes akin to an intellectual game between readers and writers who are always negotiating what is going to happen next. This writer already knows that the readers are discussing the possible turns of the story and wants to surprise them. While writers need to deliver what the readers want to some extent, they also need to demonstrate their creativity by providing unexpected plot developments. At the same time, these developments await further approval from readers.

A more salient problem than providing happy endings is that writers are forced to stick to very specific genres because they need to attract readers' attention within a short timeframe. The front pages of literary websites are organized by a list of different genres. Genre fictions have the advantage of immediately attracting readers because readers can just click on the category on the website and find them. Writers find it easier to make a profit this way because the fictions can be advertised as a piece that fits in a popular genre. Consequently, genre fictions have become dominant in online literature recently. In 2011, the most popular genres were fantasy, time-traveling, and historical romance (Ouyang, 2013). However, because they have to stick to the

genres dictated by the website, originality is low. Many stories are repetitive and extremely lengthy with simple plots and stereotypical characters (Ma, 2011; Ouyang, 2013).

Because readers are involved in online literature for the content and also for the interactional process, writers are urged to write long stories. It is common for an online fiction to have 2-3 million words or more. The longer the story, the more likely the fiction will attract more followers and make a profit. As one writer said in an online forum, 'As long as you write enough words, it doesn't matter how much you suck at writing. The readers swear and threaten to leave but they never really quit reading it.'[6]

In summary, we show that online writers are simultaneously worshipped by and beholden to readers. This power dynamic sustains both the writers and readers, enabling the production of online literature, but also forcing writers to stick to certain genres and expected plots. At the same time, readers anticipate surprises, engendering a careful balance that writers must observe between their individual agency to provide novel lines of action and the constraints of fan expectations. In this sense, a story's development becomes a negotiation between readers and writers involving the plot, a wider awareness of writer biography, and situated contexts offline.

It is important to note that the multiple endings, unfinished stories, and happy endings might be influenced by readers' empowerment, but they do not always reflect what readers desire. Readers expect high quality work, yet if the writers strictly follow readers' demands, e.g. through adhering to genre fictions and the rapid production of content, their creativity is constrained. Nevertheless, readers' influence is so great that if writers do not get enough support from readers early on, writers often give up continuing stories with great potential for becoming good work. In fact, what readers hate the most are unfinished stories; ironically, however, many unfinished stories are caused by readers' involvement.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we show that the production of story lines in commercialized Chinese literary websites involves dynamic and persistent writer/reader interaction in which writers are both idolized and castigated. Writers and readers constantly negotiate various aspects of the stories, including their content and production—for example, how frequently to produce updates, the nature of the story's turning points, the fate of the protagonists, and how many credits (ranking, votes, points, etc.) the work should get. Readers become engaged in online literature not only because of the stories, but because they are drawn into a relationship in which they have a sense of power over the writers, the work produced, and in some cases other readers as well. Based on these findings, we suggest that the popularity of online fictions relates to a sense of agency readers have, perhaps related to living under broad authoritarian governmental structures of control.

Globally, contemporary iterations of online fan communities have changed the interactional dynamics and roles related to writers and readers. To be sure, readers are empowered by the new media, but the mechanisms of empowerment are different in the Chinese context. While in North America readers are empowered through their interpretation of the textual meaning, or by carving out a niche to produce their own stories, in China, Chinese readers are empowered because these commercialized literary websites allow readers to directly sponsor a particular writer to produce online content. The fact that readers pay monetary rewards to the writers makes readers feel entitled to more power than those in fanfiction websites. While readers urge the writers to perform with authority, the caveat is that writers must quickly produce segments with happy endings in order to appease their readers.

While the internet as a platform allows Chinese writers to be freer from state control online and more easily access a wider audience, it also ironically subjects writers to the whims of numerous readers online. It is impossible for writers to be immune from or ignore the often visceral responses from their fans. Writers try to take control, but the online setting often favors fans able to impose their will upon the writers they follow. This finding sheds light on how new media influence the production of fictions as a cultural form. For example, fanfic writers are known to add new content influenced by fan postings on websites where there are simultaneous discussions anticipating forthcoming plot-lines and story developments (Pugh, 2005; Thomas, 2011: 213). However, unlike other online fan-based communities (see also Baym, 2000), here we find a more immediate relationship or mode of interaction between writers and readers, echoing the view that technology acts to *mediate* and *constrain* how literature is produced and received (Bolter, 2001; Landow, 2006; Shackelford, 2005; see also Page and Thomas, 2011: 3).

This is an exploratory study of an emerging new phenomenon that leaves several questions for further research. First, while writers and readers seem to constantly negotiate in an open-ended fashion, preliminary empirical evidence suggests that the readers have more power over the nature and production of online literature. Unprotected by institutions and agents such as publishers, writers are made vulnerable by direct reader contact. Further interview data is required to explore the subjective understandings of participants in relation to their strategies, asking which authors are more likely to write, why this is the case, and under what conditions.

Research should also investigate the sociality of narrative production and consumption, especially given the 'network culture' affordances of Web 2.0 (Bird, 2011). Theoretical development lies in empirical research drawing comparisons across variegated cultural contexts, and asking questions beyond what content is produced, such as how and under what social,

cultural and socio-technological conditions (Thomas, 2011: 206; Yuan, 2012). Research may also investigate reader perceptions of the importance of story quality. While digital fiction may appear to outside observers as sacrificing literary quality, stories may be well received by fans given their participatory interactions with writers, their influence on plot development, and even the frequency of posted content (cf. Ryan, 2011: 59-60).

We may also ask how the prosperity of online fictions reflects the broader context of China. Indeed, the composition of the readership/writership and the fictions' form and content might reflect important aspects of the context itself (Griswold, 1993). Under the powerful control of the Chinese nation state, agency is negotiated through 'new knowledge spaces' such as websites. Thus in this paper we suggest that the popularity of online fictions points to a form of cultural sublimation of aspirations for more freedom and self-determination. The agency which readers collectively experience in fashioning online fiction content and influencing frequency of posting may have particular purchase in mainland China, where cyberspace is rigorously monitored and censored (Qing, 2011). It is probably because of censorship that fictions rather than other literary forms dominate in online spaces because, as pointed out by Hockx (2015), it is impossible for state control mechanisms to systematically subject the numerous and lengthy online fictions to careful scrutiny. The government only occasionally intervenes "through the publication of bans and blacklists of specific works, or through specific instructions to sites to remove specific content" (Hockx, 2015: 113). However, because we relied on textual analysis in this paper, we do not have data to illuminate the role of censorship in Chinese online literature; i.e. how censorship influences the way writers produce content or literary websites operate, or how readers' use of a literary website is related to their experience of living under an

authoritarian state. More data and further research is required to answer these important questions about the broader context of contemporary China.

Notes

[1] The Writers' Association is a government entity with local province and city-level branches. The national association has the highest status. Before the reform era, almost all writers received salary and benefits from the government as employees of different government branches or state-owned enterprises.

[2] 'Give power' (*gei li*) is a popular internet slang term in China. It means 'be brilliant.'

[3] http://tech.qq.com/a/20130715/004728.htm. Accessed March 2015. All translations by the first author.

[4] http://tech.qq.com/a/20130715/004728.htm. Accessed March 2015.

[5] http://novel.hongxiu.com/a/201358/2366057.html. Accessed March 2015.

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