Women in the Mirror: Chinese Online Fan Fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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Abstract

In Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a classical masterpiece of eighteenth-century China, the novel's complex female characters facilitate a wide discussion of women's issues. In contemporary China, with the rise of online fiction, fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has flourished, discussing women's issues in the original novel and making changes with a contemporary twist. For example, there are many female characters in fan fiction who do not care about philosophy or literature as those in the original novel do. Instead, these characters focus on developing a career (usually business) in an effort to change their tragic fate in the original novel. At the same time, however, authors of fan fiction are keen to give the heroine an illustrious husband and make her a princess or queen at the end. Online fan fiction, I argue, functions as a prism to refract the receptions of women in contemporary China on *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Due to the reader-oriented production mechanism of Chinese online fiction, it is a reflection of Chinese women's perceptions and expectations of their own gender and their fantasies of romantic relationships with men. These works show the individual independence of the female characters as they work hard to change their fate in imperial China with restrictions and constraints on women. However, on the other hand, they also show a desire to acquire a rich and powerful husband and thus improve their social status. The two inclinations in fan fiction imply a complex social context in contemporary China where the Confucian culture is still largely maintained. However, the feminist movement in China developed in the twenty-first century as the widespread use of the internet in China provided a platform for women to share their experiences and provide emotional support to each other. Through investigating and comparing the different representations of women's issues between *Dream of the Red Chamber* and online fan fiction, I want to clarify that stories of women in online fan fiction exhibit a complex landscape of women's desire to express their subjectivity and their submission to a patriarchal gender order.

Introduction

Dream of the Red Chamber, otherwise known as *Honglou meng*, a classic work of Chinese literature written over several decades in the eighteenth century. Written in the early part of the Qing Empire, the novel follows the changing fortunes of three generations of the Jia family, primarily told through the main character of Baoyu, the family's youngest grandson, and his various female relations. In the novel, the author, Cao Xueqin, reveals the predicament of life through describing the stories of many characters, most of whom are women. It marks the peak of classical

Chinese novels, and has impacted much subsequent Chinese literature.

From the eighteenth century onwards, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has elicited a wide variety of discussions amongst Chinese readers and scholars. Although the author did not finish the novel before his death because the writing and editing took a very long time, this unfinished work incited readers' curiosity to imagine and debate the novel's ending and the characters' fates. Many people, therefore, have not only been involved in arguments but also have written fan fiction to demonstrate their conceptions of this novel and its characters although they demonstrate a different thinking than Cao. For example, the sequels produced during the Qing Dynasty are mainly about how Baoyu achieves success in the National Examination and acquires a position in the government, as well as marrying many concubines. These stories contradict *Dream of the Red Chamber* in which Baoyu explicitly expresses his dislike towards the examination; however, Chinese men of the Qing Dynasty projected their own sexual desires and career ambitions in these novels.

In contemporary China, this production of fan fiction is growing. Since Qidian Chinese Web and Jinjiang Literature City developed into two of the biggest online literature websites, online fiction has become a prosperous industry in China. Literature websites provide online platforms which welcome works of any form on any topic. Thus, writers' imagination and creativity seem to have been liberated and stimulated. Each year, many works are produced, and some writers make a lot more money than traditional writers, which shows that online fiction has become the most

preferred method of literary consumption in contemporary China. Since China has a very long literary history, classical Chinese novels appear as resources upon which to base fan fiction for many authors, because these stories are well-known. Among these works, fan fiction about *Dream of the Red Chamber* is especially popular among female readers because this novel itself is the most famous novel in China and tells stories of upper-class women in late imperial China. The topic of the love story and its large proportion of female characters of *Dream of the Red Chamber* have played a pivotal role in its popularity. Often, women are interested in romantic stories, and more importantly, female authors are more concerned with women's issues, such as women's status in the family and society and the relationship between women and men. For many contemporary readers, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is their only channel to learn about women's lives in eighteenth-century China which is the main content of this novel. Also, female readers usually like to read fiction with female protagonists because they can immerse themselves in these stories, travel with the female protagonists and experience fantastic adventures. The online fan fiction reflects contemporary women's understandings and perceptions of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and how they imagine women's lives in eighteenth-century Chinese society, as well as how they conceive of women's issues in contemporary China. However, in these works, the authors usually change the fate of the female characters whose lives end in tragedy in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In online fan fiction, female characters do not care about philosophy and literature as much as the original characters do, and their standard for an

ideal husband is just one with power. Compared to the original novel, this change seems so incomprehensible to me. These differences are what I am interested in and which I hope to explain.

There are relatively few studies of *Dream of the Red Chamber* fan fiction, with only two Master theses by Wu Jin (2012) and Wang Qian (2016) and several journal articles. These studies have initially examined the reception and re-creation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* by readers in the twenty-first century, but have not paid particular attention to the female themes. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is a novel that focuses on women, and the complex and implicit representation of female themes is a particularly intriguing part of the story. This article is therefore dedicated to examining women in the online fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, enriching the contemporary reception studies of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In addition, *Dream of the Red Chamber* fan fiction is a branch of online fan fiction, and the discussion in this article will also advance the study of fan culture in contemporary China. It will help us to understand the deep cultural psychological mechanisms behind fan fiction. Fan fiction has "the complex intertextuality that tends to embed stories in an economy of collectively shared production, distribution, and reception that together create a more complex intertextual meaning" (Hellekson & Busse 2014, p. 24) By examining how contemporary Chinese female authors construct stories of women in imperial China in contemporary perspective, we will better understand the contemporary reception of classical Chinese literature and the dissemination of classical Chinese

literature through the new medium of online fiction.

As for text selection, firstly, I only look at completed workson Jinjiang, the biggest online fan fiction website. [1] Secondly, I use "tag" of a novel to choose those works that take female characters as their protagonists. [2] Moreover, there are works that take different stories as universes where protagonists travel to fulfil tasks, which are called *kuaichuan* fiction. [3] Among them, some works take *Dream of the Red Chamber* as a universe. I do not look at these ones. There are fewer than 700 works in Jinjiang which meet the requirements. I read all of these works and analyse their characteristics, different plot settings and contemporary shifts.

Chinese Online Fiction

The most striking cultural industry in twenty-first century China, arguably, is online fiction (*wangluo xiaoshuo* 网络小说). [4] What is Chinese online fiction? Before I give my definition, let me briefly introduce what researchers have defined as online literature. Ouyang Youquan (2008) states that online literature is a new literary style created by internet users and published on the internet for users to enjoy or participate in, and that this is a new literary form that comes with the development of modern computers and

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[1] I mean works that have been finished.

[2] In Chinese online fiction, writers use tags to demonstrate their characters, styles, and universes for fan fiction.

[3] Universe is a term of fandom and fan studies which refers to the original texts that fan writers use to create fiction.

[4] Some scholars use the term internet literature, even though the literature discussed in academia is basically fiction. I am discussing in this article the novels that are serialized on the website, hence use the term online fiction.

digital network technology. With the help of computer networks, online fiction is first published on the internet, created by internet users and viewed and interacted with by readers online. Shao Yanjun (2015) asserts that the focus of online literature is its networked feature, that the internet is not just a dissemination platform but also a production space, and that online literature is the literature produced online with the participation and interaction of readers. It has functionality as its first priority and aesthetics as its second. Michel Hockx (2015, p. 4) also emphasises its interactive nature and argues that "it is Chinese-language writing, either in established literary genres or in innovative literary forms, written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen."

Scholars have highlighted the nature of online literature with its roots in the internet, although their discussion of online literature also includes literary genres such as poetry. I argue that the characteristics of online fiction also derive precisely from the interactive, participatory nature of the internet. Accordingly, I argue that online fiction is fiction published on online platforms, usually in serial form, where readers express their preferences through subscriptions, rewards and comments, and indirectly influence the production of works.

Since the establishment of Qidian Chinese Web (*qidian zhongwen wang*, henceforth referred to as Qidian), one of China's two major online literary platforms, in 2002, online fiction has grown exponentially over the past 20 years and now has over 460 million readers in China alone (CNNIC 2021), as well as venturing overseas. In 2017, Qidian established Qidian International, the international website and mobile app of Qidian.com, which specialises in publishing English translations of Chinese online fiction for overseas readers (PR Newswire 2017). A large number of online novels have also been adapted into films and TV series, some of which have been so successful that they have become popular both at home and abroad. Online fiction is an important part of Chinese contemporary popular culture. Although it succeeds the tradition of popular fiction, its production environment is the internet, which gives it a different production mechanism, profit means and characteristics. It is written on the premise of catering to the preferences of readers and the needs of the market, and the achievements of online fiction are therefore driven step by step through readers and the market.

As online fiction became the most conspicuous literary consumption in twentieth-century China, fan fiction also developed rapidly on the platforms of online fiction. The history of Chinese fan fiction can be traced back to the sequels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, but contemporary Chinese fan fiction is an offshoot of online fiction. Unlike English-language fan fiction, which has a well-established community culture and its own distribution channels, Chinese fan fiction rarely makes it into print due to the Chinese government's strict controls on publishing channels. [5] As a result, the

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[5] In China, a licensed book number (*shuhao*) is required to publish a book. Book numbers are granted by state-approved publishing houses. Personal publishing is regarded as illegal and is subject to severe penalties. In 2018, an author, Tianyi, was sentenced to ten years in prison for privately printing her *danmei* novels. See https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-

publication and distribution of fan fiction in China almost entirely relies on the internet since it provides a relatively free space to write and communicate. There have also been a small number of online works to be published offline. Usually, such texts are the ones that have already received so much attention on the internet that publishers think they can make a profit by buying the rights from the authors.

Fan Fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Currently, the main platform for fan fiction is Jinjiang. The other major site for Chinese online fiction, Qidian, has relatively few works of fan fiction. Jinjiang has a special category for fan fiction, of which there are different kinds, such as fan fiction of film and television, famous novels and pop stars' lives. As China has a long literary history, classical novels occupy a large place in the cultural life of Chinese people. Chinese classical novels have a wide market of readers in contemporary times, as they have all been adapted for Chinese opera, film and television series and other performing arts, as well as featuring in Chinese textbooks for secondary school education. The wide applicability and readership of Chinese classical literature points to the key cultural importance of such texts. To draw a comparison that may help underline the key cultural position of classical literature in China, I turn to Elena K. Myers' (2015, p. 2) analysis of Russian classical literature,

> In Soviet Russia, an irreligious society, classical literature was canonized and Soviet citizens were taught to revere it while still at school. Russian classics took the place of sacred texts and were honored not only as a source of literary entertainment, but also of general life wisdom.

As a similarly irreligious society and communist state, I would argue that classical novels have a similar status in China. The Four Masterpieces, in particular, are almost a household name in China. Chinese people still hold these novels in great affection and appreciation, which is both satisfied by and encouraged by their continued, almost endless, adaptation. When online fiction grew in popularity, an industry centred on fan fiction of classical novels quickly developed. Among these, as *Dream of the Red Chamber* is by far the most popular and, as the 1980s television series adapted from it was such a sensational hit, it has the largest number of related fan fiction, with several thousand in Jinjiang.

Online fiction, as popular literature, has different popular styles and themes at different times, but *Dream of the Red Chamber*'s fan fiction has maintained a high level of popularity. *[Qingchuan + honglou] Linshi zhangnv* ([清穿+红楼] 林氏长女 [*Qingchuan+ Honglou*] Lin's Eldest Daughter 2021) also made it to Jinjiang's list of the best works of 2021.[6] This suggests that *Dream of the Red Chamber* still has a large contemporary fan community which generate strong creativity and literary consumption. As Jia Shu (2018, p. 48) says in her discussion of online fiction, the internet has rapidly broken down the boundaries between people, allowing anyone find a person that

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[6] http://www.jjwxc.net/sp/ndsd_2021/index.php

shares their interests, and even the most niche groups have a voice. The fantasy of gathering sand into a tower has become a real reality on the internet. So, we can see contemporary Chinese readers still maintain a strong interest in the world created by *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and want to keep reading new fan-written stories.

In an analysis of Russian fan fiction, Natalia Samutina (2017, p. 257) notes that, "Fan fiction literature is, in many ways, a world-building, an expanding of an assortment of images, characters, and their multiple interconnections." *Dream of the Red Chamber* presents Chinese society in the eighteenth century, but its focus is within the Jia House. However, fan fiction greatly expands this world. Most fan fictions of the novel feature women as the main protagonists, depicting how female characters (either from the original novel or adapted by the writers) change their destiny and help save characters that originally had tragic ends. For example, in *Linshi zhangnv* (2021), the heroine is Daiyu's elder sister, a character that does not exist in the original novel and who protects Daiyu from her death in the original novel and ends up marrying the emperor. There are also some *danmei* (耽美) novels where at least one of the main characters is from the original novel.[7] The authors depict the love story of the two male protagonists along with how the protagonist changes the tragic fate of the female character of the original novel. One such example is *Honglou zhi nizi Jia Lian* (红楼之逆子贾琏 *Honglou*: Deviant Jia

Lian 2014). In a very small number of works, the authors choose to have a straight male protagonist or female protagonist and the story focuses on how the protagonist builds their career. For example, in *Shu fengliu renwu* (数风流人物 Truly Great Men 2020), the protagonist is Feng Ziying, a rarely seen supporting character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The author sets the story in the late Ming Dynasty, depicting how Feng Ziying achieves a career in a time that is beset by internal and external troubles and crises, and incidentally saves several women who originally suffered a tragic end. Another example is *Honglou: xianyu nvshi shengzhiji* ([红楼] 咸鱼女史升职记 [*Honglou*] Struggling at the Court 2021), in which the author borrows the setting of female court official and a virtual dynasty from *Dream of the Red Chamber* and describes how the heroine works her way up the ladder in the palace as a female official, with only passing references to the Jia family.

When considering the scope of online fan communities, it is important to understand the key role and influence of technology in bringing together fans and creators. In his analysis of "participatory culture" and media industry convergence, Henry Jenkins (2006, p. 1) asserts that new technologies:

> [A]re enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content. Powerful institutions and practices (law, religion, education, advertising, and politics among them) are being redefined by a growing recognition of what is to be gained through fostering—or at

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[7] The term *danmei* is from Japanese and literally means "addicted to beauty," which denotes novels that describe romantic love between male protagonists.

least tolerating—participatory culture.

Internet technology has brought fans closer together. As mentioned earlier, discussion boards for online fiction provide a platform for readers to voice their opinions, to which authors sometimes respond, and allow readers to have conversations, exchanges, and even heated debates about the literature in question. In the context of contemporary China, having an open space to share one's opinions and thoughts on a given topic can be both liberating and provocative, even if on the surface of things the discussion is simply about fan fiction of a classical novel. From this perspective, discussion boards for fan fiction are a form of fan forum, in which fans can gather, assemble, and exchange their views on original novels, films and TV dramas as well as on fan fiction. This follows Jenkins' (1992, p. 252) arguments that fans engage in the cultural production: "they constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation." In other words, fans are the readers as well as the creators of fan fiction. All of these comments and opinions on discussion boards have had a considerable impact on fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, especially as the content of the novel itself has historically been the subject of much debate. *Dream of the Red Chamber* remains in the limelight in contemporary China, and apart from the influence of the 1987 TV series, the novel itself is an important reason. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an unfinished manuscript, and the versions now preserved differ from each other in many aspects. Therefore, interpreting the novel's characters has

been the subject of lively discussion among fans.

For example, fans diverge from the more nuanced academic views on the triangular relationship between Baoyu, Daiyu, and Baochai, and the dichotomy between Grandmother Jia's cherishing of Daiyu and Daiyu's untimely death because her love cannot be fulfilled. Fans usually see Baoyu as incompetent and Grandmother Jia as hypocritical. By contrast, Daiyu is usually seen as a sympathetic character that needs to be saved. There is no doubt that these discussions have guided works of fan fiction and many works cater to these mainstream views. The mechanics of writing online fiction require authors to cater to the interests and perceptions of their readers; otherwise, it is difficult for authors to stand out in a highly competitive market. The popular views of the fandom have therefore directly affected the outputs of online fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Fan fiction most often takes the position of changing the tragic ending of the original novel. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the Jia family ends up having its possessions confiscated and noble titles revoked, with many of the female characters either dying or being sold as chattel, something which is obviously regrettable for many readers, particularly for contemporary readers. The desire to change the tragic ending of the Jia family was already evident in the sequels of the Qing dynasty, but some works still partially inherited the tragic spirit of the original novel, for example, *Honglou meng ying (*红楼梦影 In the Shadow of Dream of the Red Chamber, 1877) retained Daiyu's death. However, online fan fiction,

for the most part, as far as I have observed, has shown a stance of rescue, especially for the female characters who meet a tragic end in the original novel. This illustrates the contemporary reader's resistance to the tragic overtones of *Dream of the Red Chamber* and demonstrates the strong desire of contemporary readers to intervene. As in *Shu fengliu renwu*, the story of the Jia family is not at the main stage in this novel, but the author still does not forget to change the tragic fate of Daiyu and some other female characters, which is highly suggestive of the strong orientation of contemporary fan fiction towards ameliorating the tragedy that defines the original novel. Daiyu, for example, is often the object of rescue in fan fiction. Authors often give Daiyu a brother, as a new character, to give her someone who can help protect and shield her from tragic events. In imperial China, daughters were considered unfortunate if there was no son in the family, as they could not be protected by a brother, so in this way the fan fiction writers are bestowing good fortune onto Daiyu. A good example of this is [*Honglou] Daiyu Houma buhaodang* ([红楼] 黛玉后妈不好当 [*Honglou*] Daiyu's Stepmother Is Not Easy 2020), where the protagonist marries Daiyu's father Lin Ruhai and has a son. As the Lin family has an heir, the property is preserved from being privately appropriated by the Jia family, and Daiyu is saved from tragic end.

Secondly, in order to achieve the goal of rescuing female characters, most fan fiction contain elements of either time travel or rebirth. In such fan fictions, the protagonist is able to travel through time or transmigrate their consciousness to understand the family's historical

outcomes and become aware of the original novel's plot, as a way to successfully avoid the misfortunes of the original novel. For example, in [*Honglou gonglue*] *Daiyu yijie buhaodang* ([红楼] 黛玉义姐不好当 [*Honglou*] It's Not Easy to be Daiyu's Cousin 2021), the female protagonist is a modern person who travels back in time to become Daiyu's cousin. Using the system, she tends to Daiyu's health and informs Lin Ruhai and Daiyu of the original storyline, thus avoiding the downfall of the Lin family and the tragic end of Daiyu's death.[8] In works that have a rebirth setting, a character from *Dream of the Red Chamber* is reborn with memories of a previous life. For example, *Wangxifeng chongsheng [honglou]* (王熙凤重生 [红楼] The Rebirth of Wang Xifeng [*Honglou*] 2015) is the story of Wang Xifeng, Baoyu's cousin and Jia Lian's wife, who is reborn with her memories after her death, taming her husband, correcting her mistakes and thus changing her tragic fate in the original novel. Overall, the story is largely similar to that of the protagonists in time travel novels, who make an effort to change their tragic fate in various ways.

The setting of time travel has been used in Chinese literature before. Chinese people believed that the flow of time varies from space to space, which means that if a man spends a day in heaven, he will find a year has passed when he returns to the earthly world. One of the Qing dynasty sequels, *Xin shitou ji* (新石头记 The New Story of the Stone 1905), is the story of Baoyu, who cultivates himself to be immortal in heaven and later returns to

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[8] The system, a common setting in online fiction, is similar to a computer and is usually a tool to assist the protagonist in achieving victory

the world to find that it has changed. However, contemporary online fiction about time travel often features a modern person who travels back to imperial China and uses modern knowledge to make a career. Fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* also falls into this category. In many novels, the heroine makes efforts to develop her own career. For example, the heroine of *Honglou yiliao xitong* (红楼医疗系统 Medical System in *Honglou* 2016) travels back in time to *Dream of the Red Chamber* and becomes Jia Yuanchun, who uses the medical system she brings with her to become a famous doctor and eventually marries into the imperial palace to be an empress.[9] In late imperial China and as represented in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it was considered unethical for a woman to show her talents in society, and noble women in particular were usually confined to the home, doing housework, such as embroidery, seen as befitting of a woman's status. This imagining of women's lives of imperial China in contemporary fan fiction is certainly unconventional, but reflects the value that contemporary women place on female subjectivity.

This reflects the individual independence of the female characters in fan fiction, as they work hard to change their fate in imperial China with restrictions and constraints on women, rather than waiting and hoping for a male saviour to come along. Clearly, this is a reflection of contemporary women's feminist awareness in fan fiction. The widespread use of internet technology in the twenty-first century has brought new strength to the feminist movement in

China, as it provides a new forum for women to connect with each other. Feminism is increasingly resonating among young women as more and more women share their experiences and offer emotional support online (Harris 2008). The internet in China is experiencing a similar movement, although China has a strong Confucian culture and patriarchal tradition. As Jiang Chang & Hao Tian (2020, p. 617) note, "digital technologies feature prominently in the formation of contemporary Chinese feminist counterculture, generating porous feminist discourses, and establishing new modes of feminist critique and activism." The openness of the internet and the inclusiveness of online fiction has allowed female authors to express diverse female themes in their fiction, which has also broadened the boundaries of online fiction.

Thirdly, there is a relentless pursuit of money and power in contemporary online novels. The core of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has strong Buddhist overtones, viewing the present life as a dream. One of the characteristics of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is Cao Xueqin's disdain for, and criticism of, social status and fortune, as expressed through the novel's characters. For example, *Won-Done Song* exposes the futility of people's pursuit of power and fortune, and also expresses through the male protagonist Jia Baoyu the damage done to human nature by the pursuit. This departure from worldly values is the root cause of the love tragedy of Baoyu and Daiyu. However, in fan fiction, we can see that the protagonists are full of desire for money and power.

This value orientation is also reflected in the choice of male protagonists. The authors of fan fiction rarely follow Baoyu, who defies social norms regulated by

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[9] The eldest sister of Baoyu. She is an imperial concubine in the original novel.

Confucianism, as their male protagonist; instead, they treat him with contempt and he often appears as a loser. Fan fiction authors love to pick princes and nobles as husbands for their heroines, especially the emperor, who is their favourite. The online fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* has a feature that differs from previous sequels in that many authors combine the stories of *Dream of the Red Chamber* with other popular parent texts in their writing. This method of writing is also known as "crossover" (Pugh 2015). In such cases, different stories are considered as "cosmologies to be entered" (Gwenllian-Jones 2002, p. 84). For example, the story of princes competing for the throne during Emperor Kangxi and Emperor Qianlong, depicted in the novels of Eryue He (二月河), is an important parent text for online fan fiction, and fan fiction based on it is known in online fiction as *Qing chuan* (清穿 Travels back in Time to the Qing). Much of the fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* incorporates the stories from this category.[10] In such novels, Daiyu is usually the heroine, and she is often arranged by the authors to marry Emperor Yongzheng, a popular male character, regarded as cold on the outside but affectionate on the inside, and commonly found in romances. Yongzheng's status as emperor certainly added to his deadly

charm as it satisfies the reader's desire for money and power. This quest for fame and fortune reflects the preferences of contemporary readers and is a subversion of the original novel.

In addition, many fan fictions combine with other kinds of settings found in online fiction. One of the characteristics of Chinese online fiction is that different genres sometimes appear to merge in novels' setting. Some works combine fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* with *kuaichuan* (快穿 fast-travel) novels, allowing the protagonist to cross over to the world of *Dream of the Red Chamber* to complete his tasks. For example, in *Bi'an fanhua* (彼岸繁花 The Flowers on the Other Side 2017), the author has the protagonist travel to different fictional worlds such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Water Margin*, Late Ming, etc. In the world of *Dream of the Red Chamber* alone, the protagonist travels several times to become different original characters and complete the task of reversing the tragic ending. Moreover, many authors give their protagonists superpowers in order to change the tragic fate of the original novel. *Dream of the Red Chamber* itself has a mythological background and, as a result, its fan fiction often has a *xuanhuan* (玄幻 Chinese fantasy) colour. In these novels, protagonists are often given the chance by the authors to gain extraordinary abilities and change their fate and the fate of their families. The sequels of the Qing dynasty also feature protagonists who become immortal, such as *Bu honglou meng* (补红楼梦 Supplement to Dream of the Red Chamber 1820)*, where Baoyu and Daiyu become gods in heaven after their deaths, but they have little intervention to the real world. By contrast, in online fan fiction,

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[10] In fact, there have been adaptations combining *The Story of the Stone* with the historical stories of the Qing Dynasty in the Republican era, for example, Tian Han (2000, p.19) once mentioned in a letter to Zong Baihua that there was a modern play in Shanghai, *qingchao sanbainian* (清朝三百年 Three Hundred Years of the Qing Dynasty), about Wang Xifeng marrying the Regent and the Shunzhi Emperor falling in love with Lin Daiyu. However, contemporary fan fiction of *The Story of the Stone* with *qingchuan* is based on the novels of Eryue He.

the protagonists use their superpowers to proactively change their fate. For example, *Xichun shi foxiu [honglou]* (惜春是佛修 [红楼] Xichun is a Buddhist Magician [*Honglou*]), Xichun is a *foxiu* (Buddhist magician) who masters magical superpowers, gaining a title from the court by revealing magical powers at birth.[11] She uses her superpowers and position to punish those who led the Jia family to its doom in the original novel, for example by stopping Jia Jing's alchemy, and then change the tragic end of the Jia family and her own fate.[12] Xu Shuang (2016, pp. 121-122), in her analysis of the alternative space created by time-traveling novel, says "it is through the process of imagining the creation of a counter-space, that it is possible to develop the possibility of new connections between humanity and the world. In this way one is able to doubt reality, and express new political or social imaginations." These time-traveling fan fictions, in which the authors give the protagonists superpower that apparently can only exist in fantasy space to change their fate, are a new imagination of this classic novel and show what readers expect from women's abilities.

It should be noted that *xuanhuan* fiction is a very popular genre of online fiction, with many excellent works. This combination with other popular themes and settings of online fiction is, I believe, decided by the production mechanism of

online fiction to cater to the tastes of readers. Online fiction is reader-oriented. Readers, as a rule, do not read only one genre of fiction, instead, they show a diverse range of reading interests. Therefore, the fusion of the fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* with subjects commonly found in other genres of online fiction attracts readers with different preferences and expands the reach of fan fiction.

What also clearly distinguishes fan fiction from the original novel is the language it uses. The language of *Dream of the Red Chamber* is traditional vernacular, and because the main characters are noblemen, the language that they use in the book is elegant and sophisticated. Authors of online fan fiction usually do not have a high level of traditional Chinese and they do not give much thought to fitting together the language and identity of the characters in the original text, so, we can often see the ladies of the original novel speaking a modern language. When discussing language in Chinese time-travel fiction, Jie Lu (2016, p. 166) says:

> This strong postmodernist turn of linguistic incongruity, cacophony, and disjuncture make the language both disruptive and productive at the level of narration… they allow readers to look at the familiar and known historical events in novel ways by offering alternative readings of historical texts.

The modern language brings the readers closer to late imperial China and make it easier for the readers to get into the story, but it also creates a certain amount of deviation from the original

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[11] Xichun is Baoyu's cousin. *Xiushi*, in Chinese fantasy fiction, are similar to magicians in Western fantasy novels. They can master various magical superpowers through study. In Chinese fantasy novels, depending on the religion they have converted to, xiushi can be divided into *daoxiu* (Taoist *xiushi*) and *foxiu* (Buddhist *xiushi*), and so on.

[12] Jia Jing is Xichun's father, the master of Ningguo mansion.

novel in online fan fiction. This is inevitable and is one of the characteristics of online fan fiction.

One of the disappointing things, perhaps, about online fan fiction is that characters that are complex and ambiguous in Cao Xueqin's original are rendered superficial and flat in online fan fiction. The characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* have multiple images that are difficult to summarise in one word. For example, Xue Pan is a lustful, uneducated and violent man for much of the original novel, but he also displays caring sincerity to his friends. After Liu Xianglian becomes a monk, Xue Pan, whom he once beat up, sheds tears for him. Xue Pan also apologises sincerely to his sister, Xue Baochai out of regret after he quarrels with her. This complexity of characterisation is lost in online fan fiction. For example, Lady Wang is the culprit in the original novel for causing Skybright's death, and according to hints in the book, she is also the one who thwarted the love between Baoyu and Daiyu, and as a result, she is often portrayed as a vicious and sinister woman in fan fiction.[13] However, in the original story, Lady Wang also has a generous nature, pitying the old and cherishing the poor. The first time Grannie Liu came into the Jia's house, it was actually for the purpose of seeking financial help, which both sides knew very well, but Lady Wang made a point of explaining to Wang Xifeng that Grannie Liu's visit was well-intentioned and should not be neglected. The second time Grannie Liu came, Lady Wang gave her a hundred taels "for starting a little business or buying some land with…so that you can be self-sufficient in the future."[14] (Cao 1977, p. 326) As a noblewoman, it speaks volumes about Lady Wang's kindness that she can be sympathetic to the difficulties of life for the lower classes. However, this nuance is lost in online fan fiction, as Lady Wang usually appears in a straight-forwardly villainous role, and some novels blame her for the downfall of the Jia family. For example, in *Peijia dayahuan qiusheng richang* (陪嫁大丫鬟求生日常 [红楼]The Daily Life of a Senior Maid [*Honglou*] 2021), Lady Wang secretly asks Wang Xifeng to squeeze the poor people by offering loans at extortionate rates of interest. And usury, in the original novel, is one of the charges against the Jia family. This kind of simplification helps fan fiction writers quickly set their scenes and plots but diminishes the challenging nature of Cao's soaring tome, in which the most forward-thinking, even-handed characters can also be the most inconsiderate and unpleasant and the most charming, good-natured characters can be the most hypocritical and underhand. This, I think, is also determined by the reading orientation of online readers and the production features of online fiction. Online fiction requires writers to try to keep publishing new chapters daily in order to attract and keep readers, and readers usually read the latest chapters of different novels every day. In this case, readers do not care about the depth of characterisation in a novel; they are more concerned with the intensity of the plot. In other words, the story has to be eye-catching and exciting. Diminishing the complexity of the original characters and

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[13] Lady Wang is Baoyu's mother.

[14] According to the novel, this amount is roughly equivalent to five years of expenditure for an average family.

exaggerating one side of them can make the conflict between characters more intense, serving the particular purposes of online fan fiction.

Conclusion

In this article, I examine how online fan fiction has re-narrated this greatest of Chinese classical novels, investigating how this literary heritage is received by contemporary Chinese people. In fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, writers answer two questions: "what if" and "what else" (Pugh 2015). Some characters' images and fates are changed. I argue that the different ways in which *Dream of the Red Chamber* forms the basis for an "actively transformative relationship" (Romanenko 2020) between writers and readers. Online fan fiction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* embodies contemporary readers' interpretation of it and their imagination of the unfinished ending. The sheer volume of fan fiction tells us that this masterpiece of the Qing dynasty still has a huge impact today. As a wide range of women authors continue to recreate the women's stories of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, they show their own thinking about many women's issues. These contemporary retellings of the Qing dynasty novel reflect both the complex social context of contemporary China and the impetus of the internet on the Chinese feminist movement.

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