

To Become Immortal: Chinese Fantasy Literature Online

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Abstract

The Internet provides individuals alternative approaches of self-realization. Virtual communities bind people who prefer the fantasy literature that bypasses the gate-keeping of mainstream culture. Through there, amateur writers upload their stories and people pick their readings and pay for that. The paper presents thick description of selected fantasy stories from QIDIAN (the most popular Chinese fantasy literature website and fan community) and studies the interactions between the writers and readers. From the analysis, the study expects to learn more about people's reading experience of the fantasy fiction and understand the underlying mechanism of publishing stories on the Internet.

Keywords: Chinese fantasy literature, virtual community, fan

Introduction

Nowadays, it is widely thought that advanced information technologies are transforming individuals' socio-cultural existence. The development of the Internet provides individuals access to realize their imaginations in virtual reality. The Internet provides individuals alternative approaches of self-realization, which may be more desirable than their offline counterparts. Robins (2000) suggests that virtual reality can be more comfortable than imperfect reality. People with similar sub-cultural interests build social networks online and experience their own versions of virtual realities. This paper examines the role of Chinese fantasy literature online in people's experience of virtual reality.

Fan communities online bind people who prefer Chinese fantasy literature that bypasses the gate-keepers of mainstream culture. Through the communities, individuals consume the cultural products, which are produced by their peers, mostly amateur writers. They want to read works that fit their interests or match their perception of the world. Failing to locate suitable print reading materials, some of them start to post their own writings online. The postings, imitating popular Western fantasy stories like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of Rings* or Chinese fantasy novels like *Xun Qinji* (寻秦记), first appeared in a few literature web communities (e.g., *www.shuku.net*), which mainly hosted published pieces, in the late 1990s. Since the early 2000s, some die-hard fans in mainland China have organized interest groups and founded virtual communities of fantasy literature.¹ They wrote reviews of classic Western and Hong Kong fantasy novels,

¹ In Taiwan, fantasy literature communities (e.g. *www.myfreshnet.com*) came into existence in the late 1990s. Before 2000, most popular Chinese fantasy pieces shared online were written by Chinese writers living outside mainland China.

and posted their own fantasy stories in the community BBS (bulletin board system).

Before 2003, fantasy literature communities were non-profit, and members donated money for community maintenance. Since spring 2003, most communities started to require members to pay subscription fees to read popular stories.²

There are dozens of Chinese fantasy literature communities/websites online. This study focuses on QIDIAN (<http://www.qidian.com>), which is the largest Chinese fantasy literature website in the world.³ It was established as a fan community in 2001, in the name of *Chinese Magic Fantasy Union - CMFU*, and then acquired by SHENGDA (NASDAQ: SNDA) in October 2004. *Alexa Internet* (<http://www.alexa.com>), an Amazon affiliated company that gauges website traffic, ranks it 446th in terms of daily visits world-wide in September 2010.⁴ This is the highest rank of all websites in this category in the world.

Even after the transfer of ownership, the subscription fee to popular stories is still the primary income source of QIDIAN. QIDIAN runs independent of SHENDDA's business operation, and the original structure of a fan community remains untouched. The active devotion of members is taken as a valuable asset, and it helps build QIDIAN a great reputation among fans of fantasy literature. Over ten thousand amateur writers post over 15,000 stories there, some of which get published in print later.

A visitor of QIDIAN can read stories of the site without becoming a member of the community. However, only registered users can have the community benefits, including interacting with other members and story writers, paying a subscription fee to read a newly updated chapter of a popular story (otherwise, one may need to wait a few months to read it for free).

Only a few popular writers are full-time, and get their cut from readers' subscription fees, and most others are part-time, who are primarily driven by interest and get nothing or little money. Most writers in QIDIAN do not upload a complete story at once. They update on a regular basis. It can be a 5,000-word new chapter a day, or a 10,000-word new chapter a week, depending on the schedule of the author and popularity of the story. Some writers stop updating their stories without a narrative closure. The reasons vary: exhaustion of creative passion, time pressure, unpopularity of the stories, harsh criticism, and lack of writing skills.

Readers can exert direct influence upon writers in QIDIAN. It is a custom for a member of QIDIAN to write book reviews or comments on plots or chapters of a story. QIDIAN facilitates reader participation by providing a BBS area to each story. Writers may take readers' comments seriously and develop stories based upon readers' reflections. Sometimes, writers even rewrite previous "flawed" chapters according to readers' suggestions. In 2010, QIDIAN allowed registered users to give cash directly to a writer through its own online banking system. Such a rewarding mechanism motivates writers to spend more time to learn readers' preferences and adjust later plots according to their expectations.

² QIDIAN, the largest fantasy fiction website and fan community in the world, started its paid VIP service on October 10th, 2003.

³ QIDIAN had 10 million registered users by September 2010.

⁴ The highest rank of QIDIAN in history was 99th in October 2004.

Through participation of QIDIAN, individuals actively search stories that meet their reading interests; meanwhile, amateur writers have more freedom to create stories that fit either their own interests, or readers' interests, or both. It is interesting to look at the relationships between the simulated fantasy worlds of the popular fictions and the real world. From there, we may learn to understand how the fans perceive the stories. The paper presents thick description of selected online fantasy stories and studies the interactions between the writers and readers. The study also looks at how protagonists deal with social norms in the stories and analyzes the readers' reflection towards it.

Literature Review

The development of the Internet adds to the blurring of the real and the simulated. Both Virilio and Baudrillard propose that virtual technologies are destined to not only simulate the real but also replace it (cited in Wilbur, 2000). Baudrillard (1983) claims that the proliferation of mass media and mediations leads to the dissolving of the dichotomy between the real and the simulacrum, between the authentic and the inauthentic. Robins (2000) suggests that widespread application of the Internet signals an age of boundary breaking, "creating the illusion the internal and external realities are one and the same" (p.85). Information technologies help individuals feel real in simulated environments.

When the real and the virtual overlap on the Internet, the knowledge of power relationships may help explain the creation and consumption of cultural products on the Internet. Power discussed in this study is approached in the Foucauldian sense, considering that the social life of the characters, who transcend beyond worldly norms in fantasy stories, is still viewed as a series of conflicting elements set in power relationships. Foucault considers that a society without power relations can only be an abstraction. He interprets the relationship of power:

A power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up (Foucault, 1982, p.220).

From Foucault's perspective, power always entails a set of actions performed upon other individuals' actions and reactions. Furthermore, Foucault feels that power is exercised by individuals when they are free subjects and faced with real options. Foucault (1982) says, "At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom" (pp. 221-222).

The power relationships on the Internet are a window where we may understand socio-cultural impacts of the Internet upon individuals. Zizek (1999) states, "Cyberspace opens up the domain of shifting multiple sexual and social identities, at least potentially liberating us from the hold of the patriarchal law" (p.112). On the other hand, Haraway (1991) and Kendall (2002) find that the power relationships in web communities resemble that of the real world;

Tsang (2000) observes that the racial stereotypes offline still work in online queer communities. Zickmund (2000) argues that the openness of the Internet and its interactive options make it less likely for individuals to break away from society. In short, individuals can not develop isolated subcultures online completely outside the reach of moderating influences of the offline society.

This connection with the material world pre-determines the parameters of the ways that individuals can use online communities. Yang (2003) suggests the cultural influence of web participation gives individuals shared meanings, expressive symbols, and emotional repertoire with which they can seek anything. Yang argues that web community participants share some cultural repertoire, in which cultural traditions have been built in. Elliott (2004) observes that non-profit participants of the Goa community objectify the scenes in which they are involved. She suggests that these participants submerge their own presence and employ aesthetic and informational resources within online contexts to promote larger social concerns. Stein (2002) finds that Roswell fans transformed pre-existing online forums into spaces of mourning, coping, political and social debate and action after September 11th, 2001. Through these community activities, members react to the socio-cultural environments in the material world.

The debate whether the Internet (potentially) liberates individuals from the hold of offline power relations represents an ongoing negotiation between the real and the virtual. People reconstruct their identities online, bridging the imagined and the real. Zizek (1999) concludes that the effect of the Internet “hinges on the network of socio-symbolic relations (of power and domination, etc.) which always-already overdetermine the way cyberspace affects us” (p.123).

Being bodiless is the focus of the study of the power relationships in the Internet. Csordas (1994) argues that “control of the body is control of the relations of personal production” (p.14). Giddens (1991) suggests that identity construction largely focuses on bodilessness. Turner (1994) upholds this point of view, “the appropriation of bodiliness, in all its aspects, from sexuality and reproductive capacities to sensory powers and physical health, strength, and appearance, is the fundamental matrix, the material infrastructure, so to speak, of the production of personhood and social identity” (p.28). He argues that body is “the main battlegrounds on which the struggle to forge a critical perspective adequate to the changing features of contemporary social, political, and cultural reality is being fought” (p.31). Taking the body as essential ground of culture and self, he states that the body is a site of both social inequality and personal empowerment.

Chinese communication scholars also contribute to the study of fantasy literature on the Internet. Han (2007) divides Chinese fantasy literature into five categories: history and myth, Chinese alternate history, modern melodrama, Western fantasy, and science fiction. He states that more and more fantasy fiction novels get published in books and magazines as well as on the Internet. Teng (2011) argues that fantasy literature on the Internet is mainly different from classic literature, in terms of value systems. He mentions that the production of fantasy fiction is largely joined by readers’ active participation. Xu (2007) analyzes the symbiotic relationship between fantasy literature and websites. Fantasy literature websites make fiction writing possible in a sustainable and profitable way, and readers actively participate in story production through fan communities and BBS areas of the sites. Gai (2006) says that fan communities

facilitate interactions among readers of fantasy fiction and allow a change in experience from individual reading to collective meaning creation.

Categorization of Fantasy Stories and the Subjects of Analysis

Different fantasy literature websites and virtual communities have developed various systems to classify fantasy stories. Although slight differences remain, all the category systems resemble each other. The present study adopts the category system of QIDIAN in the analysis:⁵

1. Super-human self-perfection stories: the characters strive to become immortal through exercising Daoism, Buddhism, or similar techniques.
2. Martial-arts stories: evolve from traditional Chinese martial-arts novels.⁶
3. Historical-military stories: focus on wars and power struggles of competing nations in any time frames and geographic locations.
4. Witchcraft stories (Prototype: *Lord the of the Rings*): happen in settings similar to Europe in the Middle Ages.
5. Modern melodrama stories: take place in modern China. The characters may have limited supernatural power and struggle for business success or/and the appreciation from their lovers.
6. Cyberspace stories: tell about players' gaming experience in future multi-player massive role playing games.
7. Sci-fi stories: resembles classic sci-fi novels or Japanese sci-fi comics.
8. Detective or ghost stories: resembles mainstream detective novels while focusing on supernatural phenomena like ghosts.

Some stories cannot fit strictly to one specific type. The characters can easily travel across time, space, and even different universes. They may jump from a modern setting to a middle-age battlefield suddenly.

Three stories in the super-human category are selected in the analysis: '升龙道' (*Shenglong Dao*), '飘邈之旅' (*Untouchable Journey*), '道缘儒仙' (*Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal*).⁷ In the three stories, the three protagonists strive to become immortal and evolve into the mightiest being in all the universes. The study chooses the stories as subjects of analysis for two reasons:

1. Super-human self-perfection is the most popular fiction category in QIDIAN, and the

⁵ QIDIAN modifies its categorization every once a while. The study adopts the one used by QIDIAN from 2004-2008. The 2010 system combines category 1 and 4 to one unit, category 6, 7, and 8 to one unit, and adds a new category as "Girls' stories".

⁶ Jin Yong, the most popular martial-arts novelist in contemporary China, can be a good reference to understand the nature of Chinese martial-arts novels: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jin_Yong

⁷ *Shenglong Dao* was finished in October 2004, while the other two were updated regularly until 2006.

selected stories were among the most popular ones from 2004-2008 in terms of reading visits and favorite-votes in QIDIAN.⁸

2. The stories have many fans, who posted messages discussing the plots and characters and sharing their reflections with each other.

Super-Humans and Power Relationships

All the protagonists in the stories are immortal super-humans, who can exert supernatural power and transcend the limits of time and space. They become immortal through exercising Daoism⁹ techniques, which to a certain extent are similar to Chinese Qigong.¹⁰ Ots (2000) defines *Qigong* as a part of an array of techniques of health preservation and of exercises prolonging life which are intimately related to ancient Daoist practices.

All the protagonists have excellent physical bodies. The perfection of the body is fundamental for all of them to become immortal. Physical defects in the body may thwart the process of self-perfection. In *Shenglong Dao*, the body of Yichen (the protagonist) was damaged by his Daoism instructor as a punishment. Until he recovers from it, he loses his supernatural power. In *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal*, it is much easier for the youths to become immortal than the elder people, because the physical bodies of the elderly malfunction. In *Untouchable Journey*, when people's body is aging to a certain extent, they lose the possibility of becoming immortal.

A body of being in the world implies that even super-humans cannot transcend their material existence. They still eat, drink, and sleep, although they may not eat, drink, and sleep in the same way as that of normal people. The socio-cultural, economical, and political forces of the normal world can act upon the bodies of the super-humans. Furthermore, the body is the agency through which the super-humans respond to external social relationships. Super-humans interact with average people and exert paranormal power, when they have physical bodies and are confronted with real life complications.

The stories can be approached on two levels: the interactions between super-humans and normal people and the interactions among super-humans. The writers establish that most super-humans live with two identities: as an average citizen and as a superman. Most super-humans often mask their super-human identities and stay with normal people for various reasons. At the end of *Shenglong Dao*, when Yichen possesses 60% of the energy of all universes, among which our universe is at the lowest end, he chooses to return to the Earth. He dislikes the peaceful and carefree paradise-like universe; while, the conflict-laden secular society, full of emotional

⁸ QIDIAN has a list of most popular fantasy stories according to readers', both members and non-members, daily, weekly, and monthly visits. It also has a list of favorite stories, which are voted by members on a monthly basis.

⁹ Dao is considered as integral truth. Daoism is the domestic religion in China. It offers the knowledge that helps people get Dao. Daoism believes that Yin and Yang are the fundamental principles of the universe.

¹⁰ With a Daoist origin, Qigong is widely practiced in China by millions of people, taken as a serious alternative to the established therapeutic tools.

attachment and sensational pleasures, holds him. In *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal*, maintaining the prosperity of *Shenzhou* (resembles ancient China) is critical to resolve the conflicts between evil and good immortal beings. In *Untouchable Journey*, the universe where average people are situated is the center that connects all higher universes.

When performing their average citizen roles, super-humans restrict their use of supernatural power or even hide their superman identity from the public. As long as they live in the secular world, they adopt several strategies that help them get accepted by the regular world.

First, once super-humans use destructive supernatural power, they usually stay away from average people. In *Shenglong Dao*, super-humans prefer battlefields, which avoid public observation. In *Untouchable Journey*, super-humans try their best not to hurt average people. In *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal*, although Ye Haotian, the protagonist, can easily annihilate Japanese pirates in a second, he spends several months to train average people to defend the invaders. Most super-humans share a view that the use of supernatural power upon average people may break the balance of the world, which in return leads to unexpected negative impact on their socio-cultural surroundings. In *Shenglong Dao*, Yichen has hired a group of ex-soldiers. The mercenaries take care of Yichen's enemies, who are without supernatural power. Those who use supernatural power to take advantage of average people are often depicted as evil beings, and they often have less fortunate endings. Even most evil super-humans have tried to hide their uses of sorcery upon average people. Ye Haotian kills dozens of evil super-humans, because they have tried to usurp national governance by black art. On the other hand, when Ye Haotian uses his supernatural force to help average people, he often masks his real identity and performs in a way which might be ignored by the masses.

Second, alongside the restricted use of supernatural forces, super-humans more or less respect powerful elite classes. Even though the super-humans cannot strictly abide by the law set by the government or the king, they will not breach it if there are other options. Yichen always asks his so-called friends (corrupted police officers and politicians) to pressure his enemies and crash the opponents' business first. Only when this strategy fails, Yichen will do the dirty work by himself. When Ye Haotian kills the evil super-humans, the written permission of the king justifies his killing. If not necessary, most super-humans may not challenge government authority. They are not afraid of government punishments; however, the assistance from governments will make things less troublesome. Liqiang (the protagonist of *Untouchable Journey*) and his close friend Houpijing have asked the king of 'Dasong' to help him move thousands of people out of a dangerous valley (Series 11th: chapter 10th Brothers; (第十一集逆天宝镜第10章兄弟)). Sometimes, super-humans develop official connections to nations. In *Untouchable Journey*, many super-humans serve for kings and royal families and enjoy the fortune and admiration brought by the service. Personal attachment may also contribute to super-humans' service to nations. Ye Haotian takes the position as a senior official in the country, where he was born; Liqiang and Houpijing accept aristocratic titles of a kingdom, where Houpijing was born.

Third, most super-humans realize the importance of money and use it to reach their goals. All the three protagonists gain much from their business transactions with normal people and other super-humans. In *Untouchable Journey*, super-humans have to buy a lot of rare ores that store pure energy, which can greatly shorten the time for them to self-perfect and evolve to

higher-levels of life beings. In the story, a child born in a rich family has a better opportunity of becoming immortal than a poor kid, because the poor kid cannot afford expensive rare ores. Liqiang has an abundant collection of rare ores, which he trades for other items useful to his/his friends' self-perfection.

Ye Haotian and Yichen are among the richest business men in their worlds. For example, Ye Haotian spends million of Yinliang (银两, local currency) earned from his business to help local citizens get over famine (1st version, chapter 52, *Overcoming Famine*-赈灾). The first 76 chapters of *Shenglong Dao* talk much about how Yichen becomes a billionaire and leads a luxurious life with his wife and friends. His improvements of Daoism practice always come along with his successes in business.

Even though super-humans interact with normal people frequently, they live for self-perfection. The three stories show that super-humans will be able to self-perfect at a faster pace if they interact with other super-humans. Naturally, super-humans develop their own societies, situated in higher worlds/universes. In the stories, the power-structures of the super-human societies can be traced back to the power-structures in the real world. The mechanism of super-human worlds resembles the real world in two major aspects.

First, there is a central entity that governs all super-humans, and most super-humans respect its governing authority. In all the three stories, the working mechanism of the entity can be summarized as following:

1. The leaders regulate dozens of fundamental norms that all super-humans should follow. The most important are:
 - A. When super-humans reach a break-through point in Daoism/Buddhism practice, they will be invited or required to reside in a higher universe. The central entity discourages or restricts those residing in the higher universe from travelling to the lower universe, where the Earth is situated. In *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal* (1st edition, Chapter 60 - Immortal World), super-humans will lose the amount of energy that they will take at least 500 years to recover if they travel to a lower universe.
 - B. Properties are privately owned. The higher world is not Utopia. Precious items in the normal world may still be precious to super-humans.
2. In most cases, the leaders will not interfere with the privacy of an individual super-human, unless he or she violates the regulation, or the interference is concerned with the interest of all super-humans.
3. The leaders have their own police forces that supervise the implementation of the rules.

Second, being wealthy is important in super-human worlds, though the wealth may not be evaluated by currency. In *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal*, the turning point of Ye Haotian comes when the richest super-human in all universes decides to help him. Ye Haotian pays for other super-humans to promote his Daoism practice, which saves him hundreds of years to reach a higher-level of Daoism. In the story, super-humans have their own markets and do business in similar ways as that of the modern society. In *Untouchable Journey*, Liqiang usually treats his relationships with other super-humans as a business partnership. The author admits several

times in the story that Liqiang's past experience as a businessman helps him win appreciation from other super-humans. Liqiang often purchases some unnecessary ores or exotic items at relatively low prices, and later he trades the items for higher returns. In *Shenglong Dao*, Yichen and his friends even value the items in the paradise-like universe by the value system of the Earth. They have stolen thousands of shining stones from other super-humans, because they feel that the stones can be sold at a good price in the Earth. Such contents show that super-humans may not resist the same temptation of being wealthy as normal people do. In order to be wealthy, super-humans have to follow the rules of market, which are associated with the influence of real life power relations.

Reader Reflections and Power Relationships

In the community BBS areas, hundreds of messages are posted to discuss the three stories, and more messages follow these threads of posts. Readers are free to comment and join any thread of story discussion. Although simple statements such as "You are right!" or "Up, Up" can be seen frequently as a follow-up, more posts focus on the developments of the protagonists and the connection between the stories and the real world. The readers have been deeply attracted by and involved in the development of the stories. The messages reflect the readers' interpretation of the underlying power relationships in the stories.

In general, when a chapter has a content that can be related to the real world in terms of social settings or power relations, it has higher viewing visits and more reading comments than a chapter that only focuses on the matters of the immortal or unreal and invented issues.

In the first 76 chapters of *Shenglong Dao*, when Yichen stays in London, 32 out of 105 threads of posts in total at that period, discuss his strategies of taking advantage of the governments of European countries. Readers express their admiration and encouragement to the author in many of the remaining posts. In the later 100 chapters, when Yichen upgrades to a higher universe, where the immortals reside, 23 out of 92 threads of posts, discuss the governing structure there and Yichen's approaches of dealing with superior immortals, and only 15 address Yichen's ways of getting universe energy.

Many messages express their appreciation of Liqiang's immortal evolution. In the story, Liqiang takes several hundred years to become immortal. The story sets that all super-humans evolve in the order of eleven stages (Xuanzhao旋照, Kaiguang开光, Ronghe融合, Xindong心动, Lingji灵寂, Yuanying元婴, Chuqiao出窍, Fenshen分神, Heti合体, Dujie渡劫, Dacheng大乘) in Daoism practice. Only if a super-human survives through the testing of Dujie from the Heaven, he or she will turn to be immortal. One message by member天下第一 (*The World Number 1*) posted on the HJSM admits that this setting greatly promotes his interest in Daoism practice and quotes Daoism masterpieces to validate his interests.

The readers' emphasis on the procedures of becoming immortal demonstrates their preference for a step-by-step rule of self-perfection, which matches the description in Daoism classics. The readers feel that super-humans cannot develop in whatever ways the writers like. "That super-humans are restricted in their evolutions makes the stories more acceptable. They should be trapped by power-relationships, with which readers are familiar," said by member天下第一 (*The World Number 1*) in the HJSM fan community.

Moreover, the readers extend their interpretation beyond the scope of the stories. They discuss the relationships between the stories and the social realities. Some readers feel that the stories reflect the dark side of the society. One message (member ID *Wgkjikal*) on the QIDIAN says, “*Shenglong Dao* is just a means through which the author expresses his strong dissatisfaction towards the real world. The use of supernatural power, the street-wise knowledge, and political tricks in the story demonstrates a preference for gangster lifestyle to deal with the inequalities in the real world.” *Wgkjikal* attributes the popularity of *Shenglong Dao* to the fact that individuals with lower socio-economic status seek to negotiate with the power relationships in the real world for a better living.

Some readers criticize that the power struggle in *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal* is over-simplified compared to that in reality. One message (member ID *Tianzhen*) on the HJSM teases that only ‘idiot’ readers (小白) are fans of the story. *Tianzhen* feels that the story lacks in-depth presentation of psychological states of characters and complicated power-struggle. The author *Guiyu* (鬼雨) replies to the message, admitting his incoherent story setting and indicating that it is just to amuse readers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Internet offers people options to renounce fixed symbolic identity, meanwhile, power-relationships in the real world still affect the imagined worlds in the stories posted online. Individuals negotiate their existence between personal freedom and socio-cultural norms and traditions in reading fantasy fiction.

In *Shenglong Dao*, the socio-cultural environments mirror that of the modern world, and *Untouchable Journey* starts from current China. In both stories, the power-relationships in modern China find new forms of representation. Meanwhile, the historical background of *Daoism Lot & Confucian Immortal* is ancient China.

Although the three protagonists are unsatisfied with the political and socio-economical systems in the simulated societies, they have no intention to overthrow the systems. Instead, they make efforts to take advantage of the systems or to improve the systems. They strive to promote the prosperity of China or the mirrored nations of China. The title of ‘*Shenglong Dao*’ itself means promoting China. This patriotic theme may provoke readers’ emotional attachment to the story.

It is noticed that super-humans are more or less trapped by external power institutions, which often have counterparts in the real world. Although readers and writers distance themselves from reality, the continuity and stability of individual identity and social reality make them still connected to real life restrictions in their consumption of imagination. In the fantasy lands, they choose to experience the power relationships that they are most familiar with offline. If a fantasy story does not respect offline power-relations or at least widely-accepted social norms, it is less likely to be popular. Chinese readers are still largely predetermined in their online cultural consumption by their offline experience, knowledge and background, even when they are seeking to escape from dreariness of daily life. From this perspective, the attachment to the offline power relationships in the stories is justified.

Moreover, some readers seek to affect the developments of the stories to match their

preferences. They posted messages suggesting future plots in the BBS, and the writers took some of their suggestions into consideration and adapted the plots in the later chapters accordingly. The fans' active participation in the story creation indicates that they try to fill in the gaps left by the writers and build personal connections between themselves and the protagonists. They are amused or gratified, when they put themselves in the positions of the characters and overcome the challenges that can be traced back from their real life situations. The stories present the readers lifestyles which they desire but are unachievable in the real world.

As indicated by Jenkins (2008), the roles of producer and consumer are being blurred further within the new media landscape. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of mass generated content but active participants in cultural production and circulation. In the case of Chinese fantasy literature on the Internet, writers and readers collaborate and create fiction content that serve their personal and collective interests. On the other hand, this new form of participatory culture in fiction creation cannot make people get rid of their real world connections in reading experience. Although individuals expect to transcend beyond the limits of the secular world, they are prone to take advantage of rather than overthrow the systems.

Considering the nature of collective intelligence in the process of meaning creation, this descriptive study must relinquish any claim to authority. Further studies may need to apply an approach of virtual ethnography, exploring readers' patterns of participation and reflections from their own perspectives. Moreover, many authors of popular stories set up QQ (the most popular instant messenger in China) groups, which allow up to several hundred people to chat together simultaneously on one screen. Participant observation of the QQ groups may help researchers understand the dynamics of interactions among readers and writers.

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