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Role-Plays and Social Positioning in Female-Oriented Genres of Web Fiction

From its forum beginnings in the late 90' to the mature system of today, in which a majority of financially viable websites are under the flagship of one giant actor of the culture industry, Shanda Group 盛大集团, Web fiction in China has remained strikingly gender-oriented in the displaying of its products. Well-known reading platforms include *Hongxiu Tian Xiang* 红袖添香 or *Jinjiang Wenxue* 晋江文学, both explicitly dedicated to a female readership. An even clearer sign of this market separation is the fact that the main male-oriented website, *Qidian* 起点, ended up launching a separate *Qidian Nüsheng Wang* 起点女生网 in 2009, instead of simply trying to diversify its readership and its genres on one same platform.

In order to study what characterizes female-oriented writing on the Web, one would have then to map these websites and tackle separately the numerous genres and sub-genres they propose, a daunting task given their ever-expanding repertoire. However, if we consider the dynamics proper to these reading platforms - fan fiction, interaction between authors and readers, mutual influences between genres, predominance of the Romance super-genre - this apparent diversity might in fact hide homogeneity in the narrative structures. I contend that narrowing these structures would put us in a better position to apprehend female Web fiction as a whole and to understand the phenomenon of gender-oriented markets.

I propose to compare patterns of different genres and see if they obey some common rules beyond those of the romantic one. It is likely indeed that elements typical of Romance, such as its fantasizing and escaping functions, are to be found, and newfound patterns might participate of it as well. However, putting Romance aside for a while might allow us to downgrade it to one simple part of a broader “game”, and to see things in a new light.

I will limit myself for now to three genres that have acquired broad visibility through paper publications and screen adaptations: *Xianxia* 仙侠, that is, fantastic/immortals, *Hougong* 后宫, or palace struggles, and *Chuanyue* 穿越, travels in time or to parallel universes. This latter is more of a narrative device serving to trigger the stories of the two former ones, but I will consider it a genre here because its status is often ambiguous, and it is one of the first “types” coming to mind when one thinks of web fiction. Using examples drawn from six bestsellers, I will focus on the center of gravity of the stories (the main protagonist), the environment she evolves in, and the theatrical effect produced by the superposition of these two elements.

Layered identities of the main protagonists

Our starting point shall be the female character at the center of the narration, often seen in the first-person, or in a close-up perspective. Let us note that this individual systematically has a fractured, double identity (or even more when magic is involved): I do not refer here to any psychiatric disorder, but to the fact that for main protagonists in these genres personal identity and social identity refer to literally different persons. *Chuanyue* provides the easiest examples: a contemporary woman ends up, without any developed reason, into the body of another person, either from the past or from an imagined world, or keeps her body but quickly has to reconstruct a social identity in a completely new social environment. Her inner self stays hidden from the view of the other protagonists, who are only conscious of the social role she now must assume. In the genre *Hougong*, itself often triggered by a *Chuanyue* as well, the woman finds herself forced into a closed microcosm with a particular role to play (that of a concubine of a certain position or level). Her inner self, usually that of a dynamic, rebellious young woman, has to co-exist with a social identity constrained by the specific rules of her new environment. Finally, in the case of *Xianxia*, the doubling of identities is made possible by the jump between different layers of existence, usually different lives, intertwined in a blurry world where neither time nor space matter much. The former identities are usually first unknown to the heroine, and sometimes demoniac, dangerous selves. The very title of the novel sometimes betrays this complex identity: As we can see from the titles of my examples, the word “dream” and words implying a repetition participate in the general sentiment of blurriness and multi-foldedness.

Hierarchy and social positioning

In the narrative blurriness of *Xianxia*, caused by the lack of description and by the inexistent time and space limits, the author’s emphasis and precision on the society in which the protagonist evolves stands out particularly. Hierarchy, classes (between mortals and immortals, to start with), status and gossips contribute in creating a challenging environment in which the protagonist has to navigate to get the “prince” of the fairy tale.

Hierarchy is, needless to say, even more explicit in the *Hougong* genre, where common life in a closed universe is governed by a strict set of concubine categories, among which ascensions and degradations are always possible. As for the *Chuanyue*, enough to remind that the world traveled to is typically a palace, therefore similar to *Hougong*, or an imagined world, often closed to immortal ones.

Interestingly, whatever the genre, the main female protagonist, usually being described as independent, rebellious, sometimes even impertinent, is not very intimidated by this social structure and goes her way, exploring the rules and limits of her world and the possibilities offered to her. In a sense, this playground allows her to experiment enough to find eventually her right place in that particular society, along with an identity suiting her.

Role-plays and role distance

A pattern common to these three genres could then be so formulated: the subjectivity of a woman struggling in a restrictive setting in which she is an outsider, to finally overcome difficulties and find her place. Outsider because coming from another world, from another life, or suddenly catapulted into a concubine palace. A complex identity, unsure of itself, enters a setting, a playground, as one would enter a game. By putting on her new clothes, the female protagonist is literally in a role-play, especially obvious when face-shifting magic is also involved. Moreover, it is a game not only of social positions, but also of gender and sexual roles: In *Xianxia* the magic, the lucid dreams and the physical transformations, allowed by the fantastic setting, amplify the complexity of social interactions. One same protagonist for example can as a woman meet people she had dealt with (and fallen in love with) as a man, because at a time she has had to transform herself.

Thus, this place to find is not only a position within the romantic relation or even the power relation, but also a position of gender, of sex and, as we have seen, of identity.

Finally, the distance between the reader and the role-play experienced in the reading might be larger in our three genres than in others: the numerous *mise-en-abymes* and references external to the protagonist's world spread over the work prove the author's and reader's detachment from the role. The movie-like cut-scenes that are the *Fanwai* 番外 at the end of some of the novels add to the theatrical effect. The identification of the reader to the protagonist, while still possible, stays within the framework of the game. The reader's *Chuanyue* (is every reading experience not a kind of *Chuanyue*?) remains very explicit and conscious.

In the light of these elements, and as a tentative conclusion, we could say that the format and the narrative tools proper to Web fiction amplify a multi-dimension role-play that should not be discarded as mere fantasy, but taken as a genuine search for a positioning of the self, of which romance is just an element. Could we therefore reconsider as such female Web writing as a whole? It could help us understand other recursive features such as *Danmei* (homosexual romance between men, intended for female readers), and we could draw tentative parallels with other popular forms such as workplace novels and urban novels. Finally, this perspective could be a way to apprehend authors of female web fictions themselves: are they not in a way also exploring the possibilities of creation offered to them by the reading platforms, and trying to find their position in the broader literature circle?

Examples will be taken from the following titles:

蜀客：《落花时节又逢君》，文化艺术出版社，2009

桐华：《步步惊心》，海洋出版社，2006

流潋紫：《后宫：甄嬛传》，浙江文艺出版社，2015

唐七公子：《三生三世十里桃花》，湖南文艺出版社，2012

小佚：《潇然梦》，朝华出版社，2007

fresh 果果：《花千骨》，湖南文艺出版社，2014