INTRODUCTION

THIS IS NOT YOUR MOTHER’S QIONG YAO

Yaya Bay (Yaya wan 丫丫湾) is a U.S.-based Chinese-language website that circulates novels, especially popular romances, that were originally published on other websites. The site also hosts a lively discussion forum where romance fans converse about the novels as well as other topics. A transcript of a sequence of comments posted by four different users on Sunday, March 6, 2011, between 10:00 and 10:30 p.m., Beijing time, illustrates how a typical exchange may develop:

This novel is full of dog blood [gouxue 狗血, clichés] and thunderclaps [tianlei 天雷, ridiculously bad plots]! Only idiots would like reading such a stupid novel.

We read idiotic novels precisely because we don’t want to exhaust our brain. Real life is hard enough as it is, so why shouldn’t we find some painless pleasure through reading?

It is misguided to hope to realize your ideals through others’ writings.

Well, I am just taking a breather here myself. I saw many policemen and some foreign journalists at X, but no protesters in sight. The foreign journalists claimed that they got pushed around, but who wants them there anyways? Oh, I shouldn’t have mentioned this. We are only discussing novels here, not politics.¹

Within the space of half an hour, a series of female readers from across the globe converged to critique the plot of a popular romance, debate the purpose of romance reading in general, and report on the day’s events. In the last comment, a reader residing in mainland China alluded to Chinese people’s responses to the “Jasmine Revolution” in the Arab world, venting her nationalist feelings against perceived foreign interference while displaying conscious self-censorship by withholding her location. Throughout the discussion the readers used a Web patois made up of elements lifted from both official discourses and popular culture and adapted to suit their various discursive needs, creating a campy humor in the process.

The online exchanges at Yaya Bay reveal the varied sociopolitical environments and personal experiences that shape Chinese women's consumption of Web romances. They also raise crucial questions regarding reader's experiences on the Internet: How is the Web influencing their views about good literature? How do they deal with social norms and current political issues on the Web? The enthusiasm demonstrated by their commentaries raises one further question: What personal, social, cultural, and political benefits do they hope to reap through reading, interpreting, and discussing popular romances in the company of their anonymous fellow users? Although privileging literary and discourse analysis, this audience-focused study of Chinese Web romance also integrates relevant sociological data to distill these and other critical questions down to three basic issues: How is the Internet transforming contemporary reading and writing practices? How is it facilitating the production of new forms of popular romance? And, ultimately, how does women's writing and reading of online literature help them to reinvent their gender and cultural identities?

Chinese women frequently appropriate from and reinvent existing cultural products on and through the Internet, displaying a common trend among authors and readers of Chinese Web literature. I show through this book how Chinese women create cultural capital for themselves by employing various strategies of online rewriting, such as producing fan fiction (fanfic), to reconfigure popular romances. Web romance thus serves as a window for me to examine both the narrative patterns and ideologies of Chinese popular literature and the social power that the Internet engenders in contemporary China.

Chinese women's production and consumption of Web-based popular romance yields valuable sociological documents whose contents provide revealing glimpses into the popular mind and cultural landscape of contemporary China. I look at the unique linguistic and narrative forms of both the fictional works and the exchanges surrounding them, as well as those of cartoons, audio files, and video clips created by authors and readers to accompany specific works. Drawing on my research as a participant-observer, I situate romances, commentaries, and discussions in their multimedia environs while using oral interviews of Web users to examine the significance of these artifacts of popular culture. I thus explore how larger sociocultural forces, such as the economics of romance publishing and state control of the Internet, shape the content and audience of Chinese Web romance.

Web users' lasting influence on Chinese fiction awaits long-term investigation, but current trends in Chinese Web literature have yielded