CHAPTER FOUR

REWRITING CLASSICS, RIGHTING WRONGS

Fandom is a peculiar mix of cultural determinations. On the one hand it is an intensification of popular culture which is formed outside and often against official culture, on the other it expropriates and reworks certain values and characteristics of that official culture to which it is opposed.

–John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”

I joined Yaya Bay in April 2009. Like many other members of Yaya, I had been looking for a Web-based serialized fan fiction, and found it through the Chinese search engine Baidu. However, when I located Yaya, I discovered that the fiction forum requires users to register. I felt a little apprehensive in the beginning, since I had never before subscribed to an online forum. But the registration process was straightforward and speedy: I only needed to create a Web name and provide an e-mail address that the Web administrator could verify. After subscribing, I also found that I needed to post a certain number of times, earn enough credit, and rise to a certain rank before being able to access the fiction I wanted to read.

I did post, and eventually was able to read the work that had prompted me to join Yaya. Meanwhile, I also started to write my very first Chinese-language blog at this site, and later also played online games. On September 30, 2009, the Web administrators at Yaya invited me to act as the administrator of a new sub-forum they were planning to launch: wenshi tianxia 文史天下, or, “world history and literature.” I hesitated at first, since I was extremely busy with work at the time. However, they promised that it would not take up too much of my time, and that I could decide to what extent I wanted to get involved later. I eventually accepted for two reasons. First, I was genuinely interested in this forum, which had been conceived as a place to acquire knowledge and generate discussion on political, economic, and military affairs, as well as on history and literature. Second, I thought that the experience of working as a Web administrator could benefit my research of Chinese cyber culture. On October 1, 2009, I wrote a blog entry to describe my vision of the new forum, and published it both on my blog and as a posting at Yaya’s discussion forum, asking the Web administrators and other users for feedback.
The initial reception of my ideas and call for participation was overwhelmingly welcoming and positive, though later developments showed that this forum might be a little too highbrow and demanding for ordinary users. I have learned through administering this forum that most users access Yaya for entertainment, and preferably easily consumable entertainment. While they may be interested in certain “profound” topics and ideas, few of them have the time, skills, or perseverance to research and write for a forum on world history and literature.

The response to fanfic at Yaya is all the more remarkable for its volume, intensity, and quality in light of my experience administering the literature and history forum. My participant observation at Yaya as well as face-to-face interviews conducted over the past years revealed that Yaya’s interactive features play a crucial role in shaping reader reception of romance novels. Before discussing Web-based fanfic in more depth, I first provide a detailed review of the structure of Yaya. I then discuss the production of fanfic on the Chinese Web to provide some context for my analysis, before delving into specific cases of fanfic, such as works rewriting vernacular classics by adding danmei content, and those based on Qiong Yao’s romances. I explore in this chapter not only the complex motivations of fanfic authors but also the equally complicated responses of their readers in postings charged with intense and multifaceted emotional investment.

Tricks of the Trade

Unlike the China-based Jinjiang, Yaya Bay was founded in August 2008 by a group of young Chinese men working and living in the Washington, DC, area in the United States. They established this online discussion forum, using a software program that they themselves wrote, as a venue for exchanging tips about investment in the stock market. As more people joined, they found that women, including their own wives and friends, liked to read Web-based literature. The Web administrators then added more topics to the discussion forum, including “Fiction Appreciation,” and saw membership grow exponentially. In response to rising user needs and interests, in December 2008 they purchased Discuz, a popular software application that many online Chinese discussion forums have adopted, and upgraded their forum.¹ They have since upgraded their server several times,

¹ Author’s interview of Yaya Bay’s creators and Web administrators, March 25, 2010. The creators named the forum after a daughter of one of them, whose nickname is Yaya. However, in Northern China, the character ya is also slang for a woman’s genitals, thus