CHAPTER FIVE

HOW TO MAKE MR. RIGHT

If, to at least some extent, it's still a man's world out there, if the name of the
game is patriarchy, then a woman is safer from the dangers that game poses to
women ... to the extent she is in a committed relationship with, and thus pro-
tected by, a good man.

–Catherine Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular
Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy”

Female Chinese readers invest much energy and passion in discussing and
detecting who makes the best hero in Web romances.¹ As novels written
mostly by women and for women, popular romances presumably provide
opportunities for readers to empathize with the heroine and experience
the fictional world together with, if not in place of her. But another ques-
tion captures most of their imagination instead: Who is the intended hero?
Or, as Chinese Web fans call it, what is the “official coupling” (guanpei 官配,
short for guanfang peidui 官方配对) designed by the author? In this chap-
ter, I focus on the specific reader gesture of “seeking Mr. Right”: deciphering
the intended hero in Web-based popular romances. Two time-travel het-
erosexual romances posted at Yaya Bay serve as case studies: Qingchao jingji
shiyong nan 清朝经济适用男 (An economical and serviceable man in the
Qing dynasty, henceforth Economical Man) by Zou Zou 邹邹, and Zhifou,
zhifou, yingshi lüfei hongshou? 知否, 知否, 应是绿肥红瘦? (Do you know it
should be many green leaves and few red flowers?, henceforth Zhifou) by
Guanxin ze Luan 关心则乱 (Deeply Concerned).

In this chapter I continue to analyze Web users' unique style of reading,
commenting on, and discussing romance works alongside one another. But
thanks to the multimedia environment that it inhabits and helps to create,
Web romance not only displays unique linguistic and narrative patterns
that challenge the traditional generic definition of popular romance, it also
features cartoons, audio files, and video clips created by both authors and

¹ Epigraph from Catherine Roach, “Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance
-patriarchy-by-catherine-roach/.
readers as their contribution to Chinese popular romance. Web users deploy these audiovisual aids to fulfill various goals: to illustrate particular interpretations, parody the original work, satirize related social phenomena, and generate humor to be enjoyed by the whole online reading community. In the following exploration of the role of the ideal hero in Web romances, I investigate how visual images influence readers’ interpretations of the romance text as well as their representations of the ideal hero.

Seeking Mr. Right?

Traditional wisdom states that women read romance novels for the vicarious pleasure of experiencing and exploring the world of the heroine. Yet not only does the popularity of danmei fiction belie the limits of this preconceived idea, female readers also seem more concerned with figuring out the intended hero rather than identifying with the heroine. One part of my fieldwork, consisting of semi-structured and in-depth interviews with a group of female Chinese students studying at a U.S. college, reveals that they adopt such an attitude for a variety of reasons. The students, all in their late teens or early twenties, had read a variety of genres on the Chinese Internet. Those born in the late 1980s typically favored more traditional heterosexual Web romances set in either modern or premodern periods. In contrast, the students born in the 1990s confessed that they had developed an interest in Japanese manga (including danmei) at an early age, and were not necessarily fans of the time-travel Web romances currently so popular on the Chinese Internet. Yet when pressed to identify their favorite characters, both groups devoted more time to talking about heroes than heroines. Some of them frankly admitted that when reading popular romances, they were most interested in discussing what kind of man would turn out to be the ideal romantic partner (and spouse) for the heroine in the novel and for themselves.

Janice Radway has discussed the “ideal romantic hero,” a supermasculine yet nurturing figure that she sees as allowing “the typical romance reader [... to] relax momentarily and permit herself to wallow in the rapture of being the center of a powerful and important individual’s attention.”\(^2\) Radway even contends: “Romantic novels function for their reader, on one level at least, as the ritualistic repetition of a single, immutable cultural

\(^2\) Radway, Reading the Romance, 113.