

**“Textual Nomads”:
Resistance and Compliance in Web-based Popular Chinese Literature**

My long-term research project investigates changes in cultural production and gender configuration in contemporary China by examining web-based popular Chinese literature. I currently focus on the production and consumption of popular romance at Jinjiang, a Chinese-language women’s literature website. I will not only examine works, commentaries, and discussions circulated at Jinjiang, but also bring interviews to bear on the significance of these artifacts of popular culture. My project will not only add new dimensions to the research on contemporary reading and writing practice in the age of the Internet, but also shed light on various timely issues related to China, such as the relationship between popular culture and dominant official ideologies, and the role that the Internet plays in shaping gender identities, cultural production, and socio-political consciousness in contemporary China.

The Internet is changing Chinese culture and society in profound ways (CNNKI). This can be seen not only in China’s current status as the world’s largest Internet market (Barboza), but also in the dynamic cultural production happening on the Chinese web. It thus behooves us to study more deeply the mores and modes of production and consumption on the Chinese web, rather than focusing solely on issues of liberty and state censorship, a flaw that Michel Hockx has found in Western scholarship on the Chinese Internet in his study of Chinese online poetry communities. Moreover, Chinese scholars tend to discuss the ontology and aesthetics of Chinese web literature, but pay no attention to Chinese women’s experiences of web-based popular romance (Ouyang). My project will thus fill in this lacuna by scrutinizing not only the dynamic cultural production and consumption on the web, but also the ways that Chinese women engage

with officially sanctioned interpretive practices and discourses through the medium of the Internet.

Towards those ends, Jinjiang can serve as a good representative of Chinese literature websites in its apparatus and mode of operation, and therefore bring to light the way that Internet is shaping user experience of producing and consuming popular culture on the web. One of the earliest and most influential women's literature websites (Yin), Jinjiang not only almost exclusively answers to contemporary Chinese women's interests and concerns, but also frequently changes and enhances its web features to make itself more user friendly. It thus emerges as an invaluable source of Chinese women's ethnographic accounts. Furthermore, the reign of popular romance at Jinjiang especially signals a new phase in the production and consumption of popular literature in mainland China. Since 1949, official discourses in China had always emphasized the utilitarian function of literature, regarding it as a tool of civil education and social engineering that should mobilize the people under the banner of socialist construction and national salvation. It was not until the 1980s, with the rise of print popular romance in China, that women's emotional lives became a legitimate subject of literary works. Yet, while listing many popular cultural products as sources for their inspiration, Jinjiang writers also express a deep dissatisfaction with these predecessors. For instance, they often disparage blatant male fantasies in male-authored time-travel novels, unflatteringly calling them "stud (*zhongma*) fiction." Consequently, romance novels at Jinjiang often display self-conscious differences from existing works even as they liberally appropriate from them.

Michel de Certeau has used the term "Brownian motion" to describe a kind of guerrilla-warfare tactics employed by members of a subordinate group to resist,

negotiate, or transform the system and products of the relatively powerful from their position of relative powerlessness. As women living in a patriarchy, Jinjiang users have become exactly this kind of “textual nomads,” who raid on existing cultural products and make do (*bricolage*) with various heterogeneous elements in order to elude or escape institutional control. For example, they often employ *e’gao*, or extreme forms of parody, to undermine mainstream and canonical cultural products. However, Jinjiang women also adopt multiple and sometimes contradictory positions vis-à-vis dominant ideologies and social norms. Their production and consumption of a particular type of popular romance, *danmei* fiction, provides a perfect case in point. Originally imported from Japan and Taiwan, this sub-genre refers to homoerotic tales of idealized love between attractive male figures written by women for women’s consumption. Jinjiang users have formed a very complex and nuanced relationship to *danmei* texts. While they identify with the male perspective in the narrative, they also promote an androgynous and often stylized male beauty rather than embracing “rugged” masculinity in order to ward off destructive male sexuality. We can see that they manage their anxieties and fears rooted in patriarchal rule, express their frustrated desires and aspirations, and explore their sexuality and subjectivity more fully by producing and consuming fantasy through *danmei*.

Perhaps equally importantly, interactive features of Jinjiang facilitate open exchange of ideas and provide positive emotional reinforcement. Because of the serialized nature of the novels, readers’ comments and authors’ responses often involve negotiations over plot and characterization. However, they also discuss a variety of controversial topics such as homosexuality and rape, occasionally branching into political

parodies with their word play on current political slogans. Moreover, they often exchange season's greetings and tell each other about changes and problems in their lives, such as unemployment, marriage, and pregnancy. In return, they receive not only consolation and congratulations but also practical help at times. Ultimately, the exchanges made possible through and around texts published at Jinjiang not only establish an alternative community responsive to more democratic values, creative urges, and Chinese women's unique concerns, but also provide a new platform for Chinese women to challenge dominant patriarchal norms and cross generic and cultural barriers that would have been otherwise impenetrable.