

Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web[†]

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"A damned mob of scribbling women. . . ."
—Nathaniel Hawthorne (1855)

[†] I am grateful to the two anonymous MCLC readers for their feedback and to Kirk Denton for his many corrections and comments.

¹ Properly speaking, the Three Kingdoms did not begin until the last Han emperor was formally deposed in 220CE, but for most Chinese readers the focus of interest regarding "Three Kingdoms" was in the last decades of what was, technically, still the Han dynasty.

The Three Kingdoms period, popularly taken as lasting from the chaotic last years of the Han to the unification of China in 280 CE, has been a lasting inspiration for the Chinese literary imagination.¹ For more than a millennium, numerous works, from written to visual, have been produced about the Three Kingdoms, and the interest in the period is only growing stronger today. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*), a masterpiece of the Chinese novel produced in the fourteenth century, has been widely disseminated and reworked in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, making the fascination with the Three Kingdoms not just a Chinese but also an East Asian phenomenon. A new chapter in this long tradition of the construction of the Three Kingdoms imaginary has opened at the turn of the twenty-first century by a body of works produced by young Chinese female fans in cyberspace. This essay focuses on a particular subset of these fan works, namely, male-homoerotic fiction and music videos (MVs). In studying this particular subset of Three Kingdoms fan production on the

Internet, I attempt to provide a new perspective on the representation of the Three Kingdoms in contemporary Chinese society as well as raise some issues with a broader significance for Chinese fan production.

Fan fiction, broadly defined, is fiction based on established characters, plots, and settings in existing works known in fan fiction circles as “canon,” including books, films, or TV.² In Western fan fiction studies, the origin of narrowly defined fan fiction is traced to the late 1960s/early 1970s with the rise of *Star Trek* media fandom and its vibrant fanzine (fan magazine) culture (Hellekson/Busse 2014: 6). *Star Trek* fan fiction was the production of a primarily female fan community that had emerged from a male tradition of science fiction literature fandom as a “whole new genre of fan fiction and perhaps of science fiction generally” (Coppa 2006: 47); its most notable and noted feature is the writing of “slash” homoerotic fiction. The term slash originated within *Star Trek* fandom when Kirk and Spock were first matched with each other as lovers, with a stroke or “slash” inserted between their names—i.e., Kirk/Spock or K/S—to indicate their romantic pairing. The more direct influence on Chinese Internet fan fiction came from Japanese fan fiction subculture, with slash being especially inspired by the Japanese media genre known as *yaoi* or BL (boys’ love) (Wang 2008: 7–12, 53–54; Feng 2013: 55–56). Fan MVs are song videos edited by fans from footage of film or television shows and set to pop songs. As noted media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006: 159–160) states, “These ‘fan vids’ often function as a form of fan fiction to draw out aspects of the emotional lives of the characters or otherwise get inside their heads. They sometimes explore underdeveloped subtexts of the original film, offer original interpretations of the story, or suggest plotlines that go beyond the work itself.” Among the various forms of fan production, I focus on fan fiction and fan MVs because of their verbal, literary aspects: while fan fiction can be easily situated in the literary tradition, the song lyrics in MVs often effectively blur the boundary of pop song and modern poetry and evoke the classical Chinese poetic genres accompanied by music. The reframing of the song lyrics in

² There is no fixed term in Chinese for “canon.” Common renderings are: *yuan-zhu*, *yuanwen*, or *jingdian*.

fan MVs, however, generates new meaning for both the song lyrics and the images. In Three Kingdoms slash MVs, footage from recent films and TV dramas on Three Kingdoms is edited in such a way that images of male bonding, abundant in the original shows, are highlighted; the love song lyrics further cast the male bonding in the unmistakable light of romance.

It should be clarified from the outset, for the benefit of readers who are not familiar with Three Kingdoms fandom and fan production or with fandom and fan production in general, that not all Three Kingdoms fan production is slash, and that fandom is a diverse phenomenon with fans with a variety of ideological and aesthetic preferences. Fandom has no "mainstream," and this is perhaps one of its most exciting, and also one of the most confusing, characteristics. All fans and all fan works belong to one or another "subset" of fans and fan works. I have chosen to study Three Kingdoms slash fiction and MVs not only because they form a crucial part of my larger project on the Three Kingdoms Imaginary from past to present, but, more important, because they bring into focus fascinating questions of gender, sexuality, power, fan identity, and the encounter of tradition and postmodernity. The Three Kingdoms slash fan fiction ("slash fanfic") on the Web represents a new cultural form characterized by diversity, multiplicity, and contradictions that in many ways epitomizes larger cultural changes happening in contemporary China.

While a number of excellent studies on the impact of the Internet on Chinese state and society have appeared in recent years in the field of social sciences, despite a few pioneering works little has been written on Internet literature, especially fan fiction, from a literary or cultural studies perspective. As a literary scholar, I am interested in the literary and cultural dimensions of Three Kingdoms slash and in its unique position in the context of Chinese literary and cultural tradition. My methodology is primarily that of close literary reading, but I also use sociological and ethnographic approaches to tease out the larger significance of this new literary, cultural, and social phenomenon. I first give a brief introduction

of Three Kingdoms slash writing and MVs, followed by discussions of their cultural and literary significance through an analysis of specific examples of both. In the last part of the essay, I contextualize such fan production by examining fan activities both within and outside of the fan community, exploring the communal space in which fan productions are posted and received, and offering some general observations on the complex economy of fans, actors, and media producers. I conclude with some preliminary remarks on the larger changes in contemporary Chinese society embodied in this complicated, multifaceted, and multidimensional cultural phenomenon, as well as on the methodologies that enable us to better appreciate it.

Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Brief Survey

The Chinese term for slash fanfic is *danmei tongren*. *Tongren* (*dōjin* in Japanese) refers to fan creations based on a literary or media source text; it includes all forms of fan art, but fiction remains the most popular form. *Danmei* (*tanbi* in Japanese), literally obsessed with or addicted to beauty, is “a transnational subculture in which young women create, distribute and appreciate stories of male-male relationships in various media, ranging from fiction, comics, music, video films, cosplays (an abbreviation of costume-play), to computer games” (Liu 2009: 1). *Danmei tongren* refers to a fan fiction subgenre in which two male characters from the source text are portrayed as sharing an erotic love relationship. There are many slash pairings, known as CP (“couple”), in Three Kingdoms fandom—for example, Yun/Liang (Zhao Yun/ Zhuge Liang), Ce/Yu (Sun Ce/ Zhou Yu), and Cao/Guan (Cao Cao/ Guan Yu). The original Chinese terms consist of two Chinese characters, one each from the names of the two “lovers,” and uses no slash, but the order of the characters is important because the character appearing first is *gong* (“top,” *seme* in Japanese), literally “attack,” the dominant figure in a relationship (the term also conveniently puns with *gong* of the form of address *zhugong*, “my lord,” in classical Chinese usage); the second is *shou* (“bottom,” *uke* in Japanese), literally “receiving”

or “enduring,” the passive figure.

One of the most popular pairings is Liu Bei (161–223) and Zhuge Liang (181–234). Liu Bei, who claimed to be a descendant of the Han royal house, was the ruler of the Shu-Han Kingdom. Before he took the throne, Liu Bei had famously visited Zhuge Liang, then a commoner living in reclusion, three times, after which Zhuge Liang finally agreed to serve him. Before he passed away, Liu Bei entrusted his young son, Liu Shan (207–271), to Zhuge Liang, who continued to serve as prime minister until he himself died of illness during a military campaign against Wei. Zhuge Liang’s memorial to the throne, known as the “Memorial upon Undertaking a Military Campaign” (Chushi biao), is included in the ninth-grade textbook used in mainland Chinese junior high schools. The pairing of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang is commonly known as Xuan/Liang; Xuan, “dark,” is taken from Liu Bei’s courtesy name Xuande, and forms a nice contrast with Liang, literally “bright.”

Three Kingdoms slash, as stated earlier, constitutes a small part of a vibrant Three Kingdoms literary and media fandom, in particular, and Chinese fan culture, in general. In May 2014, a Google search for *tongren* turned up about 49,000,000 results, with *danmei tongren* yielding 1,520,000 results; a narrowed search for *tongren wen*, “fan writing,” as opposed to fan manga or fan anime, turned up 612,000 results. Three Kingdoms fan production, *Sanguo tongren*, turned up about 90,000 results, with 34,300 results for *Sanguo danmei tongren*. Three Kingdoms fandom encompasses fans of various cultural forms: history, i.e., the official history of the Three Kingdoms, *Record of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo zhi), by Chen Shou (233–297); novel, i.e., *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; cinematic representations in film and television shows; and, last but not the least, games, especially videogames such as the tactical action game series *Dynasty Warriors* (Sanguo wushuang) and card games such as *Legends of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo sha).

There are a variety of online venues for fan production. Besides general

fanfic websites like *Jinjiang wenxue cheng* or *Zonghengdao*, Three Kingdoms fan works are published on BBS forums (*luntan*), such as *Shugong shenchu*, *Yushui tan*, *Dahua Chunqiu luntan*, and *Sanguo JQ yanjiusuo* (JQ stands for *jiqing*, homoerotic passion); and on a dizzying array of “post bars” (*tie ba*) dedicated to various themes and topics, such as Three Kingdoms characters, a particular slash pairing, and specific Three Kingdoms areas of fandom like *Dynasty Warriors* fandom. Examples of these post bars include *Sanguo tongren ba*, *Xuan Liang ba*, *Wei Liang ba*, *Gongde wu Liang ba*, *Zhen Sanguo wushuang ba*, and so on. The BBS forums are usually more restrictive than post bars and require a more elaborate registration process, and one’s acceptance into the forums is subject to the approval of the forum manager(s). Sometimes, even after one is accepted into the forum, the novice needs to accumulate enough points through posting to gain access to certain restricted content on the forum. Chinese fans’ anxiety about the writing of slash for fear of censorship or accusation of copyright infringement and the Chinese state’s policing of the Internet and periodic crackdowns contribute to the secretive and exclusive atmosphere surrounding the forums. Fans also publicize writings and exchange them with one another on their blogs (*boke*) and microblogs (*weibo*). The fluidity of its medium and the multiplicity of its content characterize Internet fan production. As one researcher says, “Fan production develops at a high speed as a whole, with internal changes [in the fan circle] taking place every day. Therefore, it is an almost impossible task to get accurate statistics regarding its scope” (Wang 2008: 116).

“History Swings Around”: Slash with a Chinese Twist

Wang Zheng’s pioneering study of Chinese fan production, *The World of Fan Fiction* (Tongren de shijie, 2008), gives a detailed survey of slash fanfic. In English-language scholarship, slash fiction on the Chinese Web has received a rich and insightful treatment by Jin Feng (2009), and in her subsequent monograph *Romancing the Internet*, the first book-length

English-language study of Chinese Web romance, including slash fiction and fanfic. The diverse motives for writing slash have been amply explored by scholars of Western and Chinese fan production. One of the most common motives is the marginalization of women in the world of the canon, and this applies particularly well to the Three Kingdoms slash.

The novel has almost no well-developed female character; the few female characters who appear are subjected to heavy gender stereotyping. Martin Huang (2006: 5) contends that “women’s roles are much more important than many readers have so far realized, despite their relatively limited presence in the novel.” He goes on, however, to cite the fact that manliness is defined by a hero’s dissociation from women, “especially from their perceived bad influences,” and then proceeds to state that despite the anxiety about pernicious feminine influences, “a number of women are presented as the natural exemplars of certain Confucian virtues such as loyalty and chastity,” and these exemplary women “are often made to serve as excuses for some masculine heroes’ apparent moral deficiencies” (5–6). Women, in other words, are nothing but a foil or a medium to men in the Three Kingdoms canon. Zhu Sujin, the screenplay writer of the popular 2010 mainland TV series, *Three Kingdoms* (aka *Xin Sanguo*, the “New Three Kingdoms,” as opposed to the older TV series, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, aired in 1994), even remarked that there were only “two and a half women” altogether in the Three Kingdoms (in sharp contrast with its hundreds of memorable male characters), with the “half woman” being Lady Wu, the mother of Sun Quan (182–252), the ruler of the Kingdom of Wu, whose seniority is regarded as overriding her gender (Zhu 2008).³ Zhu himself did little to rectify the situation, claiming that he could not afford to push the limits of the audience’s tolerance too much, even though he was certainly not timorous in testing the boundaries in other aspects of the hit series (Zhu 2010).

At the same time, we should bear in mind that fanfic, particularly slash fanfic, is born in the cracks in “canon” that offer space for the creation of

³ All web addresses cited in this paper were last accessed on May 21–27, 2014.

a parallel universe. As a fan fiction scholar states, “Fanfic happens in the gaps between canon, the unexplored or insufficiently explored territory. For that to happen, the gaps must be left, and the territory must exist—i.e. the canon writers must not spell too much out, but there must be somewhere to start from and something to build on” (Pugh 2005: 92). Admittedly, given the vast scope of fanfic, one can always discover exceptions to the rule, but at least in the case of the Three Kingdoms canon, there are so many memorable stories and scenes of intense male bonding that it is not particularly difficult for fans to find subtexts that then form the basis of their homoerotic works.⁴

For instance, in an episode first recorded in Chen Shou’s *Sanguo zhi*, the official history of the Three Kingdoms, Liu Bei’s increasing intimacy with Zhuge Liang incurred the displeasure of the generals Guan Yu (d. 220) and Zhang Fei (d. 221), who protested to Liu Bei; Liu Bei famously replied: “I have Kongming [Zhuge Liang’s courtesy name] just like a fish has water. I hope you gentlemen will not speak like that ever again” (Chen 1959: 913). Fish and water had been used as a metaphor of conjugal happiness before; it later became an almost exclusive reference to a loving couple, and in late imperial literature and in modern times, the expression “joy of fish and water” (*yu shui zhi huan*) functioned as a euphemism for love-making. Liu Bei’s quote is but one of many details from the Three Kingdoms world drawn on by fans in making visible what they claim had always been there. Indeed, a particular political and sexual discourse in Chinese history, as I argue below, not only gives Three Kingdoms slash its impetus and motivation, but also constitutes a culturally charged negotiation with tradition, gender issues, and identity construction in contemporary China.

While slashing is common in global fan production, what we have here is slashing with a Chinese twist. One of the longest-standing interpretive paradigms in the Chinese literary tradition, beginning with Wang Yi’s (fl. 2nd century CE) commentary on the Western Han poetic anthology *Verses of Chu* (*Chu ci*), is the reading of political allegory into depictions of sexual

⁴ See Kam Louie’s (2012: 32–41) discussion of homoeroticism in the Three Kingdoms in *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*.

relationships. The most famous piece of the anthology is “Li sao” (Encountering sorrow), a long poem attributed to the shadowy historical figure Qu Yuan, the loyal minister of Chu slandered by jealous colleagues, misunderstood by his ruler, and driven to suicide. In the “Li sao,” the speaker, taken to be the voice of Qu Yuan, constantly shifts gender: sometimes he speaks as a male searching for an ideal mate; sometimes he speaks as a female slandered by jealous women in the harem. In either case, we see the possibility of configuring a political and public relation in sexual and private terms. Later in the tradition, as gender roles stabilized, it was more common to identify the minister with a woman or wife and the ruler with a man or husband. In other words, the hierarchy in the man/woman relationship in a patriarchal culture is seen as overlapping with the hierarchy in the lord/vassal relationship. Throughout the premodern tradition, politics is so consistently read into certain types of expressions of sexual love that the figure of “fair lady and aromatic plants” (*meiren xiangcao*, the aromatic plants being read as symbols of virtue) becomes part and parcel of literati self-identity.

In discussing the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Martin Huang (2006: 96–97) argues that “the novel seems to present a world where the assumed analogy between *chen* (minister) and *qie* (concubine) in traditional cultural discourse . . . is being reexamined” because in the novel the masculinity of a manly hero is often tied to his freedom to choose a wise lord to serve. According to Huang, this freedom differentiates him from a woman who “cannot choose which husband to marry, not to mention the fact that there is no possibility of remarriage if the first husband turns out to be unworthy.” Huang’s argument, while thought provoking, needs historicization and refinement. On the one hand, a woman’s choice of a suitor and remarriage were never so strictly proscribed throughout the premodern period; remarriage was particularly common in early and early medieval China, not at all stigmatized as it would be in late imperial times, which were dominated by straitlaced neo-Confucian ethics. It is true

that once a woman was committed, she was expected to remain loyal, but a man was likewise expected to remain loyal to his lord after he made his choice, which at best should only happen once (within the novel the fierce warrior Lü Bu is condemned precisely for switching his allegiance once too often). On the other hand, the freedom to choose one's lord does not change a vassal's essentially feminized position vis-à-vis his lord. As a fan author states simply, "The relationship of the historical Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei is in itself just like that of husband and wife."⁵

Seen in this context, slash on the Chinese Web takes on a more culturally complicated meaning than its Western counterpart. Its continuity with the tradition, and, more important, its departure from the "fair lady" tradition should be given further attention. In premodern writings, political and sexual readings of a text often co-exist; one does not necessarily supplant the other. The language of desire, either for one's lover or for one's lord, is common to them. The lover's discourse possesses a profound ambiguity; it can be political and sexual at the same time. Such discursive ambiguity provides fan authors with a wonderful verbal repertoire, but the authors notably strip the discourse of its ambiguity by treating desire as literal, not metaphorical. Another significant departure is that in premodern writings, the political reading mode is always generated only by the language of desire: in other words, a sexual text capable of political interpretation could only be born in the space of separation between the two—there cannot be actual sexual intimacy and consummation in the text. Such a rule does not apply to modern slash production. In Xuan/Liang slash, as in slash in general, "first time" is a favorite theme: slash authors relish the depiction of the moment when the two lovers come together for the first time after overcoming obstacles, mostly psychological; and the depiction ranges widely from soft-core erotica to explicit representations of homoerotic sex. In sum, if the traditional reading paradigm privileges the elite male subjectivity by seeing a longing woman as a textual projection of the male poet, then slash authors subvert the paradigm by treating the

⁵ The original reads: 歷史上的諸葛亮之于劉備, 本身就很像夫妻. From Wangmeng Siming's post (8/6/2010), URL: (<http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12888237>).

⁶ URL: <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/CEsy3jwm-Kk/> (uploaded by Zhongdan De Ganghuaboli on June 5, 2010, subsequently viewed more than 19,000 times).

⁷ Interview with Xinlang Yule (Xinlang Entertainment) on June 21, 2010. For a video of the interview, see <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/vB1TUQQ8jgg/> (uploaded by Tianji-angjun on June 22, 2010). A transcript can be found at <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2010-06-21/ba2993350.shtml>.

traditional male poet's allegorized sexual desire as literal and granting it its eternally denied physical gratification.

Fans' complicated negotiation with tradition is demonstrated by the lyrics of the iconic Three Kingdoms slash MV, "Romance in the Rain" (Qing shenshen yu mengmeng), produced by a fan with the moniker, Zhongdan De Ganghuaboli, better known simply as Ganghuaboli.⁶ This MV takes footage out of the 2010 TV series and matches them with the theme song of a romantic soap opera, "Romance in the Rain," produced by the famous Taiwan romance writer Qiong Yao (b. 1938). This is one of the earliest MVs made after the TV series was aired, and one of the best known because it was mentioned admiringly by the actor playing Liu Bei in an interview.⁷

Qiong Yao's lyric itself is a pastiche of lines recycled from classical Chinese tradition. In the first stanza, almost every line can be traced back to a classical text:

情深深雨濛濛
多少樓台煙雨中
記得當初你儂我儂
車如流水馬如龍
儘管狂風平地起
美人如玉劍如虹

Deep feelings in a fine drizzle:
How many towers and terraces in the misty rain?
I remember you and me in those sweet years
When chariots passed like flowing river, horses like dragons.
Even though a gust of wind came from nowhere,
The beauty was like white jade, and the sword, a rainbow.

The second line is from a quatrain by the late Tang poet Du Mu (803–852), "Spring in Southland" (Jiangnan chun), which expresses a sense of nostalgia about the Southern dynasties (322–589). The phrase "ni nong wo nong" in the third line is from "Wo nong ci" by the Yuan dynasty poet and painter Guan Daosheng (1262–1319) that expresses passionate romantic love. The

fourth line appears verbatim in a *ci* lyric entitled “Wang jiangnan” attributed to the ill-fated last emperor of the Southern Tang, Li Yu (937–978); it in turn was a phrase from the Eastern Han appearing in several source texts, such as *Dongguan han ji* (Liu 2009: 193), which described the power and glory of the imperial in-laws. The last line is from the nineteenth century poet Gong Zizhen’s (1792–1841) “Sitting at Night” (Ye zuo).

Transplanting a well-known love song from a melodramatic soap opera immediately establishes an amorous atmosphere for the two male characters. While music and lyrics give meanings to image, image also affects the interpretation of lyrics, and their mutual reframing leads to re-signification. When the line about “towers and terraces in the misty rain” is superimposed on the image of palaces of the Kingdom of Wu in the south, it evokes the phrase “cloud and rain,” a clichéd euphemism for love-making, whose locus classicus is in an ancient rhapsody about the sexual dream of a king of Chu meeting the Goddess of the Mount Wu, and the goddess claiming to be “cloud and rain” always lingering beneath the king’s Sunny Terrace. Most striking is the configuration of the images with the last line of the song: a close-up of Zhuge Liang, wearing a white robe, gazing dreamily into the distance, is juxtaposed with the words “The beauty was like white jade” on screen, followed by the masculine image of a fully-armored Liu Bei, looking wrathful and deliberate on horseback with his sword raised, accompanied by the words “and the sword, a rainbow.” In the early Chinese tradition, *meiren* could refer to either male or female; only much later did it solely come to signify “beautiful woman.” Slash writers return the concept to its gender-neutral root by inscribing it in a female fantasy about “beautiful men.”

The juxtaposition of the scenes and lyrics creates a virtual narrative of love, war, and longing from the source texts. The first meeting of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, clearly figured as a pair of lovers, is displaced into an idyllic past by words of remembrance and nostalgia, a past nevertheless framed by images of battle, violence, emotional rift, and separation. This

fan MV ends with a now iconic scene from the TV show, namely a close-up of Liu Bei's grabbing Zhuge Liang's hand, the first of many such gestures in the early stage of their relationship to demonstrate Liu Bei's affection for him; but the fan MV producer turns the colored scene in the original TV series into black-and-white, a significant revision to highlight the temporal displacement of the "good old times" into a distant past.

"Romance in the Rain" is representative of the numerous Xuan/Liang MVs that would subsequently circulate on the Web. In these MVs, the historical narrative of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang is read as and converted into an archetypal romantic story: the two lovers come together after a prolonged period of courtship (Liu Bei's three visits); they are separated because of the chaotic times (Liu Bei's trip to Wu to marry Sun Quan's sister in order to cement his alliance with Wu, as well as his Shu campaign); they are alienated from each other (Liu Bei attacks Wu to seek revenge for his sworn brothers despite Zhuge's protest); there is reunion and forgiveness right before Liu Bei's death; and the surviving lover (i.e., Zhuge Liang) lives out his life in grief and longing.

Another equally influential fan MV produced by Ganghuaboli is "Fireworks Easily Turn Cold" (Yanhua yileng), with edited footage drawn from the 2010 TV series set to the song of the same title performed by Taiwan pop singer Jay Chou (Zhou Jielun).⁸ The lyrics were composed by Vincent Fang (Fang Wenshan), a legendary Taiwan songwriter whose innovative lyrics are hailed as having revolutionized music culture as well as contemporary poetry (Ding 2009: 1–20). According to Fang, "Fireworks Easily Turn Cold" is about a fictional tragic love story between a general and a young girl from Luoyang set in the Wei dynasty—not the Wei of the Three Kingdoms, but the Northern Wei (386–534) during another period of disunion.⁹ Fang refers to *The Record of the Buddhist Monasteries of Luoyang* (Luoyang qielan ji), a work from the early sixth century, as the "source of allusion" behind the song, but he deliberately blurs the boundary between fictionality and historicity in the love story. The song itself frequently references

⁸ URL: <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/cNpui8RCeDo/> (uploaded by Ganghuaboli on June 14, 2010).

⁹ URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--BqapCA3vg> (uploaded by Fang Wenshan, together with a "preface," on May 19, 2010, and subsequently viewed more than 1,672,000 times).

the writing of official dynastic history, the background against which a pair of fictional lovers meet and part; and yet, together with the author's explanatory remarks, the song seems to imply that such a made-up love story *must* have happened, and thus constitutes "real history" as opposed to the grandiose official history recording the rise and fall of a dynasty.

In the fan MV, which begins with a scene of goldfish swimming in a pond taken from the 2010 TV series, the dynastic history of Wei and of the city of Luoyang in the song lyrics is seamlessly grafted onto the Three Kingdoms, even as history's "incapability of tenderness" (*shice wenrou buken*) and the theme of waiting acquire a new meaning in the Xuan/Liang context. An image of a hand stroking a scroll of bamboo slips is matched with the line, "The history written on green bamboo slips—how could it be not real? / The *Book of Wei*, the city of Luoyang" (*Er qingshi qi neng buzhen? / Weishu Luoyang cheng*). The question about the authenticity of the official version of history bears the close scrutiny of fans looking for a subtext of emotion and vulnerability of the macho heroes of the past, an alternative history at a fine moment of, as the song sings, history's "swinging around" (*lishi zhuan Shen*).

Side-street: Cao/Guan and the Secret behind Lustfulness

In the last section, taking up Xuan/Liang, one of the most popular pairings in Three Kingdoms slash, I argue that Three Kingdoms slash production is distinguished by a special cultural characteristic because of the fans' creative engagement with the Chinese literary tradition. In this section, I turn to another popular pairing, Cao/Guan, which both exemplifies the ruler/minister romance as the Xuan/Liang pairing, though as a remarkably failed romance, and demonstrates another interesting aspect of slash pairing, namely the exploration of the emotional world of ultra-macho male characters. If Xuan/Liang is treated with a great deal of seriousness by fans, Cao/Guan slash always has a strong tinge of irony, in the spirit of *egao* (spoofing). However, it needs to be pointed out that *egao* is very

much subjective and also largely depends on the audience's point of view: an unsympathetic reader may well consider all Three Kingdoms slash as *egao*, but anyone who has read a great deal of Three Kingdoms slash as well as spent much time in the slash fan communities learning about the readers' responses knows that there is so much emotional investment into these slash works that even the most ironic and potentially comical of them (such as the Cao/Guan slash and the claim to get into the heads, or should I say hearts, of two of the toughest men from the Three Kingdoms) holds a strangely alluring emotional power to slash fans. Not that the slash fans are necessarily naïve—in fact, many of them exhibit a healthy self-irony about their obsession with slashing; but their attitude toward their slash production is complicated, and irony is never in the way of profound emotional engagement. Ultimately, as I show in this section, the desire to replace a world of politics and public values with a world of *si*—personal and private values, a life of psychological nuance—is one of the driving motivations behind Three Kingdoms slashing.

The courtship model and the feminized position of the minister, displayed in the Xuan/Liang case, are primary reasons why Cao Cao (155–220) and Guan Yu, both ultra-macho in their conventional images, are paired off as a couple, who in their aborted romance present a perfect foil for Xuan/Liang. In the novel, the warlord Cao Cao tries to obtain Guan Yu's services by treating him with every manner of generosity imaginable; but Guan Yu refuses, leaving him for Liu Bei. After his spectacular defeat in the Battle of the Red Cliff, Cao Cao and a few dozen of his surviving men are fleeing on the Huarong Trail (Huarongdao), where, at Zhuge Liang's command, Guan Yu has been lying in wait for him. Cao Cao pleads for his life, citing his former generosity toward Guan Yu, who finally lets Cao Cao go.

As early as in 2003, the slash potential of the episode was hinted at in a song titled "Huarong Trail" performed by Xuecun.¹⁰ Xuecun is a popular singer and songwriter whose national fame was secured by his song posted

¹⁰ URL: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XODA4OTkyMDg=.html.

on the Web, "Northeasterners Are All Living Lei Fengs" (Dongbeiren dou shi huo Lei Feng), in a musical form he dubs "musical story-telling" (*yinyue pingshu*). "Huarong Trail" is performed to *pipa*, a traditional musical instrument with a "Chinese" aura, and the MV shows Xuecun wearing a Chinese gown and standing behind a table, with a folded fan and a gavel as his prop in the manner of a *pingshu* performer. The words, "I am Lord Guan, you are Cao Cao / Grudges and debts of kindness cannot be crossed out / Don't you ever forget me," are accompanied by images of a woman wearing red dress and red high-heel shoes; the stanza, "You are Lord Guan, I am Cao Cao / I granted you favors, I was good to you / In my heart there is only you / In the end I am tormented / At our encounter on the Huarong Trail," is sung to the image of a man looking gloomily through the window at the woman, all smiles, walking away with another man.

Xuecun's "musical storytelling" claims to represent the life of contemporary Chinese common people; among other things, he sings of illicit office romances, SARS, and the eternally-disappointing Chinese men's soccer team. The "Huarong Trail" MV obliquely tells a story of a woman rejecting a suitor for another man, and the economy of favors and payback of the original Huarong Trail story is superimposed on the romantic entanglement of a heterosexual couple, built on the old trope of portraying love-making as a battle between the sexes in classical vernacular fiction and perhaps also inspired by the modern adage "The arena of love is like a battleground" (*qingchang ru zhanchang*). The true message of the song only emerges in the many intriguing visual details: the woman, with her red dress and shoes, is clearly identified with Guan Yu, known for his operatic image of a "red face"; the line "granting favors" is sung to images of the woman leisurely sitting back in a bathrobe, wearing sunglasses and holding a martini; and finally, the man with whom the woman walks away is dressed casually in a white T-shirt, as opposed to the "Cao Cao" in a dark-colored western suit. The material gifts that Cao Cao showered on Guan Yu in the novel are reconfigured as the material luxury afforded the woman by the man in the

suit, a stereotypical image of a wealthy businessman; the steed Red Hare that was presented to Guan Yu by Cao Cao in the novel is transformed into a snazzy car, which transports the woman to her true love just like Guan Yu famously rode the Red Hare to seek Liu Bei “over a thousand leagues.” Xuecun’s MV is a clever modern retelling of the old story, but the new plot and the ideology driving the plot are nothing if not conventional: money cannot buy a girl’s love. Traditional gender roles—with a woman at the receiving end of a man’s material gifts and favors—remain in place.

The 2010 TV series emphatically portrays Cao Cao’s desire to obtain talented men, in particular Guan Yu, and Guan Yu in turn is deeply touched. A prolonged emotional enactment of the encounter and parting of the two men on the Huarong Trail was immediately picked up by fans as ideal slash material. In contrast to Xuecun’s heterosexual version, the fans’ reading cuts directly to the homoerotic subtext of the Cao/Guan bonding. One of the most popular Cao/Guan MVs is reworked from a popular song, “Blue-and-White Porcelain” (Qinghua ci) composed by Fang Wenshan and performed by Jay Chou.¹¹ The song lyrics are matched with footage largely taken from the TV series; the song writer Yan31, the singer Hetu, and Wuyu Gongzi, editor of the footage, are all members of a popular music group, “Moming Qimiao,” launched online in 2007 and known for its espousal of a genre of music called “archaic style” (*gufeng*), mixing classical and modern musical and poetic influences (Liang 2014). Yan31, on her Sina blog, describes herself as a “rotten woman” (*funü* or *fujoshi* in Japanese, “girls who love boys love”).¹²

The song is sung in a first-person voice—that of Guan Yu. Brilliantly reworking the source lyrics, the lines often adopt the same phrases and rhymes by using homophones and thus radically, comically, changing the meaning of the ur-text. For instance, the original line, “Your beauty has dispersed in a single wisp [*yilü*] / To the place where I cannot follow,” is turned into, “Your men have all [*yilü*] dispersed / To the place where I cannot follow.” “Cooking smoke” (*chuiyan*) is changed to “battle smoke”

¹¹ URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p-Rd-_47cl (uploaded on August 1, 2010; viewed more than 88,000 times). The original MTV “Qinghua ci” can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ78y__MlzM (uploaded on December 27, 2007 and viewed more than 7,247,600 times by May 2014).

¹² URL: http://blog.sina.com.cn/yan31_

(*langyan*), alluding to the fire that destroyed Cao Cao's naval fleet in the Battle of the Red Cliff. A particularly clever transformation is of *ni yan dai xiaoyi* (in your eyes there is a smile), which becomes the humorous *ni liandai xiao yi* (besides, you also made a small bow with folded hands). The charm and humor of the fan MV depends greatly on one's knowledge of the source text. But even if one knows nothing about the original lyrics, one can still enjoy the rich irony of Guan Yu's complicated feelings about a man he knows he should not "love."

Two things are noteworthy. First, Guan Yu's perspective in the fan MV turns a historical battle deciding the fate of the Three Kingdoms into an opportunity for him to see Cao Cao again:

華容道等戰役，而我在等你
狼煙被風卷起，隔江千萬里
用火攻干掉你鐵索船的詭計
就當我為遇見你伏筆

The Huarong Trail waits for a battle, but I am just waiting for you.
Battle smoke was blown by wind for ten thousand leagues
across the River.
As for the devious strategy of destroying your chained
battleships with fire:
Just consider it a setup for my meeting with you.

Seen from this point of view, the war, the burning of the battleships, the loss of lives—all was but a pretext for an encounter between the star-crossed lovers. This individual perspective, based on personal emotion and relationships rather than on public concerns or dynastic interests, directly counters the values espoused by the 2010 TV show, in which every woman *and* man constantly talks about "the great enterprise" (*daye*) of the state, be it Wei, Shu, or Wu, and in which personal feelings are always to be sacrificed for the sake of an abstract ideal or an objective larger than individuals.

The second notable thing about this MV is how it *claims* to provide its audience direct access to Guan Yu's inner thoughts and feelings. Akin to a lyrical poem, a song (even in the form of an *egao* parody) is a way of bringing out emotions of the singer-narrator. In the MV, Guan Yu repays Cao Cao by reciprocating Cao's recognition of him with his own recognition of Cao's true worth:

當年曹營的情意躍然于眼底
風聲鶴唳遠遠的卻惦記著你
你隱藏在好色里仁義的秘密
極細膩，猶如繡花針落地

The affection you showed me in the old days comes vividly to
mind;
Sound of wind, cries of crane: though faraway, I have been
thinking of you.
The secret of benevolence and righteousness concealed behind
your lustfulness
Is so subtle, just like an embroidery needle falling on the floor.

Cao Cao has concealed his "benevolence and righteousness" underneath his "lustfulness" (*haose*), an allusion to Cao Cao's "promiscuous" love of talented men, which is made explicit in the 2010 TV show through a hilarious dialogue: Cao Cao, upon witnessing the general Zhao Yun's remarkable prowess on the battlefield, exclaims, "I love him madly!" He orders that no one must shoot an arrow at Zhao Yun, who is nevertheless killing off Cao Cao's men left and right. At this Cao Cao's counselor Xun Yu protests: "My lord, you cannot just fall in love at first sight with everybody!" The conflation of political discourse (love of talented men, *aicai*) with romantic discourse (love of pretty face, *haose*) appears in the MV, which also playfully suggests that Cao Cao is a playboy only on the surface, and that Guan Yu understands, and "loves," his true self.

In the final analysis, however, what is so fascinating about the pairing

of Cao Cao and Guan Yu in this MV is its emphasis on the emotional lives of two ultra-macho characters, especially that of Guan Yu, who in the popular tradition seems almost godlike in his eternal uprightness and nobility. As Sheenagh Pugh (2005: 93–94) argues, one of the primary aims of fan fiction writers is to “ratchet up the emotional charge of the canon and to make their heroes more interesting by increasing their vulnerability and opening them to their own, often very closed-off, feelings.” We are allowed to get inside Guan Yu’s head for a moment, to explore hidden emotional layers that are “so subtle, just like an embroidery needle falling on the floor.” The access to the unsayable emotional truth of a man, especially a tough man like Guan Yu, as we will see in the next section, is a driving motivation for many Three Kingdoms fans. In doing so, they have transformed a world all about politics, public values, and “great enterprises” into one about lust, emotions, and personal desires.¹³

“I Am Your Fan”: Writing the Self

In *Articulated Ladies*, Paul Rouzer (2001: 35) postulates that in a certain kind of classical poetry, male elites enjoy occupying the position of the feminine because it enables them to monopolize both *yin* and *yang*, *nei* (inner chamber) and *wai* (outer world), “supplanting the woman’s own position and relegating her to yet another *nei*, a *nei* where she cannot be represented in the text.” In the twenty-first century Three Kingdoms slash, female fans nevertheless manage to insert themselves back into the text by the way in which they produce and consume it. In this section, through close reading of one story, I explore how a female author inscribes herself in a slash text and how a female character is situated vis-à-vis the male pair, which reveals much about the construction of female identity and gender politics in the slash world.

It needs to be pointed out, before we go into an analysis of the story, that a female author’s insertion of an invented female character into canon often risks being labeled as a “Mary Sue” (*Malisu* in Chinese). “Mary Sue,”

¹³ This is perhaps why slash fans often do not care much about homoerotic fiction written by men. According to one fan named Dang Huanggua Yudao Qiezi, “A man’s writing of BL is simply different from a woman’s. A woman would definitely devote long passages describing the passions between the *gong* and the *shou*, while a man just likes to pile up words with a strong taste that have nothing with feelings” (posted June 25, 2011). This is a comment on a short story entitled “Kongming and Jiang Wei” (“Kongming and Jiang Wei”) by Shi Yifeng (b. 1979), a now widely published novelist in print media; the story was recommended, with a short excerpt, by a fan named Zhuge Boyue in her post of March 7, 2011 (<http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1019308474>). I read the story in early May 2014, but the link has since been broken, and I have been unable to locate the story on the Web, another reminder of the fragility of Web literature.

the name of a character invented by Paula Smith in 1974, is a parodic reference to a formula in a genre of fan fiction in which the heroine—young, beautiful, smart, and armed with the skills of a superwoman—barges into the canon universe, wins the heart of every man, and saves the day. Such a genre has been so denigrated for its juvenile self-indulgent fantasy in the fan fiction community that many fanfic authors would hesitate to write about (invented) female characters at all (Bacon-Smith 1992: 94–96, 111). As Wang Zheng (2008: 257–258) points out, the Mary Sue phenomenon also exists in male-authored fan fiction, which is referred to as YY (short for *yi yin*, “lust of the mind,” slang for “fantasy”); but, “using Three Kingdoms as an example, a female participant often imagines herself as a smart beauty worshipped by Zhou Yu, Zhao Yun, Zhuge Liang, and so on, while a male participant’s typical fantasy is to become a figure with super martial arts skills and great wisdom, who leads the generals of the Three Kingdoms to unify the country and takes all the beauties, such as Diaochan and the Qiao sisters, into his harem.” Many Chinese fans are likewise critical of such self-aggrandizing fantasies, which nevertheless continue to flourish in fan production for obvious reasons. In American popular culture strong female characters have made more frequent appearances in recent years, so that fan authors can build on existing female characters much more than they could back in the 1970s; but Chinese popular culture is a different story. Especially in a canon world with such a paucity of strong and interesting female characters like the Three Kingdoms, if a fan author wants to insert herself into her fandom world and interact with her favorite characters, she has to resort to *chuanyue* (time travel), and she has to risk being considered a Mary Sue if she wants her female character to have a strong and interesting personality. Therefore, a central challenge for female fan authors is how to inscribe the self in a slash text and yet to avoid the much derided “Mary Sue” phenomenon. The story to be discussed in this section, “The Ballad of White Feather” (Baiyu xing), written and posted in 2007 by Yeshe Fengzhu, not only successfully rises to this challenge but also

becomes something like an allegory of fan writing itself.

The first person narrator, Kongshan, is a female Daoist adept with magic powers who helps people for a price—taking a few years from their lifespan to add to her own.¹⁴ When the story opens, Liu Bei comes to seek her help: he confesses he is in love with Zhuge Liang, and he wants her to find out if Zhuge Liang feels the same way about him. The Daoist transforms herself into a white feather fan that is presented by Liu Bei as a gift to Zhuge Liang; as the feather fan, she tries to uncover his true feelings by staying close to him day and night. After several failed attempts, she finally succeeds: she stages a fake assassination attempt on Liu Bei's life without even letting Liu Bei in on it, and just when Zhuge Liang tries to protect Liu Bei, using his body to screen Liu Bei from the assassin, she turns herself into the assassin's dart, entering Zhuge Liang's heart to learn his true feelings while he is unconscious:

在孔明昏迷的一刻，我終於順利地進入到了他的內心。運用感知能力，我迫切地和他的心靈進行交流。

“對他的感情，超越君臣？”

“超越君臣。”

“那麼，想和他耳鬢廝磨，肌膚相親？”

他又急劇地想掩飾什麼，然而沒有用，在這裡他顯然是掩飾不了的。我很快抓住了他一閃而過的真實想法。

.....

感情是無法用明晰的界限來界定的。有時候，它處在似是而非之間，半明半昧，卻又真摯動人。譬如劉備和孔明，說他們是君臣，分明已超越了君臣；說不是君臣，卻依然還是君臣。其實這兩人的心意，彼此都已感覺到了罷？只是沒有公然說出口而已。

I finally managed to enter his heart at the moment when he passed out. Using my perceptive powers, I urgently communicated with his heart.

“Are your feelings for him beyond those between lord and vassal?”

“Yes indeed.”

“Then, do you want to become physically intimate with him?”

¹⁴ URL: <http://www.zonghengdao.net/read.php?tid=43631>.

He again quickly wanted to hide something, but it was useless—he could not hide it, not in here. I quickly grasped that momentary thought flashing through his mind.

...

Feelings could not be delineated by any clear boundary. Sometimes they remained in between worlds, half illuminated, half in the dark, yet true and moving. For instance, Liu Bei and Kongming, though lord and vassal, were clearly more than just lord and vassal, but at the same time remained such. They must have known each other's feelings instinctively, yet never articulated them.

Now that her mission is accomplished, she starts to leave. Before she goes, Zhuge Liang asks her: "You—who are you?"

“我？”我頓了頓，該怎麼說呢？”我是你遮掩的道具啊孔明先生。”

“嗯？”

“呵呵，‘出入君懷袖，動搖微風發’。”關於這個問題，他怕是想不明白的了，我猜劉備永遠也不會告訴他。

“‘出入君懷袖，動搖微風發’.....扇子？”

我沒有回答，悄然退了出去。就在退出的時候，我改變了一個決定。

"Me?" I briefly paused, not quite sure what I should say. "I am your prop for hiding, Master Kongming."

"Huh?"

"Haha, 'It goes in and out of your bosom, / Waved back and forth, stirring a gentle breeze.'" I feared he would never understand. I supposed that Liu Bei would never tell him.

"'It goes in and out of your bosom, / Waved back and forth, stirring a gentle breeze.' . . . A fan?"

I quietly withdrew without answering him. At that moment, I changed my mind about something.

That is, she decides to forfeit Liu Bei's payment for her service, which is five years of his mortal life, because, with her magic powers (the hindsight of

a later-born?), she foresees that he does not have many years left, and she wants the lovers to be able to stay together longer for Zhuge Liang's sake.

The white feather fan has always been the trademark of Zhuge Liang, in both literary and visual representations. The white fan—usually round and made of silk—was also a traditional figure of a palace lady who worries about being discarded by her lord, like the fan that will be put away when the weather turns cool. The following is the canonical poem on the fan, invoked twice in the slash story, conventionally attributed to Lady Ban (Ban Jieyu, d. ca. 6 BCE), an imperial consort of the Western Han emperor Chengdi (r. 32–7 BCE):

新裂齊紈素, 皎潔如霜雪
裁成合歡扇, 團團似明月
出入君懷袖, 動搖微風發
常恐秋節至, 涼颼奪炎熱
棄捐篋笥中, 恩情中道絕

A piece of newly cut fine plain silk from Qi,
As dazzling and pure as frost and snow.
Made into a fan of "joyful union,"
It is perfectly round like the bright moon.
It goes in and out of your bosom,
Waved back and forth, stirring a gentle breeze.
It ever fears that autumn will come,
A cool wind will drive away the blazing heat.
It will be cast into the storage box,
Favor and love are severed midway.

Barely concealed behind the image of the palace lady lamenting her lord's fickleness is the figure of the courtier who worries about slander and loss of favor, evoking the Qu Yuan persona in the "Li sao." The heroine in our story turns herself into Zhuge Liang's fan (which, in a fortuitous English pun, humorously takes on double meanings): a role that places hers in a feminized position vis-à-vis Zhuge Liang, who is in turn in a low and femi-

nized position vis-à-vis his lord Liu Bei. By being objectified into a fan, she seems to mirror him and become his double.

In the story, concealment is a prominent motif: Zhuge Liang tells Kongshan that his feelings for Liu Bei are concealed in his innermost heart, just as Liu Bei tries his best to conceal his own feelings from Zhuge Liang for fear of offending him. “That is why you are always hiding,” Kongshan says to him, and he replies: “Hiding is my nature.” A wonderful response that places Zhuge Liang in a fully *yin/yin* (female/concealed) position, and that turns the story into a complex embodiment of the traditional metaphoric reading of the fan poem. Indeed Zhuge Liang in the story often uses the fan to cover his face and feelings, creating with it an inner space for himself, even as he turns himself into a fan-like screen for Liu Bei to block the dart with his body, another move that parallels the fan’s screening of him. The woman/fan’s gender identity and interiority thus become another inner layer within the inner space.

The woman is a fan negotiating between the two men; she is nevertheless an unusual fan with agency and power. In “real life,” Kongshan’s power is far greater than that of Liu Bei, who comes to seek her help. In this she again appears to be a double of Zhuge Liang, whom Liu Bei famously called on three times to invite him to serve him; but Kongshan is not Liu Bei’s vassal—instead, by agreeing to help him, she assumes control over Liu Bei’s life. She may be a medium between the two men, but she *chooses* to be so, and she forgoes payment, making her action one of free will. Perhaps most important, she, not Liu Bei, is the one who “penetrates” Zhuge Liang. If a premodern male poet could play voyeur in his boudoir poetry, his gaze taking in her make-up, her clothes, and her innermost thoughts and feelings, then the slash heroine reverses the direction of the gaze and of the penetration, literally and metaphorically. The fantasy of penetrating layers of history and discovering the unsayable—i.e., feelings “half illuminated, half in the dark”—seems to sum up much of Three Kingdoms slash.

Despite the narrator’s first-person female perspective, Kongshan is

depicted as an anti-Mary Sue: Kongshan looks young but is actually very old; she has powers but works within limitations; she does not win any heart, and maintains her distance by treating the whole experience as but one episode in a long career; despite her intervention she remains an observer. But perhaps what most separates her from a Mary Sue is an ironic self-consciousness about gender identity. In the story, Kongshan likes Liu Bei because, although he has assumed, like everyone else, that she was a man because of her prominent reputation as a Daoist wizard, he does not express disappointment, nor does he change his respectful attitude toward her, after he discovers her female identity; nevertheless, although she keeps telling him not to call her an “immortal lady” (*xian gu*), but to call her by her name Kongshan—an indication of her desire to be treated as an individual and a professional with her gender identity downplayed, Liu Bei constantly ignores her request. She is annoyed, but shrugs it off: facing conscious or unconscious gender bias, she tries to develop coping strategies, however imperfect and unsatisfying they are.

Pleasure and Power: The Complexity of Slashing

In the preceding sections, I have discussed the special cultural twist in Three Kingdoms slash, as well as some of the motives and consequences of fans’ engagement in slashing. How, then, do we evaluate the social and cultural role of slash? It is a particularly difficult task for scholars because slash, like fan culture and fan production in general, is such a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon, and one cannot generalize about it and analyze it as a monolithic collective undertaking in a one-size-fits-all manner. While fan production is global and there are many common elements in fanfic writing that cut across national and linguistic boundaries, it is also a sphere where we see cultural and linguistic factors most intensely at work, as evidenced by fans’ negotiations with tradition and by their carnivalesque pleasure in exuberant linguistic play. Indeed, although Chinese fan production has been heavily influenced by Japanese popular culture, it remains

unique enough to preclude one from using the umbrella term “East Asian fan culture.” In this section, I shed light on the diversity and complexity of the meanings of Three Kingdoms slash production. I focus here not only on the texts themselves, but also consider the communal consumption of such texts; in other words, literary close reading must be supplemented by a sociological perspective in order to properly understand and evaluate the social, cultural, and literary significance of slashing.

Fanfic scholar Sara Gwenllian Jones (2002: 79–90) argues, in some ways quite rightly, that we cannot regard fan fiction, especially slash, as subversive because the source texts already have a homosocial element that invites homoerotic readings. This is certainly true of the Three Kingdoms canon, especially the 2010 television show, as I discuss below. Yet there is an undeniable subversive element in the transformation of an allegorical “love” relationship in the premodern Chinese cultural discourse into a literal and physical one. To push this point further, I would like to posit that the subversiveness lies less in the transformation per se than in the pleasure female fans derive from the act of transforming and, more important, in their communal enjoyment of sexual fantasies about men. While many Three Kingdoms slash texts are merely titillating and the penetration of Zhuge Liang in “Ballad of the White Feather” is metaphorical, plenty of stories, often marked with “flesh” (*rou*) in their titles, are explicitly sexual, and the authors freely indulge in descriptions of male beauty as erotic objects. It is an eroticization of a particular kind of male beauty: “the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh,” to use the words of Joanna Russ (1985: 90).

A story entitled “On the Eve of Entering Chuan” (*Ru Chuan qianye*) by Wangmeng Siming cleverly parallels Liu Bei’s military campaign in Sichuan with his exploration of Zhuge Liang’s body on the eve of his departure:¹⁵

柔韌而碩長的頸子，精巧的喉結因了緊張興奮微微滾動著。寬而秀麗的肩胛，平滑白皙的胸膛，無不緊緊的攫住了劉備的眼睛。這是世人絕沒見過的諸葛孔明，充滿了誘惑，不能不讓人心生妄想。

¹⁵ URL: <http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12914475> (posted December 8, 2010).

A soft, supple, long neck; the exquisite Adam's apple, now slightly quivering because of nervousness and excitement; broad, beautiful shoulders; flat, smooth and fair chest: Liu Bei's eyes were closely drawn to everything in his sight. This was a Zhuge Kongming no one in the world had ever seen, full of seductive charm, impossible not to stir one's fantasy.

A favorite trope in Three Kingdoms slash is watching the male body in sleep—a passive state that renders the body an immobile object of a desiring gaze—scenes enabled by common description in historical sources of two good male friends “sharing of the same bed” and in particular of Liu Bei's sharing his bed with his trusted generals, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Zhao Yun (Chen 1959: 939, 948). For instance, in “No Robe” (Wu yi), a long work started in 2010 and still ongoing at the time of the writing of this essay, Liu Bei repeatedly observes the sleeping Zhuge Liang with his “jade-like neck” and “long lashes,” and Zhuge Liang is constantly placed in a compromised position (drunken stupor or illness), all to highlight a corporeal passivity much relished by the author and her readers.¹⁶

The controversial “Regrets” (Hen) is one of the most famous—or notorious—Three Kingdoms slash stories because of its portrayal of Zhuge Liang as a sexually promiscuous femme fatale and its explicit, detailed, and extended erotica, often with an S/M tendency. In a scene of sex with Cao Cao in front of several generals and party guests,

那白玉一般的雙腿被曲起，那身順著酒桌向下躺，胸前紅蕾凸起，明晃晃的展現出激越的欲色，長髮如瀑一般落下，散在青色的石板上，仿若流光。¹⁷

[Zhuge Liang's] two jade-like legs were bent, his body sliding down from the banquet table; two red buds stood erect on his chest, shining bright with the color of passionate desire. His long hair fell down like a cascade, spreading over the blue rock slab in a semblance of flowing light.

Or in the eyes and words of Cao Cao's heir, Cao Pi:

¹⁶ URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/943752066> (posted by Yichenyin in collaboration with Chunjiang Huayueyejing).

¹⁷ URL: <http://www.yaochi.me/eb-ook/23797/9.html>.

¹⁸ URL: <http://www.yaochi.me/ebook/23797/36.html>.

“孔明哥哥，縱然是如此年紀，卻依然是眉如遠黛，眸似春水，唇如凝露……看哥哥這身子，竟是比较從前更加的流离含光，膚如錦緞，從里到外散髮出柔婉和媚，壓抑禁止之態，真真令人想煞!”¹⁸

“Kongming, my elder brother, even at your age, you still have eyebrows like distant hills of kohl, eyes like spring water, and lips like congealed dew. . . . Look at your body: it is even more smooth and radiant than before, and your skin is like brocade; from inside to outside, it exudes such a mellow, tender charm and such an air of repressing and forbidding yourself—truly it makes me long for you madly!”

Despite the unmistakable sign of maleness, such as the Adam’s apple and a flat chest, we detect a strange familiarity in these descriptions because the authors are recycling, with little or no modification, much of the old vocabulary of female beauty—for example, “eyes like spring water” (a modification of the trope “eyes like autumn water”), “jade-like legs,” and cascading long hair (traditional Chinese men’s hair style conveniently lends itself to such androgynous depiction). And yet, upon closer inspection, one recognizes that there is nothing inherently “female” about these descriptions and these characteristics, and we are conditioned to accept them as “feminine” by linguistic and cultural habits that enforce gender stereotypes both in perceiving male beauty and in the use of verbal rhetoric. The appropriation of the traditional language of female beauty used in male-authored texts turns the table on the men and creates a new sort of highly eroticized male beauty exclusively for female pleasure and consumption that does not fit conventional ideas of masculinity.

This eroticized male beauty for female pleasure is something new in Chinese literary history. It is true that the male-authored eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng) “already represents [in its male protagonist Jia Baoyu] a form of feminized, fragile male beauty much appreciated by female readers of the original canonical text,”¹⁹ but Jia Baoyu’s attraction for female readers stems largely from his emotional

¹⁹ I thank one of the external reviewers for this comment.

hyper-sensitivity, not from his beauty; it is his emotional hyper-sensitivity that separates him from other young male characters in the novel with delicate good looks such as Jia Rong or Jia Yun. More important, throughout the novel, Baoyu appears mostly as the subject, not object, of desire; his own physical beauty is rarely described, and there is never any sexually explicit description of the kind that appears in slash fiction. As I discuss later in the essay, even the nineteenth-century sequels (themselves a form of fanfic) to the canonical text are largely discreet and chaste in content. In contrast, it is the eroticized and erotically scrutinized male body as an object of female desire that distinguishes the sort of male beauty flaunted in Three Kingdoms slash. In premodern fiction, usually only in pornographic novels with homosexuality as the main theme or motif can we find an explicitly eroticized depiction of the delicate, “feminized” male body (for instance, in the famous homoerotic story collection *Hairpins beneath the Cap* [Bian er chai], or in Chapter Two of the erotica *Lantern Moon Liaisons* [Dengyue yuan], both from the seventeenth century). But here again there is striking and enlightening difference: it is highly unlikely, and at the very least impossible to prove, that late imperial homosexual erotic fiction was written by female authors for a group of female readers.²⁰ The Internet as a new media is a key factor in the formation of such a large female community consuming female-authored male-homoerotic works that are created unabashedly for the pleasure of young women. It is for this reason that, despite the common Chinese mistrust of any claim to “newness,” one can indeed unequivocally proclaim the newness of the phenomenon of slashing in the Chinese cultural and literary tradition. In this regard, the bafflement of the Chinese police perhaps best illustrates the shocking unconventionality of this literary phenomenon: in a high-profile case of multiple arrests of fanfic authors on charges of pornography made by the Zhengzhou police in the spring of 2011, the cops were stunned by their discovery that the perpetrators were a bunch of young women—they had expected to uncover “male homosexuals” or perhaps some “dirty old men.”²¹

²⁰ Indeed, we cannot know or even begin to speculate on something of this sort in pre-Internet China. The existence of a long *tanci* novel, *Phoenixes Flying in Pair* (Feng shuangfei), depicting male homoerotic love and written by a female author Cheng Huiying (fl. 1868), is the exception that proves the rule, although we know nothing about a community of female readers communicating with the author and commenting on the novel as in the contemporary case. I thank Paola Zamperini for pointing me to this particular work.

²¹ URL: <http://news.qq.com/a/20110321/000741.htm>.

²² URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/?kw=%D0%C4%D7%D6%B3%C9%BB%D2>. The postbar is defined as “a place where one can enjoy a bottom’s ‘steaming of meat buns.’” Steaming meat buns (*zheng baozi*) is a term for childbearing. The post bar’s rules and regulations specify that in all writings posted there the child’s parents must be both male and that no male partner in a BG (boy and girl) relationship is allowed except in a video.

²³ For instance, “Wei shei fenglu li zhongxiao” (For whom to stand alone at midnight in the wind and dew). URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1004479247> (posted by Shanzhong Yiweichang in February 2011).

²⁴ URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/664672114?pn=13>.

²⁵ For instance, see fan authors’ posts in *Shugong shenchu* (a forum devoted to Xuan/Liang fandom): URL: <http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12887341>; and URL: <http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12897574>.

²⁶ Even though this practice did spread to boy actors in the nineteenth century, the consumers of male beauty remained male (Wu Cuncun 2004: 116–158).

The interest in the softness, malleability, and vulnerability of the male body is manifested most clearly, and perhaps also most shockingly, in the so-called *shengzi wen* (childbirth writing) that features male pregnancy and childbearing. Childbirth writing does not have universal appeal among Three Kingdoms slash fans—some like it, and some like it only in a certain mood (for example, a fan may post a message seeking a *shengzi wen* because of a sudden urge for something with “a strong taste”)—but it is a recognized subgenre. Outside of Three Kingdoms fandom, *shengzi wen* also has quite a large following: one postbar, *Xinzi chenghui ba*, which is devoted to the topic of male childbearing in a male homoerotic relationship, had 191,300 posts between its founding in November 2008 and May 2014.²² In some of the texts in this subgenre, the representation of labor pain bears remarkable similarity to menstrual pain.²³ *Martyrs of Shu* (Shu shang), a long, much followed work of Three Kingdoms slash by Yeyu De Huihui, includes a detailed description of an excruciating birth; the author admits that she heard of much of the stuff about childbirth from her mother.²⁴

Just as important as the erotic fantasy expressed in the fanfic are the many discussions of the male body in the fan community, especially in connection with media fandom. The discussions range from the relishing and savoring of various screen images of the characters and closely analyzing their sexy charm in terms of facial features, body types, postures, and clothes in the stills posted online, to comparing different screen versions of a favorite character such as Zhuge Liang in terms of physical attractiveness.²⁵ Here we see a form that comes close to the numerous volumes on the “ranking of flowers” (i.e., evaluation of beautiful women, usually courtesans) from late imperial China.²⁶ This sort of gender inversion may not fundamentally change gender stereotypes, but I find *some* progressive aspect in the public forums offered by the Internet in which women can freely express and exchange their sexual fantasies, speak of their sexual desires and “perversions,” and discuss what turns them on or off—in a

generally supportive and sympathetic environment. In its emphasis on sexuality and sexual fantasies, slash presents a drastically different picture of female authors and readers than that, say, of eighteenth and nineteenth-century sequels to *Dream of the Red Chamber* that are generally assumed to have targeted a female audience, at least “proper ladies,” by virtue of their chaste content (Widmer 2004: 129–133). In fact, Three Kingdoms slash fanfic subverts the traditional gender stereotype that women are more interested in emotional fulfillment than physical satisfaction. It showcases raw sexuality, though at the same time that sexuality is saturated with emotion; spirit and flesh are inseparable, each reinforcing the other.

Pleasure, especially the sexual pleasure that binds slash authors and readers together, plays a powerful role that must not be underestimated in our evaluation of slash fandom as a positive cultural force and a force for women’s liberation. This online community of like-minded women, many of whom are genuinely talented, carves out a space to express their non-mainstream emotional, sexual, literary, and artistic tastes and needs. They have created a world of possibilities to experiment with ways of writing about the male body, male beauty, and sexuality. Comparing slash writers to nineteenth-century female popular novelists, Constance Penley (1997: 134) characterizes the former as embodying the same impulse as the latter: “to transform the public sphere by imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved through making it more answerable to women’s interests.” Perhaps, as Jin Feng (2013, 82) wisely states, “Only time can tell whether these new developments in Chinese Web literature will permanently change fiction writing in general and Chinese society at large.” But for the moment, at the very least, girls are having some long overdue fun.

As stated earlier, slash is a complicated, multifarious phenomenon that requires a nuanced approach. While the female fans’ pleasure is empowering, it is also a double-edged sword, because subversion often paradoxically serves to reaffirm what is being subverted. In Xuan/Liang slash, the unequal social positions of the lovers, especially with Zhuge

²⁷ The original reads: “在三國里，偶對主公 X 臣子的戲碼多數不喜。我覺得主公和臣子，就應該是戰友，是朋友，甚至可以是兄弟，但不應該是情人。” URL: <http://www.yaochi.me/ebook/23797/11.html> (posted by author on May 23, 2010).

Liang the minister usually portrayed as a “bottom” and the lord Liu Bei as a “top,” only serve to reaffirm traditional gender roles and stereotypes (lord-vassal, male-female, active-passive) by conflating social and political hierarchy with romantic relationships. Perhaps recognizing the entrenched male-female/lord-vassal stereotype and desiring to transcend it, the author of “Regrets” makes a point of portraying Zhuge Liang in any number of pairings, except with Liu Bei. The author, Tianpin Youdu, asserts: “I dislike stories about the ruler/minister pairing in the Three Kingdoms [slash]. In my view, ruler and minister should be comrades, friends, even brothers, but not lovers.”²⁷ She does not elaborate, but avoiding the Xuan/Liang pairing offers a way out of an explicitly unequal social relationship between the lovers. With other men in the Three Kingdoms world, Zhuge Liang has a more or less equal relation, and he can freely enjoy his sexual adventures with them as an independent person, and the power dynamics of those sexual relations is of a different nature than those in a straightforward ruler-minister relation.

Although Three Kingdoms fan authors greatly complicate the male-centered patriarchal tradition of the Three Kingdoms story cycle, the moral values explicitly espoused by Three Kingdoms slash, in the final analysis, remain largely conservative. As Henry Jenkins (1992: 34) says, “Readers are not *a/ways* resistant; all resistant readings are not necessarily progressive readings; the ‘people’ do not *a/ways* recognize their conditions of alienation and subordination.” His insight applies quite well to the Chinese case. Most stories treat loyalty to the Han as an unquestioned virtue, and Zhuge Liang’s loving devotion to Liu Bei (and to Liu Bei’s cause) as a moral and sexual turn-on. “Regrets” is an exception in that Zhuge Liang sleeps with and loves many men, and that, perhaps, much more than the explicit sex scenes, is the primary reason this work is so controversial. However, even in “Regrets,” Zhuge Liang’s failed romance with Cao Cao is attributed to the fact that Zhuge Liang experiences a split of “spirit and flesh” in this affair—he cannot tolerate Cao Cao’s wicked personality even though Cao

Cao is a perfect match for him in every other way, and they always have great sex.

In her article on *Star Trek* slash fandom, Penley cites a passage from Nina Auerbach's book *Communities of Women*,

Women in literature who evade the aegis of men also evade traditional categories of definition. Since a community of women is a furtive, unofficial, often underground entity, it can be defined by the complex, shifting, often contradictory attitude it evokes. Each community defines itself as a "distinct existence," flourishing outside familiar categories and calling for a plurality of perspectives and judgments. (Penley 1997: 132; Auerbach 1978: 11)

Ultimately, the progressiveness of Three Kingdoms slash does not so much lie in the transformation of the political discourse into the sexual discourse *per se* as in the act of transforming and in the pleasure derived from it.

A Conspired Performance: Media Producers, Actors, and Fans

The values underlying the writing of Three Kingdoms slash inform the Three Kingdoms fan subculture in general, and it is necessary to contextualize close analysis of fan texts by looking at fan activities, both within and outside of the fan community, as a collective performance. In other words, at a time when fan culture seems to be going mainstream globally and when media convergence and active audience participation are becoming the norms (Jenkins 2006), we must consider not only the dynamics within the fan community itself but also the fan community's constant interactions with other modes of cultural production at large. In the last section of this essay, I seek to contextualize Three Kingdoms slash fandom in contemporary Chinese society by examining the online interface among fans and by exploring the ways in which this particular fan community colludes with media producers and actors to produce a multimedia, multidimensional social performance; this social performance, as we will see, is driven by a

complex network of social, cultural, and (on the part of the media producers) economic factors.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the gender of a netizen, various sources reaffirm what we already know, that Three Kingdoms slash authors and audiences are predominantly young females.²⁸ On post bars such as *Xuan Liang ba* and *Gongde wu Liang ba*, judging from numerous posts that mention winter and summer breaks, exams, and classes, many fans are in high school or college. Despite the apparently subversive nature of slashing, the moral and cultural values expressed by these fans are often fundamentally conservative. Particularly revealing are many *Xuan Liang ba* posts in which fans talk about balancing their slash interests with their school life. A series of posts was spurred by a fan's message of June 13, 2010 entitled, "That little bit of YY I had felt in my heart at the time of reciting 'Chushi biao' is all gushing out now," alluding to the hit TV series being aired on mainland Chinese television at the time.²⁹ The post provoked many replies in which fans recalled their experience of studying Zhuge Liang's "Memorial upon Undertaking a Military Campaign" (Chushi biao) in the not too distant past or expressed eager anticipation to study it in class. Taught as a manifesto of Zhuge Liang's loyalty to Liu Bei's great enterprise of "unifying China" and his spirit of "perseverance until last breath," the text is read by fans as a declaration of Zhuge Liang's undying love for Liu Bei, in which they count "fourteen evocations of the 'deceased emperor' [i.e., Liu Bei]." Sometimes writing about Zhuge Liang, especially about his tireless efforts to manage the state after Liu Bei's death, helps the young fans find a release from their emotionally-fraught adolescent lives, made particularly difficult by China's relentlessly oppressive educational system. One author says in a postscript to her story, "If There Is No Tomorrow" (Ruguo meiyou mingtian), that the suffering she went through in the final year of high school was the feeling she drew upon to write about the painful perseverance of Zhuge Liang after Liu Bei's death: "The feeling of despair in hell and then again raising hope, holding onto hope but then

²⁸ On the gender of slash fanfic authors/readers, see also Wang 2008: 122–124.

²⁹ The original reads: 當初背《出師表》心里那點YY 現在全部噴湧出來了。URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/797581262>.

again despairing, is a true depiction of myself in the final year of high school.”³⁰

In another series of messages, a fan posted a group of photos of Zhuge Liang’s grave site in Mian County of Shanxi, now a tourist site, including a picture of the ticket that cost 50 yuan.³¹ There are also pictures of the gift shop at the tourist site where numerous Zhuge Liang paper fans in an assortment of sizes and colors are on display, and where one finds “cute” clay figurines of Zhuge Liang and other Three Kingdoms characters. There is no irony here about the commodification of history, still less about the local government’s sponsorship of cultural tourism to promote patriotic education and to boost the local economy. The posts and the replies all convey a sentimental adulation of Zhuge Liang. Slash fantasy about Zhuge Liang, no matter how eroticized, is or can always be made consistent with the mainstream nationalistic sentiments sanctioned and promoted by the Chinese state.

Recent fan studies have largely turned away from Stuart Hall’s incorporation/resistance paradigm, which either pitches fans against, or envisions them as incorporating, the media’s messages and ideology. As the editors of the volume *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* state, “fans are seen not as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures but, in sharp contrast, as agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies” (Gray/Sandvoss/Harrington 2007: 6). The actual state of things, as I try to demonstrate in the earlier part of this essay, is never quite as clear-cut as this; nevertheless, it is fair to say that its basic conventionality is perhaps what makes it easy for Chinese media producers to rewrite, repackage, and remodel the Three Kingdoms world to engage audiences and achieve commercial success while maintaining mainstream status.

Both the screenplay writer and the director of the 2010 TV series were keenly aware of their audiences and fans on the Web. In an interview with *Sanlian’s Life Weekly* (Sanlian shenghuo zhouban), to the question, “When

³⁰ The original reads: 那种在地獄里絕望又重振希望，抱持希望卻又絕望的心情，就是高三時的我的真實寫照。” URL: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/800830616> (posted by Yiyefengbaitou 一夜風白頭 on June 16, 2010).

³¹ <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/834437584?pid=9019796587&cid=0#9019796587>.

you were writing your screenplay, did you consider today's audiences' aesthetic tastes and some of their values?" the screenplay writer Zhu Sujin (2008) replies: "I considered them a lot. The preparation for every TV series [I wrote] basically began with that [consideration]." Although he claims that he does not care much about comments on the Web, in a later interview with the *Southern People Weekly* (Nanfang renwu zhoukan), Zhu (2010b) reveals his thorough familiarity with those comments, citing from them to demonstrate that he loves the audience's online active engagement with the show. In the same interview, Zhu describes Zhuge Liang and his nemesis, the Wei minister Sima Yi (179–251), as a pair of "rivals as well as lovers." To the reporter's follow-up question, "So you do not mind some audience members regarding *Three Kingdoms* with [the perspective of] the subtle feelings between men?" he replies: "Not at all. Boys look for spirit [*jingshen*], and girls look for feelings [*ganqing*]. Their points of view are different, that is all. The audiences take their own values [to the show] and see something [in the show] that belongs to themselves: I think that is great!" Although Zhu's perceived gender characteristics fall into the old patriarchal stereotypes discussed in the preceding section, it is clear that he is aware of the female slash fans in cyberspace and he immediately understands what the interviewer is getting at by the euphemistic phrase, "subtle feelings between men." In contrasting male "spirit" (*jingshen*) with female "feelings" (*ganqing*) rather than "body" (*routi*), which after all is a much more common antithesis of "spirit" than "feelings," the gender binary Zhu employs completely evades the issue of sexuality, even though sexuality is at the heart of many *Three Kingdoms* fans' homoerotic fantasies.

It is quite impossible to consider this TV series, with its highlighting of male bonding, its conventional, cursory treatment of female characters, and even its casting of male characters, as completely unaware of a young audience deeply into the slash subculture or at least well-versed in its language. The director of the hit series, Gao Xixi, was instrumental in shaping and constructing a new, prettier-than-ever image of Zhuge Liang with

his choice of the actor Lu Yi, a teen idol who had appeared frequently in romantic soap operas. It was a controversial choice, because older Chinese audiences had become accustomed to the conventional image of Zhuge Liang as a middle-aged man, an image that derives from traditional Chinese operas where Zhuge Liang is invariably cast in the role type of *laosheng*, the bearded senior male in a position of authority. On the famous television program, *A Date with Lu Yu* (Lu Yu youyue), Gao Xixi defended his choice by saying that Zhuge Liang was only twenty-seven when he first came out of seclusion to serve Liu Bei, and that he should be a “dashing, handsome fellow” (*junnan*).³² The actor Lu Yi’s delicate good looks, as opposed to a more rugged type of masculine beauty, turned out to be a perfect fit with the image of a beautiful Zhuge Liang depicted in *Three Kingdoms* slash. The director’s choice of a teen idol, coupled with the numerous scenes of Zhuge’s emotionally charged interactions with Liu Bei in the show, seems to be a gesture of collusion with, and certainly caters to the taste of, the young female *Three Kingdoms* fans.

Media scholar Bertha Chin (2007: 218) claims that “in East Asian cultures,” “rather than a strong focus on characters from a popular text, the emphasis is on the pop idol.” Chin (211) admits that due to the language barrier she is largely limited to “fan sites and Web forums where English is the preferred, and main, language used,” and indeed her generalization based on such limited observations must be refined and revised when we look at the “real” virtual world on the Chinese Web. *Three Kingdoms* fan culture, like those of *The Lord of the Ring* or *Sherlock Holmes*, is where literary fandom and media fandom conflate and reinforce each other. Actors, especially stars, are a crucial element in the economic, cultural, and social game of popular culture consumption and fandom. After the slash MV “Romance in the Rain” kicked up a storm on the Web, the actor playing Liu Bei, Yu Hewei, mentioned it along with several other Xuan/Liang MVs in an online interview, praising them as “touching.” He said, “Regarding the relation of Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, if we look at the version of ‘Romance

³² URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8gPAUUGDm8>.

³³ URL: <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/vB1TUQQ8jgg/>.

in the Rain' from the perspective of entertainment, [that version] is really not all that excessive: their relationship is simply too special."³³ Yu Hewei had not been nearly as well-known as the pop idol Lu Yi; but after the airing of the *Three Kingdoms* series, and especially after his endorsement of the Xuan/Liang MVs and his frank admission that he frequently checked out viewers' online comments, he endeared himself to Three Kingdoms fans and his celebrity status improved as a result.

³⁴ URL: <http://shugong.igetbbs.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12887346>.

The actor's shrewd acknowledgement of fan production became a driving force in a continuous off-camera social performance. Soon afterward, a work of RPS (Real Person/People Slash) called *Chuanqi* was written by none other than Zhongdan De Ganghuaboli, the creator of the iconic MV "Romance in the Rain."³⁴ She could not have picked a better title, since *chuanqi* is a term with cultural resonance, evocative of Tang dynasty romantic tales known as *chuanqi* (accounts of the remarkable) and of the wildly popular woman writer Eileen Chang's (1920–1995) story collection of modern urban romances. This RPS work concerns the emotional involvement of the two actors playing Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang during the shooting of the television series. Started in July 2010 and completed in January 2012, it was posted, like all long works of fan fiction, one section after another in the manner of serialized fiction in newspapers and magazines. Based on extensive research in media reports and interviews about the TV show and the actors, *Chuanqi* successfully weaves a fantastic story about the two actors, with a recurrent motif of the intersection of drama and real life, and with a hint (though unfortunately not realized fully in its later development) that in their previous lives the actors had been the historical figures themselves. Since *Chuanqi* collaborates closely with the actors' own performance in social media—newspaper or television interviews, blog entries, and so forth—the text has been regarded by many fans as successfully blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy, further complicating the issue of representation and performance. The work itself has obtained a certain cult status among Three Kingdoms slash fans, spawning more "Yu/Lu RPS"

stories.

Ironically, a “warning” (*jinggao*) by the author in a red, large-size font appears at the beginning of the text; it states, first, that the work has nothing to do with reality and that the reader must not take it seriously; and that, second, “our of respect for the actors . . . this text must not be circulated, reposted, or recommended to Baidu post bars, especially Yu [Hewei] Bar, Lu [Yi] Bar, and *New Three [Kingdoms]* Bar, and absolutely must not be read by the actors themselves.”³⁵ The irony of forbidding the circulation of a text published on the Internet aside, it is impossible to say whether the actors were aware of this story; but as the work was serialized on several websites (such as *Jinjiang wenxuecheng*, *Shugong shenchu*, and *Wei lu yi hua*, a Lu Yi fans BBS forum), it stirred up a frenzy among fans, who simultaneously followed the actors’ blogs and microblogs and analyzed them fervently in various social media. As meticulous close readers, the fans zealously looked for and subsequently found many signs that the actors were supposedly “responding” to the development of the RPS story and revealing their “repressed feelings” about a forbidden romance (in real life both actors are married men, each with a child). They scoured the actors’ presence online and interpreted their images and words, especially the ambiguous ones, as containing deep meanings. Even after the TV series had ended, another equally engaging “show” was staged in virtual reality by fans and actors.

The above analysis of the activities inside and outside the fan community shows that today’s fandom is very different from the earlier fandom that occupied a more marginal position outside mainstream society and popular media; a new relationship between fans and mass media has emerged, in which a complicated power dynamic is played out. The producers, writers, actors, and fans are together enacting what is in Kurt Lancaster’s (2001: 1–2) words “a social performance,” which is “no less and no more important” than the theatrical performances occurring on the site of a movie or a TV show; and there is indeed far more collusion

³⁵ URL: <http://shugong.igetbbs.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12887346>.

and connection among the various parties than ever before. Although it is evident that producers and writers manipulate and control audiences' responses, audiences are also changing the directions of popular cultural productions.

The intricate interplay of fan production and media production is further complicated by the ever-watchful Chinese state, which remains a powerful force in mainland Chinese popular culture. The Chinese state has recently created an internet security group led by none other than President Xi Jinping himself, and one of the latest moves in the campaign against online activities and activism was the crackdown in May 2014 on smartphone-based instant messaging services.³⁶ The state's periodic crackdown on so-called harmful content on the Web causes immense anxiety and self-censorship; during such a campaign, forum managers and authors might batten down the hatches and hurriedly take down potentially offensive fanfic posts, which could of course poses a problem for researchers.³⁷ More invisible, however, is the state's dead hold over the values and ideologies espoused by fans and media producers, conveyed through patriotic education and school pedagogy, promotion of "national learning" (*guoxue*), and the ominous SARFT—the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, which was once rumored to have "banned time-travel" (thankfully only in television shows) and caused quite a stir in the news.³⁸ In Three Kingdoms fandom and fan production, the authoritative ideological discourse and its contestation both play a prominent part and are inseparably intertwined.

Conclusion

Back in the nineteenth century, a woman author signed the penname Yuncha Waishi to a novella developed from the canonical novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She showed the manuscript to a literary woman friend, who wrote a preface for it also under a pseudonym, Xihu Sanren. The novella was not printed until 1877, the year the author died, which

³⁶ See "China Cracks Down on Instant Messaging Service," published May 28, 2014 by the Associated Press. URL: <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-cracks-down-instant-messaging-services-n116071>.

³⁷ See a "warning" post at <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2989554165> or a post about deleting fanfic posts at <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2982989405>.

³⁸ It turned out that SARFT did not "ban" the theme of time travel in TV shows altogether, but it did criticize and discourage such a theme. URL: <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2011/04-02/2950090.shtml>.

suggest that Yuncha Waishi may have “wished her novel to be published posthumously” (Widmer 2004: 119), since fiction was not considered the domain of a “proper lady.”³⁹ In any case, this is the first novel in Chinese literary history known to have been written by a woman.

Things have come a long way. Today, Yuncha Waishi’s novella would by all means qualify as fanfic, and both the text and the pseudonyms (“pseuds” in fanfic terms) of Yuncha Waishi and Xihu Sanren would blend seamlessly with numerous similar texts and pseuds in the virtual space of the Chinese Web today. There is now a vibrant community of young women who connect with one another online, and the community has spilled from the Web into the world offline, as fans organize events and meetings in real life, order print-on-demand fanfic from their favorite authors, and interact with one another in social media. Instead of being apprehensive about the accusation of impropriety like their nineteenth-century predecessors, these young women experiment with and revel in explicit expressions of sexuality, explore gender roles and gender identity, and try to work out real-life issues through producing and consuming slash in a generally sympathetic and supportive environment. Three Kingdoms slash is but a small subset of a vast network of fan production, but it nevertheless embodies certain issues that are of central importance for our understanding of contemporary Chinese society: the interaction between tradition and postmodernity, between the classical literary canon and contemporary popular culture, between a super-macho world with traditional patriarchal values and an ultra-female world with bourgeoisie urban sentiments, and, last but not the least, between the market economy and state ideology. In this essay, I have provided a preliminary investigation into a phenomenon that is as fascinating as it is large, multifarious, and difficult to analyze, and hope to inspire more in-depth studies on the topic of Chinese literary and cultural production in various new social media.

According to the 33rd report issued by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) in January 2014, there were 274 million users of online

³⁹ Yuncha Waishi was Gu Chun (1799–1877); Xihu Sanren was Shen Shanbao (1808–1862).

literature in 2013, representing a growth of 17.6% over the end of the previous year (49–50). In English language scholarship, there have appeared in social sciences a number of informative and illuminating monographs that powerfully demonstrate the revolutionizing impact of the Internet on Chinese society and culture (Zhou 2005; Tai 2006; Zheng Yongnian 2007; Yang Guobin 2009); in the field of literary scholarship, we have also begun to see the emergence of serious scholarly interest in Internet literature (Hockx 2005, 2015; Feng 2013; Inwood 2014). It is clear from these studies that the Internet is playing a crucial role in the evolution of the literary and cultural landscape of China. We are witnessing a significant change from the days when print media was the main venue for literature and literary criticism and was largely under the control of universities and other state-sponsored cultural institutions. Contemporary literature no longer belongs to an enclosed, self-perpetuating elite circle; and the literary establishment—universities or state-sponsored writers' associations—is losing its former authority in the eyes of the public. Whatever new problems and complications they bring about, capitalism and technology, with their rude and crude democratizing power, are undermining the old cultural elite like never before.

The larger scope and impact of cultural change in contemporary China are comparable to the watershed changes that happened in the much discussed Tang-Song transition in Chinese history, during which new social and cultural structures, new forms of information dissemination, and new ideologies and concepts were tied to the opening up of the civil service examination, the spread of print culture, especially of commercial printing, and the formation of local communities as opposed to a “national” arena or the center. The Internet is a global phenomenon that turns nations into new local communities bound together by language and culture that transcend national boundaries; there is no center on the Internet—or there are multiple centers, with each interest group being a center, and with numerous intersections and overlaps among interest groups. Three

Kingdoms slash fandom is but one of the many such interest groups; but with its diversity and multiplicity, complications and contradictions, conservatism and progressiveness, it is like a prism that refracts the dazzling light of these immense sea changes.

While there are many scholarly books and articles on the general topic of "Internet literature" (Ouyang 2008: 256–293), Internet fanfic, especially slash fanfic, has not received much special attention. Researchers writing about *danmei* typically focus on the entire Chinese *danmei* subculture as a social phenomenon and on its dissemination in cyberspace (Zhang/Dong 2013; Long 2013), with a particular interest in exploring the causes of *danmei* from a psychological and educational point of view (You 2012; Song/Wang 2011; Zheng Xuemei 2010). They variously see slash fiction as an expression of young women's desire to fulfill their repressed sexual needs (Yang Ya 2006) or a means to fill their emotional void (Wang 2010), or evaluate its moral role in female adolescents' sexual education (Wu/Sun 2013), or even regard it as a form of Japanese "cultural colonialism" (Su 2009).

Only a few articles discuss slash fiction as literary texts, albeit in very general terms (Li 2013; Zhang Bing 2012). Such an approach perhaps demonstrates an anxious desire to get a grasp on something so new, amorphous, and complicated, but the lack of fandom-specific studies and the dearth of details in discussing fan production hamper any effort to understand Internet slash fanfic, whose diversity often undermines the sweeping generalizations made by these scholars about "*danmei* fiction" as a whole. The use of the all-purpose term, *danmei xiaoshuo* or *danmei wenxue*, fails to bring out the characteristics of slash fanfic, which, based on male characters with no homoerotic relation with each other in the canon, is sometimes confused with gay literature in general (Liao 2013). More detailed studies of individual fandoms and fan texts would not detract from the attempt to sketch a larger picture but will help us gain clarity as well as depth in grappling with this complex vast phenomenon.

It has been pointed out by the editors of *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* that “close readings and literary analyses of a particular fan text remain rare” in fan studies because “treating a fan story as only a singular literary text may obscure the complex intertextuality that tends to embed stories in an economy of collectively shared production, distribution, and reception that together create a more complex intertextual meaning” (Hellekson/Busse 2014: 24). This is no doubt true; we see a good example in an essay that, based on the reading of one slash novel, attributes the writing of slash to a woman’s “castration complex” and her desire to be a man (Zhang Bo 2011: 11–12). Nevertheless, the best way to deal with fan production should be a combination of methods: close reading against a background of wide reading, in conjunction with sociological and ethnographic approaches to understand the communal space and communal interactions on the Web and in other social media. Ultimately, our study of fan culture and fan production must also be informed by a perspective on the Chinese cultural context that is more refined than the umbrella term “East Asian cultures,” and any profound understanding of Internet fan production in a given language and society must necessarily include a historicized understanding of its cultural past.

Glossary

aicai	愛才
"Baiyu xing"	白羽行
Ban Jieyu	班婕妤
<i>Bian er chai</i>	弁而釵
boke	博客
Cao/Guan (Cao Cao/ Guan Yu)	曹關 (曹操/關羽)
Ce/Yu (Sun Ce/ Zhou Yu)	策瑜 (孫策/周瑜)
Chen Shou	陳壽
Chengdi	成帝
Cheng Huiying	程蕙英
<i>Chu ci</i>	楚辭
<i>Chuanqi</i>	傳奇
chuanyue	穿越
chuiyan	炊煙
Chunjiang Huayueyejing	春江花月夜景
"Chushi biao"	出師表
<i>Dahua Chunqiu luntan</i>	大話春秋論壇
Dang Huanggua Yudao Qiezi	當黃瓜遇到茄子
danmei tongren	耽美同人
daye	大業
<i>Dengyue yuan</i>	燈月緣
"Dongbeiren doushi huo Lei Feng"	東北人都是活雷鋒
<i>Dongguan han ji</i>	東觀漢記
Du Mu	杜牧
egao	惡搞
Er qingshi qi neng buzhen?/ <i>Weishu</i>	而青史豈能不真? /魏書
Luoyangcheng	洛陽城
Fang Wenshan	方文山
<i>Feng shuangfei</i>	鳳雙飛
funü	腐女
ganqing	感情
Gao Xixi	高希希
gong	攻
gong (zhugong)	公 (主公)
Gong Zizhen	龔自珍
<i>Gongde wu Liang ba</i>	攻得吾亮吧
Gu Chun	顧春
Guan Daosheng	管道昇
gufeng	古風
guoxue	國學

haose	好色
"Hen"	恨
Hetu	河圖
<i>Honglou meng</i>	紅樓夢
Huarongdao	華容道
Jia Baoyu	賈寶玉
Jia Rong	賈蓉
Jia Yun	賈芸
"Jiangnan chun"	江南春
jingdian	經典
jinggao	警告
jingshen	精神
<i>Jinjiang wenxuecheng</i>	晉江文學城
jiqing	基情
junnan	俊男
"Kongming yu Jiang Wei"	孔明與姜維
Kongshan	空山
langyan	狼煙
laosheng	老生
"Li sao"	離騷
Li Yu	李煜
lishi zhuan	歷史轉身
Liu Bei	劉備
Liu Shan	劉禪
Lu Yi	陸毅
luntan	論壇
<i>Luoyang qielan ji</i>	洛陽伽藍記
<i>Lu Yu youyue</i>	魯豫有約
Malisu	瑪麗蘇
meiren xiangcao	美人香草
Mian Xian	勉縣
"Moming Qimiao"	墨明棋妙
<i>Nanfang renwu zhoukan</i>	南方人物周刊
ni liandai xiao yi	你連帶小揖
ni yan dai xiaoyi	你眼帶笑意
"Qing shenshen yu mengmeng"	情深深雨濛濛
Qingchang ru zhanchang	情場如戰場
"Qinghua ci"	青花瓷
Qiongyao	瓊瑤
Qu Yuan	屈原
rou	肉
routi	肉體

"Ru Chuan qianye"	入川前夜
"Ruguo meiyong mingtian"	如果沒有明天
<i>Sanguo JQ yanjiusuo</i>	三國 JQ 研究所
<i>Sanguo sha</i>	三國殺
<i>Sanguo tongren</i>	三國同人
<i>Sanguo tongren ba</i>	三國同人吧
<i>Sanguo wushuang</i>	三國無雙
<i>Sanguo yanyi</i>	三國演義
<i>Sanguo zhi</i>	三國志
<i>Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan</i>	三聯生活週刊
Shanzhong Yiweichang	山中意味長
Shen Shanbao	沈善寶
shengzi wen	生子文
Shi Yifeng	石一楓
shice wenrou buken	史冊/溫柔不肯
shou	受
<i>Shu shang</i>	蜀殤
<i>Shugong shenchu</i>	蜀宮深處
si	私
Sima Yi	司馬懿
Sun Quan	孫權
tanci	彈詞
Tianjiangjun	甜醬君
Tianpin Youdu	甜品有毒
tie ba	貼吧
<i>Tongren de shijie</i>	同人的世界
tongren wen	同人文
"Wang jiangnan"	望江南
Wangmeng Siming	王夢思明
Wang Yi	王逸
<i>Wei Liang ba</i>	維亮吧
<i>Wei lu yi hua</i>	圍爐繹話
weibo	微博
"Wei shei fenglu li zhongxiao"	為誰風露立中宵
"Wo nong ci"	我儂詞
"Wu yi"	無衣
Wuyu Gongzi	舞雩公子
xian gu	仙姑
Xihu Sanren	西湖散人
<i>Xin Sanguo</i>	新三國
<i>Xinlang Yule</i>	新浪娛樂
<i>Xinzi chenghui ba</i>	心字成灰吧

Xuande	玄德
Xuan/Liang	玄亮
<i>Xuan Liang ba</i>	玄亮吧
Xuecun	雪村
Yan31	焰 31
"Yanhua yileng"	煙花易冷
"Ye zuo"	夜坐
Yeshen Fengzhu	夜深風竹
Yeyu De Huihui	業餘的灰灰
yi yin	意淫
yilü	一縷
yilü	一律
Yichenyin	依宸尹
Yiyefengbaitou	一夜風白頭
yin	陰
yin	隱
yinyue pingshu	音樂評書
Yu Hewei	于和偉
Yu Nan	余楠
yu shui zhi huan	魚水之歡
yuanwen	原文
yuanzhu	原著
Yuncha Waishi	雲槎外史
Yun/Liang (Zhao Yun/ Zhuge Liang)	雲亮（趙雲/諸葛亮）
<i>Yushui tan</i>	魚水潭
Zhang Fei	張飛
<i>Zhen Sanguo wushuang ba</i>	真三國無雙吧
zheng baozi	蒸包子
Zhu Sujin	朱蘇進
Zhongdan De Ganghuaboli	中彈的鋼化玻璃
Zhou Jielun	周杰倫
Zhuge Boyue	諸葛伯約
<i>Zonghengdao</i>	縱橫道

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