

TWO CASES OF CHINESE INTERNET STUDIES

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of two parts. Chapter 1 concentrates on one genre of Chinese online literature and its relationship with gender and sexuality. It aims at exploring the diversity of Chinese *danmei* fiction and relating it to the gendered self-identifications of young and educated women in contemporary China. It argues that while *danmei* fiction in China creates a channel of gender and sexual expressions, it also reflects the difficulties and contradictions that women encounter and experience when they try to place themselves into the current social and economic structure. Chapter 2 studies Chris Marker's documentary *Sunday in Peking* and its reception in contemporary China. It closely examines the internet reviews on a Chinese website from the perspectives of idealization and exoticization, and contends that both the filmmaker and his Chinese audiences are under the influences of stereotypes that their society, culture or ideology impose on them.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yuan Liang was born and raised in Chengdu, China. She started her undergraduate studies at Beijing Normal University in 2013 and earned her bachelor's degree in Chinese Language and Literature in 2017. In the same year, she joined the M.A. program in Asian Studies at Cornell University. She is expected to receive her master's degree in August 2019. After graduation, she will become a Ph.D. student in the department of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara.

To my grandfather

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER 1 WOMEN IN TRANSITION: ANALYZING FEMALE-ORIENTED <i>DANMEI</i> FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA.....	1
Heteronormativity: Obedience and Transgression.....	6
The Battlegrounds: Danmei and Censorship	17
The Method of Alienation: Danmei and Women	24
Conclusion	37
REFERENCES	39
CHAPTER 2 A STUDY ON CHRIS MARKER’S SUNDAY IN PEKING AND ITS RECEPTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA	42
Idealized Beijing: Communist Propaganda?.....	45
“ All the Thrills of the Exotic ”	58
Conclusion	67
REFERENCES	69

CHAPTER 1

WOMEN IN TRANSITION: ANALYZING FEMALE-ORIENTED *DANMEI* FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Although the arrest of Chinese online writers is not a new story, in November 2018, the case of Tianyi, who was sentenced to ten and a half years in prison due to her illegal publication and distribution of homoerotic books, captured both national and international attention, stimulating a dispute on Chinese social media platforms (i.e., Sina Weibo) about the harsh punishment.¹ The scale of the public engagement with this issue was in great contrast to that with earlier cases, which only received limited attention from the “online literature circle.” As a long-term reader of online novels, I witnessed how this new form of literature evolved into an independent literary genre and expanded its influence over an increasing number of people. The emergence of online literature has brought enormous changes to the literary world: it not only turns literary production towards market consumption, but also makes a new subgenre exceptionally famous in Chinese popular culture – *danmei*.

Danmei, literally translated as “indulgence in beauty,” is the Chinese designation of a female-oriented subgenre in online literature that depicts the over-romanticizing relationship between homosexual men. A more comprehensible term for this genre is BL (Boys’ Love), and it is widely used in China and Japan. Whereas

¹ For example, see Javier C. Hernández and Albee Zhang, “Writer of Erotic Novels in China Is Jailed for Producing Gay Pornography,” *New York Times*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/asia/tianyi-china-erotic-novels-prison.html>.

danmei fiction stems from the Japanese *yaoi* culture and shares some similarities with its Western counterpart, slash fiction, its development in China definitely obtains its own features and impacts that are rooted in the social, economic and cultural contexts of the Chinese society – in fact, this is precisely what I am interested in. While *danmei* culture already existed in the cyber world at the end of the 1990s, Chinese academia turned a blind eye to it until 2006, when an undergraduate student at Renmin University of China carried out through interviews an experimental investigation on *danmei* culture and its Chinese female fans.² Scholars thus began to notice this interesting phenomenon, and relevant research started to spring up.

Early studies on Chinese *danmei* fiction often make discussions concerning the demands from women. For instance, many argue that the male-male romance in fact embodies women's desire for egalitarian love relationships.³ Another well-known contention is that *danmei* products offer Chinese women a less explicit way to satisfy

² See Yang Ya (楊雅), "Tongrennü Qunti: 'Danmei' Xianxiang Beihou 同人女群體：耽美現象背後 [Female *Danmei* Fans: Behind the Phenomenon]," *China Youth Study*, no. 7 (2006): 63-66.

³ For example, see Zheng Dandan (鄭丹丹) and Wu Di (吳迪), "Danmei Xianxiang Beihou De Nüxing Suqiu: Dui Danmei Zuopin Ji Tongrennü De Kaocha 耽美現象背後的女性訴求——對耽美作品及同人女的考察 [Women's Desires behind the Danmei Phenomenon: A Study on *Danmei* Fiction and Its Female Fans]," *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, no. 6 (2009): 219; Ge Zhiyuan (葛志遠) et al., "Woguo 'Danmei Wenhua' De Wangluo Chuanbo Qianxi 我國 '耽美文化' 的網絡傳播淺析 [A Brief Analysis on the Online Dissemination of 'Danmei Culture' in China]," *Economic Vision*, no. 9 (2009): 59; Song Jia (宋佳) and Wang Mingyang (王名揚), "Wangluoshang Danmei Yawenhua Shengxing De Xinlixue Sikao 網絡上耽美亞文化盛行的心理學思考 [Psychological Reflections on the Prevailing Subculture of *Danmei* on the Internet]," *Heihe Journal*, no. 8 (August 2011): 23.

their sexual needs.⁴ However, although scholars tended to approach this problem from the viewpoint of gender studies, few of the earlier writers identified themselves with feminism, and it is reasonable to speculate that many of them had little encounter with feminist ideologies at that moment. Recent scholars have already noticed the overestimation of Chinese *danmei* fiction in previous studies and tried to conduct research in a more critical way. Papers concentrating on readers use interviews and surveys to study the readers' preference and psychology in *danmei* reading, some coming to the conclusion that the male-male romantic relationship is, under most circumstances, in fact consumed through a heteronormative frame.⁵ In 2017, a research group also carried out a quantitative content analysis of Chinese *danmei* fiction, pointing out the amazing similarities between the depictions of homosexual relationships in *danmei* novels and heterosexual relationships in traditional romance.⁶ What is interesting is that in recent years some female writers have started to express their thoughts on gender equality in contemporary China both inside and outside their books (e.g., on Sina Weibo), which raises a very important question for me: Do these

⁴ For example, see Yang, "Female *Danmei* Fans: Behind the Phenomenon," 66; Ge Zhiyuan (葛志遠) et al., "A Brief Analysis on the Online Dissemination of 'Danmei Culture' in China," 59;

Du Rui (都睿) and Ren Min (任敏), "Jiedu 'Tongrennü' Wenxue Chuangzuo Qunti Jiqi Shehui Wenhua Genyuan 解讀 '同人女' 文學創作群體及其社會文化根源 [Interpreting the Literary Groups of Female *Danmei* Fans and Their Social and Cultural Roots]," *Journal of Shenyang Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition)*, no. 2 (March 2010): 249.

⁵ For example, see Yao Zhao and Anna Madill, "The Heteronormative Frame in Chinese *Yaoi*: Integrating Female Chinese Fan Interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone Survey Data," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, no. 5 (2018): 435-457, doi: 10.1080/21504857.2018.1512508.

⁶ Zhou, Paul and Sherman, "Still a Hetero-Gendered World: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes and Romantic Ideals in Chinese Boy Love Stories," *Sex Roles*, no. 1-2 (2018): 107-118.

writers realize the heteronormative discourse implicit in their *danmei* works? If not, will they? Even though we still need more studies to answer this question, my attitude towards the potentiality of Chinese *danmei* fiction is rather optimistic.

Since its importation in the last century, the production and consumption of *danmei* fiction in China has been under constant change. The character setting famous a decade ago may not be welcome today; by the same token, one marginalized theme also has the possibility to become the mainstream one day. In the meantime, it is crucial to realize that Chinese *danmei* fiction itself is not a homogeneous entity; nor is it representative of a fixed perception of gender, marriage and love that is shared by most of its readers. On the contrary, it is a massive collection of texts; it consists of much more diversified works produced by numerous individual writers, whose ideas may even stand in stark contrast to each other. Thus, instead of viewing *danmei* fiction as a whole, I argue that it is more appropriate to take into consideration the factor of time, and pay more attention to its heterogeneity and internal contradictions.

Therefore, I anticipate to explore the diversity of Chinese *danmei* fiction in this paper, and more importantly, to associate it with the gendered self-identifications of young and educated women in contemporary China. In brief, I contend that while *danmei* fiction in China creates a channel of gender and sexual expressions, it also reflects the difficulties and contradictions that women encounter and experience when they try to place themselves into the current social and economic structure. In what follows, I will first discuss the present situation of *danmei* novels on Jinjiang.⁷ I agree

⁷ Jinjiang, or Jinjiang Literature City, is one of the most popular Chinese literature websites. This paper will focus on the *danmei* novels serialized on Jinjiang, for it offers interesting materials to study Chinese women's writing and reading of male-

that the heteronormativity hidden behind the seemingly equal and stereotype-free relationships has a huge impact on Jinjiang's *danmei* fiction. However, it is also critical to notice that not every writer is subject to this ideology. After all, it is not difficult to find a work on Jinjiang that distinguishes itself from the others by challenging the taken-for-granted authority of heteronormative discourses. While this small group of writers do provide inspiring reflections on the dominant gender ideology, I argue that it is still extraordinarily hard for them to eliminate its influences because women have already been disciplined to internalize the "default" sexual orientation and power relations. Aside from that, I will also discuss the essential role censorship plays in the field of Chinese *danmei* fiction, which ironically stimulates women's awakening to their rights of sexual expressions. *Danmei* fiction thus becomes battlegrounds where conflicts between "parents" and "children" play out in post-Socialist China.

The second section of this paper will first examine the method of alienation employed by female *danmei* readers. I believe that it is by distancing themselves from the *danmei* stories, especially the same-sex couples, that many female readers find *danmei* fiction enjoyable. Hence, analyzing the presence and absence of female characters not only helps to reveal women's motivation for the writing and reading of *danmei* stories, but also serves as an effective way to study their gendered

male romance. With ninety-one percent of the users being female and mainly aging from eighteen to thirty-five, this literature portal is particularly famous for online novels written by and for women. It is best-known for its promotion of *danmei* fiction, which has also earned a good reputation among readers by allowing niche genres to thrive. Since its foundation in 2003, Jinjiang has already reached more than 1,630,000 registered writers and 29,900,000 registered readers.

subjectivities. I argue that the inferior position of women within current social and economic structure engenders a sense of economic insecurity that is inconsistent with their desire to “emancipate” themselves, which, together with the implicit influences of the traditional Chinese gender ideology, constitutes the contradictory self-identification that we have found in female *danmei* writers and readers.

Heteronormativity: Obedience and Transgression

Famous for its diversification and inclusiveness, Jinjiang has four overlapping sections, including traditional romance (言情小說), *danmei*/no coupling fiction (純愛/無 CP), fanfiction/light novels (衍生/輕小說), and original fiction (原創小說).⁸ While each section has a considerable number of writers and readers, it is the *danmei* fiction that enjoys the largest readership and makes this website unique. Supported by a well-regulated ranking system, Jinjiang uses different kinds of rank lists to motivate writers and attract readers, the most influential one being the ranking according to the novel’s total credits (總分榜). Jin Feng documented how *danmei* fiction ranked at Jinjiang in 2008: 16 out of the top 50 in the all-time rank list, and 13 out of the top 50 in the half-year rank list were *danmei*.⁹ Since *danmei* fiction already showed its competence a decade ago, it is then not surprising for us to see the proportion it takes up of the rank lists today. The most striking example lies in the total-credit rank list – all of the top

⁸ URL for the homepage of Jinjiang: <http://www.jjwxc.net/> (accessed 6/4/2019).

⁹ Jin Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, no. 2 (2009): 4.

20 novels are *danmei* works, which also take up the 80% of the top 50 spots.¹⁰ As for both the half-year and quarterly reader favorites (半年/季度排行榜), 24 out of the top 50 are *danmei* stories.¹¹ In the monthly rank list, 21 *danmei* novels rank among the top 50.¹² Here, it should be noted that the length of the period covered by the rank list is of remarkable significance: A novel on the half-year rank list is without doubt more popular than a novel on the monthly one. Therefore, I speculate that *danmei* fiction does not dominate Jinjiang by its quantitative advantages, but through the success of a group of representative novels written by celebrated authors.¹³

As mentioned before, while earlier scholars were more inclined to focus on the positive effects of *danmei* fiction, recent studies tend to criticize its heteronormative nature that was once erroneously neglected. For example, the gong-shou model in *danmei* novels is one main target of the attack. Chinese *Danmei* writers and readers always label male protagonists as either gong (攻) or shou (受), meaning the attacker and the receiver. Here, the literal meaning already demonstrates the binary opposition within the male-male relationship. Some people try to figure out the complex

¹⁰ Unluckily, Jinjiang's PC version only allows readers to search for rank lists under each section. Therefore, I collected my statistics from its smartphone version. URL: <https://wap.jjwxc.net/rank/more/700020> (accessed 6/18/2019).

¹¹ URLs: <https://wap.jjwxc.net/rank/more/700010>;
<https://wap.jjwxc.net/rank/more/700005> (accessed 6/18/2019).

¹² URL: <https://wap.jjwxc.net/rank/more/700000> (accessed 6/18/2019).

¹³ While many people in China still hold the idea that online writers (*xieshou*) do not qualify as authors (*zuojia*, a term sounds more professional and respectful), some writers do produce excellent works that compete well with the books written by traditionally recognized authors. Besides, online writers also start to join Chinese Writer Association, which to some extent enhances their social status. In this paper, by intentionally referring to successful online writers as authors, I try to express the idea that online writers also have the ability to deal with more serious problems in their works. Their potentiality should not be overlooked.

relationship among gong, shou, masculinity and femininity. For example, Zhou, Paul, and Sherman argue that *danmei* novels typically “pair one high-masculine/low-feminine man, who is similar to traditional men, with one high-feminine/low-masculine male partner, who is similar to traditional women.”¹⁴ Dai Jinhua, a Chinese feminist cultural critic at Peking University, describes her anticipation and disappointment with Chinese *danmei* culture in one of her famous papers, “The Ghosts of Post-revolutionism.”¹⁵ Whereas she used to believe that *danmei*, as a new cultural form, would help to alter the pre-existent power logic in the current hierarchical and patriarchal society, she ultimately realize that it should be viewed as less a form of transgressions than self-discipline. Not only does the gong-shou model resembles the traditional men-women/dominant-submissive relationship, but this power relation is also in accordance with the protagonists’ social status, which, as Dai contends, constitutes one form of the ghosts – “the internal and delicate recognition of the power mechanism and the person in power.”¹⁶ Dai’s incisive critiques are remarkably inspiring. While agreeing with these comments, I would also like to put forward my personal opinions about the male-male relationship in *danmei* fiction, and the angst romance novel that Dai criticizes most.

¹⁴ Yanyan Zhou, Bryant Paul and Ryland Sherman, “Still a Hetero-Gendered World: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes and Romantic Ideals in Chinese Boy Love Stories,” 114.

¹⁵ Dai Jinhua (戴錦華), “Hougeming De Youling 后革命的幽靈 [The Ghosts of Post-revolutionism],” in *Dialogue Transcultural*, ed. Le Daiyun (樂黛雲) and Alain le Pichon (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2018), reprinted by Sea Snail Community (海螺社區), <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hUJjiEXjITLDFJJOHEIZIw>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Based on my observation, readers on Jinjiang do not have a constant preference for a particular type of gong and shou. In the same way, the favorite themes on Jinjiang also vary from time to time. Hence, while there is no denying that the heteronormative principle is deeply intertwined with *danmei* novels, we should not ignore the important changes happening in this community. For instance, for a pretty long time one of the mainstream types of the gong had been a wealthy, standoffish and macho president, and his male partner, the shou, was often of socially inferior status and had feminine traits. This pairing serves as a typical example to confirm the heteronormative gender stereotypes and the hierarchical features disguised by the seemingly egalitarian male-male relationship. However, this gong-shou coupling is not always adored by readers. No later than 2012, people started to consider it cliché and vulgar, and president-related *egao wen*, roughly translated as “stories of mischievous mockery,” was once fashionable, which to some degree dissolved the opposition of power.¹⁷ Nonetheless, recently the character setting of a macho president has regained its popularity on Jinjiang, notably in tradition romantic novels. In fact, although there have constantly existed some posts on Bi Shui Jiang Ting (碧水江汀, the forum of Jinjiang for writers and readers to discuss original-novel-related topics) and Sina Weibo that complain about the recurrence of this fixed and repulsive pattern, I believe that it will never completely disappear on Jinjiang (unless in a coercive way) because *danmei* fiction does not set any limitations on its writers – it is after all more of a

¹⁷ For example, *Cool President* (總裁酷帥狂霸拽) written by Yuxiaolanshan in 2012 is a parody of the traditional president novel. URLs: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1605441> (accessed 6/18/2019); <https://web.archive.org/web/20130126212931/http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1605441> (a snapshot on 1/26/2013).

genre than a theme. This also explains why contradiction is precisely one significant feature of *danmei* literature.

Today, the gong-shou pairings are so flexible that it is almost impossible to simply classify them into old categories, such as *qianggong qiangshou* (強攻強受, strong gong and strong shou) and *qianggong ruoshou* (強攻弱受, strong gong and weak shou). Consequently, *danmei* writers often use a few phrases to describe the gong and the shou they are going to write about in the summary passage shown at the top of the web page, providing clues for readers to decide whether to start reading or not (some writers even create new phrases on their own). What is especially interesting is that the description one writer uses to portray the gong may be exactly the same thing another writer uses to depict the shou. Zhao and Madill list a wide variety of types of gong and shou respectively in their research, with “black heart,” “cowardice,” “natural,” “king,” “standoffish,” and “loyal dog” for gong, and “princess,” “wife,” “tempter,” “queen,” “natural,” and “standoffish” for shou.¹⁸ While we can see that the words “natural” and “standoffish” appear in both sides, I would like to take it a step further, arguing that in fact every word listed above can be used to depict both gong and shou in today’s *danmei* fiction on Jinjiang. Hence, writers who realize their gong-shou pairings contradict to the conventional stereotype, will take different methods to avoid troubles caused by readers’ aversion to the reversal of the gong-shou relationship, some highlighting the pairing information in the summary

¹⁸ Zhao and Madill, “The Heteronormative Frame in Chinese *Yaoi*: Integrating Female Chinese Fan Interviews with Sinophone and Anglophone Survey Data.” Their survey indicates that a very low percentage of Chinese women (7.10%) endorse the type of cowardice in terms of gong. With regard to shou, the type of princess receives the least votes (12.60%).

passage, and others choosing to do this in the “Authors Words” column.¹⁹ In addition, there are also *danmei* novels that do not divide male protagonists into gong and shou. On Jinjiang, *danmei* writers need to inform readers from whose perspective the novel is narrated. The four options provided by Jinjiang are gong, shou, *hugong* (互攻, roughly translated as “mutually attacking”), and not clear. The last two perspectives explicitly deconstruct the prevalent gong-shou model, for in these cases, writers themselves do not have a pre-established distinction between a dominant protagonist and a submissive one. Nevertheless, I would go too far if I refuse to admit that the gong-shou relationship is still the mainstream model in *danmei* writing, and that the hetero-gendered stereotype also remains unchanged when we choose to view *danmei* community holistically. What I hope to do in this paper is draw people’s attention to some easily overlooked features, components and possibilities of Chinese *danmei* fiction, which will challenge and offer new inspirations to current scholarship.

With regard to the angst romance novel, I argue that its heyday coincided with the early stage of online literature, enjoying a large readership only before 2013. Since then, it has gradually lost its popularity, and today only writers with new ideas or superb writing skills dare to challenge this type of story (let us suppose they all want to create some successful works). This may be because nowadays readers are more likely to desire a light and easy read when they already have a tough life in reality, since sweet romance novels become the mainstream in all kinds of themes. Aside from that, I speculate that the reason may also lie in the different attitudes that female

¹⁹ The “Author’s Words” column is either at the beginning or at the end of each chapter. The number of words in this column will not be counted as profitable.

readers have towards violent elements in the angst romance novel. In recent years, I have observed that more and more female netizens start to view the traditional female identity critically, condemning it for being deeply stereotyped, oppressive and vulnerable. Many Weibo users have become concerned with any issue relevant to gender, and the topics vary widely: for example, workplace discrimination, inequality in marriage and domestic violence.²⁰ I believe that this group of female Weibo users more or less overlaps with the female users of Jinjiang, who degrade the angst romance novel so much because it is a type of fiction that always includes a certain extent of violence imposed on the subordinate and amenable protagonist.

However, there exists one exception – the Alpha/Beta/Omega fiction.²¹ It is a fan-made trope that depicts a different world in which everyone has two genders. On the one hand, just like us, they are either male or female. On the other hand, however, they are also assigned to another gender, namely, Alpha, Beta, or Omega, to which their social status is closely related. Alphas are the dominators of this alternative universe, who are born to be strong, charismatic and aggressive, and capable of

²⁰ In fact, the increasing number of discussions about gender-related questions on Weibo, while raising many people’s awareness of the current situation of Chinese women, does engender opposition and even antagonism. Some netizens contend that those female users are exceedingly sensitive, ridiculing them as “Weibo feminists (微博女權)” and “native Chinese feminists (中華田園女權).” On June 10, 2019, the Weibo account of Mianyang Internet Police posted an article that equates extremism with “extreme” feminism, a group of people who, according to this article, “pretend to fight for the rights of women, but are actually creating a social opposition.” It is fair to say that the contradiction between women, who start to ask for equal rights, and the government, which hopes to maintain order and harmony, is progressively visible.

URL:

https://www.weibo.com/1887344341/HyhDxi7yd?type=comment#_rnd1560851702409 (accessed 6/18/2019).

²¹ Another name for this type of fiction is Omegaverse, meaning an alternative universe (AU) where Omegas (even in the male gender) can get pregnant.

impregnating Omegas. They always act as leaders and soldiers, standing at the top of this hierarchical pyramid. Omegas, on the contrary, are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy. They are weak, gentle and docile, who have the obligations of reproduction and nurturance. Both Alphas and Omegas will experience heats and ruts, which occur at regular intervals and can only be alleviated through sexual intercourse.²² This is the most notorious part of the ABO trope – during this period, Alphas and Omegas lose control of their bodies and are subject to the most primitive and animalistic desire. The setting of Betas varies from one novel to another. By and large, they do not possess any special features as Alphas and Omegas do. They are very similar to the humans in our own world, but are forever subordinate to Alphas due to their innate physical inferiority. Thus, in some ABO novels, writers intentionally omit Betas and only focus on the Alpha-Omega relationship.

The ABO trope first appeared on LiveJournal in 2010, under a kink meme prompt in Supernatural fandom.²³ On October 25, 2012, Shui Zai (睡仔) uploaded the first ABO novel on Jinjiang, a Sherlock Holmes/John Watson slash written in

²² This is not completely fan-made. In “Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology,” Constance Penley used the term *pon farr* to refer to this kind of heats and ruts. She points out that *pon farr* first appears in the Star Trek universe, where Vulcans suffer a blood fever every seven years and can only survive through mating rituals. See Constance Penley, “Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology,” in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 158.

²³ LiveJournal is a blogging platform for fan activities, such as posting fanfiction and pictures. The term prompt in fandom means that someone posts a request for others to write something in particular, which is often quite short and can offer inspirations to fanfiction writers, and the activity is often done anonymously. Supernatural is an American television drama premiered on September 13, 2005, describing the life of two brothers who hunt and expel supernatural creatures.

Chinese.²⁴ One year later, Huai Shang (淮上), one of the most famous *danmei* authors on Jinjiang, started to serialize an ABO novel, *Blade of the Galaxy Empire* (銀河帝國之刃), which formally introduced this Western trope to Jinjiang readers.²⁵ Since then, ABO has become a famous background setting of *danmei* fiction, which reinforces the patriarchal and heteronormative values that are already demonstrated by the gongshou relationship. In the first place, the core principle of the ABO universe is that power dominants reproduction, which constitutes a severe form of sexual discrimination and suppression. Within this structure, the social position of Omegas is much worse than that of women. Because they have a weak, slender and sensitive body that will go through ruts regularly, they are meant and forced to be a breeding machine. In other words, ABO stories try to send us a message that people's social roles and status are genetically determined. As long as biological differences still exist, under no circumstance can they change their predestined life. In addition, the tolerance of sexual harassment aggravates gender inequality drastically. When speaking about ABO, many people agree that it is essentially invented for the writing of erotic fantasies. In ABO societies, rape is ideologically legitimized, since both Alphas and Omegas cannot control themselves as long as they go into a blood fever, and mating means reproduction. Here, it is interesting to compare the ABO and angst romance fiction on Jinjiang. The angst romance fiction, whether depicting a homo- or

²⁴ URLs: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1652318> (accessed 6/18/2019); <https://web.archive.org/web/20190618103441/http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1652318> (a snapshot on 6/18/2019).

²⁵ URLs: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1904453> (accessed 6/18/2019); <https://web.archive.org/web/20140409181232/http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1904453> (a snapshot on 4/9/2014).

hetero-gendered relationship, is on the one hand famous for its capability of both tormenting the protagonists and readers. In *danmei* fiction, the method writers usually employ is to first torture the shou, both mentally and physically, through “constant rape, captivity, assault, and humiliation,” and then the gong, but more spiritually.²⁶ The ABO fiction, on the other hand, is based on a strictly hierarchical social structure filled with biases, discrimination, and violence. That is to say, even though the writer tries to focus on the true love between the main protagonists and creates a sweet and happy story, readers can always find out the negative and dark sides of the fiction as long as its worldview still rests on the ABO structure. Unlike the angst romance fiction, readers in favor of ABO fiction seem to overlook its problematic nature, in stark contrast with those who dislike and criticize it.

However, the ABO community on Jinjiang is also not homogeneous in itself. Although in earlier ABO novels, the majority of writers chose to take a male-Alpha as gong, and a male-Omega as shou, there have always been people not satisfied with this traditional pairing. The double gender in the ABO trope provides them with as many as twenty-seven combinations, such as female-Alpha and male-omega, which, in terms of male-female relationship, is contradictory to our current power structure. Among these interesting pairings, what attracts me most is the appearance of Beta protagonists, which sheds light on the absurdity of the ABO trope. For example, *My Wife is a Beta* (我老婆是個 Beta), written by Yu Yao (魚幺), is a *danmei* novel about

²⁶ Dai, “The Ghosts of Post-revolutionism.”

a male-Alpha and male-Beta.²⁷ In the summary passage, the writer wrote a conversation between two protagonists, where the Beta, Qian Li (千里), shows his explicit aversion to the other two genders. Working at the observation station, Qian has the job to monitor the scent of Omegas, which is the signifier of heats and will cause any Alpha who smell it to chase after them. In this book, readers encounter lots of troubles made by Alphas and Omegas, and therefore have the chance to rethink about this ABO world from the Beta's perspective. Aside from that, one of the most popular plots of ABO fiction on Jinjiang is about how the Omega protagonist challenges the social hierarchy by becoming an indispensable person in his country, often as a general who protects human beings from the invasion of aliens.²⁸ His Alpha partner is also idealized, usually with a noble identity and playing a supportive role. While this kind of story can be regarded as a rebellion against inequality and gender suppression, I consider it more of a fantasy, where the representative of the ruling class and the representative of the ruled are fighting together for an egalitarian future.

In sum, on the one hand, I agree that the some of the *danmei* writing on Jinjiang does reflect a patriarchal, hierarchical and heteronormative world. Like traditional romance writers, *danmei* writers are also very likely to fall into the trap of “reconcile[ing] women to patriarchal society and reintegrat[ing] them with its

²⁷ URLs: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3683305> (accessed 6/18/2019); <https://web.archive.org/web/20190618104802/http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3683305> (a snapshot on 6/18/2019).

²⁸ The top- and second-highest ranked ABO novels, *Blade of the Galaxy Empire* (2013) and *Cadet* (軍校生, 2013), may contribute to the popularity of this plot.

institutions.”²⁹ On the other hand, however, we should not ignore any *danmei* novels that are trying to break this limitation. Focusing on the diversity of *danmei* production requires us to pay more attention to its possible causes, which will be discussed in the third part of this paper.

The Battlegrounds: Danmei and Censorship

Although homosexuality is no longer a taboo in contemporary China, the LGBT community remains marginalized, and people associated with it still suffer social discrimination. During the implementation of the one-child policy, having a homosexual child meant no more descendant of the nuclear family, which seriously threatened the kinship ideology in China. The state has also held a conservative attitude towards homosexuality. It was decriminalized as late as 1997, and remained on the official list of mental illness in China until 2001. On June 30, 2017, the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) issued new principles of auditing netcasting content, in which homosexuality, together with incest, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence, is considered “abnormal sexual relationships and behaviours.” The principles also condemn the portrayal of same-sex relationships for exaggerating obscenity and pornography, as well as “vulgar” and “low” interest – thus, the representations of homosexual people in television dramas should be banned across China. Undoubtedly, these descriptions generated massive public outrage, especially among *danmei* readers and writers.

²⁹ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 217.

Writers on Jinjiang generally have three ways to earn money: serializing VIP chapters, publishing paper books, and selling copyrights. The last one is the most profitable, and the works qualified to be adapted into films, television dramas, and animation are the ones with a large readership, often referred to as “Big IP” in China. *Danmei* fiction, despite the most famous genre on Jinjiang, cannot compete with traditional romance in this trend of visualization. This is because, as mentioned before, homosexual love is not recognized by state-sponsored media yet, especially in terms of television channels. Hence, to pass the state’s censorship, people in charge of the adaptation need to delete or obscure the same-sex relationship in the original story. One typical way is to transform it into bromance, or at least claim it to be. For example, *Guardian* (鎮魂), the second-highest ranked novel according to its total credits, was adapted into web dramas and released on Youku, a Chinese online video platform, on June 13, 2018.³⁰ The romantic content was replaced by brotherhood, and there was also an enormous change in the background setting. During the next two months, the web series had enjoyed a large volume of viewership, and its fans started to call themselves Guardian Girls, which became an interesting phenomenon on the Chinese Internet. However, eight days after the release of its last episode, the whole series was banned on Youku without explanation, and a re-censored version was uploaded three months later. Here, two points attract my attention: the state’s negative and cautious attitudes towards *danmei*, and the delayed prohibition.

³⁰ URLs: <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1673146> (accessed 6/18/2019); <https://web.archive.org/web/20130511032640/http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1673146> (a snapshot on 5/11/2013).

In the first place, the aforementioned principles issued in 2017 offer us important information to understand why *danmei* fiction is still mostly accessible online. As discussed above, it is accused of spreading obscene and pornographic content, which I believe is partially because of the stereotyped public impressions of homosexuals in Chinese society. If we look outside the *danmei* circle, we may be surprised by the harsh situation LGBT people experience in real life. They are often treated with misapprehensions and discrimination, and as a result, only a small part of them choose to reveal their sexual orientations. One widely spread misunderstanding of gays in China is that their private life is always promiscuous. The frequent inclusion of aestheticized sexual activities in softcore *danmei* novels, as well as the more explicit descriptions in the hardcore ones, may also contribute to the state's final decision on the definition of this literary genre. I believe that this point merits great notice because, as Michel Hockx argues, the state is willing to act as a patriarchal parent and impose parental controls over its citizens.³¹ It believes that it has the very responsibility to "protect" its "children" from the contamination of unhealthy things, such as abnormal sexual activities (i.e., homosexuality) and erotic fiction.

Yan Lianke (閻連科) makes a clear distinction between soft censorship and hard censorship: while hard censorship is more direct, forceful, and observable, soft censorship tries to create docile bodies – authors who internalize self-censorship and conduct self-inspection voluntarily.³² Under the second circumstance, the censorship

³¹ Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 120.

³² Yan Lianke (閻連科), "Examination of China's Censorship System," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 263-274.

system may appear to be more tolerant than ever, but its real effects remain the same, or even stronger. In fact, Yan's contention that soft censorship, instead of producing detailed rules, focuses more on "intent and sentiment" is in fact in consistency with Hockx's observation that in China, the state distinguishes healthy literature from unhealthy literature, promoting the former and oppressing the latter in online publications.³³ As mentioned before, Hockx considers it a strong residue of a socialist mentality and hierarchy – a unique phenomenon of a post-socialist country.³⁴ Here, I argue that the Chinese government mainly exerts soft censorship on *danmei* production, but with necessary hard censorship as a supplement. Compared to Westerners, Chinese people are more conservative and even ashamed when talking about sexual topics. To some extent, it seems to some of them that the expressions of sexual desires and orientations are actually "dirty" and immoral. This life-long process of moral education, as well as the docile bodies it produces, demonstrates that even today the ideological control of the state still penetrates into the deepest reaches of the current social structure – its citizens' thoughts and private life. Nevertheless, "aggressive children" always exist, who in this case are the ones daring to blatantly express interest in immoral sexual activities. This is when hard censorship – punishments, including penalties and imprisonment – takes place.

In fact, one main argument of this paper is that the tension between state censorship and homoerotic novels has brought about women's awakening to their rights of gender and sexual expressions. The writing and reading of *danmei* novels

³³ Yan, "Examination of China's Censorship System," 265; Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*.

³⁴ Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*.

provide women with a rare chance to objectify and gaze at men, a process through which their sexual desires are expressed and satisfied. The female users on Jinjiang, many of whom have high salaries, good education backgrounds, and high social status, are more likely to break free of the traditional constraints imposed on women. They are unwilling to remain subordinate and submissive, hoping to change their current situation and obtain equal rights as men. From this point of view, advocating against the prohibition of *danmei* and erotic novels is just one way for women to defend their rights. Writers who believe in this mission will more or less drop hints about their attitudes when writing.³⁵ Sometimes they even express explicit thoughts outside their books. For example, on Jinjiang, there is a group of readers deeply obsessed with virginity, who require protagonists to be completely “pure” before meeting each other. Some writers make complaints on Weibo, and some find it so annoying that they write down “no asking for ‘mutual pureness’” in the summary passage (although in practice, these readers will ignore this sentence and still post undesirable comments). This phenomenon does not only happen to traditional romance writers, since some *danmei* readers also find it hard to accept an “unclean” gong or shou. This example also reveals the internal differences among *danmei* readers, which can be regarded as another limitation of the current *danmei* culture.

In 2014, as a response to the state’s anti-pornography campaign, Jinjiang launched an activity called “Inviting netizens to wipe out pornography” – readers who helped to review newly uploaded chapters would be rewarded with points, which

³⁵ The novels of Yue Xia Die Ying (月下蝶影), the second-highest ranked author on Jinjiang, serve as a perfect example. URL for Yue Xia Die Ying’s writer’s column on Jinjiang: <http://www.jjwxc.net/oneauthor.php?authorid=321503> (accessed 6/18/2019).

could be used to subscribe to VIP chapters. Since then, it has become an integral part of Jinjiang's censorship system. This reminds me of the second feature that the case of *Guardian* indicates: the delayed prohibition. The prohibition of *Guardian* was allegedly due to public complaints about the homosexual connotations of the story. In *Internet Literature in China*, Hockx mentions his interview with a GAPP (the General Administration of Press and Publishing) official, who claimed that the blacklists of online erotic novels were created as "a response to consumer complaints."³⁶ When talking about China's censorship system, Yan also points out the reader's function as an indirect censor, considering it "one of the most effective methods of contemporary China's soft censorship system."³⁷ In fact, the conflict between censorship and *danmei* production does involve a third participant – the homophobic consumers. Here, the most persuasive argument these consumers often propose lies in the protection for children. According to them, children are easy to follow the trend, and watching homosexual dramas may cause them to question heteronormativity, thus inducing their homosexual tendencies. With regard to sexual content, the situation is even worse. Children are incapable of telling right from wrong, and that is why the government should clean up the Internet and provide a healthy environment. Whether these claims are reasonable or not, the contradiction between the protection for children and women's gender and sexual expressions does disclose the necessity of implementing rating systems for not only books, but also videos, films, and television dramas. There is no denying that in China, parents are the most dedicated supervisors.

³⁶ Ibid., 120.

³⁷ Yan, "Examination of China's Censorship System," 269.

Nevertheless, both *danmei* and erotic novels (sometimes in combination) are hard to control, let alone eliminate, especially in the cyber world, for online publishing differs immensely from traditional publishing. In China, if a person hopes to publish his work in print, he has to apply for an ISBN, which means the publisher will censor his work. In contrast, everyone can publish a book online by going through a much weaker censoring process. This partly explains why the state, on the one hand, explicitly suppresses the expressions of homosexuality in traditional publications and television/web dramas, and on the other hand, remains considerably tolerant in the fields of social media and literature websites. Besides, during an interview about the current situation and predicament of Chinese women, Dai proposes a term “the demassified cultural market” to illustrate the popularity of androgynous idols and *danmei* culture.³⁸ She lays great emphasis on the power of capitalism, arguing that it is the demand-supply relationship controlling the cultural market that has a huge impact on the development of *danmei* culture.³⁹ In other words, the rapid propagation of *danmei* culture in the Chinese society is directly due to the tremendous business opportunities hidden behind. I strongly agree with her that consumerism should be considered a crucial factor. Since women are gaining more power and becoming more independent, *danmei* and erotic products will never lose all of their consumers. Even if small and fragmented, these groups of people will find ways to circumvent censorship and continue to exist.

³⁸ Dai Jinhua (戴錦華), “The Prevalence of Xiaoxianrou, Big Female Protagonist, and *Danmei* Culture: The Current Situation and Predicament of Contemporary Women,” interview by Zaojiu TALK, October 10, 2018, video, 32:18, <http://m.acfun.cn/v/?ac=4630908>.

³⁹ Ibid.

Today, *danmei* writers on Jinjiang are really cautious about the body contact they depict in their novels. They use the phrase “no description of the action below the neck of the character” as a sarcastic exaggeration to show how strict and arbitrary the present regulation is. Nonetheless, as for writers that are unwilling to sacrifice the integrity of their novels, there do exist some practical strategies to circumvent censorship. For example, many of them employ the methods of aestheticization and obscuration, avoiding the use of sensitive characters and words. Besides, a few writers choose to remain “healthy” in the main text, and publish “unhealthy” after-stories on other websites, such as POPO, a Taiwanese online literature platform. Different from mainland China, Taiwan has a rating system that allows adults to access restricted content, and thus becomes a utopia for mainland users to express sexuality.

The Method of Alienation: Danmei and Women

Anyone who decides to study *danmei* fiction will encounter some inevitable questions: Why is it female-oriented? What is the role of women in this kind of stories? In what follows, I will make a detailed analysis of the relationship between Chinese *danmei* fiction and women. I will focus on the internal contradiction that female *danmei* writers and readers have, and then examine its social and economic causes.

To date an enormous amount of research has been done on female readers’ attitudes towards *danmei* fiction. One acceptable notion is that *danmei* fiction, in spite of depicting male homosexuality, is essentially about “a female fantasy of sexuality

acted out on and by male bodies.”⁴⁰ This can also be viewed as the difference between queer literature and *danmei* fiction. In fact, readers who enjoy *danmei* fiction are much less likely to claim themselves to be homosexual, compared to those of queer literature.⁴¹ I contend that this is firstly because homosexuality remains a taboo in most of the Chinese families, even if same-sex marriage has already been recognized by law in many other countries. Young Chinese people are cautious about expressing their sexual orientations in public, which complicates the results of many *danmei*-related surveys and interviews conducted in China. Besides, the idea of alienation also helps to elucidate this difference, which can be understood from the following two perspectives.

In the first place, by canceling the appearance of female protagonists (sometimes even women at all), female *danmei* readers try to distance the fictional world from the patriarchal reality. Although their attempts always end in failure, this action in effect indicates their discontent with the real world. Here, Penley’s comment on slash fiction deserves our attention:

The bodies from which they [the women fans of *Star Trek*] are indeed alienated are twentieth-century women's bodies: bodies that are a legal, moral, and religious battleground, that are the site of contraceptive failure, that are publicly defined as the greatest potential danger to the fetuses they house, that are held to painfully greater standards of physical beauty than those of the other sex.⁴²

⁴⁰ Catherine Salmon, “Crossing the Abyss: Erotica and the Intersection of Evolutionary Psychology and Literary Studies,” in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, ed. Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 254.

⁴¹ Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang.”

⁴² Constance Penley, “Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology,” in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 154.

If there are so many constraints on the female body, why not just focusing on the male one? At any rate, this seems to be the simplest way to construct a world without gender suppression. Hence, “if a protagonist in *danmei* fiction gets hurt, it is definitely not due to his gender.”⁴³ However, faced with the absence of women in *danmei* stories, Wang and Liu also raise an important question: does this phenomenon indicate feminism, or is it a form of self-belittlement instead?⁴⁴ This interrogation also helps us understand why in some *danmei* novels, the function of female characters is often reduced to a plot device. Sometimes these female characters are even stereotyped as foolish and vicious, and readers refer to this kind of character as *paohui*, the cannon fodder. In fact, as discussed before, I contend that the intentional ignorance of women will only result in the strengthening of the preexistent order, for female writers and readers have already internalized the patriarchal power structure and mechanism – they have been self-regulating their thinking and writing, constantly but unconsciously.

Secondly, the term “alienation” also means that women choose to alienate themselves from the intimate relationship depicted in romantic stories. During Yang’s interviews, many female readers expressed their concern about the reading of sexually explicit content in heterosexual novels – they turn their interest to romantic relationships that exclude women because they hope to avoid a sense of immersion,

⁴³ Wang Ping (王萍) and Liu Dianzhi (劉電芝), “‘Tongrennü’ Xianxiang De Fenxi Yu Sikao ‘同人女’ 現象的分析與思考 [An Analysis and Reflection on the Phenomenon of Female *Danmei* Fans],” *Youth Studies*, no. 10 (2008): 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

which will make them uncomfortable and shameful.⁴⁵ Here, what complicates this thought is female readers' attitude towards *baihe* fiction. *Baihe*, literally meaning "lilies," is used to refer to the romantic ties between female protagonists.⁴⁶ Although there does exist a *baihe* community on Jinjiang, its size is small when compared with the *danmei* or the traditional romance one. For instance, only one piece of *baihe* fiction enters the top 200 of the total-credit rank list on Jinjiang, with none included in the top 150 one.⁴⁷ However, if female readers anticipate an equal love experience, the lesbian relationship seems to be a better choice. We have already discussed the heteronormative values of *danmei* fiction, which are often exemplified by the popular gong-shou model. While there is no denying that some *baihe* writers also employ this model in their writing, more choose to tag their stories as *hugong* than *danmei* writers, which makes "the relationship become exciting and unpredictable again."⁴⁸ Indeed, without the downplay or overlook of women, I believe that *baihe* fiction has the potential to play a more important role in female empowerment than *danmei* works. Besides, the depiction of female protagonists, their homosexual love and their social status, whether idealized or not, are able to make the problems of gender inequality more visible. After all, as long as the novel is not set in a matriarchal background, the

⁴⁵ Yang, "Female *Danmei* Fans: Behind the Phenomenon."

⁴⁶ By and large, there are three designations of the female-female romantic relationship: *baihe* (the Chinese translation of the Japanese word *yuri*), shoujo-ai, and Girls' Love. Today most of the people use them interchangeably, regardless of their subtle differences in the past.

⁴⁷ URL: <https://wap.jjwxc.net/rank/more/700020> (accessed 6/18/2019).

⁴⁸ Katrien Jacobs, *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 105.

patriarchal system is always in conflict with women's fighting for love and freedom.⁴⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pays prominent attention to the immense power of visibility and speech. She points out that the impact of social movements consists in their capabilities of "making the rage, loss, and even pleasure of a large group of people visible, audible, graphically apprehensible," which *danmei* fiction clearly lacks with regard to female-related issues.⁵⁰

A decade ago, when *danmei* started to transform from a niche subculture to an influential trend, it was not unusual to hear some new fans expressing their dislike of female homosexual love. This phenomenon raises an interesting question for me: Is it possible that some female *danmei* fans are in fact homophobic? The reason why they are in favor of male-male romance but simultaneously find *baihe* fiction sickening may lie in the fact that they are not, and will never become gays. Unlike *danmei* readers who often claim themselves to be heterosexual, *baihe* readers include plenty of homosexual and bisexual women, or at least women who are not homophobic. When discussing the crip theory, Robert McRuer proposes a notion of "flexible bodies," arguing that Neoliberalism requires and consequently engenders more flexible heterosexual bodies that tolerate the existence of queerness.⁵¹ On the one hand, it is reasonable to assume that the heterosexual women who read *danmei* fiction obtain this kind of bodies. On the other hand, we should also be aware of the degree of their

⁴⁹ On Jinjiang, there is a type of novel called Nüzun, meaning female supremacy, which describes matriarchal societies.

⁵⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *[Censorship & Homophobia]* (New York: Guillotine Press, 2013), 9.

⁵¹ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

tolerance, which varies from person to person and offers us clues about their real attitudes to homosexuality.

To summarize, I agree that *danmei* fiction provides this group of women with a safe channel to express their sexual desires – as a spectator and through the objectification of men. Many people regard this as a form of the empowerment of women, who create a subculture in which the gender hierarchy is reversed, namely, women having control over men. I argue, however, that this problem should be viewed critically. In fact, it is at the sacrifice of the very existence of women that the imaginary manipulation of male bodies takes place. On the contrary, male readers find no contradiction between their physical presence and their dominance over women when reading traditional romantic novels. In other words, *danmei* fiction only provides women with an illusory dream, or a temporary shelter, allowing them to escape from the gender-stereotyped and patriarchal reality.

However, it is also important to notice the “presence” of women. Here, considering the difference between queer literature and *danmei* fiction will, again, help us answer this question: Whereas queer literature is more realistic, focusing on the obstacles homosexual couples often face in current societies, such as self-hatred, familial pressure, and social discrimination, *danmei* fiction has the feature of idealization and romanticization, which tends to downplay the difficulty of the “coming out” process. Similarly, the male protagonists in *danmei* fiction are all good-looking and attractive young men, and the descriptions of their sexual acts are always aestheticized and obscured, with an emphasis on their emotional changes rather than

explicit details.⁵² Here, I would like to argue that it is precisely during this process that women become an integral part of *danmei* narratives. The quantitative analysis conducted by Zhou, Paul, and Sherman indicates that gay male characters in *danmei* fiction exhibit androgynous attributes, though the homosexual relationships are always portrayed in a hetero-gendered manner (a more-masculine and less-feminine man with a more-feminine and less-masculine partner).⁵³ However, the reconfiguration of male identity is far from enough to satisfy female readers. Penley examines the “retooling” of the male body in slash fiction, pointing out that *pon farr* and male-pregnancy are both used as a biological parallel with what women experience in their real life.⁵⁴ To put it in differently, although women consciously exclude themselves in *danmei* stories, their backstage existence can still be detected by analyzing the description of men.

My observation therefore leads to a more interesting question: What causes the contradictory self-identification of female *danmei* readers? To answer this question, the rest of this paper will concentrate on the social and economic difficulties and conflicts that educated urban women often encounter in contemporary urban China. I argue that the inferior position of women within current social and economic structure generates a sense of economic insecurity, which, together with their assimilation of feminist ideas and the influence of traditional gender ideology, constitutes the

⁵² Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang.”

⁵³ Zhou, Paul, and Sherman, “Still a Hetero-Gendered World: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes and Romantic Ideals in Chinese Boy Love Stories.”

⁵⁴ Penley, “Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology.”

contradictory gendered subjectivity that we have found in female *danmei* writers and readers.

Public surveys often find that most of the women in contemporary China are more than willing to obtain and maintain economic independence. For example, Ting Li, who conducted deep interviews with ten unmarried women in Chengdu, mentions in her paper that all informants declined to become housewives.⁵⁵ Li then concludes that “the self-reliance identity” is successfully established among Chinese unmarried urban women.⁵⁶ As the foundation of spiritual independence, economic independence has a significant impact on the ideological self-positioning of women. However, in reality different factors hinder the achievement of this aspiration, the first of which consists in the discrimination against women in the labor market.

In China, while the proportion of women in higher education has been steadily increasing, they still receive lower income than men, and account for a very small percentage of chief executive positions. Early in 2010, the average length of education for Chinese young women under the age of thirty was 10.8 years, with 30.4% of them being college graduates or above, which was in fact 4.5 percentage point higher than that of men.⁵⁷ Another report published by NBS reveals that in 2017, women comprised 48.4% of all graduate students, 52.5% of all undergraduate students, and 58.8% of all adult students enrolled in both normal and short-cycle programs in higher

⁵⁵ Ting Li, “Civilizing Unmarried Urban Women in China: Authentic or Not?” (working paper, Contemporary Asian Studies, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, Lund, 2015).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ This data comes from *The Third National Report on the National Status of Women in China*, jointly published by NBS (the National Bureau of Statistics of China) and ACWF (the All-China Women's Federation).

education.⁵⁸ In other words, the old idea that because women are more likely to be denied access to education, higher education in particular, they are less competitive than men in the workplace needs to be changed. Due to the one child policy implemented between 1979 and 2015, many urban women born in this period (noticeably in the 1980s and 1990s) enjoyed equal amount of care and economic investment from their parents, which partially contributes to the growing college enrollment rate. However, the fact that urban women receive the same education and possess the same abilities as men does not decrease gender disparity and inequality in the labor market. According to *Gender Equality in China's Economic Transformation*, the gender pay gap has been expanding since 1990 – in 2010, the average income of urban women only approximates 67.3% of that of men.⁵⁹ The authors contend that the major cause of this income disparity consists in gender segregation in the labor markets, which means men and women are segregated into different occupational sectors. Compared with men, women are more engaged in low-paying occupations, and more difficult to hold a high-level operational role. Here, I find one argument worth noticing: gender segregation can be traced back to both the supply and demand sides, since “social discrimination and personal preference are reinforcing each other.”⁶⁰ In fact, instead of personal preference, I regard it more as a form of self-

⁵⁸ The name of this report is the *2017 Statistical Monitoring Report for the Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)*. Besides, to clarify, the short-cycle program (*zhuanke*) requires fewer years to graduate than the normal undergraduate (*benke*) program; the former typically needs three or two years, while the latter often requires four years of full-time study.

⁵⁹ Bohong Liu, Ling Li and Chuyu Yang, *Gender Equality in China's Economic Transformation* (Beijing: The United Nations System in China, 2015), 20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

discipline. In order to survive in a patriarchal society, women have to train their minds and bodies in every aspect of their life. As a result, they become accustomed to the existing rules, and under most circumstances, they will never be aware of how docile they are. I believe that the degradation and ignorance of women in *danmei* fiction is also one result of this self-disciplinary process. Long-lasting but undetectable, even women who are beginning to resist gender oppressions are very likely to ignore its influences.

Aside from the sharp contrast between women's active participation in higher education and low representation in high-paying occupations and leadership roles, the declaration of economic independence is also hampered by the double roles that this society assigns to women. "Women hold up half of the sky" – the famous proclamation made by Mao Zedong is still used as a supportive argument for gender equality in today's China. It seems as if the Maoist era witnessed the great emancipation of women, when women labored outside the home, just as what men did, serving the collective together. While nowadays many people critique the arbitrary erasure of gender difference in those years, only a few pay attention to the double roles women had to bear: besides fulfilling social obligations, they also have inescapable responsibilities for familial matters, especially housework and childcare. Zhang Yue, who used to be a host for a popular women's talk show "Half the Sky" in China, tells how her mother did exhausting housework after returning from home in the dark evening.⁶¹ She then concludes that "Women discovered that equality meant a

⁶¹ The International Herald Tribune, "Holding up Half the Sky," *New York Times*, March 7, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/07/world/asia/holding-up-half-the-sky.html>.

double burden.”⁶² Just as Harriet Evans argues, the naturalized femininity of women, as well as their naturalized responsibilities in the domestic sphere, was only temporarily hidden behind the curtains of the Cultural Revolution.⁶³ Therefore, after the economic reform, traditional assumptions of women reemerged, and rapidly occupied the “free market.”

Evans also makes a lucid discussion about the contradiction between “inner” (*nei*) and “outer” (*wai*):

Their [Women’s] lives demonstrated the often fractious effects of being caught between the affirmative public (*wai*) values of *nannü pingdeng* and the disparaged *nei* positioning of women in their domestic relationships and activities. . . . The failure to critically include the “inner” sphere in conceptualizations of gender inequality and discrimination effectively obscured the contestation of conventional gender values that communist discourse theoretically enabled.⁶⁴

It is important to note that not only does the double burden become problematic, if we take into account salaries, the unpaid labor of women as caregivers also complicates the problem. One analysis carried out in 2008 points out that the values generated by women’s unpaid domestic work equal “25 percent to 32 percent of China’s GDP, 52 percent to 66 percent of China’s consumption, and 63 percent to 80 percent of China’s gross output value.”⁶⁵ Therefore, in what follows, I will discuss how the lack of recognition of such form of labor threatens the economic independence of women from three perspectives.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁵ Liu, Li and Yang, *Gender Equality in China’s Economic Transformation*, 28.

In the first place, we should not forget that the unpaid housework is deeply intertwined with the conventional gender values of women. To put it in another way, I believe that we can regard it as an effective way of self-discipline. While disagreeing with the traditional notion that women are homemakers, a considerable number of young women in urban China are willing to shoulder more domestic labor than their partners.⁶⁶ However, the more disciplined women become, the less independent they are. Secondly, the huge amount of unpaid care work, noticeably childcare, leads to the workplace discrimination we mentioned before. Unlike men, women are always supposed to focus more on “inner” families after giving childbirth, which means they will put less effort into their work and become less productive. This stereotype (or sometimes the real situation) of women hinders them from moving upward in the labor market or even entering it, thus leaving them with less income and inferior economic status.

Thirdly, the amendments and reinterpretations of the new marriage law to some extent weakens the sense of economic security of women. It is a good example to reflect the conflict between “the affirmative public values of *nannü pingdeng*” and “the disparaged *nei* positioning of women” mentioned by Evans.⁶⁷ On the one hand, the new marriage law aims at protecting the property of each citizen and promoting equality. When divorce occurs, the division of property is mainly based on pre-marital property and marital earnings. However, not recognized in the market economy, the contribution women make to their families is often underestimated or even ignored by

⁶⁶ Li, “Civilizing Unmarried Urban Women in China: Authentic or Not?”

⁶⁷ Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*, 104.

the society. Therefore, on the other hand, since the unpaid care work of housewives does not generate any real income, their labor is not protected by law, and they often receive less property. One result of this contradiction is that more women choose to have a late marriage. According to the *2017 Statistical Report on Social Service Development* published by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the marriage rate has been constantly decreasing since 2013. In contrast, the divorce rate has been increasing since 2010, and finally exceeded the marriage rate in 2015. What is interesting is that in 2007, the state launched a media campaign against unmarried urban, educated and middle-class women, stigmatizing them as “leftover women.” Leta Hong Fincher examines this state-sponsored media campaign and contends that the purposes of this campaign are to achieve social stability and to reach the state’s population planning goal – according to Fincher, the surplus of men poses a great threat to social harmony, and “high-quality” mothers play an important role in “upgrading population quality.”⁶⁸ Whether this method worked or not, at least in the following years, many women felt ashamed of or offended by being classified as “leftover women.” Nine years later, a report studying this “leftover” phenomenon finds out that during 2015 and 2016, people already tended to view “leftover women” positively.⁶⁹ For example, 66% of female informants think that excellent “leftover women” are able to awaken people’s

⁶⁸ Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2014), 28.

⁶⁹ The report, *Why is she the “Leftover?” – 2016 Big Data Research Report on “Leftover Women” in Chinese Cities*, coproduced by Yangcheng Evening News, South China University of Technology, and Sun Yat-sen University, examines the usage and reception of the phrase “leftover women” in the cyber world from January 2011 to May 2016.

awareness of independence, and 70% of them believe that the struggle of “leftover women” helps the society rediscover the value of women.

I believe that it is precisely the changing attitude of women towards this particular phrase that indicates how women adjust their position within the current social and economic structure. Just as Evans points out, contemporary women live “in the midst of contending narratives of gender.”⁷⁰ These multiple influences, together with the lack of economic security, all contribute to the internal contradiction of their gendered self-identification, as well as their production of *danmei* work. Nevertheless, it is crucial to notice that among all these narratives, the discourse of the traditional values of gender still dominate the mainstream, and is ideologically naturalized. Hence, to move forward, the current gender ideology may need to be thoroughly challenged.

Conclusion

In short, this paper approaches the topic of Chinese *danmei* fiction from the perspective of women’s self-identification. On the one hand, I agree that some *danmei* writing on Jinjiang does reflect a hierarchical and “compulsively heterosexual” world.⁷¹ What is even worse is that the discriminated and subordinate group, women, have already internalized this power structure and mechanism, which not only results in their incoherent and contradictory self-positioning, but also stabilizes the current patriarchal order. On the other hand, we should not ignore the diversified and shifting

⁷⁰ Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China*, 112.

⁷¹ McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*.

tastes and attitudes of *danmei* readers, which are the constitutional elements of Chinese *danmei* culture. The interrogation of traditional gender/power relations and the conflict between state censorship and homosexual erotica both make *danmei* a battleground against the long-lasting oppression of gender and sexuality in Chinese society. Thus, if both female writers and readers realize the limitations caused by their degradation and ignorance of women in *danmei* writing, if young urban women in China realize how influenced and disciplined they are under the power of conventional gender ideology, I believe that this genre may have the potential to awaken more people to the suppression and inequality of this patriarchal and heteronormative world.

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CHAPTER 2

A STUDY ON CHRIS MARKER'S *SUNDAY IN PEKING* AND ITS RECEPTION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

As an amateur work, *Dimanche à Peking/Sunday in Peking* is definitely not one of Chris Marker's best-known films. However, its content – the valuable images of a post-revolution China, a decade before the notorious Cultural Revolution – overshadows its amateurishness and makes it an effective medium for the curious contemporary Chinese to glimpse their country's past. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the features and meanings of *Sunday in Peking* by primarily examining its reviews from the contemporary Chinese audiences. The research will engage with the following questions: What does the filmmaker intend to convey? What are the contemporary Chinese understandings of this documentary and why?

It is necessary to first introduce Douban, a Chinese social networking service website famous for its user-generated content about books, music, television dramas and movies.⁷² As one of the largest review aggregation websites in China, Douban covers a considerable number of films, and oftentimes users are able to find reviews of lesser-known works there. *Sunday in Peking* is a 1956 French documentary, and unlike other famous China-related documentaries directed by non-Chinese filmmakers (e.g., *Chung Kuo-Cina(China)* by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1972, and *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes/How Yukong Moved the Mountains* by Joris Ivens in

⁷² URL for the homepage of Douban: <https://www.douban.com/> (accessed 6/10/2019); URL for the homepage of Douban Movie: <https://movie.douban.com/> (accessed 6/10/2019).

1976), it has remained unknown to the Chinese mainstream media and people. While the limited audience does facilitate my investigation on Douban, it in the meantime restricts my collection of other primary sources. Nevertheless, the statistics gathered on Douban are already informative. The average rating of *Sunday in Peking* is 7.9 out of 10 (approximately four stars); concretely, 21 percent of the 1869 users vote for five stars, 55.5 percent for four stars, 22.2 percent for three stars, 1 percent for two stars, and 0.3 percent for one star. Besides, 2569 users “have watched” this documentary, while 2367 “hope to watch” it. These audiences have also published 681 short reviews on its subpage, in addition to five longer ones.⁷³ This paper will mainly focus on these reviews, supplemented with a couple of comments posted on other video sharing websites, such as Bilibili and Tencent Video. Aside from that, I also obtain information from interviews with nine Chinese young adults, which is more personal and fragmented, but equally inspiring.⁷⁴

This paper consists of two sections. In these two sections, I will analyze two most frequently mentioned comments about *Sunday in Peking*, which center around idealization and exoticization. First, there are a great proportion of reviewers contending that the whole documentary is imbued with an air of optimism, and that Marker’s affection for China is easy to feel. Several reviewers emphasize the political

⁷³ URL for the subpage of *Sunday in Peking* on Douban Movie: <https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/> (accessed 6/10/2019).

⁷⁴ During April and May of 2018, I conducted nine interviews with Chinese young adults on Wechat (in texts and through video/voice calls). All of them were born and raised in mainland China, and are in their twenties. At the time of the interviews, four people were doing their graduate studies, two in the United States, one in the United Kingdom, and one in mainland China. Four were doing their undergraduate studies in mainland China, with the last one having a gap year after receiving a bachelor’s degree.

identity of Marker – they call him “a naïve French left-wing artist” – and consider this documentary a projection of a revolutionary Beijing that only exists in Marker’s imagination. To examine this problem, I pay special attention to the voiceover of *Sunday in Peking* and its relationship with the images. In brief, the first section will evaluate this documentary as a representative of the essay film. This film genre blurs the traditional boundary between fiction and nonfiction, allowing documentary filmmakers to visualize imagination, thoughts, and ideas cinematically.⁷⁵ I argue that while *Sunday in Peking* certainly includes performative elements and provides its audiences with colorful and energetic images, it should not be degraded to pure left-wing idealization, not to mention communist propaganda. In other words, in contrast to many reviewers on Douban, I believe that the values of this documentary are never confined to the rarity of its images, and audiences should not dismiss Marker’s commentary so easily.

The second section will discuss the exoticism of the documentary. Many reviewers on Douban point out that since *Sunday in Peking* was filmed by a foreigner, who knew little about Chinese society, culture and history, it inevitably gives its audiences a sense of sightseeing and “hunting for novelty” (猎奇 *lieqi*). Here, the word *lieqi* can also be understood as “intentionally searching for strange and special things.” To wit, they believe that Marker is fascinated to discover a mysterious and glamorous China, which involves a process of stereotyping and is in fact fundamentally based on the Western culture. Despite concurring with this viewpoint, I

⁷⁵ Hans Richter, “The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film,” trans. Maria P. Alter, in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 89-92.

argue that the problem of exoticism is more complicated than what the reviewers remark because Marker himself does acknowledge his limitations as a Westerner, which means, in short, he can never get rid of all the influences from his native culture when trying to perceive a distant country, and attempts to alleviate this sense of exoticism by deliberately relating the Chinese world to the Western one. However, this method seems to have an opposite effect – it makes people more aware of the existence of Orientalism/Eurocentrism. Hence, it is no surprise that many Chinese audiences are unsatisfied with the Orientalist features of *Sunday in Peking*. Nonetheless, I wonder if there is any other reason that influences their responses to this documentary. To answer this question, I will take into account the spatial and temporal distance between contemporary Chinese audiences and the Beijing of 1955. In fine, I will also discuss what Marker tries to convey through *Sunday in Peking*, which, interestingly, seems contradictory to the notion of exoticization.

Idealized Beijing: Communist Propaganda?

During the Berlin Film Festival in 1957, the selection committee refused to screen *Dimanche à Peking*, for they deemed that Marker's commentary contained lots of communist propaganda.⁷⁶ For instance, when the camera focuses on several people riding on bikes, with white masks covering half their faces, the voiceover starts to remark on the Chinese revolution: "The result [of the revolution] is one still finds Capitalists in China, but there are no more flies, and [China is] on its way to a future

⁷⁶ Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 52.

without Capitalists, disease and flies.”⁷⁷ Obviously, the selection committee believed that Marker followed the Chinese government’s requirement to spread communist propaganda in Europe, which in this case was by promoting “a future without Capitalists, disease and flies.” However, I contend that while Marker does mention the topic of the Chinese revolution, it is still too early to consider this documentary a political pamphlet. On the contrary, this comment is perplexing because a future without disease and flies is almost impossible – if two out of three goals are unachievable, what about the third one, a future without Capitalists? Thus, it is difficult to determine whether Marker tries to express admiration or irony regarding the Chinese revolution, which leaves space for multiple interpretations. For example, one understanding is that Marker implies in his comment that the Chinese government may underestimate the public health and environmental problems.

In fact, not only the selection committee, many Chinese audiences also hold the idea that *Sunday in Peking* is permeated with left-wing ideologies and emotions. Here, Douban user Zhou Zongshu (周宗澍) gives one of the most representative comments: “[This is] a left-wing Orientalist travel essay. Although this type of films carries a lot of performative elements providing exclusively for foreign guests and a release of French left-wing emotions, as a document, it is still of remarkable

⁷⁷ In the 3 DVD Chris Marker Collection published June 2, 2014 by SODA Film+Art, the original French narration by Gilles Quéant is substituted with an anonymous (also unclear and un-subtitled) English voiceover. This paper will analyze the latter because almost all the versions of *Sunday in Peking* that are accessible to Chinese netizens use the 2014 collection resources.

significance for the present-day people.”⁷⁸ Some audiences also like to compare Marker with Antonioni. One example lies in the comment of a user named The Rampaging Buddha (暴走如来佛): “However, Marker is a French left-wing advocate, whose documentaries are basically more than surrealism. If you must see what China looks like in French people’s eyes, you can try the documentary directed by Antonioni.”⁷⁹ Although this reviewer makes a mistake about Antonioni’s nationality (he was an Italian filmmaker), his idea that compared to *Chung Kuo, Sunday in Peking* is more a product of idealization, which is impacted by Marker’s political orientation, is shared with a few other reviewers. Another Douban user Lu Zhefeng (芦哲峰) illustrates this notion more clearly: “Chris Marker filmed the positive side, while Antonioni recorded the negative side; hence, we should combine them together to see the full picture.”⁸⁰ Triggered by these reviews, the rest of this section will center on the following question: Is *Sunday in Peking* really a politicized and idealized documentary?

Although *Sunday in Peking* is an amateur work of Marker’s early filmmaking career, it already obtains some characteristics of his later works, which allow it to be categorized into a film genre that he is well-known for – the essay film. Here, I borrow

⁷⁸ URL for Zhou Zongshu’s comment on Douban:
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=101&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

⁷⁹ URL for The Rampaging Buddha’s comment on Douban:
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=141&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

⁸⁰ URL for Lu Zhefeng’s comment on Douban, which gains twenty-six thumbs up (which in Chinese is “finding this comment useful”):
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?sort=new_score&status=P (accessed 6/10/2019).

Bazin's definition of the essay film, which explains it as "an essay documented by film."⁸¹ Simple but fundamental, this definition indicates that the essay film possesses the features of a literary essay, and in the meantime, is presented in the form of a documentary. While scholars find it difficult to reach a consensus about the exact definition and categorization of the essay film, most of them agree that it is Hans Richter who first used this term in 1940. The mission Richter assigns to this film genre is to "visualize thoughts on screen."⁸² In contrast to recording visible objects directly and mechanically, the film essay allows the filmmaker to employ various means, including imagination, so long as they contribute to the visualization process. Hence, this film genre achieves more creativity and flexibility than traditional documentaries, and the common use of irony and paradox also renders it elusive and ambiguous. Nora Alter and Timothy Corrigan provide the following features to summarize what is meant by the essay film:

. . . the blending of fact and fiction, the mixing of art- and documentary-film styles, the foregrounding of a personal or subjective point of view, a focus on public life, a dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses, and a dialogic encounter with audiences and viewers.⁸³

Here, what attracts my attention is the "dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses" in the essay film. Bazin also argues that the magic of Marker's documentary films depends on three elements – "the images, the relationship between

⁸¹ André Bazin, "Bazin on Marker," trans. David Kehr, in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 102-108.

⁸² Richter, "The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film," 91.

⁸³ Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, "Introduction," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 3.

the images and their relationship to the commentary, conceived as an explanation of the images and as a constitutional element of the film.”⁸⁴ Therefore, I will approach the problem of idealization and politicization by concentrating on the relationship between the audial and visual discourses of *Sunday in Peking*, and try to dig out more “invisible thoughts” Marker intends to visualize.

In the first place, I believe that the fact that some audiences compare Marker to Antonioni, arguing that the former focuses on the bright side of China and the latter concentrates on disclosing the dark side, results largely from the visual discourse of *Sunday in Peking*. It is easy to note that a considerable number of the Douban reviewers express enthusiastic admiration for the beautiful and warm colors *Sunday in Peking* presents, which I consider one important reason for their belief in Marker’s fascination with China. In fact, it was only after its restoration in 2013 that *Sunday in Peking* started to deeply impress its audiences with the richness of colors.

Nevertheless, Marker himself also points out the colorfulness of Beijing in his commentary: “It is the feast of color. There is color everywhere, on the walls, on the food, on the pastry shops, on the children’s toys, on the musical instruments selling in the open air, on the theatrical costumes, on the sweetmeats, on the cheap porcelain in the market, and on precious porcelain in Liou-Li Shan, . . . on roofs as well.” These bright and fabulous colors are often associated with happiness, vigor and diversity, which audiences may confuse with the emotional orientation of the documentary.

Aside from that, many Douban reviewers express their mixed feelings about the

⁸⁴ André Bazin, “Sur les routes de l’URSS’ et ‘Dimanche à Pékin,” *France-Observateur*, no. 372 (1957): 19.

optimistic, pure and relaxed faces in *Sunday in Peking*. On the one hand, they are happy to witness the flourishing of a nascent communist society that is now their homeland. On the other hand, they sigh deeply and even become frightened when starting to think about what would happen a decade later. Even though this sentiment resonates with me, I still find it necessary to question the idea of an energetic Beijing/China in the middle of the 1950s, which many audiences come up with after watching this documentary.

In fact, the images of *Sunday in Peking* merit cautious consideration. While for some audiences it is not very difficult to observe the performative elements in this documentary, there are still people failing to notice the political manipulation behind it. It is crucial to realize that the Maoist government considers *Sunday in Peking* a form of political advertisement. Two years after the end of the Korean War, the Chinese government began to focus on establishing diplomatic relations, seeking recognition and support from the international world. When discussing the Western images of China, Colin Mackerras points out that during the Cold War, people's attitudes towards China mainly depended on their ideological positions. He further stresses the difference between the United States, a country working hard to disseminate and reinforce a negative image of China, and some European societies, known for their tolerance of varied imaginations about this faraway land.⁸⁵ In fact, during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, foreigners could not enter China freely, and visitors invited by the Chinese government were mostly left-wing advocates. Marker

⁸⁵ Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

was able to film in China because he was a member of an official visiting group from France, organized by the Franco-Chinese Friendship League. Hence, I believe that the underlying intention of the Chinese government to allow the filmmaking of *Sunday in Peking* consists in its need of international partners and its desire to restore China's international fame. Agnès Varda, the sinology consultant of *Dimanche à Peking*, admitted in an interview that the film production team was invited by the Chinese government because the latter thought it would help China to restore its international reputation. "At that time, the United Nations didn't recognize this great country, as if it didn't exist."⁸⁶

As a result, it is no surprise that the Chinese government intervened in the process of filmmaking – at any rate, it was the state officials who decided where to visit. Audiences who have watched both *Sunday in Peking* and *Chung Kuo* may note some similarities: for example, the Pekingese performing Tai Chi together, the school children doing exercise and dancing, and the old ladies walking on bound feet.⁸⁷ It is easy to wonder whether there existed a standard tourist route specially designed for

⁸⁶ Lei Wang, "The Past of China through the Lens of Western Documentarists: From Oblivion to Remembrance," *Wen Wei Po*, November 20, 2009, http://book.ifeng.com/culture/2/detail_2009_11/20/309403_0.shtml.

⁸⁷ Like Marker, Antonioni and his team were also officially invited and escorted. Here, I will list several differences between these two documentaries: First, Antonioni visited China seventeen years later than Marker. Second, the length of Antonioni's work is about eleven times that of Marker's. Third, besides Beijing, the five-week trip for Antonioni also includes Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou and Linxian. Fourth, although the itinerary was likewise established in advance, Antonioni successfully managed to film at some unscheduled stops and keep his camera on in some places where shooting was prohibited. Last but not least, on January 31, 1974, *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, published an article entitled "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo*," which started a massive criticism campaign against Antonioni.

foreign visitors during the Maoist era. However, compared to Antonioni, who succeeded in filming some unallowable places and events, Marker seems more “obedient.” The highly performative elements in *Sunday in Peking* are not difficult to observe: from the exercising Pekingese to the acrobats, to the Peking Opera actors, to the young athletes, and to the little dancers. Some performances are deliberately selected, and some may even be carefully prepared, aiming at presenting foreign audiences with a dynamic and modernized China. Louise Sheedy proposes a notion of “circus-nation” to discuss this feature, mentioning that for audiences who are exposed to Chinese culture for the first time, China may even appear to be a nation “in which performance was as common a means of communication as writing or speaking.”⁸⁸

As mentioned before, there are audiences who trust the images wholeheartedly. To give an example, several Douban reviewers show their appreciation of the young gymnasts in this documentary. “[In the images,] the middle school students at that time are practicing gymnastics, who have a vigorous and upright spirit.” “Are previous middle school students really that awesome? They do exercise on the pommel horses, the uneven bars and the horizontal bars as if they were gymnastic champions.”⁸⁹ One of my informants also mentioned how astonished and impressed she was when she saw that the Chinese government in the 1950s focused intensively on students’

⁸⁸ Louise Sheedy, “‘All the Thrills of the Exotic’: Collective Memory and Cultural Performance in Chris Marker’s *Sunday in Peking*,” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 52 (September 2009), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/cteq/all-the-thrills-of-the-exotic-collective-memory-and-cultural-performance-in-chris-markers-dimanche-a-pekini/>.

⁸⁹ URL for the comments of aprinow and Yiduanyunshu (异端云术) on Douban: https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=241&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019); https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=141&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

physical training. In fact, these exercising scenes are almost certainly to be an organized performance. I believe that audiences will consider this possibility carefully once they realize that the entire documentary spends far more time on clean, happy, and talented children, with only a few shots of children wearing tattered clothes (e.g., children watching street performances). While based on current materials, I have no idea whether this is Marker's own choice, or it is a sign that *Sunday in Peking* is subject to a certain degree of state censorship, a repeated word in Marker's commentary indeed implies his concerns about the issue of deliberate selections and pre-established performances: "It is in this model district that we come to see a model school with its model little girls." A sense of irony thus diffuses from this ostensibly unironic scene: instead of showing the visiting group the most common situation of ordinary people's everyday life, the Chinese government prepares for it the best examples in Beijing, the models, which are undoubtedly in accordance with the themes of advancement and modernization.

Secondly, although agreeing that *Sunday in Peking* should be viewed as more of a subjective travel essay documented by film, I believe that after examining it carefully, it is not difficult for its audiences to note that Marker tries not to make direct political judgments of China (i.e., a communist regime) in his commentary. Here, I admit that if taking both the sound and image tracks into consideration, it is easy to come up with an idea that the tone of this documentary is casual and relaxing, which fits its form of a one-day travelogue. However, Marker's employment of contradiction, irony and metaphors also engenders a sense of restraint and ambiguity that consistently lingers. For instance, as the documentary cuts from a still image of an

avenue leading to the tombs of Ming emperors to the real scene in Beijing, the voiceover comments significantly: “Yet, here I am, on this Ming avenue, with...all sorts of animals two by two, placed there to guide the traveler, with no possibility of error, to the precise spot where in fact the Ming emperors are not buried. Where they’re buried . . . that’s their own affair – a triumphal arch on a road leading nowhere that might well be the symbol of China.” Interpretations of this comment may vary from one audience to another, and it is almost impossible to evaluate which one is the best explanation.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, regardless of the specific meanings, it seems as if Marker does not really care about the actual fact of China because “that’s their own affair.” Instead, the Ming avenue serves as a link between the present journey and his childhood memories. In other words, the aim of this documentary is not to introduce China in an explanatory or persuasive way – it is merely a personal diary of an ordinary Westerner who was lucky enough to have an opportunity to visit China

⁹⁰ For example, one of my informants finds this comment a little ironic. While this avenue does not lead to the real tombs of the Ming emperors, it was still built in a formal and magnificent style, which, she argues, implies a sense of self-deception. Also, she believes that the last sentence shows Marker’s concerns about China’s undecided future (maybe in a negative way).

Another informant believes that this comment alludes to the ever-changing history of the human society. To illustrate, she argues that although the ancient emperors used to possess supreme power, after their death – to be more precise, after the changes of dynasties – the mausoleum itself is merely a symbol and a cultural relic. Here, what attracts my attention is her interrogation of Marker’s denial of the avenue’s historical authenticity. In fact, only one year after Marker’s visit to Beijing, the specific location of one of the thirteen mausoleums, the Dingling (the mausoleum of Emperor Wanli), was found, and the excavation started in the same year. Therefore, chances are that Marker had wrong information about the Ming avenue and tombs in 1955. Based on this understanding, this informant thus concludes that if this avenue does not lead people to the exact location of the mausoleums (which Marker was told about), it nevertheless stands for a path towards a symbolic mausoleum located in people’s hearts.

During the Cold War period. After all, Marker never denies his unfamiliarity with China in the whole documentary.

Marker is commonly associated with the Left Bank Group, a loosely organized group composed of artists working on the left bank of Seine River in the late 1950s and early 1960s Paris. Other filmmakers often associated with this group include Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda, the latter, noticeably, also serving as the consultant sinologist in Marker's *Sunday in Peking*. In fact, not everyone considers the Left Bank Group a coherent and independent organization; many find it safe to describe it as "the intellectual/political/feminist/literary/avant-garde wing of the French New Wave."⁹¹ Regardless of this dispute, there is consensus that politicization is definitely one noticeable characteristic of the Left Bank films.⁹² Marker himself was a life-long leftist, as well as an indefatigable globetrotter, who visited many transitional countries and regions in the middle of the twentieth century. Therefore, on the one hand, regarding *Sunday in Peking* as a non-political documentary is undoubtedly

⁹¹ Robert Farmer, "Marker, Resnais, Varda: Remembering the Left Bank Group," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 52 (September 2009), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/feature-articles/marker-resnais-var-da-remembering-the-left-bank-group/>.

⁹² In terms of the avant-garde side (which is also related to this paper), Virginia Bonner locates the origins of "experimental documentaries" in the Left Bank Group, a trend that challenges the conventional principles and methodology of documentary filmmaking, and that has been widely adopted over the last sixty years. She argues that traditional documentaries persuade audiences of their truthfulness through various ways, notably taking advantage of the commonly believed objectivity of photographic medium and the filmmakers' integrity in reflecting reality, thus building up a reliable image in audiences' minds. However, these experimental documentarists start to openly question these alleged properties of traditional documentaries, and intend to disclose some once overlooked factors, such as technical deficiencies and complex social backgrounds of the filmmakers, which implicitly influence the process of film production. See Virginia A. Bonner, "Cinematic Caesuras: Experimental Documentary and the Politics of Form in Left Bank Films by Resnais, Marker, Varda" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2003).

problematic. As a member of the official visiting group, Marker's journey to China was itself driven by political motivations, from both the French and Chinese sides. No matter how much political propaganda this documentary finally contains, the highly political circumstances under which it was produced should never be ignored.

However, on the other hand, it is still arbitrary and unconvincing to assume *Sunday in Peking* to be a typical pro-China/communist film. At any rate, compared with documentaries filmed by contemporaneous Chinese directors, *Sunday in Peking* barely demonstrates any explicit endorsement and praise of the revolutionary China.⁹³

Previous books about Marker have already mentioned the criticalness and flexibility of his works. For example, Lupton points out that "Marker's writings are evidently impatient with the unthinking rigidity of political dogmas, and seriously dismayed by their capacity to inhibit curiosity and independent critical thought."⁹⁴ Alter also argues that Marker seeks to destabilize absolute categorization, and is in favor of "an in-between area, one that reserves a place for contradictions and presents them in a productive and thoughtful manner."⁹⁵ Interestingly, a decade later, when Sinophilia was prevalent among the French leftists, a period when Marker abandoned his personal film career and dedicated himself to S.L.O.N. (*Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles*, "Society for launching new works"), he chose to remain silent

⁹³ For example, *Wandering in Beijing* (漫步北京) is a 1959 Chinese documentary directed by Yunchuan Jiang and Zhongxin He, which describes the rapid development of Beijing in the past ten years. The whole documentary (especially the voiceover) is imbued with affection and glorification.

⁹⁴ Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, 20.

⁹⁵ Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 29.

about the Cultural Revolution.⁹⁶ It was not until the production of *Le Fond de l'air est rouge/A Grin Without a Cat* in 1977, when Marker already returned to his personal filmmaking, did he start to remark on Maoist China, expressing his disillusionment with revolutionary leftism.⁹⁷

Hence, unlike what many Douban reviewers believe, Marker is never a naïve left-wing idealist. As discussed before, although implicit and obscure, some of his commentary of *Sunday in Peking* can also be understood as light-hearted left-wing critiques of China. It is problematic to view *Sunday in Peking* as purely communist propaganda, and therefore dismiss the meanings behind the baffling voiceover.⁹⁸ In fact, as I will discuss in the next section, I believe that instead of promoting

⁹⁶ Patrick Tolle, “Effacing the Effaced: Chris Marker’s Collectivist Period,” *Film International*, No. 1 (January 2013): 23.

A little note about Sinophilia. Two years after the May events in 1968, a group of Maoist leaders got arrested and their newspapers were forbidden by the Pompidou government, which directly led to the great popularity of Maoism among French intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault. The French sinologist Lucien Bianco once reflected on this period in a Chinese newspaper interview. According to him, most of the French academic world and news media at that time tended to perceive China in an ideal way, depicting China as a perfect country imbued with democracy and freedom. See Xiao Chen and Dongzhi Guo. “The Process for French Intellectuals’ Understanding of the Cultural Revolution,” *China Through the Ages*, no. 7 (2007): 78. Richard Wolin also writes about how the image of Maoist China was constructed in France: “Early on, revolutionary China ceased being an empirical point of reference. Instead, it became a trope: a projection of the gauchiste political imaginary. . . . [T]he issue became the ‘China in our heads.’” See Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 20.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ A considerable number of reviews on Douban mention the difficulty to understand Marker’s commentary. For example, some audiences use the word “unintelligible” to describe their impressions of the voiceover, with one person even criticizing it as “speaking nonsense.”

revolutionary China, *Sunday in Peking* plays a more important role in indicating Marker's concerns about the future – the future of a more connected world.

“All the Thrills of the Exotic”

Aside from idealization, exoticization is also a widely acknowledged trap for people dealing with distant societies and cultures. It is relevant to the perception of difference, which basically involves a process of stereotyping, otherization and romanticization. To take China as an example, Western visitors under the influences of Chinese temptation are often eager to discover an “authentic” traditional China, which ironically results in memories and records that are less genuine or even far from reality.⁹⁹ This is because the definition and evaluation of “authenticity” are entirely determined by the Western culture. To some extent, it is fair to say that exoticism is not so much about the exotic per se, but about selfness and its relationship to otherness. Edward Said argues incisively that “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”¹⁰⁰ To put it differently, allowing the exoticization of non-Western cultures essentially means the undermining of their cultural independence and subjectivity.

Marker's depiction of China in *Sunday in Peking* clearly indicates a certain degree of this kind of exoticism. A few audiences on Douban mentions this characteristic in their reviews. For instance, Youlishi (猶黎士) argues that “[t]o my

⁹⁹ Jenny Lin, “Seeing a World Apart: Visual Reality in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo/Cina*,” *ARTMargins*, no. 3 (October 2014): 24.

¹⁰⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 3.

astonishment, this documentary is not about a grand narrative! . . . The narration is fairly personalized and poetic, . . . I can see the director's perception and imagination of China since his childhood, as well as interesting observations that derive from exoticness (it should be noticed that "exoticness" is the only English word in this Chinese comment), from which I can also catch sight of a larger social landscape."¹⁰¹

The comment from Ryeland is also worth noting: "[Audiences observe the 1955 Beijing] from the perspective of a foreigner. Everything is full of a deliberate search for the novelty and bizarreness of China."¹⁰² The camera records numerous things and events with "Chinese special characteristics," such as the Tai Chi exercise, the street performance of Chinese martial arts, the traditional Chinese architecture, the Chinese porcelain, the Chinese painting, the Peking opera and its theatrical costumes. As the voiceover describes, "the whole town is a display stand for ancient China, with its temples, with its bronze animals, and its porcelain roofs. This is no longer the China of the movies: It's the China of Jules Verne, of Marco Polo." These traditional (also exoticized) elements are in line with the conventional imagination of China in the Western culture, which partially stems from its fascination with literary and later filmic depictions of the exotic.

However, this documentary also includes Marker's reflection on the Western perception of China. For instance, while watching children playing in the park, the

¹⁰¹ URL for Youlishi's comment on Douban:
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=241&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

¹⁰² URL for Ryeland's comment on Douban:
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=101&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

voiceover starts to tell a story of Western people saving tin foil wrappers of the chocolate bars for Chinese children. The following sentences are interesting: “I can’t delude myself into believing that our silver paper was of much help. But after all, for a Western conscience, there is something satisfying in the thought that one at least in these young athletes, lean as cats, may owe his existence to our mothers’ chocolate.” On the one hand, this self-reflexive comment signifies Marker’s sympathy for the Chinese children, who, on this occasion, acts more as a privileged giver. On the other hand, Marker tries to reflect on the Western attitudes towards China through humor and satire. The use of the word “Western” suggests that Marker does not forget about his identity as a Westerner, which also reminds his audiences of this documentary’s particular perspective, as well as its invisible political and cultural backgrounds. Here, the word “satisfying” is particularly thought-provoking because it reveals one of the fundamental motivations for “the self” to encounter “the other” – to make “the other” satisfy the needs of “the self.”

In other words, I believe that Marker is more or less aware of the common existence of exoticism in *Sunday in Peking*, and that instead of escaping from it, he takes a different path. In the first place, he consistently reminds his audiences that this documentary is subjective, and what we would call Orientalist (for example, the voiceover is sometimes purposefully shallow). To make China less exoticized, he reduces the differences between “the self” and “the other” in an intentional way. It is natural that when exposed to a new culture, people are apt to associate the unknown with the known. Marker takes advantage of this psychology and bridges the cultural gap by making repeated associations between Chinese objects and Western concepts,

which evokes a sense of familiarity among his Western audiences.¹⁰³ For instance, when introducing the scene that “a Pekingese of today is doing his physical exercise,” Marker compares the traditional Chinese sword to Western dumbbells. He then uses the phrase “a boxing match” to refer to the training of Pushing Hands (*tui shou*). As for the Western audiences who are completely unfamiliar with China, this method may work well in alleviating their sense of exoticism, making them realize that China is not a mysterious and completely different land. However, it is crucial to notice that this kind of solution is at any rate based on stereotypes, and therefore very likely to generate misinterpretations. Besides, as for the audiences who know China well enough, I believe that these arbitrary associations only make the documentary seem more problematic (i.e., Orientalist/Eurocentric). Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that some audiences start to challenge the authority of the voiceover, particularly after becoming suspicious of or discontent at Marker’s commentary. For example, they may ask questions like: Isn’t there a more appropriate way to explain the Chinese sword dance and Pushing Hands? Some may even become aware of the inductivity of the commentary, questioning the relationship between the images and the voiceover: Is playing the sword really a common daily exercise in Beijing, or is it just what happened to be recorded in the film?

Another example also merits notice. Marker, on the one hand, highly praises the historical values of Chinese theatre, pointing out that the past of China lives in the 1950s theatres. The Peking opera and the marionettes, as Marker writes, are imbued

¹⁰³ Sheedy, “‘All the Thrills of the Exotic’: Collective Memory and Cultural Performance in Chris Marker’s *Sunday in Peking*.”

with the aura of Chinese tradition and history; the narratives and performances offer a nostalgic atmosphere to both the city and the film. On the other hand, however, the documentary declines to offer any further explanation for this world. The voiceover remains silent, leaving room for the background music during the forty-five-second performance of the Peking opera. As for the marionettes, Marker's commentary on Chinese legendary stories and figures is amazingly simple, and that he describes Sun Wukong, a typical Chinese legendary figure as "half Prometheus and half Charlie Chaplin" is impressive and interesting.¹⁰⁴ In fact, one of my informants explicitly expresses her indignation about this Eurocentric depiction. She points out that the voiceover speaks with a superior attitude, and how the filmmaker compares two cultures sounds ridiculous to her. Since it is not a demanding task for Marker to have a deeper study on Chinese culture and history, why does he refuse to do so in this short documentary?

Of course, one can answer that this is simply because Marker is merely an Orientalist filmmaker who is too lazy to conduct research. However, based on what I have discussed above, I am more inclined to consider it a way to show the impossibility for a stranger of understanding China "correctly." Marker never pretends to be a China expert, nor a person who knows this country better than his audiences. The refutation of the omniscient voiceover thus enables an active interaction between the filmmaker and his audiences, which contributes to the reproduction of the

¹⁰⁴ Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is widely known in China as a main character in *Journey to the West*, a 16th century novel that tells the story of a pilgrimage for Buddhist sutras. As a monkey born from the stone, Sun Wukong acquires supernatural power from a Daoist immortal, and uses it to protect his master, Tang Sanzang, during their long journey.

documentary. Here, Lupton's comment is inspiring: "[t]he meaning of these scenes is never fixed or taken for granted, but opened up to a different, unexpected significance, which in turn triggers further imaginative associations that suddenly yield revealing insights into Chinese society."¹⁰⁵ Bonner also stresses the significant role the viewer plays in the meaning-making processes of Marker's films.¹⁰⁶ As a matter of fact, the audiences of *Sunday in Peking* do make it more worthy of study.

Secondly, I argue that in order to reduce the extent of exoticism, Marker also deliberately imposes a sense of disorientation on this documentary. At the beginning of *Sunday in Peking*, the camera pans slowly across an array of Chinese souvenirs, first a paper windmill, then a colorful costume, and finally miscellaneous toys placed on some Chinese-style paintings. When the camera rises up, the Eiffel Tower emerges on the right side of the frame. The picture then remains still for seconds, with the paper windmill on the left and the Eiffel Tower on the right, both at odd angles, representing the Chinese and Western culture respectively. This opening scene is already confusing enough. Its disorienting feature makes strange both China and the West, which obscures the self-other opposition temporarily. Also, when visiting the model school, Marker shows a French picture book to the Chinese students, which gives them "all the thrills of the exotic." While the image track still shows audiences an "exotic" China, the sound track reverses the relationship implicitly: It is not China but France that becomes the exotic other. In short, Marker, by estranging his native

¹⁰⁵ Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, 51.

¹⁰⁶ Bonner, "Cinematic Caesuras: Experimental Documentary and the Politics of Form in Left Bank Films by Resnais, Marker, Varda," 13.

culture and stimulating confusion among audiences, transforms exoticism into an effective way of dissolving cultural barriers.

Here, it is important to note that unlike Marker, the separation between most of the contemporary Chinese audiences and the 1955 Beijing is not due to spatial distance, but because they belong to different time periods. Unless they are aged over 65, they have no chance to witness the 1955 Beijing through their own eyes. However, according to the latest *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (2018), only 5.2% of Chinese netizens were aged 60 or above in 2017.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the majority of the contemporary Chinese viewers gain the knowledge of the 1955 Beijing as indirectly as the Western audiences. Generally speaking, while there are countless textual materials about the Maoist China, photographs are relatively fewer, with audiovisual ones the fewest. As mentioned before, a considerable number of reviewers on Douban regard this documentary as a precious historical document that contains the images of Beijing in 1955. In other words, these Chinese audiences also hope to discover a (temporally) distant city through *Sunday in Peking*, and their memories/imagination of this city are/is based on subjective understandings. Here, Douban user Benedict's (本尼迪特) comments are noticeably enlightening: "This is master Marker's one-day trip in Beijing. Although I watched it with a *lieqi* attitude, I did not expect to have more sense of nostalgia than novelty. Is this the Beijing 60 years ago? The bright colors shrouded in the mist are

¹⁰⁷ China Internet Network Information Center, *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, January 2018, <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201807/P020180711391069195909.pdf>.

fairly similar to my impressions of the Beijing more than a decade ago.”¹⁰⁸ If Marker is searching for novelty in the 1955 Beijing, so are some native Chinese audiences. The stereotyping process I have discussed before may also apply to the Chinese side, which implicitly influences its reception of *Sunday in Peking*.

In fact, I believe that what Marker tries to convey through *Sunday in Peking* is in direct contradiction to exoticization. At the end of the film, the visitor stops at a garden, watching people spending their Sunday afternoon leisurely. The voiceover goes on: “China is now called upon to reveal itself, and we are required to understand these sensitive faces – these men, these women, these children, with whom we shall have to share history, as we shall have to share our daily bread.” I argue that Marker tries to remind the Western audiences that China has already become an integral part of the modern world, and will become more active and visible, and that therefore they have to know more about this country and “these sensitive faces.” Thus, I consider this documentary more of a glance, a reminder, and a proposal. To demonstrate, it is helpful to look at the images of children in *Sunday in Peking*. Their images almost penetrate the whole documentary: They appear everywhere – on the sidewalks, in the parks, at the school, on the playground, at the fair, on the bus, in the garden, at the zoo, in the Forbidden City and even in the military parade. As for this young generation, Marker delightedly refers to them as “the China of tomorrow.” Regardless of the performative issues, their images in the documentary are rather positive and energetic: for instance, a group of kindergartners on their way to school, who give “a cheerful

¹⁰⁸ URL for the comment of Benedict on Douban:
https://movie.douban.com/subject/1466013/comments?start=201&limit=20&sort=new_score&status=P&percent_type= (accessed 6/10/2019).

greet” to the filmmaker, the little kids playing happily in the park, whose faces are “charmingly traditional,” and the young athletes doing gymnastic performances, who are “lean as cats.” Before arriving at the end of the documentary, audiences are presented with a montage of dances performed by the children of China. With the male narrator’s placid voice leading them into vivacious scenes filmed in the zoo of Beijing, the camera tilts down and zooms in on a young visitor’s lower body, after which the frame immediately jumps to the dance step of the little dancers. The camera first concentrates on a group of elementary school students, all in blue uniforms and wearing red scarfs, singing and dancing in various ways. Then another group of younger girls enter the frame, dancing two by two, soon followed by some more professional dancers performing the Chinese ribbon dance, whose flowing celeste culottes flutter freely in the wind, with red ribbons flying around. A sense of cheerfulness, freedom and optimism is generated and diffused from this montage, accompanied by bright and graceful dance music in the background.

It is crucial to associate Marker’s remarkable attention to children with his concerns about the future – the future of China and, above all, the future of the world as a whole. For Marker, people in the future will be more connected than ever.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, it is more important to explore and examine these unfamiliar societies, which not only have chances to become successful models for the development of Western countries, but are also the future neighbors that the Westerners must communicate and collaborate with. Here, thinking about the ambiguous question that the film finally ends with is helpful – “whether China itself is not the Sabbath of the

¹⁰⁹ Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*.

whole world.” It should be noted that one version of the Chinese subtitles translates the word “Sabbath” into “miniature,” implying that China in the documentary epitomizes the world in the 1950s. I suspect that this subjective translation may partially explain why some Chinese audiences believe in Marker’s fascination with China – they consider this interpretation the original thought of Marker, and hence the evidence of his optimism about the revolutionary leftism. However, I personally prefer a different understanding that is more based on the context. Before proposing this question, the voiceover describes the scenery of the Summer Palace as follows: “All this is as remote as China, and as familiar as Hyde Park.” Therefore, I believe that what Marker tries to convey is that although China still seems far away from the West, these two lands, as well as their people and cultures, are not completely distinct, and are actually closely connected to each other. China is one constitutional element of the world’s calendar.

Conclusion

This paper studies Chris Marker’s documentary *Sunday in Peking* and how it is reviewed by its Chinese audiences living in the present-day China. I conduct my research by examining two often mentioned characteristics of *Sunday in Peking* on Douban: idealization and exoticization. My conclusions are as follows. In the first place, although the political motivations for the production of *Sunday in Peking* do exist, I argue that it is problematic for some audiences to ignore Marker’s self-reflexive (potentially critical) commentary, and oversimplify it into a mere product of leftist optimism and idealization, or even pure political propaganda. Secondly, while

agreeing that *Sunday in Peking* shows a certain extent of exoticization, I unfold how Marker tries to mitigate this sense of exoticism in this documentary: first by engendering the Western audiences' familiarity with the Chinese culture, and second through disorientation and estrangement. I contend that while the first method also has a negative result that highlights the Orientalism/Eurocentrism of the documentary, it also contributes to the positive interaction between the filmmaker and his audiences. In the meantime, it is crucial to note that although some Chinese audiences provide incisive critiques regarding the subjective and stereotypical features of *Sunday in Peking*, they themselves may be unconsciously subject to a different form of stereotypes that their society, culture or ideology impose on them.

Last but not least, I discover that Marker's anticipation for a more connected world seems incompatible with the process and result of exoticization. This inspires me to reflect on a further question: Can Orientalism persist in a more globalized world? My answer is yes. To borrow Said's definition, Orientalism is "a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world."¹¹⁰ It is a discourse that "is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power."¹¹¹ In other words, it is based on unequal and dynamic power relations and penetrates a wide variety of fields. Therefore, as long as there exists the opposition between selfness and otherness, I believe that it is hard to get rid of the impacts of Orientalism even though living in a more globalized world.

¹¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

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