

### 3. Fans and Their Utterances in the Communications Circuit of Chinese Internet Literature

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**Abstract:** Increasingly, specific communication processes specific to professional fields are taken over by fans to promote, produce, and comment on online content. In this study, I engage speech acts and Bakhtinian heteroglossia to analyse fans' voices and social roles in and beyond online communities, along with their impact on the lifecycle of Chinese internet literature (CIL). Selected online posts about the internet novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* and its adaptations in four fan sub-communities show how fans utilize online utterances to participate in the lifecycle of CIL, employ speech acts to construct/assume/adopt different social identities, and achieve various intentions within the heteroglossic context of online fan communities. Therefore, my study contributes to the body of research on non-English-speaking fan communities.

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, dialogism, heteroglossia, online community

#### Introduction

Fans are widely regarded as consumers of cultural products, even though they are more affectively engaged with their object of fandom than regular consumers.<sup>1</sup> To communicate about their fandom and daily lives with one another, fans form online and offline communities. The widespread use of

<sup>1</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

social media and the internet further expands fan communities.<sup>2</sup> As a unique site of fandom, virtual fan communities have become an object of research.<sup>3</sup> The complexity of the field is one aspect that makes it attractive to scholars from various disciplines, since the phenomenon has blurred the boundaries between play and labour, production and consumption.<sup>4</sup> As a result of their communal practices, fans are “neither producers nor consumers in the usual sense,” but are best defined as “prosumers.”<sup>5</sup>

This development is exemplified by fans of Chinese internet literature (CIL), as research into their community has shown the “centralisation of authorship and readership into the core of production and the decentralisation of other agents and institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Originating in the 1990s, CIL “was born digital as a fan-generated phenomenon”<sup>7</sup> and denotes Chinese literary productions in existing or new genres that are chiefly meant for reading online, with internet novels accounting for most of the online publishing market.<sup>8</sup> CIL resembles fanfiction in that it comprises amateur writing, but unlike fanfiction it also features original and independent characters and narratives that do not refer to any prior novels or movies. There have been studies on CIL readers’ prosumer role in contributing to the creation of internet novels and in facilitating CIL translation on the international market, yet there is a dearth of studies on the complex roles of CIL fans other than as CIL writers, readers, sponsors, and translators.<sup>9</sup>

Building on international fan studies on fans’ multiple social roles on the global market, such as promoters, entrepreneurs, and infopreneurs, this chapter aims to provide insights into identifying and exploring the various

2 Cindy Bird, “Phenomenological Realities or ‘Quinntown’: Life in a Cyber Community,” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 25, no. 1–2 (2002): 32–37.

3 Samantha Groene and Vanessa Hettinger, “Are You ‘Fan’ Enough? The Role of Identity in Media Fandoms,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5, no. 4 (2016): 324–39.

4 Christian Fuchs, “Digital Prosumption Labour on Social Media in the Context of the Capitalist Regime of Time,” *Time & Society* 23, no. 1 (2014): 111.

5 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 266.

6 Shih-chen Chao, “The Re-institutionalisation of Popular Fiction: The Internet and a New Model of Popular Fiction Prosumption in China,” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 3 (2013): 4.

7 Xiang Ren and Lucy Montgomery, “Chinese Online Literature: Creative Consumers and Evolving Business Models,” *Arts Marketing* 2, no. 2 (2012): 118.

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

9 Xiaoli Tian and Michael Adorjan, “Fandom and Coercive Empowerment: The Commissioned Production of Chinese Online Literature,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2016): 881–900; Rachel Suet Kay Chan, “Game of Translations: Virtual Community Doing English Translations of Chinese Online Fiction,” *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 9, no. 1 (2017): 39–55.

social roles and functions of CIL fans.<sup>10</sup> Given that the commercialization of the CIL industry has boosted the adaptation of CIL texts into forms such as manga or web series, CIL fans are involved not only in the lifecycle of CIL novels but also in CIL adaptations, including drama, animation, and manga.

## Heteroglossia, Speech Acts, and Social Identities in Online Fan Communities

Given that fans' online social behaviours are often represented by their online utterances, this chapter starts by looking into CIL fans' online language use. Languages in new media often represent linguistic and stylistic heteroglossia.<sup>11</sup> Coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the concept of heteroglossia can refer to "the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms and signs," especially "intra-language varieties," in a community. Heteroglossia can also be understood as "the social diversity of speech types."<sup>12</sup>

In the context of heteroglossia, speech acts are important indicators of speakers' social identities.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the utterances of lawyers unmistakably differ from those of fortune tellers. This also holds for online fan communities, where people construct their identities as fans through fandom-related speech acts, such as expressives and declaratives.<sup>14</sup> Utterances posted on fan social media and portals often employ casual expressions, an informal tone, and/or unconventional wordings, which may sound cryptic to the general public. Despite these characteristics, fan communities should not be simplified into a monologic and homogenous domain dominated by casual and informal speech acts, as this perception

10 Sophie G. Einwächter, "Fantastic Fan Marketing—Fantasy Fan Online-Communities and Conventions as Markets of Cultural Goods," in *Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Süß (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014).

11 Sirpa Leppänen et al., "Young People's Translocal New Media Uses: A Multiperspective Analysis of Language Choice and Heteroglossia," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14, no. 4 (2009): 1080–107.

12 Benjamin Bailey, "Heteroglossia and Boundaries," in *Bilingualism: A Social Approach*, ed. Monica Heller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 257–58.

13 Anna Gralińska-Brawata, "Speech as a Marker of Social Identity: Geordie English," in *Issues in Accents of English*, ed. Ewa Waniek-Klimczak (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 102.

14 Boglárka Fazekas, "Speech Acts in Online Fan Communities," in *Encounters of the Popular Kind: Traditions and Mythologies/Populáris típusú találkozások: Hagyományok és mitológiák*, ed. Judit Anna Bánházi et al. (Budapest: ELTE Bölcsészettudományi Kar, 2021).

ignores the heterogeneity and complexity of the content, ideas, speech acts, and identities of fans.<sup>15</sup>

According to Maristella Gatto, textual registers and genres are evolving on the web, so online texts are best examined from an a posteriori perspective.<sup>16</sup> This indicates that fans' online utterances are not bound to any specific and stable registers and tone patterns. Some fans may adapt their speech acts to imitate or align with those of other social groups, thus conveying their intentions. This adaptation occurs because the ways of speaking and forms of speech inherently carry their original social functions. For instance, when fans defend a novel against criticism, they may imitate an academic poster or an attorney's letter, as these specialized speech acts can articulate a serious and formal refutation and formally assess the value of the novel or its adaptations. Examples are provided in the later sections of this chapter.

In the study of fans' social identities as represented by their speech acts within the heteroglossia of online fan communities, their posts as utterances are the "minimal unit of social analysis."<sup>17</sup> Importantly, utterances never function alone, and to make sense of them, they must be investigated in their contexts.<sup>18</sup> Utterances can be interpreted differently by recipients in different contexts, and their types change, depending on the speaker's purpose and their notion of the recipient. In Bakhtin's framework, dialogue is essential in meaning-making as "[t]hrough dialogue the two participants come together in a 'third space,' a new understanding created by changing both participants."<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin insists that both speaker and recipient achieve their social existence in and through dialogic interactions constructed of a diversity of utterances in particular contexts. These multiple utterances are speech acts of various kinds that produce heteroglossia in online and offline societies. Bakhtin also argues that utterances are not constructed passively for the sake of grammatical correctness alone; rather, the speaker's

15 CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan Communities* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).

16 Maristella Gatto, *Web as Corpus: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 61–63.

17 Gary Saul Morson, "Who Speaks for Bakhtin? A Dialogic Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1983): 231.

18 Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (London: Routledge, 2000), 86.

19 Randy Yerrick, Anna Liuzzo, and Janina Brutt-Griffler, "Building Common Language, Experiences, and Learning Spaces with Lower-Track Science Students," in *Second International Handbook of Science Education, Part One*, ed. Barry J. Fraser, Kenneth G. Tobin, and Campbell J. McRobbie (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 1427.

intention is actively invested in their utterances, and they likewise expect an active response from the recipient.

Accordingly, in this study, the utterances of CIL fans are considered to have an internally constructed consciousness “according to voices previously heard and in anticipation of a response.”<sup>20</sup> For instance, in their online posts, some fans initially share with their potential audiences the various attractive details of their productions, such as the plot design of a novel, the fabulous background music in an adapted web series, and the meticulously executed character portraits in a manga. Such posts are expected to elicit relatively positive responses from agents outside the fan community to reciprocally confirm the quality of the production and to corroborate the rationality of the fan’s preference in their original posts. This kind of in-between-ness of the “active, productive” utterance ensures “that communication can take place only in society.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, fans’ utterances, dialogues and speech acts enable them to socially engage in the making of CIL.

## Method

In this chapter, I analyse fans’ online utterances and speech acts in order to explore the diverse social identities of fans enacted in their online communities. To this purpose, I present a case study of *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (*MDZS*) and its online fan (sub-) communities. Written by famous CIL writer Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, *MDZS* is one of the most popular storyworlds on the CIL market. It was published in sequential instalments on Jinjiang ([www.jjwxc.net](http://www.jjwxc.net)), a major online CIL reading portal, in 2015. The novel tells a love story of two adventurous male cultivators, LAN Wangji and WEI Wuxian, set in a fictional, ancient and mysterious setting. With the success of the novel among fans, the story was subsequently converted into a manga, an animation, a radio drama, and a web series in China. Among them, the web series *Chen Qing Ling/The Untamed* (2019), produced by Tencent, was the most globally influential and commercially successful adaptation. For instance, episode 1 of *Chen Qing Ling* on Tencent’s YouTube channel had more than 13.29 million views in March 2024.

As the story was being promoted and received through various media, the fandom of *MDZS* in its multiple iterations was increasing, which further

20 Karen Krasny, “Dialogic Spaces: Bakhtin’s Social Theory of Utterance in Reader Response” (MA diss., University of Manitoba, 2002), 2.

21 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1991), 61, 59.

boosted the construction of corresponding fan sub-communities on Weibo, the Chinese counterpart of X (Twitter), where fans could appreciate together their favourite form of the story. Such communities are not rigid, and fans can move flexibly between them or stick to one fan sub-community for their preferred form of adaptation. My argument in this chapter is underpinned by the analysis of four relevant sub-communities for information about Chinese fans' social roles and behaviours. These are the novel fan community, the animation fan community, the radio drama fan community, and the fan community of the adapted web series *Chen Qing Ling*.

Given that fans' social roles are channelled by their utterances in online posts of respective fan sub-community on Weibo, my research employed linguistic and content analysis to examine selected posts. Inspired by Xiaoli Tian and Michael Adorjan's method for studying CIL online communities, I first conducted one-week-long non-interventional online observations of *MDZS* fans' social activities in each fan sub-community in September 2021 and August 2022.<sup>22</sup> Over these two weeks, I registered different types of CIL fans' social activities and recorded the first case of each of them I encountered. To analyse my data, linguistic analysis was used to study the styles, registers, and tones used in posts, which helped explain the various social roles of *MDZS* fans, as different roles require the speaker to take on different (socio)linguistic features. Then, content analysis was carried out to describe the actual scenarios where *MDZS* fans utilized posts to perform different social roles.

The online posts used in this chapter were summarized and translated from Chinese into English by myself to contribute to the study of non-English-speaking fan communities. The collected online utterances and dialogues exemplify the ways in which fans participate in and influence the lifecycle of CIL through their posts and acquisition of various social roles. To ensure the anonymity of the fans, their user IDs and original Chinese posts are not revealed. Instead, English letters are used to represent different fans (e.g., Fan A, Fan B), and the corresponding respondents to the posts from other fans are marked with a number (e.g., Fan A1, Fan A2, Fan B1, Fan B2).

## Towards the *MDZS* Fannish Communications Circuit

Since the boundaries of utterances "are only marked by a change of speech subject," dialogues in different phases of the lifecycle of *MDZS* must be

22 Tian and Adorjan, "Fandom and Coercive Empowerment," 886–88.

examined and the other party in each dialogue must be identified.<sup>23</sup> Below, I rely on the notion of the communications circuit to offer an overview of the main phases in the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

In his fundamental study on book history, Robert Darnton proposed the model of the communications circuit as “a general model for analysing the way books come into being and spread through society.”<sup>24</sup> This model lists the agents involved in each phase of a book lifecycle, including the author, publisher, printers, material suppliers, shippers, booksellers, and readers. Regarding those, Darnton notes the external effects on the agents and groups them in the categories of intellectual influences and publicity, the economic and social conjuncture, and political and legal sanctions, the three main factors affecting the history of books. Since Darnton’s model focuses more on the human participants than the book itself, Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker proposed their modified version of the model, in which the lifecycle of books consists of five phases: publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival (explained in detail in the subsequent sections).<sup>25</sup> Like Darnton, Adams and Barker also agree that the lifecycle of books is impacted by the outside world, including political, legal, and religious influences; commercial pressures; social behaviour and taste; and intellectual influences.

The participatory nature of the internet further blurs the lines between agents in the communications circuit. To address this, Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires propose that there are only two main agents in the digital communications circuit: readers and providers, the latter integrating the agency of the author, publishers, retailers, and distributors.<sup>26</sup> Notably, in Murray and Squires’ model, readers are not just consumers who buy or borrow cultural products and leave reviews; rather, they form a collective group, a community, to create their own content, fund, and subscribe to book instalments. This epitomizes prosumption behaviour—that is, production plus consumption—which brings into relief the agency of CIL readers as fans.<sup>27</sup>

23 Caryl Emerson, “Editor’s Preface,” in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* by Mikhail Bakhtin, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xxxiv.

24 Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 67.

25 Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker, “A New Model for the Study of the Book,” in *A Potencie of Life: Books in Society*, ed. Nicolas Barker (London: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press, 2001), 11.

26 Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, “The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit,” *Book 2.0* 3, no. 1 (2013): 3–23.

27 Tian and Adorjan, “Fandom and Coercive Empowerment.”

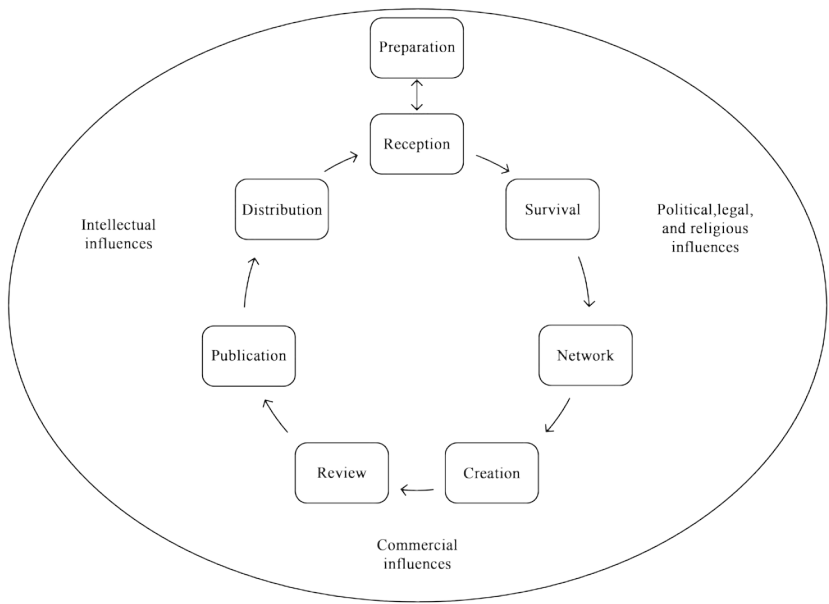


Figure 3.1. The fannish communications circuit of Chinese internet literature.

Based on the previous models, figure 3.1 charts one that is specific to CIL from the fan perspective to support the discussion. The model renders *MDZS* fans as a special group of readers who dedicate themselves to the expansion of the storyworld. Fans-as-audience participated in the making of not only literature as originally studied in book history, but also the entire life of the storyworld. Generally, the *MDZS* lifecycle encompasses eight phases: preparation, reception, survival, network, creation, review, publication, and distribution. In this chapter, I mainly focus on the phases of preparation, reception, survival, and network to showcase the various social roles adopted by fans and the contribution of their speech acts to the storyworld. I discuss the effect of the socio-economic/cultural conjuncture on the circuit when analysing the examples.

Preparation of the Content

The preparation phase refers to the process of content presentation, in which an internet novel is published in small instalments and introduced to fan readers by the Jinjiang website in the initial round of the novel publication, followed by the publication of its adaptations on other platforms. As *MDZS* was released in instalments, fans could reflect on the publication problems

involved and participate in problem-solving. Since the original novel contained adult content, it was blocked by Jinjiang in January 2019 as a result of China's Clean Network Initiative, which aimed to protect youngsters from exposure to pornography. Consequently, fans were unable to access the novel, even though it remained stored on the website. To continue enjoying the original version on Jinjiang, tech-savvy fans explored methods to unblock the novel and taught others how to do the same. For instance, Fan A published a post explaining how to unblock the novel, and other fans, such as Fan A1, Fan A2, and Fan A3, responded by requesting further particulars:

Fan A: If you bought the whole novel before on Jinjiang and want to reread it, you can use your web browser to open Jinjiang, find the purchased chapters in the purchase history, and then click and read it. Tips: 1. The kiss scene was added in the amended version after August 2016. So, if your purchased chapter hasn't got this scene, it must have been bought before this date; 2. Four bonus chapters were published in December 2017; 3. If you did not pay chapter by chapter as they came out, then you must search for them in separate months in your purchase history.

Fan A1: Can I download Jinjiang now and try the above way?

Fan A: No, but you can buy the paper edition instead.

Fan A2: What if I don't remember the purchase date?

Fan A: You can only browse your purchase history entry by entry.

Fan A3: What if I only purchased a few chapters?

Fan A: If so, you can only read those parts now.

In this communication, a screenshot with instructional captions on how to locate the blocked chapters was attached to the verbal post to provide visual step-by-step guidance for other fans. In the screenshot, a red box on the very left highlighted where "purchase history" is in the Jinjiang reading app, and the top-right-hand part showed how to search for entries by purchasing dates. On the bottom, Fan A used a timeline feature to indicate the differences between the various versions of the novel. As shown, the content "Kiss on the Baifeng Mountain" was not included in the original version, but it was added to the amended version between August 2016 and December 2017, so the chapters purchased during this period might contain the kiss scene.

Fan A served as human customer service in dialogues and formatted their original post as a product guide. This speech act carried a certain illocutionary force by informing other fans what they can do. The combination of the verbal and non-verbal signs in this post made the instruction clearer

and easier to follow. The dialogues were between individual fans who had previously heard the announcement *MDZS* being blocked on Jinjiang. Based on their shared knowledge, the fans agreed that they wanted to unlock the content and reread the novel on Jinjiang without challenging the regulations and supporting the genuine edition online. Consequently, they explored ways to achieve the common goal.

Though Fan A was initially a consumer of the content, they performed the social role of human customer service, to some extent representing the content provider by helping other consumers have a satisfying purchasing experience and guiding fans on how to use the functionalities of the website while both should be the responsibility of Jinjiang. Reading the blocked content is actually not allowed, although the content is stored on Jinjiang, so the website could in fact use more advanced IT skills to fix the problem at any time. Crucially, even if fans play the role of content providers, they can anyway have their content entirely blocked or deleted. Thus, while the social identities listed in this study are enacted by fans in fan communities, fans cannot be said to have such social identities in the actual world beyond fan communities in most cases. These social identities are fashioned and manifested in and by fans' speech acts and, as such, they are mainly recognized within fan communities alone.

## Reception in a Socialized Context

While the previous section introduces the pre-reading/watching experiences of *MDZS* fans, this section primarily focuses on their dialogues during the reading and watching processes. On Weibo, fans' online receptive behaviours are usually regulated by their respective communities' rules of dos and don'ts. Importantly, as fan sub-communities are formed, organizations and principles are concomitantly established for each of them. In all sub-communities, experienced fans are elected as moderators to review all the posts, delete the rule-breaking ones, and recommend the good ones. When fans visit these sub-communities, the default first post they usually get to see is the "Rules of Membership," an utterance published by moderators in formal writing. Comparing the rules of the four sub-communities in my sample, I concluded that their commonalities include:

- No illegal content (pornography, violence, politics, or piracy)
- No posts on other adapted forms of the same storyworld
- Respect for others and using no offensive language

The ban on illegal content in fan readers' online posts coincides with the Chinese government's Clean Network Initiative to promote healthy space for the public, especially for the young. This rule explicitly shows how political, legal, religious, and intellectual influences in the fannish communications circuit regulate fans' behaviours. Though the internet supports free speech, fans' utterances in posts need to abide by the policies of the Weibo platform and the state regarding pornography, violence, and politics. Should this be construed as passive obedience to social and legal norms, then the prohibition to discuss piracies of the story reveals that fans actively protect authenticity out of love. In a study on fans' arguments on comic book downloads, J. Richard Stevens and Christopher Edward Bell explain that fans' anti-download activity speaks to their notion of downloading either as stealing beyond legal constraints or as immoral for not paying for others' creative work.<sup>28</sup> Both attitudes are firmly manifested in the prohibition of *MDZS* piracies, and it compels community members to support and respect authenticity.

The ban on discussing other adapted forms of the same storyworld in respective sub-communities implies that fans of a given adaptation form have a strong territorial consciousness. Emphatically, particular sub-communities are not set up as inclusive of discussions on all adaptations. For instance, in the *MDZS* fan community of the original novel, the adapted web series, the manga, and the animation are all taboo topics, and similar curtailments can be found in the sub-communities for *MDZS* adaptations. The fans' pronounced preference for a given medium form contradicts some of current media scholarship, which suggests that transmedia consumption is increasingly the norm. Henry Jenkins, for instance, has argued that social media can be an ideal domain for participatory culture and the development of diverse media content.<sup>29</sup> In Jenkins' work, fans are framed as knowledgeable about entire franchises and different texts. However, the *MDZS* fans draw firm lines between the different multimodal texts and do not consider them to be one unitary storyworld at all.

This observation encourages rethinking the media mix purportedly consumed by users in its entirety.<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Lindlof applies the interpre-

28 J. Richard Stevens and Christopher Edward Bell, "Do Fans Own Digital Comic Books? Examining the Copyright and Intellectual Property Attitudes of Comic Book Fans," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 751–72.

29 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

30 Marc Steinberg, "Media Mix Mobilization: Social Mobilization and *Yo-Kai Watch*," *Animation* 12, no. 3 (2017): 244–58.

tive community concept in his (social) media research to conclude that fans' consumption of transmedial adaptations can be understood as events mediated by the genre of both the given content and the media.<sup>31</sup> Interpretive communities of media are underpinned both by their members' shared love or interest and by their shared use of the media. Thus, the platform where fans consume the adaptation is an important factor in its own right. Fans of the adapted web series consume the videos on Tencent, while fans of the original novel read the content on Jinjiang. The two fan groups need not necessarily be familiar with each other's object of fandom because their consumption experience is mediated and circumscribed by the media. As a result, there are clear boundaries between the *MDZS* sub-communities because each of them is a different interpretive community. However, fans then all build their communities on Weibo, which leads to similar behaviours of these fans and communities, specifically to publishing posts to participate in the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

This analysis further suggests that there is a correlation between the differentiation and segmentation of the market around this storyworld and the differentiation and segmentation of the overall fan community. According to Wendell Smith, strategies of differentiation and segmentation are launched by suppliers to diversify their products to "establish a kind of equilibrium in the market" or as "a rational and more precise adjustment of product and marketing effort to consumer or user requirements."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the various adaptations produced for different target consumer groups of the same *MDZS* storyworld fuel the differentiation and segmentation of the general fan community and usher taboos into fan sub-communities. When the centripetal force of the storyworld brings fans together to foster the general fandom of a title in the context of CIL and its adaptations, fans' preferences for specific types of adaptation are like the centrifugal force that pulls them apart. The two forces are clinched in perpetual interplay as the market goes on differentiating and segmenting its production lines for variously profiled customer groups.

The third rule underscores the importance of respecting other members, with "respect" being the keyword fundamental to participation in online fan communities on Weibo. While the first rule expresses respect for legal and

31 Thomas R. Lindlof, "Media Audiences as Interpretive Communities," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 11, no. 1 (1988): 81–107; Thomas R. Lindlof, "Interpretive Community: An Approach to Media and Religion," *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002): 61–74.

32 Wendell R. Smith, "Product Differentiation and Market Segmentation as Alternative Marketing Strategies," *Journal of Marketing* 21, no. 1 (1956): 5.

moral values and the second rule focuses on respect for specific adaptation works, the third rule highlights the significance of mutual respect among fan community members. For instance, a fanfiction *MDZS* writer posted such suggestions for their readers:

No adaptations to my fiction. I only ship the protagonists [of the novel], you can *quan di zi meng*, it's none of my business, but if you [ship other couples] in front of me, you are in for an insult. Fans of the actors' CP are welcome to read my fiction, but don't *dai can*, please respect each other.

The fan writer expresses their own views in an utterance in colloquial Chinese, using terminology specific to fan culture in China. The post is phrased in an informal tone and includes words *quan di zi meng* ("circle a place for self-entertainment" in literal translation) and *dai can* ("make my novel a meal replacement for your real people CP" in translation), which are commonly used among Chinese fans but may be unfamiliar to the general Chinese public, especially those not familiar with internet culture. The assertive and antagonistic tone of the post reflects the fan writer's rejection of fans of the web series actors, while also calling for mutual respect among fans. By employing this self-confident and warning speech act, the fan writer draws a clear line between the two fan sub-communities and denies the fans of the actors membership in the novel sub-community. Through this post, the fan writer played the role of an indigenous person, casting the fans of the actors in the role of strangers, visitors, or even invaders.

Finally, respect is a pillar that sustains the stability of the general fan community of *MDZS*, along with fans' shared love for the storyworld. In this regard, the fans' subjectivity and territorial consciousness are highlighted since fans are sensitive to their indigenous sub-communities, in which they play the role of moderators to maintain respect. They not only teach others to respect the rules of the platform and the state, but also contribute to rulemaking for sustaining the operations of fans' (sub-)communities and creating a harmonious atmosphere.

## Survival of the Content

In post-reading/watching processes, fans collaborate to extend the popularity of the storyworld or to preserve it from possible damages and risks. The survival phase refers to the preservation of *MDZS* content and merchandise on and beyond the web, as they are always susceptible to being damaged,

deleted, or blocked. For instance, the popularity of the adapted web series *Chen Qing Ling* in 2019 made its fans worried that it might be discontinued by an intervention from officials whose attitude to the same-sex love content was (and still is) relatively negative. Explicit descriptions of homosexual love in TV/web series are prohibited in China. In December 2015, the government introduced the “General Regulations on Television Content Production,” which defined homosexuality as abnormal and sexual freedom as unhealthy. As an effect, to continue producing any queer-themed content on the Chinese market, producers often launch opaque strategies to recast explicit queer love motifs into implicit bromance narratives in TV/web series production.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of this regulation, *Chen Qing Ling* was subject to revisions because its original *MDZS* novel contained explicit depictions of same-sex romantic relations. No wonder that besides posts celebrating the success of or bidding farewell to the web series during the last few days of its premiere, there were posts that shared concerns about the possible removal of the web series from the streaming portal because of its queer engagement. Fan B’s post conveys this worry:

Hi, it’s me again. Please forgive me for annoying you. In your posts, please don’t mention sensitive words like the National Radio and Television Administration, censorship, bromance, capital, etc. They are not fun and will put our web series in danger. I’ve heard Tencent has been interviewed by officials. I’m not sure if it’s true, but take it seriously and be cautious. I know many of you have already downloaded it, so you’re not afraid of deletion, but there will be more videos of post-credits scenes, don’t let them be censored.

Fan B acted as a protector, and their post expressed worry. To make the post sound like casual talk, Fan B, referred to rumour, using it to reinforce their appeal to fans to be careful about how they behaved. The keywords, such as “censorship” and “bromance,” are all intentionally misspelt in the post to be consistent with Fan B’s plea not to mention sensitive words directly. This post suggests that in their efforts to preserve the existing product, fans rely on two tools: self-discipline for prevention and downloading as backup. This intimate and informal exchange between fans underscores the importance of fan bonding in the fannish communications circuit.

Fan behaviours are thus closely linked to the fate of their beloved products, and this interconnectedness is enhanced when facing threats from external

33 Eve Ng and Xiaomeng Li, “A Queer ‘Socialist Brotherhood’: The *Guardian* Web Series, Boys’ Love Fandom, and the Chinese State,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 4 (2020): 479–95.

forces. The intimate tone of Fan B's utterance appears to foster a sense of closeness among the members who confront common risks. In addition, the casual chatting style, marked by phrases such as "I heard..." and "I am not sure...", contributes to the liveliness of speech, making it more acceptable and understandable by other members of the community.

## The Network and Hashtags in Action

Along with socializing with other members, fans have also organized themselves collectively to refute rumours around *MDZS* concerning plagiarism. One specific method for the rebuttal of suspected plagiarism involved the fans' dissemination of the hashtags "墨香铜臭 辟谣" and "墨香铜臭 澄清." In these two tags, 墨香铜臭 refers to the name of the author of *MDZS*, and the other two words both mean "refuting rumours." These hashtags accompanied posts that presented evidence disproving the plagiarism accusations. For instance, fans searched for and shared paratextual evidence, such as screenshots of the author, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's, online notes and Weibo posts, which were timestamped to demonstrate that her original ideas and poetics predated Author X's works the online accusations by other Weibo users alleged Mo Xiang Tong Xiu had plagiarized.

By the beginning of August 2022, 6,444 fans had published posts with the former hashtag, eliciting 430 million views and 773,000 replies; and the latter hashtag got 3,508 posts, with 140 million views and 293,000 replies. These posts often included fan-made defence posters with a screenshot of the Anti-Plagiarism Bar's post in their top part. The Anti-Plagiarism Bar was a Weibo account run by CIL fan volunteers to identify plagiarism in CIL creations. In the case of *MDZS*, the Anti-Plagiarism Bar concluded: "My opinion is that I don't think *MDZS* is plagiarism." This assessment was highlighted in a red box in *MDZS* fans' defence posters. Screenshots of posts from Author X's fans were also displayed to show their dismissal of the plagiarism accusations, saying that "we cannot and will not agree with the [plagiarism] viewpoint." Eventually, the accuser's post of apology was quoted in a screenshot to put an end to the dispute. The post read:

For the untrue charges in my posts, I'd like to apologize to Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, and I hope everyone can be cautiously avoid impetuous anti-plagiarism activities. I am so sorry for the author and her fans; I will mind my behaviour in the future.

Unlike in the cases discussed above, this fan's utterance was addressed not only to fellow fans, but to all Chinese Weibo users. In their campaign to demonstrate the innocence of the author, fans employed argumentative and critical skills, similar to those of lawyers and scholars. They adopted a formal tone and relied on quotations and references to lend credibility to their argument. The fans' defence posters as their utterances exhibited multi-voicedness in two ways. Firstly, they were used by different fans under the shared hashtags to enhance the influence of their argument. Secondly, utterances from third parties were quoted to further support the fans' argument. This approach reflects fans' consideration of the general public when the posters were produced, as plain refutation without supporting evidence might not be sufficient to persuade the general public.

As my discussion above indicates, heteroglossia in the fannish communications circuit has three major aspects to it. Firstly, fans adjust their speech acts to their target recipients and purposes, which requires fans to fulfil the role and imitate the speech acts of other social groups. Serious topics, such as setting community rules or refuting rumours in the public sphere, are typically conveyed through formal speech acts related to critical roles, whereas intimate talks among fans often feature a casual tone or a begging tone for the survival of fan objects. Secondly, fans incorporate quotes from or references to others to introduce multiple voices into their arguments and enhance their credibility. Thirdly, fans collectively engage in discussions under shared hashtags to advocate for their fan objects, which increased their influence and visibility on the internet.

At the same time, fans' behaviours and posts are constrained by external socio-economic and cultural impacts. Given that queer-related themes are sensitive content in mainstream Chinese society, fans may take preventive measures by downloading the existing materials or exercising caution when discussing sensitive topics online. In this case, fans' online social behaviours are associated with the fate of fan objects. Additionally, the differentiation and segmentation strategies implemented in marketing by official producers make the general fan community split into several fan sub-communities, where discussions of alternative adaptation forms are often taboo. This may impose further moral and cultural restrictions on fans' utterances and speech acts, so the keyword "respect" is highlighted to avoid offending individuals inside and outside respective fan sub-communities.

Nevertheless, in the fannish communications circuit, fans employ different speech acts within and beyond online fan (sub-)communities in and through which they enact different social roles, depending on the context and their intentions. Fans' voices vary in form, tone, and content,

and disagreements may arise, particularly among voices from different sub-communities. In view of this variety of voices, fan communities should not be reductively considered monologic spaces, since fans play multiple roles, such as content providers, protectors, and defenders. Through their diverse speech acts and social roles, fans actively and productively participate in the entire lifecycle of CIL, including its adaptations.

## Conclusion

In digital space, individual posts serve as the minimum unit of social interaction in online fan communities. Through their posts, CIL fans actively participate in the communications circuit of their beloved storyworlds. At the same time, the general fan community is subject to structural differentiation effected by marketing strategies, such as differentiation and segmentation, that produce adaptations. As fan sub-communities emerge for each type of adaptation of a storyworld, they may not recognize connectedness with each other.

In the case of *MDZS*, fans are actively involved in its digital communications circuit through various activities conducted via online posts. Through their speech acts and the content they share, fans assume roles of other social groups to help other fans, preserve and protect the *MDZS*-related content, and defend the author against scandals. The fans' changing and dynamic speech acts contribute to heteroglossia in online (sub)fan communities of *MDZS*, where fans adeptly adjust their speech acts and take on various social identities to achieve different purposes in interactions with different recipients in diverse contexts. Despite constraints from the outer socio-economic and cultural environment, these diverse fan voices proactively influence the lifecycle of *MDZS*.

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