



Wang Baochuan Beyond Traditional Theatre: Feminist Discourse, Digital Fluidity and Transmedia Character Network

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving figure of Wang Baochuan (王宝钏), a traditional Chinese traditional theatre character, as a “transmedia character network” within contemporary digital culture. Once celebrated in theatrical form for her loyalty and virtue, Wang Baochuan has recently re-emerged across digital platforms through feminist reinterpretations and creative remixes. Drawing on Thon and Pearson’s theory of transmedia character networks and Ashley Hinck’s concept of digital fluidity, the article examines how her image is reshaped through three case studies: *Wujia Slope 2021* (Wujiapo 2021 武家坡 2021) a web-music song created in 2021, the feminist slogan “Wang Baochuan Foraging for Wild Vegetables” (Wang Baochuan wa yecai 王宝钏挖野菜), and the mobile-first short video drama *Reborn as a Tragic Heroine, I Refuse to Be Love-Obsessed* (Hunchuan kuqing nüzhū wǒ bù zuò lián’āi nǎo 魂穿苦情女主我不做恋爱脑) or. The article argues that digital fluidity operates as a social context, enabling feminist critique to emerge through the distributed reanimation of transmedia characters in China’s commercially mediated and gendered digital environment.

KEYWORDS: transmedia character network, digital fluidity, Chinese feminism

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1. Introduction

Wang Baochuan (王宝钏) is a long-standing female character in Chinese traditional theatre, most famously portrayed in the folktale *The Fiery Red-Maned Horse* (*Hongzong Liema* 红鬃烈马) a narrative frequently adapted in various traditional regional operatic forms such as Qinqiang (秦腔) and Peking Opera (京剧). Unlike characters tied to a single authorial vision, characters in Chinese traditional theatre like Wang Baochuan emerged from the collective storytelling traditions.¹ As Lu Yang notes, “In Chinese traditional theatre, texts were created as a common work by more than one playwright. Therefore, scholars of Chinese Theatre Studies have not reached an agreement on when and by whom this character was originally created.”² Nevertheless, the image of Wang Baochuan is centred around loyalty, sacrifice, and virtue, a traditional Chinese wife, an image which has endured for over a century, undergoing constant reinterpretation across time and media.

Wang Baochuan as such an important female character through the history of Chinese theatre, literature and media, has been represented in many artistic works discussing Chinese women’s reaction, identity and position in romantic heterosexual relationships in different eras. Since the rapid development of media industries in the Sinophone world, the character has appeared across a range of media, including the Chinese film *Wang Baochuan* (王宝钏) in 1939 and the traditional theatre-based film *Wang Baochuan* (王宝钏) in 1967 in Taiwan, the pop singer Xu Jiaying’s music video *Riding a White Horse* (*Shenqi Baima* 身骑白马) in 2009, and the television series *Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan* (薛平贵与王宝钏) in 2012. Since 2021, the character Wang Baochuan has undergone an unprecedented resurgence across digital platforms in China. Once celebrated on the operatic stage as a model of female virtue and loyalty, Wang Baochuan has re-entered public consciousness through a series of reinterpretations across media forms including web music, social media discourse, and short video drama. These are not isolated revivals, but part of a wider process of becoming a “transmedia character network,” in which her character is continually reimagined through new aesthetic forms and shifting sociocultural logics.³

This article investigates this instance of a transmedia character network not a singular, coherent identity, but rather a fluid assemblage shaped by the circulation of meanings across platforms and audiences.⁴ Through close analysis of three key examples--the web song *Wujia Slope 2021* (Wujiapo 2021 武家坡

¹ Mo Jiao 莫娇, “Shidai de yinji lishi de shipian yuanxing shi yuxia Wang Baochuan xingxiang tanxi”时代的印记历史的诗篇原型视域下王宝钏形象探析 [Imprints of time and poetics of history: an analysis of Wang Baochuan as prototype], *Xiju lilun zonghe* 戏剧理论纵横 [Theatre Studies Theories Journal], 2022/12, 70

² Lu Yang 陆洋, “Chuantong xiqu zhong nüxing chuanqi de xiandai jieshou jingju hongzong liema yu xiaoshuo deng zhong shikong gouzao de bijiao fenxi”传统戏曲中女性传奇的现代接受京剧红鬃烈马与小说等中时空构造的比较分析 [The modern reception of traditional women’s chuanqi drama: the comparative analysis of time and space in theatrical and fictional renditions of the Peking Opera “The Fiery Red-Maned Horse”], *Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan xuebao* 中国戏曲学院学报 [Academy Journal of National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts], 2020/4, 65

³ Thon, Jan-Noël and Roberta Pearson. “Transmedia Characters.” *Narrative*, 30.2. (2022), 139-151.

⁴ Thon, Jan-Noël. “Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial Universes.” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7.2. (2015), 21–53.

Thon, Jan-Noël. “Transmedia characters: Theory and analysis” *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 5.3. (2019), 176-199.

Thon, Jan-Noël and Roberta Pearson. “Transmedia Characters.” *Narrative*, 30.2.(2022), 139-151.

2021), the feminist slogan “Wang Baochuan Foraging for Wild Vegetables” (Wang Baochuan Wa Yecai 王宝钏挖野菜), and the mobile-first short video drama *Reborn as a Tragic Heroine, I Refuse to Be Love-Obsessed* (Hunchuan kuqing nüzhu wo bu zuo lian'ai nao 魂穿苦情女主我不做恋爱脑) -- I explore how her character becomes a site of negotiation for digital fluidity, social context, and feminist critique in contemporary China. Wang Baochuan as a female character has been rebooting both work-specific and medium-specific representations. To account for this distributed meaning-making process, I introduce Ashley Hinck’s concept of digital fluidity, which captures how invention, identity, and cultural agency unfold in horizontal, decentralised, and participatory ways across digital platforms.⁵ I further demonstrate how digital fluidity operates as a social context, not only enabling the transmedia flow of characters but also shaping the conditions of feminist discourse in Chinese digital space.⁶

Below, in order to unpack Wang Baochuan’s transmedia character network, I first outline a theoretical framing of transmedia character networks, and provide an overview of Chinese digital feminisms, before analysing the digital fluidity in my three case studies. Anchoring transmedia character theory within a sociological lens reveals how transmedia characters are not merely narrative devices but are deeply embedded in systems of gendered power, national memory, and participatory online cultures. It also frames feminist discourse in Chinese digital space by illustrating how feminist expression often unfolds through hybrid, indirect, and commercially mediated channels, particularly through the reinterpretation of female transmedia characters. Finally, this article advocates for a work- and medium-specific approach to cultural analysis, emphasising that meaning is not only generated by narrative coherence but is also co-produced through the social lives and circulations of characters across media platforms.

2. Transmedia Studies: the evolution of the Transmedia Character Network

In exploring work and medium specificity for transmedia character studies, it is worth critically reviewing the history of transmedia studies. Transmedia studies began with the rise of participatory culture in the 1990s, when new cultural technologies enabled individuals to express and actualize themselves within an increasingly commercialized environment, shaped by multiple media forms and the institutions behind them, such as television networks, newspaper conglomerates, and film studios.⁷ In this context, where culture and commerce intersect, media act as mediators between top-down corporate-driven activities and bottom-up consumer-driven participation. These converging dynamics give rise to what Jenkins and Deuze have termed “convergence culture”.⁸

Within convergence culture, transmedia has been theorized beyond its literal sense of “transcending a variety of mediums”.⁹ On January 15, 2003, Henry Jenkins introduced the term “transmedia storytelling”

⁵ Hinck, Ashley. “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values.” *Theorizing digital rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99.

⁶ Kunz, Tobias, and Lukas Wilde. *Transmedia Character Studies*. (London: Routledge, 2023), 2.

⁷ Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Jenkins, Henry., Deuze, Mark. Editorial: Convergence Culture. *Convergence*, 14.1. (2008), 5-12.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gambarato, Renira R. “How to analyze transmedia narratives.” In *Conference New Media: Changing Media Landscapes*. (2012).

as he believed that “moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling”.¹⁰ He later refined it in 2006 to describe a process whereby a story “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole”.¹¹ The emphasis on each medium’s unique contribution highlights the complexity of transmedia storytelling, which demands simultaneous attention to both the individual medium and the overarching narrative structure.

However, this demand has been critiqued as overly idealistic. The lack of a clearly structured methodology makes it difficult to identify the specific differences and interconnections among media contributions. As such, recognizing transmedia storytelling without a robust analytical framework can lead to vague or superficial understandings. Addressing this issue, Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa call for a “cooling down” of transmedia storytelling.¹² They identify two modes of transmedia practice: one aligned with traditional adaptation (e.g., from novel to film), and the other focused on expanding a story world through new narrative additions. Yet, they argue that neither approach necessarily enhances the aesthetic value of any individual medium. From a semiotic perspective, they describe transmedia as involving “hot media,” as media saturated with different and various sign systems, while “cool media” operate with fewer semiotic layers and are more easily comprehensible for the audience.¹³ In the current era of convergence, transmedia storytelling is often too hot, it contains too many media and too many layers of structure, leading to overcomplexity and diminishing audience engagement. They suggest that simplifying the structure could make transmedia storytelling more accessible and aesthetically meaningful.

Based on Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa’s perspective, I argue that focusing on the work-specific features of each medium within a transmedia narrative allows scholars to connect media analysis with the social contexts of their production and reception. This is because social contexts are difficult to grasp at the level of an entire transmedia franchise but become more tangible when examined through individual texts or media works situated in specific sociocultural environments. This methodological need for social context becomes especially evident in the context of Chinese transmedia studies, where some conventional scholars have tended to conflate transmedia with simple adaptation from one medium to another. For example, in one recent study, transmedia was interpreted as transmedia adaptation, focusing on the integration between web-novels and films.¹⁴ The film adaptation of a web-novel is seen to improve the story's emotional and social resonance. While this case reflects meaningful intermedial

¹⁰ Jenkins, Henry. “Transmedia Storytelling”, *MIT Technology Review*, (2003): <http://www.technologyreview.com/news/401760/transmedia-storytelling/>

¹¹ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

¹² Baetens, Jan, and Domingo Sánchez-Mesa. “Cooling down transmedia storytelling.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.2 (2022): 3.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Zhang, Yeyang. “Interaction, Transmedia Narrative Adaptation and Visual Communication: A Case Study of the Internet Fiction Adapted Film *Better Days*.” *2021 5th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences*. (Atlantis Press, 2021).

transformation, the analysis ultimately falls within the realm of adaptation studies rather than transmedia storytelling.

Tobias Kunz and Lukas R.A. Wilde define transmedia characters as entry points into cultural and social reflections, or as nodes in discussions thereof.¹⁵ In their tripartite model of contexts, technological, semiotic, and social, it is the social context that is most relevant here.¹⁶ While the concept of social context helps highlight how characters are influenced by creators, audiences, and cultural codes, it does not fully explain how these interactions function in today's digital environment. Social context signals that the transmedia character network engages with social processes; digital fluidity explains how those processes unfold. It refers to identity formation, meaning-making, and political expression as occurring in decentralised, participatory, and mutable ways across media platforms.¹⁷ I propose that digital fluidity, as defined by Ashley Hinck, is the core form of this social context, it is how transmedia character networks are made social.

Such views of exploring transmedia by turning to transmedia character have been emerging only in recent years, propelled mainly by Jan-Noël Thon who proposed in 2015 to investigate the role that character plays in the transmedia storyworld or transmedia universe.¹⁸ In the 2015 article Thon focused on the question "Does character X have a birthmark on his or her back?" to argue that the transmedia character is made into a popular character by its production company or creator rather than being born as a transmedia character. In 2016, Jan-Noël Thon collaborated with Lukas R.A. Wilde to further develop their focus on the transmedia character by introducing the theory of the "actor-network account" from sociology and claimed that the transmedia character in comics is what Sebastian Bartosch called "a dynamic network formed by heterogeneous actors".¹⁹ It was not until 2019 that Jan-Noël Thon for the first time systematically proposed the concept of "transmedia character network". This means by which the transmedia character should not be one character but a "network" in which each character was not created by one author nor accepted as one character. The transmedia character is created within a network of its own rights, so the transmedia character network will likely have become more diverse, but one can still find media texts that contribute to the representation of a single transmedia character across media boundaries.²⁰ Later, in 2022, Jan-Noël Thon and Robert Pearson refined their idea of the transmedia character network. They focused on how each work-specific transmedia character "reboots" in the transmedia character network. Rebooting is a process that occurs when a character in one medium is created with some connection to a previous character in a different medium, such as a video game

¹⁵ Kunz, Tobias, and Lukas Wilde. *Transmedia Character Studies*. (London: Routledge, 2023), 3.

¹⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷ Hinck, Ashley. "Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values." *Theorizing digital rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99.

¹⁸ Thon, Jan-Noël. "Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial Universes." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7.2. (2015), 21–53.

¹⁹ Bartosch, Sebastian. "Understanding comics' mediality as an actor-network: some elements of translation in the works of Brian Fies and Dylan Horrocks." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 7:3 (2016), 242-253.

Thon, Jan-Noël; Wilde, Lukas R.A. "Mediality and materiality of contemporary comics" *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 7:3, (2016), 233-241.

²⁰ Thon, Jan-Noël. "Transmedia characters: Theory and analysis" *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 5.3. (2019), 176-199.

character created in connection to a novel or theatre character.²¹ These characters are intertextually connected to form a transmedia character network. It is this process of rebooting that enables the transmedia character network to exist not in a static status but rather in a dynamic fluidity in the digital transmedia world. It refigures the concept of transmedia character network, as developed by Thon and Pearson, to become not just a narrative strategy, but a socially situated digital fluid system, because the motivation of rebooting is not by the character itself or the network it constructs but mostly by the social contexts of the transmedia character and its transmedia character network.²²

In 2024, Kunz and Wilde further developed the transmedia character network in the social context, demonstrating that characters are shaped by the social positions of their production, are embedded in systems of gender and class, and interpreted through audience reception.²³ These interpretations are not static but culturally situated and ongoing. As Jens Eder notes, audiences' "imaginative capacity" (translated by Jan-Noël Thon in his article "Transmedia characters: Theory and analysis" 2019) to relate to characters is deeply shaped by lived experience in society.²⁴ In convergence culture, audiences act as prosumers, actively engaging with characters through memes, fan fiction, and discourse²⁵. These socially driven practices are best captured through the lens of digital fluidity, which is more than a technological property, it is a social context.

3. Chinese Digital Feminism

In this paper I extend the social context of the transmedia character network by emphasizing digital fluidity as a social context for the motivation of the rebooting process. I suggest that Chinese digital feminism bridges the transmedia character network and digital fluidity. Unlike previous phases of feminist discourse that relied on centralized platforms or canonical texts, Chinese digital feminism unfolds through decentralized, ambiguous, and affective engagements across media forms.²⁶ The character of Wang Baochuan is not a passive object of reinterpretation but an active node in this network, a character whose meanings shift depending on the media context, the platform, the audience's political stance, and the broader discourse of feminism, nationalism, or consumerism.

Chinese digital feminism has been widely discussed across Chinese media, feminist practices, and has become one of the major areas of interest in Chinese transmedia studies in recent years.²⁷ Chang and

²¹ Thon, Jan-Noël and Roberta Pearson. "Transmedia Characters." *Narrative*, 30.2.(2022), 139-151.

²² Thon, Jan-Noël and Roberta Pearson. "Transmedia Characters." *Narrative*, 30.2.(2022), 139-151.

²³ Kunz, Tobias, and Lukas Wilde. *Transmedia Character Studies*. (London: Routledge, 2023), 4.

²⁴ Eder, Jens. *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse*. (Marburg: Schüren 2008a);

Eder, Jens. *Was sind Figuren? Ein Beitrag zur interdisziplinären Fiktionstheorie*. (Paderborn: Mentis-Verlag. 2008b).

²⁵ Ritzer, George, Paul Dean, and Nathan Jurgenson. "The coming of age of the prosumer." *American Behavioral Scientist* 56.4 (2012): 379-398.

²⁶ Baer, Hester. "Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism." *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.1 (2016), 17-34.

²⁷ Examples include Chang, Jiang, Hailong Ren, and Qiguang Yang. "A virtual gender asylum? The social media profile picture, young Chinese women's self-empowerment, and the emergence of a Chinese digital feminism." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.3 (2018): 325-340; Wu, Qian, Hang Jiang, and Wenyan Lu. "Exploring the Empowerment of Chinese Women's Discourse in Tik Tok." *International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*. (2023).; Zhao, Jamie J., and Eve Ng. "Introduction: Centering Women on Post-2010 Chinese TV." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15.3 (2022):

Tian list three features of digital feminism as the reasons behind this phenomenon: (1) digital media makes the representation of women's issues more explicit among the general public due to its wider accessibility to mass media audiences; (2) digital platforms provide space with more flexible sharing patterns both nationally and globally; (3) the contemporary feminist activism, shaped by digital technology, manifests as a blend of digital and physical elements. These elements interact to sustain, support, and challenge each other in different social contexts.²⁸ The first two features are reasonable as they understand digital features as a communication channel that accelerates the accessibility and adaptability of digital feminism. However, the third feature makes the term digital feminism more problematic than pragmatic.

First, the term "digital" is ambiguous in Chinese feminism contexts. As a term that adds an important feature to Chinese feminism, it has a high level of ambiguity. It could refer to digital media, such as film, short videos, TV series, and all digitized or digitalized media forms that have boomed in China since the development of global mass media in China.²⁹ On the other hand, it is highly related to the development of the internet and online culture since the 1990s in China.³⁰ This ambiguity causes difficulty in communication and debate among scholars. While scholars use the same term "digital," they may be talking about entirely different things, such as blogs, online forums, films, web-novels, online arts platforms, and TV series. This ambiguity increases the barrier to identifying and analyzing digital feminism or using it as a theory to analyze social phenomena. However, recent studies³¹ identify the internet as a medium, similar to film or TV series, where the audience is generally the same group of people but more participatory and engaged with online culture. Therefore, in digital feminism studies, both digital media and the internet are included as research objects.

Second, Chinese digital feminism can be divided into two categories that are often used interchangeably to represent Chinese feminist digital activism or digital Chinese neoliberal feminism.³² These two

299-315; Chang, Jiang, and Hao Tian. "Girl power in boy love: Yaoi, online female counterculture, and digital feminism in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.4 (2021): 604-620; Chen, Yali, Hao Tian, and Jiang Chang. "Chinese first, woman second: Social media and the cultural identity of female immigrants." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 27.1 (2021): 22-45; Lu, Wentao. "Digitally Networked Feminist Activism in China: The Case of Weibo." *Kommunikation. medien* 12 (2020): 1-22. Wang, Yun, and Güneş Tavmen. "New outlets of digital feminist activism in China: The #SeeFemaleWorkers campaign." *Feminist Media Studies* (2024): 1-17.

²⁸ Chang, Jiang, and Hao Tian. "Girl power in boy love: Yaoi, online female counterculture, and digital feminism in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.4 (2021): 604-620.

²⁹ Chang, Jiang, Hailong Ren, and Qiguang Yang. "A virtual gender asylum? The social media profile picture, young Chinese women's self-empowerment, and the emergence of a Chinese digital feminism." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21.3 (2018): 325-340.

³⁰ Liao, Sara. "Unpopular feminism: Popular culture and gender politics in digital China." *Communication and the Public* (2024).

³¹ Yin, Siyuan, and Yu Sun. "Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.7 (2021); Wang, Bin, and Catherine Driscoll. "Chinese feminists on social media: Articulating different voices, building strategic alliances." *Continuum* 33.1 (2019): 1-15.

³² Examples include: Lu, Wentao. "Digitally Networked Feminist Activism in China: The Case of Weibo." *Kommunikation. medien* 12 (2020): 1-22; Sun, Qingyue, and Runze Ding. "Unveiling the Contested Digital Feminism: Advocacy, Self-Promotion, and State Oversight Among Chinese Beauty Influencers on Weibo." *Social Media+ Society* 10.3 (2024). Zhou, Yunyun, and Kailing Xie. "Gendering national sacrifices: The making of new heroines in China's counter-COVID-19 TV series." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 15.3 (2022): 372-392.; Huang, Qiqi. "Anti-feminism: Four strategies for the

categories together “express either a sense of hopefulness about the participatory potential of new technologies or a pervasive skepticism about these technologies as tools of commodification, surveillance, and repression”.³³ On the one hand, Chinese digital feminism represents a convergence of feminist activism actions, such as feminist protests, online activism, and media campaigns. The rise of this category of digital feminism in China can be traced back to the early 2010s, gaining significant momentum with the global spread of the #MeToo movement in 2018.³⁴ These are the “digital media in the form of networked and/or collective actions toward transformative changes of unequal power structures”.³⁵ However, studies of this type often confuse two groups of people: feminist activists³⁶ and women concerned about women’s rights in China.³⁷ The problem is that digital feminism does not have to be conducted by feminist activists; it can be carried out by Chinese women who are concerned about their rights but do not aim to be activists. Additionally, feminist activists do not have to be female when engaging in digital feminist activism.

On the other hand, other studies focus on the connection of digital feminism to consumerism and the commerciality of the social media era, which is based on the neoliberal context of internet culture. The consumerist capitalism behind this type of digital feminism still plays an important role in shaping common knowledge about women’s rights and power.³⁸ This leads many Chinese women to believe they can empower themselves through consumer activities.³⁹ However, when discussing feminism and consumerism, scholars often vaguely mention the logic of consumerism or capitalism without solid evidence of how feminism has been commercialized for profit. They also fail to mention the broader economic context in which digital feminism exists.

The problems and ambiguities within Chinese digital feminism demonstrate that it must be approached from an integrated, context-sensitive perspective. It is neither necessary nor productive to draw rigid boundaries between digital media and the internet, or between feminist digital activism and neoliberal

demonisation and depoliticisation of feminism on Chinese social media." *Feminist Media Studies* 23.7 (2023); Han, Ling, and Yue Liu. "When digital feminisms collide with nationalism: Theorizing “pink feminism” on Chinese social media." *Women's Studies International Forum*. 105 (2024).

³³ Baer, Hester. "Process-based activism and feminist politics in the neoliberal age." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.8 (2021): 1382-1386.1383

³⁴ Yin, Siyuan, and Yu Sun. "Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.7 (2021)

Sun, Qingyue, and Runze Ding. "Unveiling the Contested Digital Feminism: Advocacy, Self-Promotion, and State Oversight Among Chinese Beauty Influencers on Weibo." *Social Media+ Society* 10.3 (2024).

³⁵ Yin, Siyuan, and Yu Sun. "Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.7 (2021)

³⁶ I mean feminists with the challenging positionality of identity: here I use the case from Wang and Driscoll that when a feminist claims to be an activist or they are confirmed as being comfortable with the activist label, they can be identified as feminist activist. Wang, Bin, and Catherine Driscoll. "Chinese feminists on social media: Articulating different voices, building strategic alliances." *Continuum* 33.1 (2019): 1-15.

³⁷ Huang, Qiqi. "Anti-feminism: Four strategies for the demonisation and depoliticisation of feminism on Chinese social media." *Feminist Media Studies* 23.7 (2023).

³⁸ Yin, Siyuan, and Yu Sun. "Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China." *Feminist Media Studies* 21.7 (2021).

³⁹ Wang, Yayun, and Jiang Chang. "Why do some women hate feminists? Social media and the structural limitation of Chinese digital feminism." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 29.2 (2023): 226-247.

feminist expressions. In this light, the transmedia intertextual character network provides a valuable theoretical framework for exploring Chinese digital feminism in both work-specific and medium-specific ways. Crucially, it is the very *ambiguity* of Chinese digital feminism—its overlapping forms, contradictory logics, and blurred boundaries—that renders it especially compatible with the concept of digital fluidity as defined by Ashley Hinck. Digital fluidity embraces multiplicity, movement, and decentralised meaning-making, allowing us to better understand how feminism manifests, adapts, and circulates across different digital platforms and narrative spaces. Thus, the transmedia character network—when analysed through digital fluidity—offers a powerful lens for examining the complex, hybridised cultural logics of Chinese digital feminism. Hinck defines digital fluidity as “the capacity for meaning-making, identity formation, and political invention to occur in ways that are participatory, decentralized, and mutable across platforms and communities”.⁴⁰ This makes digital fluidity the central means by which the transmedia character network becomes socially meaningful, especially in contexts like China, where characters like Wang Baochuan are remixed within layered digital and ideological terrains.

This paper builds on Hinck’s framework to argue that digital fluidity is not merely a condition of digital media, but a social process of rebooting transmedia character network, one that facilitates the dynamic interconnection of character portrayals across media, and one that enables their mobilisation within ongoing cultural discourses. In this light, the transmedia character network is not just a narrative strategy or practice, but a socially situated and fluid system. In the combination of the digital fluidity of Chinese digital feminism and the transmedia character network, characters exist not as unified entities but as distributed presences that are rebooted, recontextualised, and reinterpreted across platforms, reflecting and responding to shifting social values, politics, and imaginaries. It enables narrative multiplicity, audience participation, and ideological reinvention across media systems.

To further articulate how digital fluidity operates within the transmedia character network of Wang Baochuan, the next section applies Ashley Hinck’s framework of three interrelated practices of digital fluidity which are further explained in the following section with case studies: the reconfiguration of public values beyond formal institutions, the role of online communities in grounding public action, and the non-hierarchical, networked nature of invention.⁴¹ Through this framework, I examine how each mode of digital feminism—represented respectively in web music, social media discourse, and short video drama, reconfigures Wang Baochuan’s transmedia presence, offering insight into the contemporary negotiation of feminist subjectivities in China’s digital landscape.

4. Wang Baochuan as Web Music

Hinck’s first type of digital fluidity in social contexts describes a bottom-up transformation in the power of speech made possible by the rise of internet technologies.⁴² Originally, this referred to a shift away

⁴⁰ Hinck, Ashley. “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values.” *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99.

⁴¹ Hinck, Ashley. “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values.” *Theorizing digital rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁴² Hinck, Ashley. “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values.” *Theorizing digital rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99.

from the exclusive control of public institutions, such as newspaper agencies or state-run television, toward individual users who can now express their views online or via social media platforms. However, when applying Hinck's theory to the Chinese context, particularly in relation to digital feminism and transmedia character networks, certain adaptations are necessary. In this section, I examine the web song *Wujiapo 2021*, part of the broader transmedia network of the character Wang Baochuan, to explore how both the content and medium reflect a reconfiguration of public discourse in China.

Since the early 21st century, the development of digital platforms and internet infrastructure in China has enabled a more decentralized model of music production and distribution.⁴³ As Liu notes, while online music creators enjoy greater creative freedom, they also encounter frequent disputes over copyright and authorship.⁴⁴ Musicians are no longer dependent on major production companies, but with this independence comes legal uncertainty. For instance, the 2004 hit song *Mice Love Rice (Laoshu Ai Dami 老鼠爱大米)* became embroiled in copyright conflicts over both its lyrics and melody. The singer Yang Chengang firstly published the song on his own web-account of a Chinese online streaming platform, which then became popular very quickly. Yang, as he claimed to be the composer and author of the song received large amounts of income due to its popularity. However, the conflict came out as he was prosecuted for plagiarism and should not have been credited as the original composer or author of the song. The biggest problem at the time was that the copyright for web-music was hard to confirm without any effective tracing mechanism.⁴⁵ Despite this potential ambiguity, many artists continue to embrace web-based production because of its accessibility and commercial potential.

Wujiapo 2021 emerged in this context and quickly gained popularity, especially among younger Chinese audiences. Composed and performed by Li Zhengkuan, also known as Menglongsi Kuandu, a 26-year-old who trained in Chinese traditional theatre before pivoting to pop music, the song exemplifies the digital music boom on platforms like Douyin. Within just one day of its release, the song was streamed over 333,000 times,⁴⁶ and by 2023 it had received more than 4.5 million likes from internet users.⁴⁷ The song reinterprets the traditional story of Wang Baochuan from a distinctly male perspective. In contrast to traditional Chinese theatre, where her character represents steadfast female virtue, *Wujiapo 2021* positions Wang Baochuan as the recipient of emotional regret from her husband, Xue Pinggui. The lyrics, sung from his point of view, both borrow directly from and summarize original lines from Jingju or Peking Opera. However, the most striking departure lies in the opening and chorus, which are shaped by a modern sensibility and a digital feminist reading.

⁴³ Nie, Ke. "Disperse and preserve the perverse: computing how hip-hop censorship changed popular music genres in China." *Poetics* 88 (2021).

⁴⁴ Liu, Jiarui. "The tough reality of copyright piracy: a case study of the music industry in China." *Cardozo Arts & Ent. LJ* 27. (2009): 621.

⁴⁵ Tencent Wang 腾讯网, "Laoshu ai dami bingfei Yang Chengang yuanchang ta jiang banquan yinvsijia" 老鼠爱大米并非杨臣刚原唱他将版权一女四嫁 [Mice love Rice is not originally sung by Yang Chengang: he sold his copyright to four companies at the same time] (2022): <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20220204A04P9800>

⁴⁶ Yin Yue Zhou Bao 音乐周报. "Wujiapo 2021 huole shi ouran ma" 武家坡 2021 火了是偶然吗 [Was the popularity of Wujiapo 2021 pure luck?] (2023): <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/XRhGgzPUONfS4M1JuhKOSw>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

1. In the opening verse of the *Wujiapo 2021*, Xue Pinggui explicitly apologizes to his long-abandoned wife, pleading “These are all my faults, please forgive me.” (千错万错, 乃是为夫一人之错, 你你你, 你就宽恕了罢). In the original Peking Opera, by contrast, Xue conceals his identity to test Wang Baochuan’s loyalty and offers no apology upon revealing himself. In fact, he reprimands her with the words: “You didn’t ask me whether I was hungry or cold? You only care about my position at the court!” (不问我饥寒二字, 就问我做官)⁴⁸. Comparing these two versions, we find the 2021 web song constructs the character of Wang Baochuan by reconstruction of Wang’s husband’s character.
2. The chorus of the 2021 web song intensifies the husband’s stand, repeating lines such as: “Ah, my wife Wang Baochuan, I feel sorry for you that...” (啊 我的妻 王氏宝钏 可怜你) and “Ah, my wife Wang Baochuan, I should not have (done)...” (啊 我的妻 王氏宝钏 我不该), none of which exist in the traditional libretto. This shift recasts Xue Pinggui as remorseful.

The implications of *Wujiapo 2021* go beyond the lyrics. The song exemplifies digital fluidity not only through its content but also through its medium: bridging traditional Chinese theatre music with contemporary web-based pop. Despite its feminist interpretive potential, the work was not promoted in these terms. Media interviews with Li Zhengkuan focus instead on his identity as an “intangible cultural heritage advocate”⁴⁹ or a “contemporary innovator of Peking Opera.”⁵⁰ These portrayals highlight the song as a creative revitalization of Peking Opera that resonates with younger audiences via familiar digital formats.

In one interview, Li remarked: “Peking Opera should not only be performed in its traditional manner. We should show respect for the tradition but also play with it to make it more attractive.”⁵¹ This statement reflects a tension between preservation and innovation, between institutional control and individual creativity. Historically, Peking Opera has been deeply entwined with state cultural institutions and was designated as the National Theatre as early as the 1930s. That legacy underscores Hinck’s point that digital fluidity allows public values, once dictated by state institutions, to be expressed through more personal and decentralized means.⁵²

At the same time, this reinterpretation invites a more complex reading. Seen through the lens of web music as a commercial form of popular culture, the case of *Wujiapo 2021* reveals an implicit nationalist undercurrent. Here, digital music is not just a space for feminist reimagining but also a platform where traditional cultural forms are repackaged for mass consumption. This ambivalence aligns with Han and

⁴⁸ Sun, Ping 孙萍. *Zhongguo jingju baibu jingdian waiyi xilie: wujiapo 中国京剧百部经典外译系列: 武家坡* [Translation series of a hundred jingju classics: reunion at wujia slope] (Beijing: Guo jia tu shu guan chu ban she 北京: 国家图书馆出版社 2016).

⁴⁹ Sohu 搜狐. “Jingju chuancheng ren Menglongsi kuandu” 京剧传承人猛龙寺宽度 [Cultural heir of Jingju: Menglongsi kuandu] (2023): https://www.sohu.com/a/728931244_115487.

⁵⁰ Tianmu xinwen 天目新闻. “95 hou xiqu ren ruhe wan jingju” 95 后戏曲人如何玩京剧 [How does a post-1995 xiqu practitioner play jingju], (2022): <https://tidenews.com.cn/news.html?id=661109>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hinck, Ashley. “Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values.” *Theorizing digital rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 99.

Liu's analysis of Chinese nationalist feminists, who, they argue, "are subject to gendered insults from male conservatives for being female and feminists, and they are criticized by more liberal-leaning feminists for being nationalists."⁵³ While Han and Liu focus on the negative online discourse surrounding nationalist feminists, *Wujiapo 2021* is situated in a more positive terrain: feminism is not explicitly attacked, but it is national tradition not feminism that is the focal point.⁵⁴

In this song, female experience, filtered through the male gaze, is not ridiculed but marginalized. What is celebrated instead is the fusion of digital creativity and Chinese heritage. The incorporation of traditional aesthetics into pop music, through genres such as Guo Feng (国风) or national style music and Xi Qiang (戏腔) or operatic tone, evokes cultural memory and reinforces national identity. These genres blend nostalgia with modern sensibilities, and, as Ye describes, create "a juxtaposition of classical (archaistic/nostalgic) and modern (popular) styles, with extraordinary elegance and classicism".⁵⁵ Ultimately, *Wujiapo 2021* illustrates that digital fluidity in China is not simply about new forms of feminist storytelling, but also about the medium-specific innovation of cultural nationalism. The song transforms traditional theatre through a male-driven digital reinterpretation while embedding it in the broader framework of national identity and popular taste. In this sense, the public values once reserved for political institutions now find hybrid expression in both the content and medium of web music.

5. Wang Baochuan on Social Media

In this second part of the analysis, I examine, in China, the social media campaign surrounding Wang Baochuan to explore the localisation of Hinck's second type of social context for digital fluidity: that *online communities ground important public action*.⁵⁶ In Hinck's original theorisation, digital fluidity is enabled by networked technologies that support "much of the radical expansion of choice brought on by fluidity, enabling rich communities and publics to form apart from geographic limits".⁵⁷ This idea has mostly been used to explain feminist activism that moves from offline to online spaces, especially in relation to the efficacy of transmedia contexts unconstrained by geographic boundaries.⁵⁸ However, the digital fluidity of feminist *transmedia characters* is more complex than the fluidity or mobilisation of real human feminist activists. This is because characters must be understood through their representations and manipulations by human creators, within specific social contexts, work dynamics, and medium specificities and, more importantly, as part of the process of rebooting a transmedia character network.

As confirmed in the previous section, the web music did not generate significant discussion around women's virtues or the differences between contemporary and traditional feminism in China. Instead,

⁵³ Han, Ling, and Yue Liu. "When digital feminisms collide with nationalism: Theorizing "pink feminism" on Chinese social media." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 105. (2024): 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ye, Shuyang 叶舒阳. "Jiyu daxing quku ziyuan fenxi de zhongguo feng geci yanjiu" 基于大型曲库资源分析的"中国风"歌词研究 [Lyrics analysis of guofeng songs based on large language model dataset]. *Shan Dong Daxue 山东大学*, (2019).

⁵⁶ Hinck, Ashley. "Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values." *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 105.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lin, Zhongxuan. "Contextualized transmedia mobilization: Media practices and mobilizing structures in the Umbrella Movement." *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 24.

the feminism debate unfolded elsewhere on Chinese social media, where Wang Baochuan appeared not as an isolated character but as part of the process of rebooting a transmedia character network. The values associated with Chinese women's personalities and traditional female virtues—represented through the figure of Wang Baochuan in the Chinese traditional theatre—were critically re-evaluated in 2022 by Chinese social media communities on Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China. A slogan, “Wang Baochuan Foraging for Wild Vegetables”, was widely circulated and became emblematic of these online feminism communities. I use the term *feminism community*, rather than *feminist communities*, to echo my earlier argument that online feminism groups need not be affiliated with formal feminist identities. The slogan is based on the portrayal of Wang Baochuan after her husband abandons her. It criticises her as a foolish woman who sacrifices her loving parents and wealthy lifestyle for a romantic marriage with a man who ultimately betrays her by marrying a second wife. The slogan represents a major plot of Wang Baochuan in the transmedia story, in which after her husband leaving her alone at home in poverty and disappearing for 18 years, Wang Baochuan rejects any support from her parents and refuses contact with any male to keep her chastity (shouzhen 守贞). She refuses to speak or work out of her house as a “loyal wife” should not work in the society to avoid any contacts with any man. Therefore, the only way she can support herself is to forage for wild vegetables in the nearby forest.

On Weibo as the social media platform, there is a ‘super-hot topic’ community (*Chao Hua* 超话) with 330 million views and 135,000 posts and comments by hundreds of thousands of users. The community's preface reads: “Tell your fellow sisters: if they are blinded by love like Wang Baochuan, they'll have to eat wild vegetables for 18 years as she did” (gaosu ni de zimei, yaoshi xiang Wang Baochuan Yiyang lian'ai nao, jiu yao chi shibanian yecai 告诉你的姐妹 要是像王宝钏一样恋爱脑 就要吃十八年野菜). Here, the phrase “love brain” or “muddled head” (Lian'ai nao 恋爱脑), refers to a group of women who act irrationally due to romantic feelings and is used as a contemporary term to criticise Wang Baochuan's excessive loyalty to her husband. This term, not limited to this online space, has become a buzzword representing Chinese women who are subordinated within romantic relationships.⁵⁹ I argue that “Lian'ai nao” encapsulates a protest by contemporary Chinese digital feminism against the traditional Chinese women's virt, specifically that of the virtuous wife who should admire and obey her husband, in accordance with the Three Obediences and Four Virtues (*Sancong side* 三从四德) requiring women to follow and obey their father, husband, and son — effectively all the males in their family. This shows how the transmedia character network functions as a process.⁶⁰ The social media community is not only linked to the web music (by filling in its lack of feminist discussion) but is also connected to Wang Baochuan's legacy in Chinese traditional theatre—positioned in opposition to traditional values of female virtue.

⁵⁹ Zheng Qizan 郑启赞. “Cong lian'ai nao dao jiankang lian'ai guan qinggan jiaoyu de yingdui celue” 从恋爱脑到健康恋爱观：情感教育的应对策略. [From muddle head to healthy love relationships: strategies of relationship education] *Advances in Education* 14 (2024): 72.

⁶⁰ Liu, Fengshu. “From degendering to (re)gendering the self: Chinese youth negotiating modern womanhood.” *Gender and Education*, 26.1. (2014):18-34

However, Wang Baochuan in these social media spaces is not only a symbol of public feminist protest against traditional Chinese women's virtues as a patriarchal oppression on Chinese women. There are also numerous posts that reveal the neoliberal manipulation of feminist discourse within the same community. With the rise of digital business and online marketing,⁶¹ platforms like Weibo have evolved from spaces for sharing public values and daily life to sites partially dominated by online consumerism. As Meng and Huang argue, online consumerism aligns Chinese digital feminism with the profitability of women-focused business, creating a socio-cultural environment in which everyday consumption among Chinese women is encouraged.⁶²

In the "Wang Baochuan wa yecai" social media community, a trend of neoliberal feminism uses Wang Baochuan's image to promote women's fashion and beauty consumption. There is a post from the same community by a commercial organisation called Nanfang Wenyijia (南方文艺家) or Nanfang Arts House which shares book recommendations and publishes sponsored content. While the post is not an advertisement *per se*, it presents wild vegetable collecting as a fashionable and alternative outdoor lifestyle. This trend of neoliberal feminism also spreads to other communities via the digital fluidity enabled by networked technologies. Another post on Weibo shows a post from another Weibo community, featuring six images of manicured nails with the caption: "A batch of beautiful nail designs, even Wang Baochuan wouldn't want to dig wild vegetables with such pretty hands" (yibo haokande meijia, Wang Baochuan zuole dou shebude yonglai wa yecai 一波好看的美甲 王宝钏做了都舍不得用来挖野菜). Here, Wang Baochuan is used as a symbolic character to suggest that women should not mistreat themselves as she did. Instead, they should reward themselves with beauty treatments. The message was effective, receiving 44 comments, most asking where the nails were done or discussing details in order to get similar designs. These content creators are not feminists, nor are they explicitly discussing feminism. Yet, they appropriate Wang Baochuan as a feminist transmedia character to promote a capitalist lifestyle and consumer practices targeted at women. This shows that the social media protests against the traditional Chinese feminine virtues was exploited by these commercial enterprises who reinterpret the original protest slogan and use it as a marketing device for beauty products.

6. Wang Baochuan in Short Video Drama

The third type of digital fluidity that Hinck suggests is a non-hierarchical structure about digital creations and inventions.⁶³ She claims that inventions characterised by digital fluidity occur in fluid, horizontal and networked ways.⁶⁴ This non-hierarchical structure is not only represented naturally in the transmedia character network, but as a mobile application-based invention. In this final section of analysis, I take the

⁶¹ Peng, Altman Yuzhu, and Peng. *A feminist reading of China's digital public sphere*. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

⁶² Meng, Bingchun, and Yanning Huang. "Patriarchal capitalism with Chinese characteristics: Gendered discourse of 'Double Eleven' shopping festival." *Cultural Studies*. 31.5. (2017): 659-684

⁶³ Hinck, Ashley. "Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values." *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 106

⁶⁴ Ibid

case the process of an invention of new medium and its contribution to Wang Baochuan as transmedia character network from both its medium-specific and work-specific features.

Based on the popularity of using *lian'ai nao* as the Chinese digital feminist discourse, in February 2024, the character Wang Baochuan was featured in a newly invented media form: short video drama. The production is entitled *Reborn as a Tragic Heroine, I Refuse to Be Love-Obsessed*, and has been played across various smart phone application-based video platforms in China such as Wechat Video Channel, Kuaishou APP, Douyin APP and Hongguo short video platforms. On the first day of the release of the first episode, the short video drama reached audiences of 1 million across the above platforms.⁶⁵ The short video drama in this final section of analysis is arguably an invention of both new media and new work in China because of the fluid, horizontal and networked transmedia environment.

For its medium specificity, it is very important to note that Wang Baochuan in the short video drama is created on a non-hierarchical transformation in Chinese media industries. As is claimed by Hinck, an invention characterised by digital fluidity does not have any "single speaker" as monopoly or centre of the sector. In China, before the introduction of Internet and other market-oriented media platforms, "all broadcast media are state owned and heavily-handedly managed by the National Radio and Television Administration."⁶⁶ China Central Television Station holds the absolute power as the single and highest mouthpiece for Chinese media industries. With the introduction of the internet video streaming companies, such as Youku and Tencent Video, there has been a minor transformation in marketisation and privatisation in the Chinese media industries. It was not until the emergence and development of the mobile app-based video platforms, such as WeChat Video Channel, Kuaishou APP, Douyin APP, that China began a deeper transformation to participatory society by grassroots creators⁶⁷ and broke the monopoly of state-ownership of media industries.

This mode of participation in media production by those grassroots individual creators can be explained by what David Harvey called "flexible accumulation",⁶⁸ a postmodern commercial mode of neoliberalist values of conducting small-scale niche production with the ideology of individual entrepreneurship.⁶⁹ According to Harvey, flexible accumulation is the practice in the postmodern market whereby a large number of small businesses come up to challenge authoritarianism and market monopoly.⁷⁰ The idea

⁶⁵ Dataeye. "2 yue duanju yuebao" 2 月短剧月报 [February report for short drama videos] *Dataeye Duan Ju Guan Cha 短剧观察* (2024): https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ocsC_TFDIGjrxhwgQT_hw.

⁶⁶ Hinck, Ashley. "Fluidity in a Digital World: Choice, communities, and public values." *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 106.

Fung, Anthony, Xiaoxiao Zhang, and Luzhou Li. "Independence within the boundaries: State control and strategies of Chinese television for freedom." In *Media Independence*. (London: Routledge, 2014.): 243-260.

⁶⁷ Lin, Jian, and Jeroen de Kloet. "Platformization of the unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese digital cultural production." *Social Media+ Society* 5, no. 4 (2019).

⁶⁸ Harvey, David. "Flexible accumulation through urbanization." *Antipode* 19.3. (1987): 260-286.

⁶⁹ Li, Xunnan. "How theatre is applied by the Chinese state for neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics? The role of Mass Entrepreneurship and Mass Innovation policies in a Jingju (Peking opera) Theatre Company." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 27.3. (2022): 359-365.

⁷⁰ Harvey, David. "Flexible accumulation through urbanization." *Antipode* 19.3. (1987): 260-286.

holds that the smaller the businesses are the more flexible and fluid they are. The following three aspects of this genre of short video dramas are particularly relevant to my analysis here:

1. Short video drama is easily consumable, with each episode being very short and with a large total number of episodes. As defined by the National Radio and Television Administration in 2023, each episode of short video drama lasts between 30 seconds to 3 minutes, and it could have up to 100 episodes. The audience do not need to spend a large amount of time watching these productions, they can easily watch the short video dramas in the current fast-paced life and work style in China.⁷¹ For example, the Wang Baochuan short video drama has 100 episodes, each lasting for 2 minutes.⁷²
2. Short video dramas are mostly disseminated on smart phones and so become embedded in mobile apps (such as Wechat Video Channel) or independent short video apps (such as Douyin), or as independent mobile apps (such as the Hongguo short video drama APP). Their consumption is organically linked to mobile payment (*yidong zhifu* 移动支付). This means the audience pay to watch the next episode easily on their smart mobile phones as almost every Chinese has their phone connected to their bank account and just needs a couple of clicks to make payment for anything through the proliferation of these platforms.⁷³
3. Short video dramas are low cost, with fast production and high return. A 100-episode short video drama could be easily finished production in a week and could net an audience payment of up to 100 million RMB.⁷⁴ For the Wang Baochuan short video drama, on the first day of first episode release, it reaches 1 million views across the above platforms, with the potential of up to 10 million RMB turnover just for a day. Due to the high productivity, those short video dramas often put up with low quality production, with awkward costumes and props with errors or inappropriateness, or unsuitable music, voice overs, or shooting skills. This has led to many professional performing art practitioners dismissing or disparaging the whole genre of the short video drama. In the case of Wang Baochuan neither of the two main actors, Liu Ying and Wu Jiao, listed this short video drama on their official profile page, while other genres of productions, such as film, TV drama and even drama series by streaming platforms are included.

Medium specificity lays the foundation for understanding how the short video drama emerges in China's digital culture. The short video drama as a potential site for Chinese women, is not to provide an escape

⁷¹ Lin, Jian, and Jeroen de Kloet. "Platformization of the unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese digital cultural production." *Social Media+ Society* 5, no. 4 (2019).

⁷² Douban Dianying 豆瓣电影. Yingping huanchuan kuqing nüzhū wo cai budang lian'ai nao 影评: 魂穿王宝钏我不做恋爱脑 [Review: Soul-Traveling to a Miserable Heroine, I Refuse to Be Blinded by Love] (2024): <https://movie.douban.com/subject/37295883/>.

⁷³ Xu, Yuqian, Anindya Ghose, and Binqing Xiao. "Mobile payment adoption: An empirical investigation of Alipay." *Information Systems Research* 35.2. (2024): 807-828.

⁷⁴ Peng Pai 澎湃. "Quanwang baohuo de shuping duanju" 全网爆火的竖屏短剧 [The popular vertical short video drama on the internet] (2023): https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_25680316.

from the hierarchical social structure of Chinese patriarchy to a utopian non-hierarchical digital place, but rather, as Heather Inwood argues about Chinese Internet media that emphasizes the role of imagination, to allow an audience to simultaneously maintain an awareness of past experiences and future possibilities, “or the world they have just exited and the one in which they are currently immersed”.⁷⁵ Short video drama should be understood as a space of imaginative simultaneity rather than escapism. Although Inwood discusses web-game-based fiction, her insights also illuminate the short video drama context. The rebooting of transmedia characters such as Wang Baochuan emerges from the same generation of China’s Internet culture, where imagination and lived reality intersect.

Chang notes that short video drama’s narrative and performance conventions revolve around three imagined “wishes”: “marry Mr. Right,” “have the right to choose in gender relationships,” and “have a successful career.”⁷⁶ These imagined scenarios resonate with the social realities faced by viewers as Chinese women facing their marriage, relationship and career choices in the real world. Yet Chang’s use of the term “wish” is problematic, as it risks conflating sociological experience with narrative style. These “wishes” should not be interpreted as the actual desires of Chinese women in the real world, but as recurring narrative devices through which the genre constructs and characterises women. What is at stake, therefore, is how short video dramas narrate female characters such as Wang Baochuan, not how real Chinese women imagine their own lives. Although Inwood’s argument is used to talk about the context of Chinese web-game based novels, I argue that it explains also the context of the short video drama, as the specific digital feminism characterisation of Wang Baochuan is contextualised by the same generation of Chinese internet.

In the narration of the first wish in the Wang Baochuan short video drama, Wang Baochuan was a contemporary surgeon who time-travelled and took over the body of the original Wang Baochuan who had died. It suggests that the short video drama is designed for an audience with prior knowledge of Wang Baochuan as a transmedia character. In this first scene of the drama, it is actually linked with the social media campaign of *Wang Baochuan foraging for Wild Vegetables* as discussed in the last section. It shows that the original Wang Baochuan did not make the right choice in the gender relationship, it is not right to either listen to her father or to sacrifice herself for her husband. The consequence of not making the right choice was death alone, while after her death, the time-traveling female surgeon would take over her body and change her fate by making the right choice of being an independent woman. This narrative aligns with Chang’s argument that it reflects Chinese women’s resistance to traditional female virtues centred on obedience to the patriarchal family, as discussed in the previous section.⁷⁷ The character Wang Baochuan is not only characterised in the male-female romantic relationship, but also reflected in the female-female friendship. Within the short video drama, a female friend and neighbour of Wang Baochuan becomes a love rival and betrays and attacks Wang over a man.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Inwood, H. (2020). *What’s in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web-Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction*. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.4849>

⁷⁷ Chang, Cuiyan. “A Study of the Commonalities of Online Novels with “Big Heroine”.” *4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development*, (Atlantis Press, 2023): 552-558

The narration of the second wish of marrying Mr.Right is implicit in the characterisation of Wang Baochuan. In the later scenes, Wang Baochuan finally got divorced from her husband and marries her husband's brother, who is characterized as the right man for her. However, to be married with the Mr Right, Wang needs to compete with other girls.⁷⁸ Even though Wang Baochuan wins, this new marriage does not constitute an equal and independent relationship. Wang Baochuan still heavily relies on her husband, he has simply been replaced by another man. As argued by Chang this is related to the social reality that many Chinese women still implicitly accept the patriarchy and believe that this is not a social structural problem *per se*, but rather that the core issue is whether the individual male is the right one.⁷⁹

Third, for the narration of the wish of having a successful career, in the short video drama, Wang Baochuan continued to practise as a surgeon as she did before time-travelling.⁸⁰ She was characterised as the best surgeon as she had brought knowledge from the future and could cure syphilis, untreatable at that time. However, Wang Baochuan's successful career is established on the condition that she has a magic bracelet which could bring her back to the contemporary world in which she could get whatever she needs, including military weapons, surgical equipment, medicine and even contemporary foodstuffs. This section examines Wang Baochuan's reinvention in short video drama as a case of digital fluidity characterised by non-hierarchical, networked, and mobile-based media production. Through the medium and narrative specificity of this genre, it shows how Wang Baochuan is rebooted as a transmedia feminist figure shaped by platform capitalism, participatory culture, and the imaginative negotiation between traditional gender norms and contemporary aspirations.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined how the Chinese traditional theatre character Wang Baochuan has been rebooted as a transmedia character network in the digital era of Chinese feminist discourse, particularly through the lens of digital fluidity. By tracing her transformation across three key media-- web music, social media, and short video drama -- the analysis has demonstrated how each work-specific and medium-specific representation contributes to a dynamic and decentralised network of meanings. Drawing on the theory of transmedia character network and digital fluidity, I argue that Wang Baochuan is no longer a singular, completed character but a fluid, evolving site of contested feminist discourses shaped by contemporary digital media platforms.

Each section of the paper has focused on a specific dimension of this process: first, how web music enables reinterpretation of traditional narratives from a gendered perspective; second, how social media transforms the character into a symbol of both feminist critique and neoliberal commodification; and third, how short video drama represents an invention of new work and medium under flexible accumulation, contributing to horizontal and immersive expressions of Chinese feminist discourse in the digital space. Together, these portrayals form a transmedia character network in which Wang Baochuan

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

is both node and nexus, functioning as a cultural site through which contemporary Chinese feminism, resistance, and reinvention are negotiated.

Two key areas, however, remain outside the scope of this paper and call for further exploration. First, the formation of the transmedia character network in China remains deeply shaped by censorship and self-censorship. The state's regulatory mechanisms, combined with the internalized self-censorship of netizens, influenced by the enduring patriarchal culture, continue to delimit what can be publicly expressed or circulated. This censorship is not only enacted through institutional bans but is also embedded in everyday online communication, where sensitive words are replaced with pinyin initials, symbols, or emojis. As such, while digital fluidity affords greater multiplicity and grassroots participation, it also operates within an environment of surveillance and constraint that fundamentally shapes the contours of transmedia storytelling. Second, Wang Baochuan's presence across multiple media is not a product unique to the digital era. As a character originating from Chinese traditional theatre, she has appeared in many forms over the past century, as mentioned in the introduction. Yet, I argue that her contemporary resonance is distinctly different. These earlier iterations represent a phase of remediation: adaptations across media that remained largely isolated from one another, lacking the intertextuality or convergence that characterizes today's transmedia networks.

In short, while this paper has focused on the transmedia reboot of Wang Baochuan in the 2020s, future research could expand on how censorship and remediation history impact the construction of transmedia character networks. The case of Wang Baochuan highlights the complexities of feminist cultural expression in China's platformised environment, where meaning is not only made across media but negotiated through power, memory, and participation.

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