



# Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web

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Slashing Three Kingdoms:  
A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web\*

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“A damned mob of scribbling women....”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne (1855)

The Three Kingdoms period, popularly taken as lasting from the chaotic last years of the Han to the unification of China in 280 CE, has been a lasting inspiration for the Chinese literary imagination.<sup>1</sup> For more than a millennium, numerous works, from written to visual, have been produced about the Three Kingdoms, and the interest in the period is only growing stronger today. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義), a masterpiece of classic Chinese novel produced in the fourteenth century, has been widely disseminated and reworked in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, making the fascination with the Three Kingdoms not just a Chinese but also an East Asian phenomenon. A new chapter in this long tradition of the construction of the Three Kingdoms imaginary has been opened at the turn of the twenty-first century by a body of works produced by young female Chinese fans in cyberspace. This paper focuses on a particular subset of these fan works, namely, male-homoerotic fiction and music videos (MVs). Through studying this particular subset of Three Kingdoms fan production on the Internet, this paper attempts to provide a new perspective on the reception of the Three Kingdoms in contemporary Chinese society as well as raise some issues with a broader significance for Chinese fan production.

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<sup>1</sup> Properly speaking, the Three Kingdoms did not begin until the last Han emperor was formally deposed in 220CE, but for most Chinese readers the focus of interest regarding “Three Kingdoms” was in the last decades of what was, technically, still the Han Dynasty.

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

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

While in recent years a number of excellent studies on the impact of the Internet on Chinese state and society in the field of social sciences, there have not been, despite a few pioneering scholars’ ground-breaking writings, nearly as much study of literature on the Internet, especially fan fiction, from the perspective of literary studies and cultural studies. As a literary scholar, my primary interest lies in the literary and cultural aspect of the Three Kingdoms slash and in its unique position in the context of Chinese literary and cultural tradition, and my methodologies are close literary reading combined with sociological and ethnographic approaches to tease out the larger significance of this new literary, cultural, and social phenomenon. In this paper, I will first give a brief introduction of Three Kingdoms slash writing, followed by discussions of its cultural and literary significance through an analysis of specific examples in fan MVs and fan fiction. In the last part of the paper, I will contextualize such fan production by examining fan activities both within and outside of the fan community, exploring the communal

space in which fan productions are posted and received, and offering some general observations on the complex economy of fans, actors, and media producers. This paper will conclude with some preliminary remarks about the larger changes in contemporary Chinese society embodied by, and the methodologies that would enable us to better approach, such a complicated, multifaceted, and multidimensional phenomenon.

### *Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Brief Survey*

The Chinese term for slash fanfic is *danmei tongren* 耽美同人. *Tongren* (dōjin in Japanese) refers to fan creations based on a literary or media source text; it includes all forms of fan art, but fiction remains the most popular form. *Danmei* (*tanbi* in Japanese), literally obsessed with or addicted to beauty, is “a transnational subculture in which young women create, distribute and appreciate stories of male-male relationships in various media, ranging from fiction, comics, music, video films, cosplays (an abbreviation of costume-play), to computer games” (Liu 1).

*Danmei tongren* refers to a fan fiction subgenre in which two male characters from the source text are portrayed as sharing an erotic love relationship. There are many slash pairings known as CP (“couple”) in Three Kingdoms fandom, such as Yun/Liang 雲亮 (Zhao Yun/Zhuge Liang 趙雲/諸葛亮), Ce/Yu 策瑜 (Sun Ce/Zhou Yu 孫策/周瑜), and Cao/Guan 曹關 (Cao Cao/Guan Yu 曹操/關羽). The original Chinese term is a compound comprising two Chinese characters respectively taken from the two lovers’ names and uses no slash, but the sequence of the characters is important because the character appearing first is *gong* 攻 (“top,” *seme* in Japanese), literally “attack,” the dominant figure in a relationship (also conveniently punning with *gong* 公 of the form of address *zhugong* 主公, “my lord,” in classical Chinese usage), and the second is *shou* 受 (“bottom,” *uke* in Japanese), literally “receiving” or “enduring,” the passive figure.

One of the most popular pairings is Liu Bei 劉備 (161-223) and Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181-

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

Three Kingdoms slash, as stated before, constitutes a very small part of a vibrant Three Kingdoms literary and media fandom in particular and, in general, of a vast Chinese fan culture both on and off the Internet. In May 2014, a Google search for *tongren* turned up about 49,000,000 results, with *danmei tongren* yielding 1,520,000 results; a narrowed search for *tongren wen* 同人文, "fan writing," as opposed to fan manga or fan anime, turned up 612,000 results. Three Kingdoms fan production, *Sanguo tongren* 三國同人, turned up about 90,000 results, with 34,300 results for *Sanguo danmei tongren*. The Three Kingdoms fandom encompasses fans of the Three Kingdoms in various forms: history, i.e., the official history of the Three Kingdoms, *Record of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi* 三國志), by Chen Shou 陳壽 (233-297); novel, i.e., *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; cinematic representations in film and television shows; and, last but not the least, games, especially videogames such as the tactical action game series *Dynasty Warriors* (*Sanguo wushuang* 三國無雙) and card games such as *Legends of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo sha* 三國殺).

There are a variety of venues for the Web publication of fan production. Besides general fanfic websites like Jinjiang Wenxuecheng 晉江文學城 or Zonghengdao 縱橫道, Three Kingdoms fan works are published on BBS forums (*luntan* 論壇), such as Shugong Shenchu 蜀宮深處,

Yushui Tan 魚水潭, Dahua Chunqiu Luntan 大話春秋論壇, and Sanguo JQ Yanjiusuo 三國JQ 研究所 (JQ stands for *jiqing* 基情, homoerotic passion); and on a dizzying array of “post bars” (*tieba* 貼吧) dedicated to various themes and topics, such as Three Kingdoms characters, a particular slash pairing, and specific Three Kingdoms areas of fandom like *Dynasty Warriors* fandom. Examples of these post bars include Sanguo Tongren Ba 三國同人吧, Xuan Liang Ba 玄亮吧, Wei Liang Ba 維亮吧, Gongde Wu Liang Ba 攻得吾亮吧, Zhen Sanguo Wushuang Ba 真三國無雙吧, and so on and so forth. The BBS forums are usually more restrictive than post bars and require a more elaborate registration process, and one’s acceptance into the forums is subjected to the approval of the forum manager(s). Sometimes, even after one is accepted into the forum, the novice needs to accumulate enough points through posting to gain access to certain restricted content on the forum. Chinese fans’ anxiety about the writing of fan fiction, particularly slash, and the Chinese state’s policing of the Internet and periodic crackdowns contribute to the secretive atmosphere of an exclusive club surrounding the forums. Fans also publicize writings and exchange with one another on their blogs (*boke* 博客) and microblogs (*weibo* 微博). Fluidity and multiplicity characterize Internet fan production. As one researcher says, “Fan production develops at a high speed as a whole, with internal changes [in the fan circle] taking place every day. Therefore, it is an almost impossible task to get accurate statistics regarding its scope” (Wang 2008, 116).

*“History Swings Around”: Slash with a Chinese Twist*

Wang Zheng’s pioneering Chinese-language study of Chinese fan production, *Tongren de shijie* 同人的世界 (2008), gives a detailed survey of slash fanfic. In English-language scholarship, slash fiction on the Chinese Web has received a rich and insightful treatment in Jin Feng’s article “Addicted to Beauty: Web-based *Danmei* Popular Romance” published in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* in 2009, and in her subsequent monograph *Romancing the Internet*, the first book-length English-language study of Chinese Web romance, including slash

fiction and fanfic. The diverse motives for writing slash have been amply explored by scholars of Western and Chinese fan production. One reason that applies particularly well to the Three Kingdoms slash is the marginalization of women in the world of the Three Kingdoms.

There is hardly any well-developed female character in the novel, and she is usually subjected to heavy gender stereotyping. Martin Huang contends that “women’s roles are much more important than many readers have so far realized, despite their relatively limited presence in the novel.” He goes on to cite the fact that manliness is defined by a hero’s dissociation from women, “especially from their perceived bad influences,” and then proceeds to state that despite the anxiety about pernicious feminine influences, “a number of women are presented as the natural exemplars of certain Confucian virtues such as loyalty and chastity, and these exemplary women serve as excuses for some masculine heroes’ apparent moral deficiencies” (5-6). Women, in other words, are nothing but a foil or a medium to men in the Three Kingdoms canon. Zhu Sujin 朱蘇進, the screenplay writer of the popular 2010 mainland TV series, “Three Kingdoms” (aka “Xin Sanguo” 新三國, the “New Three Kingdoms,” as opposed to the older TV series, “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” aired in 1994), even remarked that there were only two and a half women altogether in the Three Kingdoms (as opposed to hundreds of memorable male characters), with the “half woman” being Lady Wu, the mother of Sun Quan 孫權 (182-252), the ruler of the Kingdom of Wu, whose seniority is regarded as overriding her gender.<sup>2</sup> Zhu himself did little to rectify the situation, arguing that he could not afford to push the limits of the audience’s tolerance too much, even though he was certainly not timorous in testing the boundaries in other aspects of the hit series.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Wo yao rang Sanguo zhifan yemao” 我要讓三國枝繁葉茂, interview by Wang Xiaofeng 王曉峰 with Zhu Sujin in *Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* 三聯生活週刊, June 2, 2008. <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0602/21534.shtml>. All web addresses cited in this paper were last accessed on May 21-27, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> *Xin Sanguo jijiang shouwei, dujia zhuanfang bianju Zhu Sujin* 新三國即將收尾獨家專訪編劇朱蘇進. Interview in *Beijing wanbao*, June 18, 2010. <http://ent.163.com/10/0618/10/69F2UUUI00032DGD.html>.

At the same time, we should bear in mind that fanfic, particularly slash fanfic, is born in the cracks found in “canon” (fan slang for source material) that open up to possibilities existing in a parallel universe. As a fan fiction scholar states, “Fanfic happens in the gaps between canon, the unexplored or insufficiently explored territory. For that to happen, the gaps must be left, and the territory must exist—i.e. the canon writers must not spell too much out, but there must be somewhere to start from and something to build on” (Pugh 92). Admittedly, given the vast scope of fanfic, one may always discover exceptions to the rule, but at least in the case under discussion, the Three Kingdoms canon, from historical and literary texts to contemporary filmic representations, contains so many iconic stories and scenes of intense male bonding that it is not particularly difficult to arrive at a visible, albeit suppressed subtext that fans cite as the basis of their homoerotic works.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> See Kam Louie’s discussion of homoeroticism in the Three Kingdoms in *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, pp. 32-41.

While slashing is common in global fan production, what we have here is slashing with a Chinese twist. One of the longest-standing interpretive paradigms in the Chinese literary tradition, beginning with Wang Yi's 王逸 (fl. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) commentary on the Western Han poetic anthology *Verses of Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭), is the reading of political allegory into depictions of sexual relationships. The most famous piece of the anthology is *Li sao* 離騷 (“Encountering Sorrow”), a long poem attributed to the shadowy historical figure Qu Yuan 屈原, the loyal minister of Chu slandered by jealous colleagues, misunderstood by his ruler, and driven to suicide. In the *Li sao*, the speaker, taken to be the voice of Qu Yuan, constantly shifts gender: sometimes he speaks as a male searching for an ideal mate; sometimes he speaks as a female slandered by jealous women in the harem. In either case, we see the possibility of configuring a political and public relation in sexual and private terms. Later in the tradition, as gender roles stabilized, it was more common to identify the minister with a woman or wife and the ruler with a man or husband. In other words, the hierarchy in the man/woman relationship in a patriarchal culture is seen as overlapping with the hierarchy in the lord/vassal relationship. Throughout the premodern tradition politics is so consistently read into certain types of expressions of sexual love that the “fair lady and aromatic plants” (*meiren xiangcao* 美人香草, the aromatic plants being read as symbols of virtue) becomes part and parcel of an elite member’s construction of self-identity.

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

early medieval China, not at all stigmatized like in late imperial times dominated by the straitlaced neo-Confucian ethics. It is true that once a woman was committed, she was expected to remain loyal, but a man was likewise expected to remain loyal to his lord after he made his choice, which at best should only happen once (within the novel the fierce warrior Lü Bu was condemned precisely for switching his allegiance once too often). On the other hand, the freedom to choose one's lord does not change a vassal's essentially feminized position vis-à-vis his lord. As a fan author states simply, "The relationship of the historical Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei is in itself just like that of husband and wife" (历史上的诸葛亮之于刘备, 本身就很像夫妻).<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>5</sup> From Wangmeng siming's 王夢思明 post, dated August 6, 2010,

<http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12888237>.

woman as the male poet's textual projection, then slash authors subvert the paradigm by treating the traditional male poet's allegorized sexual desire as literal and granting it its eternally denied physical gratification.

Fans' complicated negotiation with tradition is demonstrated by the lyrics of the iconic Three Kingdoms slash MV, "Romance in the Rain" ("Qing shenshen yu mengmeng" 情深深雨濛濛), produced by a fan with the moniker, Zhongdande Ganghuaboli 中彈的鋼化玻璃, better known as simply Ganghuaboli.<sup>6</sup> This MV takes footage out of the 2010 TV series and matches them with the theme song of a romantic soap opera, "Romance in the Rain," produced by the famous Taiwan romance writer Qiongyao 瓊瑤 (b. 1938). This is one of the earliest MVs made after the TV series was aired, and one of the best-known because it was mentioned admiringly by the actor playing Liu Bei in an interview.<sup>7</sup>

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

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

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

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

Deep feelings in a fine drizzle:

How many towers and terraces in the misty rain? I

remember you and me in those sweet years

When chariots passed like flowing river, horses like dragons. Even

though a gust of wind came from nowhere,

The beauty was like white jade, and the sword, a rainbow.

The second line is from a quatrain by the late Tang poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), “Spring in Southland” (“Jiangnan chun” 江南春), which expresses a sense of nostalgia about the Southern Dynasties (322-589). The phrase “ni nong wo nong” in the third line is from “Wo nong ci” 我儂詞 by the Yuan dynasty poet and painter Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262-1319), which sings of passionate romantic love. The fourth line appears verbatim in a ci lyric entitled “Wang Jiangnan” 望江南 attributed to the ill-fated last emperor of the Southern Tang, Li Yu 李煜 (937-978); it in turn was a phrase from the Eastern Han appearing in several source texts, such as *Dongguan han ji* 東觀漢記 (Liu 193), which described the power and glory of the imperial in-laws. The last line is from the nineteenth century poet Gong Zizhen’s 龔自珍 (1792-1841) “Sitting at Night” (“Ye zuo” 夜坐).

Transplanting a well-known love song from a melodramatic soap opera immediately establishes an amorous atmosphere for the two male characters. While music and lyrics give meanings to image, image also affects the interpretation of lyrics, and their mutual reframing leads to re-signifying. As the line about “towers and terraces in the misty rain” is superimposed on the palaces of the Kingdom of Wu in the south, it evokes the phrase “cloud and rain,” a clichéd euphemism for love-making, whose original iteration appears in an ancient rhapsody about the sexual dream of a king of Chu meeting the Goddess of the Mount Wu, and the goddess claiming to be “cloud and rain” always lingering beneath the king’s Sunny Terrace. Most striking is the

configuration of the images and the last line of the song: a close-up of Zhuge Liang, wearing a white robe, gazing dreamily into distance, is juxtaposed with the words “The beauty was like white jade” on screen, followed by the masculine image of a fully-armored Liu Bei, looking wrathful and deliberate on horseback with his sword raised, with the words “and the sword, a rainbow.” In the early Chinese tradition, *meiren* could refer to either male or female, and only became a synonym of “female beauty” much later. Slash writers return the concept to its gender-neutral root by inscribing it in a female fantasy about “beautiful men.”

The juxtaposition of the scenes and lyrics creates a virtual narrative of love, war, and longing from the source texts, with the first meeting of Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang, clearly figured as a pair of lovers, being displaced into an idyllic past by words of remembrance and nostalgia, a past nevertheless framed by images of battle, violence, emotional rift, and separation. This fan MV ends with a now iconic scene from the TV show, namely a close-up of Liu Bei’s grabbing Zhuge Liang by hand, the first of many such gestures in the early stage of their relationship to demonstrate Liu Bei’s affection for him; but the fan MV producer turns the colored scene in the original TV series into black-and-white, a significant revision to highlight the temporal displacement of the “good old times” into a distant past.

“Romance in the Rain” is representative of the numerous Xuan/Liang MVs subsequently circulating on the Web. In these MVs, Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang’s story in history is read as and converted into an archetypal romantic story, in which two lovers come together after a prolonged period of courtship (Liu Bei’s three visits), become separated by chaotic times (Liu Bei’s trip to Wu to marry Sun Quan’s sister in order to cement his alliance with Wu, and his Shu campaign), alienation (Liu Bei attacked Wu to seek revenge for his sworn brothers despite Zhuge’s protest), reunion and forgiveness right before one partner’s (i.e., Liu Bei’s) death, and the surviving partner’s (i.e., Zhuge Liang’s) grief and longing for the remainder of his life.

Another equally influential fan MV produced by Ganghua Boli is “Fireworks Easily Turn Cold” (Yanhua yileng” 煙花易冷), with edited footage drawn from the 2010 TV series set to the

song of the same title performed by Hong Kong pop singer Jay Chou (Zhou Jielun 周杰 倫).<sup>8</sup> The lyrics were composed by Vincent Fang (Fang Wenshan 方文山), a legendary Taiwan song writer whose innovative lyrics are hailed as having revolutionized music culture as well as contemporary poetry (Ding 1-20). According to Fang, “Yanhua yileng” is about a fictional tragic love story between a general and a young girl from Luoyang set in the Wei dynasty—not the Wei of the Three Kingdoms, but the Northern Wei (386-534) during another period of disunion.<sup>9</sup> Fang refers to *The Record of the Buddhist Monasteries of Luoyang* (*Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記), a work from early sixth century, as the “source of allusion” behind the song, and deliberately blurs the boundary between fictionality and historicity of the love story. The song itself keeps referencing the writing of history, the real background against which a pair of fictional lovers met and parted; and yet, together with the author’s explanatory remarks, the songs seems to imply that such a love story against the rise and fall of a dynasty and of a city, though absent in official dynastic history, must have happened in “real history.”

In the fan MV, which begins with a scene of goldfish swimming in a pond taken from the 2010 TV series, the mention of the dynastic history of Wei and of the city of Luoyang in the song lyrics is seamlessly grafted to the Three Kingdoms, even as history’s “incapability of tenderness” (“shice wenrou buken” 史冊/溫柔不肯) and the theme of waiting acquire a new meaning in the Xuan/Liang context. An image of a hand stroking a scroll of bamboo slips is matched with the line, “The history written on green bamboo slips—how could it be not real?/The *Book of Wei*, the city of Luoyang” 而青史豈能不真/魏書洛陽城. The question about the authenticity of the official version of history bears out the close scrutiny of fans looking for a subtext of emotion and vulnerability of the macho heroes of the past, an alternative history at a fine moment of, as the song sings, history’s “swinging around” (*lishi zhuan Shen* 歷史轉身).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/cNpui8RCeDo/>, uploaded by Ganghua Boli on June 14, 2010.

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

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

In the last section, taking up Xuan/Liang, one of the most popular pairings in Three Kingdoms slash, I argue that Three Kingdoms slash production is distinguished by a special cultural characteristic because of the fans' creative engagement with the Chinese literary tradition. In this section I will turn to another popular pairing, Cao/Guan, which both exemplifies the same ruler/minister romance as in the Xuan/Liang case, though as a remarkably failed romance, and best demonstrates another interesting aspect of slash pairing, namely the penetration into the emotional world of ultra-macho male characters. If Xuan/Liang is treated with a great deal of seriousness by fans, Cao/Guan slash always has a strong tinge of irony, in the spirit of *egao* 惡搞 (spoofing). However, it needs to be pointed out that *egao* is very much subjective and also largely depends on the audience's point of view: an unsympathetic reader may well consider all Three Kingdoms slash as *egao*, but anyone who has read a great deal of Three Kingdoms slash as well as spent much time in the slash fan communities learning about the readers' responses knows that there is so much emotional investment into these slash works that even the most ironic and potentially comical of them (such as the Cao/Guan slash and the claim to get into the heads, or should I say hearts, of two of the toughest men) holds a strangely alluring emotional power to the slash fans. Not that the slash fans are necessarily a naïve bunch—in fact many of them have a healthy dose of self-irony about their obsession with slashing; but it must be stressed that their attitude toward their slash production is complicated, and irony is never in the way of profound emotional engagement. Ultimately, as this section strives to show, the desire to replace a world of politics and public values with a world of *si*—personal and private values, a life of more psychological nuances—is one of the driving motivations behind Three Kingdoms slashing.

The courtship model and the feminized position of the minister, displayed in the Xuan/Liang case, are primary reasons why Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220) and Guan Yu, both ultra-

macho in their conventional images, are paired off as a couple, who present the perfect foil for Xuan/Liang as the aborted romance. In the novel, the warlord Cao Cao tries to obtain Guan Yu's services by treating him with every manner of generosity imaginable; but Guan Yu refuses, leaving him for Liu Bei. After his spectacular defeat in the Battle of the Red Cliff, Cao Cao and a few dozen of his surviving men are fleeing on the Huarong Trail 華容道, where, at Zhuge Liang's command, Guan Yu has been lying in wait for him. Cao Cao pleads for his life, citing his former generosity toward Guan Yu, who finally lets Cao Cao go.

As early as in 2003, the slash potential of the episode was hinted at in a song titled "Huarong Trail" performed by Xuecun 雪村.<sup>10</sup> Xuecun is a popular singer and songwriter whose national fame was secured by his song posted on the Web, "The Northeasterners Are All Living Lei Fengs" ("Dongbeiren doushi huo Lei Feng" 東北人都是活雷鋒), in a musical form he dubs "musical story-telling" (*yinyue pingshu* 音樂評書). "Huarong Trail" is performed to *pipa*, a traditional musical instrument with a "Chinese" aura, and the MTV shows Xuecun wearing a Chinese gown and standing behind a table, with a folded fan and a gavel as his prop in the manner of a *pingshu* performer. The words, "I am Lord Guan, you are Cao Cao/Grudges and debts of kindness cannot be crossed out/Don't you ever forget me," are accompanied by images of a woman wearing red dress and red high-heel shoes; the stanza, "You are Lord Guan, I am Cao Cao/I granted you favors, I was good to you/In my heart there is only you/In the end I am tormented/At our encounter on the Huarong Trail," is sung to the image of a man looking gloomily through the window at the woman, all smiles, walking away with another man.

Xuecun's "musical storytelling" claims to represent the life of contemporary Chinese common people; among other things he sings of illicit office romances, SARS, and the eternally disappointing Chinese soccer. The "Huarong Trail" MTV obliquely tells a story of a woman rejecting a suitor for another man, and the economy of favors and payback of the original Huarong Trail is superimposed on the romantic entanglement of a heterosexual couple, built on the old trope

<sup>10</sup> [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XODA40TkyMDg=.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XODA40TkyMDg=.html).

of portraying love-making as a battle between the sexes in classical vernacular fiction and perhaps also inspired by the modern adage “The arena of love is like a battleground” (*qingchang ru zhanchang* 情場如戰場). The true message of the song only emerges in the many intriguing visual details: the woman, with her red dress and shoes, is clearly identified with Guan Yu, known for his traditional image of a “red face;” the line “granting favors” is sung to images of the woman leisurely sitting back in a bathrobe, wearing sunglasses and holding a martini; and finally, the man with whom the woman walks away is dressed casually in a white T-shirt, as opposed to the “Cao Cao” in a dark-colored western suit. The material gifts that Cao Cao showered on Guan Yu in the novel are reconfigured as the material luxury afforded the woman by the man in the suit, a stereotypical image of a wealthy businessman; the steed Red Hare that was presented to Guan Yu by Cao Cao in the novel is transformed into a snazzy car, which transports the woman to her true love just like Guan Yu famously rode the Red Hare to seek Liu Bei “over a thousand leagues.” Xuecun’s MTV is a clever modern retelling of the old story, but the new plot and the ideology driving the plot are nothing if not conventional: money cannot buy a girl’s love. Traditional gender roles—with a woman at the receiving end of a man’s material gifts and favors—remain in place.

The 2010 TV series emphatically portrays Cao Cao’s desire for obtaining talented men, in particular Guan Yu, and Guan Yu is deeply touched. A prolonged emotional enactment of the encounter and parting of the two men on the Huarong trail was immediately picked up by the fans as perfect slash material. Instead of the heterosexual application in Xuecun’s version, the fans’ reading cuts directly to the homoerotic subtext of the Cao/Guan bonding. One of the most popular Cao/Guan MVs is reworked from a popular song, “Blue-and-White Porcelain” (“Qinghua ci” 青花瓷) composed by Fang Wenshan and performed by Jay Chou.<sup>11</sup> The song lyrics are matched with footage largely taken from the TV series; the song writer Yan31 焰31, the singer Hetu 河圖, and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0p-Rd-47cl>, uploaded on August 1, 2010; viewed more than 88,000 times.

The original MTV “Qinghua ci” can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ78y\\_\\_MlzM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ78y__MlzM), uploaded on December 27, 2007 and viewed more than 7,247,600 times by May 2014.

Wuyu Gongzi 舞雩公子, editor of the footage, are all members of a popular music group, “Moming Qimiao” 墨明棋妙, launched online in 2007 and known for its espousal of a genre of music called “Archaic Style” (*gufeng* 古風), mixing classical and modern musical and poetic influences.<sup>12</sup> Yan31, on her Sina Blog, describes herself as “slightly ‘rotten’” (*funü* 腐女 or *fujoshi* in Japanese, “girls who love Boys Love”).<sup>13</sup>

The song is sung in a first-person voice—that of Guan Yu. Brilliantly reworking the source lyrics, the lines often adopt the same phrases and rhymes by using homophones and thus radically, comically, changing the meaning of the ur-text. For instance, the original line, “Your beauty has dispersed in a single wisp [*yilü* 一缕] /To the place where I cannot follow,” is turned into, “Your men have all [*yilü* 一律] dispersed/To the place where I cannot follow.” “Cooking smoke” (*chuiyan* 炊煙) is changed to “battle smoke” (*langyan* 狼煙), alluding to the fire that destroyed Cao Cao’s naval fleet in the Battle of the Red Cliff. A particular clever transformation is of “ni yan dai xiaoyi” (in your eyes there is a smile 你眼帶笑意), which becomes the humorous “ni liandai xiao yi” (“besides, you also made a small bow with folded hands” 你連帶小揖). The charm and humor of the fan MV much depends on one’s knowledge of the source text. But even if one knows nothing about the original lyrics, one can still enjoy the rich irony of Guan Yu’s complicated feelings about a man he knows he should not “love.” Two things are noteworthy: one is that Guan Yu’s perspective in the fan MV turns a historical battle deciding the fate of the Three Kingdoms into just an opportunity for him to see Cao Cao again:

华容道等战役，而我在等你

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<sup>12</sup> See Liang Chen, “Embracing the Archaic,” a news story published on March 5, 2014 about the music group in *Global Times* (a daily Chinese tabloid under the auspices of *People’s Daily*) at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/846395.shtml>.

<sup>13</sup> [Http://blog.sina.com.cn/yan31](http://blog.sina.com.cn/yan31).

狼烟被风卷起，隔江千万里

用火攻干掉你铁索船的诡计

就当我为遇见你伏笔

The Huarong Trail waits for a battle, but

I am just waiting for you.

The smoke from signal fire was blown by wind

for ten thousand leagues across the River.

As for the devious strategy of destroying your chained battleships with fire:

Just consider it a set-up for my meeting with you.

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

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

当年曹营的情意跃然于眼底

风声鹤唳远远的却惦记着你

你隐藏在好色里仁义的秘密

极细腻，犹如绣花针落地

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

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

In the final analysis, however, what is so fascinating about the pairing of Cao Cao and Guan Yu in this MV is its emphasis on the emotional lives of two ultra-macho characters, especially that of Guan Yu, who otherwise seems almost inhuman in his eternal uprightness and nobility, with a screen image based on the ubiquitous statue of the warrior god worshipped all over East Asia. As Sheenagh Pugh argues, one of the primary aims of fan fiction writers is to “ratchet up the emotional charge of the canon and to make their heroes more interesting by increasing their vulnerability and opening them to their own, often very closed-off, feelings” (93-94). We are allowed to get inside Guan Yu’s head for a moment, to explore hidden emotional layers that are “so subtle, just like an embroidery needle falling on the floor.” The access to the unsayable emotional truth of a man, especially a tough man like Guan Yu, as we will see in the next section, is a driving motivation for many Three Kingdoms fans. In doing so, they have

transformed a world all about politics, public values, and “great enterprises” into one about lust, emotions, and personal desires.<sup>14</sup>

*“I am your fan”: Writing the Self*

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

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

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<sup>14</sup> This is perhaps why slash fans often do not care much about homoerotic fiction written by men. According to one fan named Dang Huanggua Yudao Qiezi 當黃瓜遇到茄子, “A man’s writing of BL is simply different from a woman’s. A woman would definitely devote long passages describing the passions between the *gong* and the *shou* while a man just likes to pile up words with a strong taste that have nothing with feelings” (posted June 25, 2011). This is a comment on a short story entitled “Kongming and Jiang Wei” (“Kongming and Jiang Wei” 孔明與姜維) by Shi Yifeng 石一楓 (b. 1979), a now widely published novelist in print media; the story was recommended, with a short excerpt, by a fan named Zhuge Boyue 諸葛伯約 in her post of March 7, 2011 (<http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1019308474>). I had followed the link and read the story in early May 2014, but the link was subsequently broken; so were other links when I googled the story, and I have been unable to locate the story on the Web, another reminder of the fragility of Web literature.

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

In a story entitled, the first person narrator, Kongshan 空山, is a female Daoist adept with magic powers and helps people for a price, i.e., taking a few years from their lifespan to add to her own.<sup>15</sup> When the story opens, Liu Bei comes to seek her help: he confesses he is in love with Zhuge Liang, and he wants her to find out if Zhuge Liang feels the same way about him. The Daoist transforms herself into a white feather fan that is presented by Liu Bei as a gift to Zhuge Liang and tries to uncover his true feelings by staying close to him day and night. After several failed attempts, she finally succeeds: she stages a fake assassination attempt on Liu Bei's life without even letting Liu Bei in on it, and just when Zhuge Liang tries to protect Liu Bei, using his body to screen Liu Bei from the assassin, she turns herself into the assassin's dart that enters Zhuge Liang's heart, and finds out about his true feelings while he is unconscious:

在孔明昏迷的一刻，我终于顺利地进入到了他的内心。运用感知能力，我迫切地和他的心灵进行交流。

“对他的感情，超越君臣？”

“超越君臣。”

“那么，想和他耳鬓厮磨，肌肤相亲？”

他又急剧地想掩饰什么，然而没有用，在这里他显然是掩饰不了的。我很快抓住了他一闪而过的真实想法。

……

感情是无法用明晰的界线来界定的。有时候，它处在似是而非之间，半明半昧，却又真挚动人。譬如刘备和孔明，说他们是君臣，分明已超越了君臣；说不是君臣，却依然还是君臣。其实这两人的心意，彼此都已感觉到了罢？只是没有公然说出口而已。

I finally managed to enter his heart at the moment when he passed out. Using my

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.zonghengdao.net/read.php?tid=43631>.

perceptive powers, I urgently communicated with his heart.

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

“Yes indeed.”

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

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

.....

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

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

“我？”我顿了顿，该怎么说呢？“我是你遮掩的道具啊孔明先生。”

“嗯？”

“呵呵，‘出入君怀袖，动摇微风发’。”关于这个问题，他怕是想不明白的了，我猜刘备永远也不会告诉他。

“‘出入君怀袖，动摇微风发’……扇子？”

我没有回答，悄然退了出去。就在退出的时候，我改变了一个决定。

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

“Huh?”

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

“‘It goes in and out of your bosom, / Waved back and forth, stirring a gentle breeze’ . . . . . A fan?”

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

That is, she decides to forfeit Liu Bei’s payment for her service, which is five years of his mortal life, because, with her magic powers (the hindsight of a later-born?), she foresees that he will not have many years left, and she wants the lovers to be able to stay together longer for Zhuge Liang’s sake.

The white feather fan has always been the trademark of Zhuge Liang in his verbal and visual portrayals from premodern to modern times. The white fan—usually a round one made of silk—was also a traditional figure of a palace lady who worries about being discarded by her lord, like the fan that will be put away in cool weather. This is the canonical poem on the fan, invoked twice in the slash story, conventionally attributed to Lady Ban 班婕妤 (d. ca. 6 BCE), an imperial consort of the Western Han emperor Chengdi 成帝 (r. 32-7 BCE):

新裂齊紈素，皎潔如霜雪

裁成合歡扇，團團似明月

出入君懷袖，動搖微風發

常恐秋節至，涼颺奪炎熱

棄捐篋笥中，恩情中道絕

A piece of newly cut fine plain silk from Qi,

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

Barely concealed behind the image of the palace lady lamenting her lord's fickleness is the figure of the courtier who worries about slander and loss of favor, evoking the Qu Yuan persona in the "Li sao." The heroine in our story turns herself into Zhuge Liang's fan (which, in a fortuitous English pun, humorously takes on double meanings): this places herself in a feminized position vis-à-vis Zhuge Liang, who is in turn in a lower, and feminized, position to his lord Liu Bei. With the strange move of objectification, she seems to mirror him and become his double.

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

The woman is a fan negotiating between the two men; she is nevertheless an unusual fan

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

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

*Pleasure and Power: The Complexity of Slashing*

In preceding sections I have discussed the special cultural twist in Three Kingdoms slash as well as some of the motives and consequences of fans' engagement in slashing. How, then, do we evaluate the social and cultural role of slash? It is a particularly difficult task for scholars because slash, like fan culture and fan production in general, is such a complicated, multi-faceted phenomenon, and one cannot generalize about it and analyze it as a monolithic collective undertaking in a one-size-fits-all manner. While fan production is global and there are many common elements in fanfic writing that cut across national and linguistic boundaries, it is also a sphere where we see cultural and linguistic factors most intensely at work, as evidenced by fans' negotiations with tradition and by their carnivalesque pleasure in exuberant linguistic play. Indeed, although Chinese fan production has been heavily influenced by Japanese popular culture, they remain different enough that it is impossible even to use the term "East Asian fan culture" to cover it all. This section seeks to shed light on the diversity and complexity of the meanings of slash as manifested in the case of Three Kingdoms slash production. Here we must not only focus on the slash texts themselves but also take into consideration the communal consumption of such texts; in other words, literary close reading must be supplemented by a sociological perspective in order to properly understand and evaluate the social, cultural, and literary significance of slashing.

Fanfic scholar Sara Gwenllian Jones argues, in some ways quite rightly, that we cannot regard fan fiction, especially slash, as subversive because the source texts are already inviting the sort of homoerotic reading by their homosocial emphasis (79-90). This is certainly true of the Three Kingdoms canon in terms of both literary and media texts, especially the 2010 television show, as will be discussed below. Yet there is an undeniably subversive element in the transformation of an allegorical relationship in the premodern Chinese cultural discourse into a literal and physically fulfilling one. To push this point further, however, I would like to posit that the subversiveness does

not lie so much in the transformation per se as in the female fans' pleasure derived from the act of transforming itself and, more important, in their communal enjoyment of sexual fantasies about men. While many Three Kingdoms slash texts are merely titillating and the penetration of Zhuge Liang in "Ballad of the White Feather" is metaphorical and non-sexual, plenty of stories are explicit erotic, often marked with "flesh" *rou* 肉 in the title for reader's easy identification. Since they are writing about two men getting it on, the authors can freely indulge in descriptions of male beauty as erotic objects. Significantly, it is an eroticization of a particular kind of male beauty: not the aggressive masculine beauty conventionally promoted in a patriarchal discourse, but, to use the words of Joanna Russ, "the passive, acted-upon glories of male flesh" (90).

A story entitled "On the Eve of Entering Chuan" ("Ru Chuan qianye" 入川前夜) by Wangmengsiming cleverly parallels Liu Bei's military campaign to Sichuan with his exploration of Zhuge Liang's body on the eve of his departure:<sup>16</sup>

柔韧而硕长的颈子，精巧的喉结因了紧张兴奋微微滚动着。宽而秀丽的肩胛，平滑白皙的胸膛，无不紧紧的攫住了刘备的眼睛。这是世人绝没见过的诸葛孔明，充满了诱惑，不能不让人心生妄想。

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

One favorite trope in Three Kingdoms slash is watching the male body in sleep—a passive state that renders the body an immobile object of desiring gaze—a scene made convenient by the

<sup>16</sup> <http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12914475>, posted December 8, 2010.

common description of two good male friends' "sharing of the same bed" and in particular of Liu Bei's sharing his bed with his trusted generals, Guan Yu, Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun, in historical sources (Chen 939, 948). For instance, in "No Robe" ("Wuyi" 無衣), a long work started in 2010 and still ongoing at the time of the writing of this paper, Liu Bei repeatedly observes the sleeping Zhuge Liang with his "jade-like neck" and "long lashes," and Zhuge Liang is constantly placed in a compromised position (drunken stupor or illness), all to highlight a corporeal passivity that is much relished by the author and her readers.<sup>17</sup>

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

那白玉一般的双腿被曲起,那身顺着酒桌向下躺,胸前红蕾凸起,明晃晃的展现出激越的欲色,长发如瀑一般落下,散在青色的石板上,仿若流光。<sup>18</sup>

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

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

“孔明哥哥，纵然是如此年纪，却依然是眉如远黛，眸似春水，唇如凝

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<sup>17</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/943752066>, posted by Yichenyin 依宸尹 in collaboration with Chunjiang huayueyejing

春江花月夜景.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.yaochi.me/ebook/23797/9.html>.

露……看哥哥这身子，竟是比较从前更加的流离含光，肤如锦缎，从里到外散发出柔婉和媚，压抑禁止之态，真真令人想煞！”<sup>19</sup>

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

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

It is worthwhile to elaborate on the newness of this eroticized male beauty for female pleasure. As one reader of this paper points out, even in the male-authored eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢) the male protagonist Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉 “already represents a form of feminized, fragile male beauty much appreciated by female readers of the original canonical text.” I find this comment useful in the sense that the differences between the kind of male beauty portrayed in contemporary slash and the kind of “feminized, fragile male

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.yaochi.me/ebook/23797/36.html>.

beauty” depicted in premodern Chinese fiction are, as a matter of fact, particularly instructive regarding the revolutionary nature of slash male beauty. Taking Jia Baoyu as an example: his attraction for female readers stems largely from his emotional hyper-sensitivity, not from his beauty; it is his emotional hyper-sensitivity that separates him from other young male characters in the novel with delicate good looks such as Jia Rong 賈蓉 or Jia Yun 賈芸. More important, throughout the novel, Baoyu appears mostly as the subject, not object, of desire, and his own physical beauty never receives much elaboration, let alone the kind of explicitly eroticized portrayal cited above; in fact there is never any sexually explicit description of Baoyu’s body, and, as we shall see later in this paper, the nineteenth-century sequels to the canonical text, arguably also fan fiction and believed to target female readers, are exceedingly discreet and chaste in content. In contrast, it is the eroticized and erotically scrutinized male body as an object of female desire that distinguishes the sort of male beauty flaunted in Three Kingdoms slash. In premodern fiction, usually only in pornographic novels with homosexuality as the main theme or as a motif can we find an explicitly eroticized depiction of the delicate, “feminized” sort of male body (for instance, in the famous homoerotic story collection “Hairpins beneath the Cap” *Bian er chai* 弁而釵, or in Chapter Two of the erotica *Lantern Moon Liaisons*, *Dengyue yuan* 燈月緣, both from the seventeenth century); but here again the difference is striking and enlightening, because it is highly unlikely, and at the very least impossible to prove, that late imperial homosexual erotic fiction was written by female authors for a group of largely female readers. Indeed, we neither know about nor are able to speculate on something of this sort in premodern China, or perhaps even in modern, pre-Internet China. The Internet is a key factor in the formation of such a largely female community consuming female-authored male-homoerotic works that are created unabashedly for the pleasure of young women, including, first and foremost, the author herself. It is for this reason that, despite the common Chinese mistrust of any claim to “newness,” one can indeed unequivocally proclaim the newness of the phenomenon of slashing in the Chinese cultural and literary tradition. In this regard, the bafflement of the provincial police in He’nan perhaps best demonstrate the shock to

convention caused by such a phenomenon: in a high-profile case of multiple arrests of fanfic authors on charges of pornography made by the Zhengzhou police in the spring of 2011, the cops were stunned by their discovery of a bunch of young women, for they had expected to find “male homosexuals” or perhaps some “dirty old men” behind the porn.<sup>20</sup>

The interest in the softness, malleability, and vulnerability of the male body is manifested most clearly, and perhaps also most shockingly, in the so-called *shengzi wen* 生子文 (“childbirth writing”) that feature male pregnancy and child-bearing. Just as in *Star Trek* fandom, it does not have a universal appeal among Three Kingdoms slash fans: some like it, and some like it only in a certain mood (for example, a fan may post a message seeking a “shengzi wen” because of a sudden urge for something with “a strong taste”); but it is a recognized subgenre in Three Kingdoms slash. Outside of Three Kingdoms fandom, “shengzi wen” has quite a large following: one postbar, “Xinzi chenghui ba” 心字成灰吧, which is devoted to the topic of male child-bearing in a male homoerotic relationship, has 191,300 posts between its founding in November 2008 and May 2014.<sup>21</sup> In some of the texts, the representation of birth pain bears remarkable similarity to menstrual pain.<sup>22</sup> The author of *Martyrs of Shu* (*Shu shang* 蜀殤), a long, much followed work by Yeyude Huihui 業餘的灰灰 that includes a detailed description of the excruciating birth process, admits that she has heard of much of the stuff from her mother.<sup>23</sup>

Just as important as the erotic fantasy expressed in the fanfic are the many discussions of

<sup>20</sup> <http://news.qq.com/a/20110321/000741.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%D0%C4%D7%D6%B3%C9%BB%D2>. The postbar is defined as “a place where one can enjoy a bottom’s ‘steaming of meat buns.’” Steaming meat buns (*zheng baozi* 蒸包子) is a term for childbearing. The post bar’s rules and regulations specify that in all writings posted there the child’s parents must be both male and that no male partner in a BG (boy and girl) relationship is allowed except in a video.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, “Wei shei fenglu li zhongxiao” 為誰風露立中宵 (For Whom Stand Alone at Midnight in Wind and Dews), <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1004479247>, posted by Shanzhong Yiweichang 山中意味長 in February 2011.

<sup>23</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/664672114?pn=13>.

the beauty of the male body in the fan community, especially in connection with media fandom. The discussions range from the relishing and savoring of various screen images of the characters and closely analyzing their sexy charm in terms of facial features, body types, postures, and clothes in the stills posted online, to comparing different screen versions of a favorite character such as Zhuge Liang in terms of physical attractiveness.<sup>24</sup> This is the first time one sees a form that comes closest to the numerous volumes on the “ranking of flowers” (i.e., evaluation of beautiful women, usually courtesans) from late imperial China. It is, as some critic points out, gender inversion and does not fundamentally change gender stereotypes; yet I would argue for seeing *some* progressive aspect in the new availability of a public forum—the Web—where women can freely express and exchange their sexual fantasies, speak of their sexual desires and “perversions,” discuss what kind of scene or language turns them on or off—in a generally supportive and sympathetic environment. In its emphasis on sexuality and sexual fantasies, slash presents a drastically different picture of female authors and readers than, say, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century sequels to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, arguably also fan fiction, that are generally assumed to target a female audience, at least the proper ladies, by virtue of its chaste content (Widmer 129-33). In fact, Three Kingdoms slash fanfic represents a complete subversion of the traditional gender stereotype that women are more interested in emotional fulfillment than physical satisfaction by showcasing a raw sexuality, which is deeply saturated with emotion *at the same time*: here, spirit and flesh are definitely inseparable, and each reinforces the other instead of detracting from the other.

Pleasure, especially the sexual pleasure that binds the slash authors and readers together, plays a powerful role that must not be underestimated in our evaluation of slash fandom as a positive cultural force and in women’s liberation in general. This online community of like-

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, see fan authors’ posts in Shugong shenchu (a forum devoted to Xuan/Liang fandom):

<http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12887341>,

<http://shugong.maozhumeili.com/wap/mtc.aspx?tid=12897574>.

minded Chinese women, many of whom are genuinely talented, carves out a space for them across national boundaries over a vast physical space to express their emotional, sexual, literary, and artistic tastes and needs that are decidedly not mainstream and would not have found an easy outlet otherwise. What they are doing is something entirely new in the Chinese cultural and literary tradition, and here by what they are doing I do not just mean the products of their creative endeavors but also the way in which they share their products and interact with one another as members of an enclosed community; in other words, out of a traditional discourse that affords few resources and opportunities for women to inscribe their object of desire, they have created a world of possibilities to experiment with ways of writing about the male body, male beauty, and sexuality. Comparing slash writers to nineteenth-century female popular novelists, Constance Penley characterizes their work as embodying the same impulse: “to transform the public sphere by imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved through making it more answerable to women’s interests” (134). Perhaps, as Jin Feng wisely states, “Only time can tell whether these new developments in Chinese Web literature will permanently change fiction writing in general and Chinese society at large” (2013, 82); but at present, at the very least, girls are having some long overdue fun.

And yet, as stated at the beginning of this section, slash is a complicated, multifarious phenomenon that requires a nuanced approach. While the female fans’ pleasure is empowering, it is also a double-edged sword, so to speak, for the fan authors and readers, because subversion often paradoxically serves to reaffirm what is being subverted, the transformation of the political discourse in ruler/minister pairing into a literally sexual discourse risks an ossification, rather than dissolution, of the former. In Xuan/Liang slash, the unequal social positions of the lovers, especially with Zhuge Liang the minister usually portrayed as a “bottom” and the lord Liu Bei the lord as a “top,” only serve to reaffirm traditional gender roles and stereotypes (lord-vassal, male-female, active-passive) by conflating social and political hierarchy with romantic relationship. Perhaps recognizing the entrenched male-female/lord-vassal stereotype and desiring to transcend

it, the author of a unique work of Three Kingdoms slash, “Regrets” (“Hen” 恨), makes a point of portraying Zhuge Liang in any pairing one could imagine except with Liu Bei. The author, Tianpin Youdu 甜品有毒, asserts: “I dislike stories about ruler/minister pairing in the Three Kingdoms [slash]. In my view, ruler and minister should be comrades, friends, even brothers, but not lovers.”<sup>25</sup> She does not elaborate her motive, but avoiding the Xuan/Liang pairing offers a way out of an explicitly unequal social relationship between the lovers. With other men in the Three Kingdoms world, Zhuge Liang has a more or less equal relation, and he can freely enjoy his sexual adventures with them as an independent person not in a subordinately position, and the power dynamics of those sexual relations is of a different nature than in a straightforward ruler-minister relation.

It must also be pointed out that, despite the fact that the Three Kingdoms fan authors greatly complicate the male-centered patriarchal tradition of the Three Kingdoms story cycle, the moral values explicitly espoused by Three Kingdoms slash, in the final analysis, remain largely conservative. As Henry Jenkins says, “Readers are not *always* resistant; all resistant readings are not necessarily progressive readings; the ‘people’ do not *always* recognize their conditions of alienation and subordination” (1992, 34). His insight applies quite well to the Chinese case at hand. Most stories treat loyalty to the Han as an unquestioned virtue, and Zhuge Liang’s loving devotion to Liu Bei (and to Liu Bei’s cause) as a moral and sexual turn-on. “Regrets” is an exception in that Zhuge Liang promiscuously sleeps with and loves many men, and that, I suspect, is, far more than the explicit sex scenes, is the primary reason why this work is so controversial. But even in “Regrets,” Zhuge Liang’s failed romance with Cao Cao, the love of his life, is attributed to the fact that Zhuge Liang experiences a split of “spirit and flesh” in this affair—he cannot tolerate Cao Cao’s wicked personality even though Cao Cao is a perfect match for him in every other way, and they always have fantastic sex.

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<sup>25</sup>“在三国里，偶对主公X臣子的戏码多数不喜。我觉得主公和臣子，就应该是战友，是朋友，甚至可以是兄弟，但不应该是情人。” <http://www.yaochi.me/ebook/23797/11.html>, posted by author on May 23, 2010.

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

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

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

#### *A Conspired Performance: Media Producers, Actors, and Fans*

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

dimensional social performance, driven by a complex network of social, cultural, and (on the part of the media producers) economic factors.

Although it is difficult to ascertain or confirm the gender of a netizen, various venues, including the afore-mentioned case of multiple arrests of fanfic authors made by the diligent Zhengzhou police in 2011, reaffirm what we already know, that Three Kingdoms slash authors and audiences are predominantly young females.<sup>26</sup> On post bars such as Xuan Liang Ba and Gongde Wu Liang Ba, judging from numerous posts that mention winter and summer breaks, exams, and classes, many fans are in high school or college. Despite the apparently subversive nature of slashing, the moral and cultural values expressed by these slash authors and readers are often fundamentally conservative. Particularly revealing are many Xuan/Liang Postbar posts in which fans talk about squaring off their slash interests with their school life. One series of posts was started off by a fan's message of June 13, 2010 entitled, "That little bit of YY I had felt in my heart at the time of reciting 'Chushi biao' is all gushing out now" (當初背出師表心里那點YY現在全部噴湧出來了), alluding to the hit TV series being aired on mainland Chinese television at the time.<sup>27</sup> This post provoked many replies in which fans recalled their experience of studying the text in the not too distant past or expressed eager anticipation to study it in class. Taught as a manifesto of Zhuge Liang's loyalty to Liu Bei's great enterprise of "unifying China" and his spirit of "perseverance until last breath," the text is read by fans as a declaration of Zhuge Liang's undying love for Liu Bei, in which they count "fourteen evocations of the 'deceased emperor' [i.e., Liu Bei]." Sometimes writing about Zhuge Liang, especially about his tireless efforts to manage the state after Liu Bei's death, helps the young fans find a release for the emotionally-fraught adolescent life that is made particularly difficult by the enormous pressure posed by China's relentlessly oppressive educational system. One author says in a postscript to her story, "If There Is No Tomorrow" ("Ruguo meiyou mingtian" 如果沒有明天), that the suffering she went

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<sup>26</sup> For the gender of slash fanfic authors/readers, also see Wang Zheng, *Tongren de shijie*, pp. 122-24.

<sup>27</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/797581262>.

through in the final year of high school was the feeling she drew upon to write the painful perseverance of Zhuge Liang after Liu Bei's death: "The feeling of despair in hell and then again raising hope, holding onto hope but then again despairing, is a true depiction of myself in the final year of high school."<sup>28</sup>

In another series of messages, a fan posted a group of photos of Zhuge Liang's grave site in Mian County 勉縣 of Shanxi, now a finely constructed tourist site, including a picture of the ticket that cost ¥50 apiece.<sup>29</sup> There are also pictures of the gift shop at the tourist site where numerous Zhuge Liang's fans in an assortment of sizes and colors are on display, and where one finds "cute" clay figurines of Zhuge Liang and other Three Kingdoms characters. There is no irony about the commodification of history, even less about the local government's sponsorship of cultural tourism that aims to promote patriotic education and to make a handsome profit to boost the local economy. The posts and the replies all convey a sentimental adulation of Zhuge Liang. Thus the slash fantasy about Zhuge Liang, no matter how eroticized, is or can be always made consistent with the more straight nationalistic sentiments sanctioned and promoted by the Chinese state.

Recent fan studies have largely turned away from Stuart Hall's incorporation/resistance paradigm, which either pitches fans against, or envisions them as incorporating, the media's messages and ideology. As the editors of the volume *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* state, "fans are seen not as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures but, in sharp contrast, agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies" (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 6). The actual state of things, as I try to demonstrate in the earlier part of this paper, is never quite as clear-cut as this; nevertheless, it is fair to say that a basic conventionality of the Three Kingdoms fandom is

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<sup>28</sup> "那种在地狱里绝望又重振希望, 抱持希望却又绝望的心情, 就是高三时的我的真实写照."

<http://tieba.baidu.com/p/800830616>, posted by Yiyefengbaitou 一夜風白頭 on June 16, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/834437584?pid=9019796587&cid=0#9019796587>.

perhaps what makes it easy for Chinese media producers to take advantage of it in rewriting, repackaging, and remodeling the Three Kingdoms world to engage audience and achieve commercial success while maintaining mainstream status.

Both the screenplay writer and the director of the 2010 TV series were keenly aware of their audiences and fans on the Web. In his interview with Sanlian's "Life Weekly" (*Sanlian shenghuo zhoukan* 三聯生活週刊), to the question, "When you were writing your screenplay, did you consider today's audiences' aesthetic tastes and some of their values?" the screenplay writer Zhu Sujin replies: "I considered them a lot. The preparation for every TV series [I wrote] basically began with that [consideration]." In the same interview, he claims that he does not care much about the opinions on the Web, but "I rather care about the opinions of those grandpas and grandmas—they are more real."<sup>30</sup> He never specifies in exactly what venues he might hear the opinions of "those grandpas and grandmas," nor does he explain why those opinions might be "more real," and the assumption that the opinions from the Web are from a much younger generation is implied in the contrast. In a later interview with the *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhoukan* 南方人物周刊), he reveals that he is thoroughly familiar with comments on the Web by citing from them to demonstrate that he loves the audience's active engagement with the show. When the interviewer asks him how he deals with criticisms, he retorts defensively, "Actually, the young people at my daughter's age, of twenty something years old, are the audiences who like watching [the show] and find it fun to watch, because they watch 'Three Kingdoms' purely as a television show, without having attained the level of 'cultured folks.'"<sup>31</sup> In the same interview, Zhu describes Zhuge Liang and his nemesis, the Wei minister Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179-251), as a pair of "rivals as well as lovers." To the reporter's follow-up

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<sup>30</sup> "互联网上的我不会在意,我比较在意那些大爷大妈的意见,这个更真实一些."

<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2008/0602/21534.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> "Zai wo kanlai, Luo Guanzhong genben jiu mei xiewan" 在我看來,羅貫中根本就沒寫完. Interview with Yu Nan 余楠, June 25, 2010. <http://www.infzm.com/content/46575>.

question, “So you do not mind some audience members regard Three Kingdoms with [the perspective of] the subtle feelings between men?” he replies: “Not at all. Boys look for spirit [*jingshen* 精神], and girls look for feelings [*ganqing* 感情]. Their points of view are different, that is all. The audiences take their own values [to the show] and see something [in the show] that belongs to themselves: I think that is great!” Zhu’s perceived gender characteristics (male=spirit or soul/female=feelings) fall into the old patriarchal trap of gender stereotypes discussed in the preceding section, but it is unmistakable that he is aware of the female slash fans in the cyberspace and he immediately understands what the interviewer is getting at by the euphemistic phrase, “subtle feelings between men.” In contrasting male “spirit” (*jingshen*) with female “feelings” (*ganqing*) rather than “body” (*routi* 肉體), which after all is a much more common antithesis of “spirit” than “feelings,” the gender binary Zhu employs completely evades the issue of sexuality, even though sexuality is at the heart of many Three Kingdoms fans’ homoerotic fantasies.

It is quite impossible to consider this TV series, with its highlighting of male bonding, its conventional, cursory treatment of female characters, and even its casting of male characters, as completely innocent and unself-conscious about a young audience deeply into the slash subculture or at least well-versed in its language. The director of the hit series, Gao Xixi 高希希, was instrumental in shaping and constructing a new, prettier-than-ever image of Zhuge Liang by his choice of the actor Lu Yi 陸毅, a teen idol who had appeared frequently in romantic soap operas. It was a controversial choice, as older Chinese audiences had become accustomed to the conventional image of Zhuge Liang as a middle-aged man; it is an image from traditional Chinese operas where Zhuge Liang is invariably cast in the role type of “laosheng” 老生, the bearded senior male in a position of authority. On the famous television program, “A Date with Luyu” (*Luyu youyue* 魯豫有約), Gao Xixi defended his choice by saying that Zhuge Liang was only twenty-seven when he first came out of reclusion to serve Liu Bei, and that he should be a “dashing, handsome fellow”

(*junnan* 俊男).<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the actor Lu Yi's delicate good looks, as opposed to a more rugged type of masculine beauty, turned out to be a perfect fit with the image of a beautiful Zhuge Liang depicted in the Three Kingdoms slash. The director's choice of a teen idol, coupled with the numerous scenes of Zhuge's emotionally charged interactions with Liu Bei in the show, seems to be a gesture of collusion with, and certainly caters to the taste of, the young female Three Kingdoms fans.

Media scholar Bertha Chin claims that "in East Asian cultures," "rather than a strong focus on characters on a popular text, the emphasis is on the pop idol" (218). Chin admits that due to the language barrier she is largely limited to "fan sites and Web forums where English is the preferred, and main, language used" (211), and indeed her generalization based on such limited observations must be refined and revised when we look at the "real" virtual world on the Chinese Web. The Three Kingdoms fan culture, like *The Lord of the Ring* or Sherlock Holmes fan cultures, is where literary fandom and media fandom are conflated with and constantly reinforce each other. Actors, especially stars, are a crucial element in the economic, cultural, and social game of popular culture consumption and fandom. After the slash MV "Romance in the Rain" kicked up a storm on the Web, the actor playing Liu Bei mentioned it along with several other Xuan/Liang MVs in an online interview, praising them as "touching." He said, "Regarding the relation of Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, if we look at the version of 'Romance in the Rain' from the perspective of entertainment, [that version] is really not all that excessive: their relationship is simply too special."<sup>33</sup> The actor Yu Hwei 于和偉 had not been nearly as well-known as the pop idol Lu Yi; but after the airing of the Three Kingdoms series, and especially after his endorsement of the Xuan/Liang MVs and his frank admission that he frequently checked out viewers' online comments, he has become much more endeared to the Three Kingdoms fans and tremendously improved his celebrity status.

The actor's shrewd acknowledgement of fan production became a driving force in a

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8gPAUUgDm8>.

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

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

There is, ironically, a “warning” (*jinggao* 警告) by the author at the beginning of the text, in a red, large-size font, stating that, first, the work has nothing to do with reality and the reader must not take it seriously, and that, second, “our of respect for the actors...this text must not be circulated, reposted, or recommended to Baidu post bars, especially Yu [Hewei] Bar, Lu [Yi] Bar, and New Three [Kingdoms] Bar, and absolutely must not be read by the actors themselves.”<sup>35</sup>

The irony of forbidding the circulation of a text published on the Internet aside, it is impossible to

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

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

say whether the actors were aware of this story; but as the work was serialized on several websites (such as Jinjiang Wenxuecheng, Shugong Shenchu, and Wei Lu Yi Hua 圍爐繹話, a Lu Yi fans BBS forum), it stirred up a frenzy among the fans who simultaneously followed the actors' blogs and microblogs and analyzed them fervently in various social media. As the most meticulous close readers, the fans zealously looked for and subsequently found many signs that the actors were supposedly "responding" to the development of the RPS story and revealing their "repressed feelings" about a forbidden romance (in real life both actors are married men, each with a child). Images and words posted by the actors in question, especially the ambiguous ones, are particularly singled out as containing deep meanings. After the end of the TV series, this other, equally engaging "show" was staged in virtual reality by fans as well as actors, who care as much about the fans and their stardom as the fans care about them.

The above analysis of the activities inside and outside the fan community shows that today's fandom is far from the earlier fandom marginalized by mainstream society and popular media; a new relationship between fans and mass media has emerged, in which a complicated power dynamics is being played out. The producers, writers, actors, and fans together are enacting what is in Kurt Lancaster's words "a social performance," and no party's performance is "no less and no more important" than the performances occurring on the site of the show (1-2); and there is indeed far more collusion and connection among the various parties than ever before. It is easier to recognize the efforts of producers and writers to manipulate and control the audiences' responses than to observe the audiences collectively changing the directions of the popular cultural production, but the latter is nevertheless happening.

The intricate interplay of fan production and media production is further complicated by the ever watchful Chinese state, which remains a powerful force in mainland Chinese popular culture. Even during the writing of this paper, the Chinese state has created an internet security group led by none other than the President of the country himself, and one of the latest moves in the campaign against online activities and activism was the crackdown on smartphone-based instant

messaging services in May 2014.<sup>36</sup> The state's periodic crackdown on so-called harmful content on the Web causes immense anxiety and self-censorship; during such a campaign forum managers and authors may, just like someone who would batten down the hatches to weather a storm, hurriedly take down potentially offensive fanfic posts, which could of course spell disaster for researchers.<sup>37</sup> More invisible, however, is the state's dead hold over the values and ideologies espoused by fans and media producers, conveyed through patriotic education and school pedagogy, promotion of "national learning" (*guoxue* 國學), and the ominous SARFT—the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China, which was once rumored to have "banned time-travel" (thankfully only in television shows) and caused quite a stir in the news.<sup>38</sup> In Three Kingdoms fandom and fan production, the authoritative ideological discourse and its contestation both play a prominent part and are inseparably intertwined.

### *Conclusion*

Back in the nineteenth century, a woman author signed her penname, Yuncha Waishi 雲槎外史, to a novella developed from the canonical novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. She showed the manuscript to a literary woman friend, who wrote a preface for it also under a pseudonym, Xihu Sanren 西湖散人. The novel was not printed until 1877, the year in which the author died, a fact possibly meaning that the author may have "wished her novel to be published posthumously" (Widmer 119), since fiction was not yet considered a genre that should have been written by a

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

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

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2011/04-02/2950090.shtml>.

proper lady.<sup>39</sup> In any case, this is the first known novel written by a woman in Chinese literary history.

Things have come a long way since then. Today, Yuncha Waishi's novella would by all means qualify as a fanfic, and both the text and the pseudonyms ("pseuds" in fanfic terms) of Yuncha Waishi and Xihu Sanren would have blended seamlessly with numerous similar texts and pseuds in the virtual space of the Chinese Web. There is now a vibrant community of young women who connect with one another, and the community has spilled from the Web into the world offline. Instead of being apprehensive about the accusation of impropriety like their nineteenth-century predecessors, these young women experiment with and revel in explicit expressions of sexuality, explore gender roles and gender identity, and try to work out real-life issues both through writing slash and through interacting with many others in a generally sympathetic and supportive environment. The Three Kingdoms slash is but a small subset of a vast network of fan production, but it nevertheless embodies certain issues that are of central importance for our understanding of contemporary Chinese society, with its interface of tradition and post-modernity, of classical literary canon and contemporary popular culture, of a super-macho world with traditional values and an ultra-female world with bourgeoisie urban sentiments, and, last but not the least, of market economy and state ideology, which is juxtaposed uneasily with the commercialism of media producers and with the complex desires and demands of a young audience. This paper hopes to provide a preliminary investigation into a phenomenon that is as fascinating as it is large, multifarious, and difficult to analyze, and to inspire more in-depth studies on the topic of Chinese literary and cultural production in various new social media.

According to the 33rd report issued by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) in January 2014, there were 274 million Internet users of online literature in 2013, representing a growth of 17.6% over the end of the previous year (50).<sup>40</sup> In English language

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<sup>39</sup> Yuncha waishi was Gu Chun 顧春(1799-1877); Xihu sanren was Shen Shanbao 沈善寶(1808-1862).

<sup>40</sup> <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201404/U020140417607531610855.pdf>.

scholarship, there have appeared in social sciences a number of informative and illuminating monographs that powerfully demonstrate the revolutionizing impact of the Internet on Chinese society and culture (Zhou; Tai; Zheng; Yang); in the field of literary scholarship, we have also begun to see the emergence of serious scholarly interest in Internet literature (Hockx; Feng; Inwood). The World Wide Web, instead of being merely a newer, fancier venue for literary production and consumption than print media, plays a crucial role in the evolution of the literary and cultural landscape of China. We witness a significant change from the days when print media was the main venue for literary criticism and was largely under the control of academia and other state-sponsored cultural institutions. Contemporary literature no longer belongs to an enclosed, self-perpetuating elite circle; and the literary establishment—academia or state-sponsored writers' associations—is losing its former authority in the eyes of the public. Whatever new problems and complications they bring about, capitalism and technology, with a rude and crude democratizing power, are undermining the old cultural elite like never before.

The larger scope and impact of cultural change in contemporary China are comparable to the water-shed changes that happened in the much discussed Tang-Song transition in Chinese history, during which new social and cultural structures, new ways of information dissemination, and new ideologies and concepts were tied to the opening up of civil service examination, the spread of print culture, especially of commercial printing, and the formation of local communities as opposed to a “national” arena or the center. The Internet is a global phenomenon that turns nations into the new local communities bound together by language and culture rather than by national identities; there is no center on the Internet—or there are multiple centers, with each interest group being a center, and with numerous intersections and overlaps of interest groups. Three Kingdoms slash fandom is but one of the many such interest groups; but with its diversity and multiplicity, complications and contradictions, conservatisms and progressiveness, it is like a prism that refracts the dazzling light of these immense sea changes.

While there are many scholarly books and articles on the general topic of “Internet

literature” (Ouyang 256-293), Internet fanfic, especially slash fanfic, has received little special attention. Researchers writing about *danmei* typically focus on the entire Chinese *danmei* subculture as a social phenomenon and on its dissemination in cyberspace (Zhang and Dong; Long), with a particular interest in exploring the causes of *danmei* from a psychological and educational point of view (You; Song and Wang; Zheng). They variously label slash fiction as an expression of young women’s desire to fulfill their repressed sexual needs (Yang 2006) or a means to fill their emotional void (Wang 2010), or evaluate its moral role in female adolescents’ sexual education (Wu and Sun), or even regard it as a form of Japanese “cultural colonialism” (Su).

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

It has been pointed out by the editors of *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* that “close readings and literary analyses of a particular fan text remain rare” in fan studies because “treating a fan story as only a singular literary text may obscure the complex intertextuality that tends to embed stories in an economy of collectively shared production, distribution, and reception that together create a more complex intertextual meaning” (Hellekson and Busse 24). This is no doubt true; we see a good example in an essay that, based on the reading of one slash novel, attributes the writing of slash to a woman’s “castration complex” and her desire to be a man (Zhang 2011,

11-12). Nevertheless, I believe that the best way to deal with fan production should be a combination of methods: close reading against the background of wide reading, in conjunction with sociological and ethnographic approaches to understand the communal space and communal interactions on the Web and in other social media. Ultimately, our study of fan culture and fan production must also be informed by a perspective on the Chinese cultural context that is more refined than the umbrella term of “East Asian cultures,” and any profound understanding of Internet fan production in a given language and society must necessarily include a historicized understanding of its cultural past.

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