Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance: Re-writing Revolution-Plus-Love in Contemporary China

Zhange Ni

Introduction

What if the industrial revolution had first taken place in late imperial China? What if China had taken the lead in technological innovations but suffered a severe shortage of fossil fuels and clashed with the equally energy-hungry West? What if—fast-forward to 2012—global warming had released a deadly virus and unleashed a zombie pandemic threatening to terminate human civilization and transform the entire planet? These are some of the speculative scenarios enacted by popular online novels in contemporary China. Surprisingly, these novels are not associated with the relatively more established field of science fiction, but instead are produced and consumed as *danmei*, homoerotic romance featuring love affairs between male characters primarily but not exclusively for the entertainment of young women (Feng 2009: 4–7; Zheng 2018: 173–181).

In Priest's steampunk novel *Shapolang* (Stars of chaos, 2015; hereafter *SoC*), during a devastating Sino-European war reminiscent of China's encounter with Western colonial powers in the nineteenth century, thanks

to the leadership of two homosexual lovers—one a liberal-minded prince pushing forward social, economic, and political reforms and the other a military leader wearing an Iron Man–style super armor to fight against invaders—a fictional Chinese empire named Liang eludes the downfall suffered by the real-life Qing dynasty (1644–1912). In the novel, China triumphs over the West and establishes global hegemony.[1] In Feitian Yexiang's zombie apocalypse novel *Erlingyisan/Mori shuguang* (Twenty thirteen, or Dawn of the world, 2011; hereafter *DotW*), in the wake of a zombie outbreak, another pair of homosexual lovers—a recently discharged young soldier and a master's student in mechanical engineering—fight for their own survival, the livelihood of the Chinese nation, and the redemption of our planet. What dawns after the zombie apocalypse is a new world order that values ecological sustainability rather than capitalist accumulation.[2]

The two stories just summarized are *danmei* novels serialized at Jinjiang, an online literary portal specializing in romance, both heterosexual and homosexual.[3] Unlike typical *danmei* fiction, both novels portray their protagonists as more than romantic lovers in that they must fight side by side for national salvation on the global stage. The paradigm of "revolution-plus-love" (*geming jia lian'ai*) that waxed and waned in the twentieth century has reemerged in the twenty-first. Love, the pursuit of sexual pleasure and personal happiness, stands for the quest for individual autonomy and other Enlightenment ideals. Revolution, the collective striving for freedom, equality, and social progress, is couched in terms of national salvation, given China's history as a semicolony. Among scholars of modern Chinese literature, Jianmei Liu (2003) has studied how these two tropes of modernity, love of the individual and revolution for the collective, interacted with and shaped each other in different historical periods. Although she believes that the postsocialist generation had lost interest in the formula, the old themes of romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism have taken on new forms in the

[1] ***SoC*, over 600,000 characters in length, was serialized at Jinjiang from January 23 to June 8, 2015. See Priest 2015.**

[2] ***DotW*, about 450,000 characters, was serialized from August 3 to October 23, 2011. See Feitian 2011. An English translation of *DotW* produced by fans is available at URL: http://bltranslation.blogspot.com/2018/03/2013-by-feiti-an-yexiang.html.**

[3] **For an introduction to the history and current status of Jinjiang, see Shao/Xiao 2018.**

twenty-first century.

In this essay, I explain the unexpected reconvergence of the collective and the individual in *SoC* and *DotW* and explore how these novels, sci-fi and *danmei* crossovers, have transformed the model of revolution-plus-love. In the words of Mingwei Song (2013: 87), sci-fi is "deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China" and "mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China's potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power." When sci-fi meets *danmei*, a platform on which young women (and men) construct personal identities beyond existing social norms, form affective communities in a highly participatory space, and pursue alternative visions of the world, the two genres work in tandem to bring back revolution and love.

The nonrealist genre of sci-fi paradoxically does more justice to the hallucinatory reality of contemporary China than does realism itself. And it is sci-fi that helps to build a connection between homoerotic romance, deemed "illegitimate" by the government, and narratives of national salvation, arguably the central theme of modern Chinese literature and an ideal hiding place for homoerotic romance. Homoerotic romance, although seemingly apolitical and lower in status than sci-fi in contemporary China's literary hierarchy, provides a safe haven for the *danmei* community to pursue social engagement by reflecting on the oftentimes abusive power of the market and the state. When sci-fi and homoerotic romance join forces, they create a space in which Chinese youth wrestle with the dual crisis of the collective and the individual at the present moment—that is, the triumphal ascent of both state nationalism and neoliberal individualism and the marginalization of alternative imaginaries.

I begin by outlining the generic features of steampunk and zombie apocalypse. These two genres may seem worlds apart, but they both endeavor to examine and refigure the social order that connects the indi-

vidual and the collective. The Chinese examples of steampunk and zombie apocalypse that I concentrate on in the first section, *SoC* and *DotW*, stand in contrast to each other in their shared strivings, with *SoC* reinforcing and *DotW* deconstructing the current order of global capitalism and the international system of sovereign states. However, although their unfolding stories eventually arrive at diverging utopian ends, both novels valorize the image of a powerful Chinese state and its technologically assisted or enhanced superheroes, attesting to the rise of China's military-industrial-entertainment complex.

The second section explains the previously-mentioned trend. Because much work has been done on the early history of *danmei*, I focus on new developments of the genre in the second decade of the twenty-first century, marked by the entanglement of ever-escalating commercialization, ever-tightening state censorship, and the ever-increasing formal and thematic sophistication of the genre.[4] Under the dual pressure of the monetary extraction of media capital and the state's moral censorship, authors such as Priest and Feitian Yexiang have hybridized *danmei* with other popular genres, including those newly imported into China, such as steampunk and zombie apocalypse, and experimented with telling stories of strong states and superheroes. This venture outside their comfort zone is also motivated by the desire of *danmei* authors and readers to tackle contemporary issues—that is, the rise of China and the rise of the individual, both inseparable from marketization and the strengthening of state power—in the space of Internet literature.

In the last two sections, I examine both novels and their online discussion columns to demonstrate how the *danmei* community has reimagined the collective and the individual against the background of China's increasing global importance and of Chinese processes of individualization. These reimaginations are not always reducible to stories celebrating dominant discourses of the state and the market; on close examination, the novels under discussion may be camouflaging some genuinely radical

[4] For more on the history of *danmei*, see Feng 2009; Tian 2015; Chao 2016; and Hockx 2015: 114–116. Hockx briefly introduces *danmei* in his book on Internet literature in China, and Jin Feng and Shih-Chen Chao have studied Jinjiang and Lucifer's Club, respectively, two major *danmei* websites. Xiaofei Tian has considered *danmei tongren* (slash fiction) based on *Three Kingdoms*.

visions. Section three considers how both novels strive for a configuration of the collective that is broader than that offered by resurrecting the Confucian vision of *tianxia* (all under heaven). Whereas *tianxia* in *SoC* is a Sinocentric hegemony that leaves the competitive nation-states and transnational capitalist market intact, *DotW* posits post-apocalyptic China as playing a crucial role in dismantling the state system and ushering in a new era of planetary cooperation.

Section four demonstrates that the new individual in the novels and in the "real" world, a product of marketization since the 1980s, strives to assert autonomy as well as rebuild social relationships that neoliberal policy and the globalized economy have been destroying. And in these novels, the individual is obliged to engage in various collective projects but also has been privileged as the source of energy and legitimacy for the collective, which in turn should respect and safeguard the dignity of the individual. The ideal individual both novels propose is neither marked by competition with the other nor disconnected from various collectives at the familial, local, national, and planetary levels. Instead, while attending to personal needs and desires, the individual cares for the other and privileges the well-being of the other over any self-interest. However, because *SoC* adheres to "exclusive nationalism" (Adam 1990) in its reimagination of *tianxia*, the individual is ethically responsible for the other only within a limited community. By contrast, *DotW* breaks the model of competition at both individual and collective levels, because its *tianxia* is a planetary community that encompasses a diversity of selves and others.

Reading the two novels in tandem, I argue that the collective and the individual are interlinked and interdependent formations in both the original revolution-plus-love formula and the contemporary rewritings. However, the collective and the individual have been reimagined, with the goal of the collective revolution shifting from social progress benefiting a particular nation to a sustainable future for humans and nonhumans alike, and the ideal of love has expanded to include the self's

ethical obligation to the other broadly construed outside the confines of heteronormativity and anthropocentrism.

Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Their Chinese Inflections

Steampunk and zombie apocalypse are both popular fiction genres of American origin. When Feitian began to serialize *DotW*, AMC's TV drama *The Walking Dead* (2010–) was a hit in China, as it was around the world. Max Brooks's book *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) was available in Chinese translation in 2011. Before Priest worked on *SoC*, in 2012, two Hong Kong steampunk movies, *Taichi Zero* and *Taichi Hero* (directed by Stephen Fung), were commercial hits. One year later, two steampunk classics were translated into Chinese: William Gibson (1948–) and Bruce Sterling's (1954–) *The Difference Machine* (1990) and Scott Westerfeld's (1963–) YA series the *Leviathan* trilogy (2009–2011). What are these new sci-fi subgenres? And why are Chinese audiences fascinated?

Known as a literary genre of alternative history, steampunk emerged in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s and has developed into a subcultural movement including various art forms. In 1987, American science fiction writer K. W. Jeter coined the name "steampunk" for fantasy texts with a Victorian setting. This neologism is a combination of "steam engine," a symbol of the industrial revolution and modern technologies, and "punk," a contemporary youth culture famous for its rebelliousness. In contrast to one of its generic siblings, cyberpunk, which presents futuristic scenarios complete with futuristic technologies, steampunk fixes its attention on the past, especially the Victorian era. Unlike time-travel narratives that transport the person's mind and/or body between two historical periods, steampunk reenacts the nineteenth century as a fantastic playground in which markers of different historical periods, more often than not technologies, can be isolated from their original contexts and presented as simultaneous to each other (Bowser/Croxall 2010, 2016; Danahay 2016; Schillace 2017).

Steampunk also deviates from hardcore science fiction, which generally sticks to rational extrapolation from existing or feasible technoscientific advancements. It does not shy away from scientific romance or even unscientific fantasy, fusing technologies from various historical periods or inventing alternative technologies that bend the laws of nature. Because technology is more than just machines, technical procedures, or the practical application of science but also an index of social and political relations, one particular ambition of the genre, as scholars have pointed out, is to reconfigure cultural memory and collective identity by reimagining the past, present, and future as conflated in fictional technologies (Mielke/LaHaie 2015; Pho 2016).

For Western audiences of steampunk, the nineteenth century is an era of scientific breakthroughs, artistic flourishing, rapid industrialization, the global expansion of colonialism, and the domination of the British Empire around the world. In Chinese history memory, this is the same period in which China suffered a series of defeats at the hands of Western powers and was forced into the global system of nation-states and the capitalist market. Revisiting the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, steampunk writers challenge established norms and authorities, explore the contingent trajectories of Western modernity, and even question the domination of the West over the Rest. For instance, Michael Moorcock's *The Land Leviathan* (1974) presents the Euro-American West as devastated by a global war. In the same novel, an alternative South Africa led by Mohandas Ghandi avoids apartheid to become the beacon of human civilization; China, however, is depicted as a wasteland ruined by the opium trade. In Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* series (2001–2006), set in the distant future, the modern West is reincarnated as mobile megacities (such as London) that devour small towns and battle other cities for resources. What resists this "municipal Darwinism" is the Anti-Traction League, an alliance of static settlements that fights against the destructive consumption of natural resources and has its stronghold in the moun-

tainous western area of China.

Either as wasteland or as Shangri-La, China remains an exotic other in the Western imagination. By contrast, the punk attitude of *SoC* lies in its boldness to transport "Western" technologies into imperial China and then release them from state monopoly into the hands of the masses. The appeal of *SoC* to Chinese readers cannot be exaggerated.[5] Through anachronism and anatopism, it has China and Europe swap places and turns China's century of humiliation into a transitional period presaging another modern world—that is, a China-dominated global network of energy flow and commodity circulation. What this fictional imagination encapsulates is China's efforts to come to terms with its own historical legacy and revamp the existing geopolitical order. This fictional order is, quite clearly, not that different from what the real-life Chinese state, an enthusiastic player in the game of neoliberal capitalism, dreams about in the present age of digital technologies, but *SoC* is also an "Anti-Traction" story that calls for the popularization of steam technologies. It articulates the yearning of youths and, more specifically, the *danmei* community to unleash the democratic potential of digital technologies—the very condition that gives rise to Internet literature—that has been subsumed into the mega-machines of capital and the state, which I discuss in the next section.

The fictional world of *SoC* circles around *ziliujin* (purple fluid gold), a fictional fossil fuel that steam engines run on. The technologically advanced Liang does not produce the precious *ziliujin* and must import it from abroad. Liang is an empire of machines—*huoji* (vehicles of production and transportation), *kuilei* (robots and other automatic systems), and *gangjia* (exoskeleton suits)—all powered by the burning of *ziliujin* and maintained by professionals called *changbi shi* (masters of long arms). The explosive development of technologies results in a severe energy shortage, which exacerbates the tensions among the new elites, the old nobility, and the masses within the empire as well as Liang's conflicts with

[5] A new sci-fi genre, steampunk has already made a discernible impact on Chinese games, films, and novels. Role-playing games such as *Xuanyuan jian: Fengzhiwu* (Xuan-yuan sword: dance of the maple banners, 1995), *Xuanyuan jian: Cangzhitao* (Xuan-yuan sword: billows of the bleak, 2004), and *Gujian qitan 2* (Marvelous tales of ancient swords 2, 2013) place highly sophisticated machines in ancient settings. In 2012, two steampunk movies, *Taiji: Cong ling kaishi* (Taichi zero) and *Taiji: Yingxiong jueqi* (Taichi hero) (directed by Stephen Fung), fused the training of a young Taichi master in the late Qing with a Chinese village's fight against the monsters of Western modernity, locomotives, and railways. In 2016, SF writer Liang Qingsan published his novel *Xinxin ribaoguan: Jixie jueqi* (From the new daily news: mechanical wonders), which, also set in the late Qing, follows the adventures of an inventor and a reporter, who—as representatives of new technologies—had to struggle with old bureaucrats, defenders of the repressive political status quo.

its close neighbors and distant competitors.

The novel portrays *ziliujin* as a demonic force that disrupts the established social order. A new bourgeoisie is empowered and emboldened by the productivity of steam-driven machines, with the outdated imperial system colliding head-on with capitalist interests, and the lower classes either pushed out of the workplace by the docile machines or forced to work as the human components of the capitalist megamachine. The surplus humanity ousted by automation—peasants and manufacturers—rise in rebellion across the country. Beyond Liang's territories, and unfortunate for the *sijing manzu* ("barbarians" on the four frontiers) that surround it, especially the northern and western barbarians, the world's major *ziliujin* reserves are discovered. These lands resemble Central Asia, a strategic area in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiatives in our world beyond the fictional text. The "barbarians" have to navigate between the Scylla of an increasingly aggressive Liang and the Charybdis of an equally avaricious Europe, designated as *xiyang fanbang* (foreign countries across the Western oceans) and united under the sacred canopy of a fictional Catholic Church. To avenge Liang's military conquests, the northern and western barbarians decide to assist the Europeans in attacking Liang, which is on the brink of total collapse.

To quench labor uprisings, tame the barbarians, and forestall the invading Europeans, Liang resorts to a twofold strategy: it attempts to contain technological advancements and capitalist expansion by issuing energy, technology, and trade laws, and it commits to building a new set of apparatuses of state violence. Confucian scholars who pass the civil service exams may choose to enter the traditional Hanlin Academy or the newly founded Lingshu Academy (literally, the Academy of Smart Devices). The latter is a state bureau for talented "masters of long arms," specializing in developing mechanical technologies for the military. Added to the Liang army, which has already been equipped with steam weapons and vehicles of various sorts, is a new special force named *Xuantie ying*

(Battalion of Dark Metals), whose soldiers wear exoskeleton armors and form an army of Iron Men. Gu Yun, one of the protagonists in the novel, is the commander of the Xuantie Battalion and of the empire's armed forces in toto. His best friend, Shen Yi, is a Confucian technician from the Lingshu Academy. The relationship between this military-industrial complex—represented by the soldier and the technician—and the emperor is strained because he sees it as an imminent threat to his absolute power.

The other protagonist, Chang Geng, is a mixed-blood prince born to the old emperor of Liang by the priestess of the northern barbarians, who was captured and forced to marry the emperor after the Liang army brutally conquered her tribes to gain access to their *ziliujin* mines.[6] After his mother committed suicide to protest the Liang's imperial violence, Chang Geng was taken out of the palace by his aunt, the priestess's sister, who escaped to the northwestern border area with the baby and raised him, although with hatred and curses. It is Gu Yun who finds the prince, saves him from his abusive aunt, and takes him back to the dying emperor, who longs to see his lost son. However, the invincible warrior the boy looks up to turns out to be half blind and almost deaf, having been poisoned by the same emperor for whom he fights. His disabled body depends on prosthetic technology to function properly.[7] The prince and his mentor fall in love. Chang Geng sees an ideal father figure in Gu Yun; Gu Yun cares for Chang Geng, trying to recover his lost childhood for him while becoming human himself again, not just a war machine. However, they are unable to stay together, because Liang is plagued by conflicts from within and without.

The novel presents Gu Yun as a loyal official who, despite the emperor's distrust and persecution, remains committed to defending Liang's land and people against foreign invasions. However, this national hero does not choose to side with the disenfranchised among the masses, praised as he is for having put down internal rebellions in addition to warding off the hostile barbarians. Likewise, although half barbarian,

[6] Chang Geng is the name of the planet Venus in Chinese. It is the star of nightfall and daybreak, signifying warfare, chaos, and the dawning of a new order. In the novel, it is the nickname of Li Wen, the mixed-blood prince of Liang.

[7] Gu Yun always wears a high-tech monocle, which is a variation of the goggles in the steampunk genre. For a discussion of the goggles in steampunk, see Crowther 2016.

Chang Geng is fully assimilated into the Confucian civilization of Liang, a Han regime, and stays indifferent to the sufferings of his own people on the maternal side of his family. Moreover, he is celebrated as a theoretician of free-market capitalism and the policymaker who then masterminds a series of reforms that strengthen the empire. During the Sino-European war, Gu Yun (the military), Shen Yi (the engineer), and Chang Geng (the economist), all high-ranking aristocrats, take over the imperial court and lead a united Liang to defeat the Europeans. The novel ends with Chang Geng's ascension to the throne, China's transformation into a constitutional democracy, and the new trend to popularize technologies allegedly for the masses. Having fought for national salvation and China's triumphant rise, the lovers happily step down and retreat into the hustle and bustle of ordinary people's daily life. To conclude, the scenario of a Western invasion is not so much a crisis moment as the golden opportunity the novel carefully prepares for Liang so as to submerge class struggle under nation-building and justify the colonization of barbarian neighbors. By setting it up this way, the pursuit of national interests in the global arena of brutal competition becomes an unquestioned and unquestionable sacred value.

Whereas *SoC* rather uncritically embraces technology, nationalism, and global capitalism, *DotW* brings the nightmare of zombie apocalypse to bear on the former's rosy vision. Another new sci-fi genre recently introduced into China, zombie apocalypse has quickly gone viral. Where does it come from? Legends of the zombie originated on Haitian plantations where slaves from Africa toiled for Western colonizers. The monstrous figure of the zombie was brought into American popular imagination by William Seabrook's (1884–1945) travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929). Originally a few dead bodies reanimated by magical practices, the zombie evolved in the twentieth century through a process of medicalization and massification. Now the zombies are explained as humans (in some cases, other life-forms as well) infected by a vicious virus that

kills its hosts and takes over their mechanisms to reproduce themselves.[8] When infectious diseases are projected onto the zombies, zombie stories become epidemic narratives (Wald 2008: 33–39) that usually depict how a zombie pandemic breaks out, takes advantage of existing global networks in order to spread, and brings down human civilization as a whole.

Strictly speaking, zombie apocalypse as a genre did not mature until the 1990s and became wildly popular in global culture as late as the twenty-first century. Apocalypse, a term lifted from the biblical tradition, is understood as the total collapse of the human order; another often neglected meaning of the term is revelation. Zombie apocalypse is a revelation that unveils the blurred boundaries between life and nonlife, the interconnectivity of human and nonhuman lives, and the fragility of global ecology under the endless accumulation of capital. This revelation further sheds light on the very processes by which our social order is produced, maintained, and reinforced, with the zombie signifying the laboring body, the mindless consumer, and/or the terrorist other (Luckhurst 2015: 182–183). The same way in which steampunk plays with existing and alternative social orders, zombie apocalypse is an experimental site for world-revealing as well as world-(re)making. Authors explore the formation of local, national, and planetary communities that struggle with the zombie hordes, whereas readers are compelled to rethink and relearn how to live ethically in what sociologist Ulrich Beck (2009) called the global risk society, in which a permanent state of emergency has become the new norm.

China, a coalescence of Third-World poverty, Communist totalitarianism, and ultracapitalist debauchery, stands out as a stereotypical zombieland in Western zombie stories, especially after severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) broke out in Guangdong in 2003. The Chinese state's initial attempts to cover up the epidemic were severely criticized for having aggravated the situation. In Max Brooks's 2006 best seller, *World War Z: An Oral History,* after a mysterious zombie infection breaks out in China,

[8] **For more scholarship on the genealogies of the zombie, see Christie/Lauro 2011; McNally 2011; Luckhurst 2015.**

the Chinese party-state lets it escalate into a global pandemic by hiding information from national and international communities. The novel then depicts the dissolution of the People's Republic of China, which is overthrown by PLA deserters who later found a new confederation. Predictably, the novel, unlike the *Survival Guide* by the same author, has never been translated into Chinese.[9]

As a Chinese tale of zombie apocalypse, *DotW* introduces to the genre a leadership role for the Chinese state. When the novel was first published at Jinjiang in August 2011, its original title was *2013*, although the global outbreak occurs in August 2012, exactly one year ahead of the novel's serialization; one explanation is that the American disaster movie *2012* (2009) had already claimed that title. In the novel, it is at the very beginning of the year 2013, after several months' anarchy, that the post-apocalyptic Chinese state begins to broadcast to survivors and send special forces to eliminate zombies and evacuate humans to its undersea resistance and refugee center. It turns out that the pre-apocalyptic Chinese state is savvy enough to build this safe zone, most likely located in the much-disputed South China Sea, right after the Fukuyama triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident shook the world in March 2011, so that the post-apocalyptic Chinese state is able to operate from international waters, a space between states, and contribute to the final victory of the global antizombie war.

Although apocalypse in *DotW* carries an implicit critique of China's neoliberal path in the real world, the image of China as a triumphant zombie-fighter taps into the nationalist sentiment that the nonfictional state strives to promote, with the imaginary zombie threat, like the foreign invasion in *SoC*, acting as a proxy for the perceived hostility from the outside world at a time that China is eager to flex its muscles. However, the image of the zombie in *DotW* demands further investigation. As a zombie-fighter, the novel's fictional China does not necessarily fall into the trap of national development. Unlike many other zombie apocalypse

[9] Nor has its film adaptation (2013; dir. Marc Foster), which removed the Sinophobia of the original novel to make it more palatable in the Chinese market, been screened there.

stories that opt to leave the origin of the zombie virus unsolved, *DotW* explains that the virus came from an unknown planet annihilated by the belligerent civilizations it had bred. Moreover, it is not exactly a virus but the disembodied consciousness of the destroyed planet, a godlike or ghostlike existence that seeks to transform all life-forms and inorganic objects on Earth—that is, to colonize Earth and appropriate our planet as its new body.

More specifically, the novel imagines the two planets as two cosmic living bodies, a notion that resonates with James Lovelock's Gaia conception of Earth as a complex system, and even a living being itself, embracing all living organisms and their inorganic environments. These cosmic beings are further endowed with quasi-divine consciousnesses named *xian* (string). The term "string," borrowed from theoretical physics, refers to one-dimensional objects whose vibrations make fundamental particles to generate the world. In the novel's reinterpretation, the strings are planetary consciousnesses capable of manipulating the laws of nature and intervening in life processes. The consciousness of Earth, named *diqiu xian* (Earth-string), resists the planetary alienation caused by its opponent, *bingdu xian* (virus-string), which symbolizes the vicious spirit of neoliberal capitalism wreaking havoc by imposing an unbearable burden on human and nonhuman lives.

Humans are caught up in the cosmic battle between the two strings, or the two futures of our planet: endless capitalist accumulation resulting in environmental degradation or ecological sustainability maintained by the cooperation between formerly competitive individuals/collectives. Changes start at the personal level. The mutually dependent and supportive relationship of the two protagonists, Liu Yan and Meng Feng, is a new paradigm that ripples out to affect community building, nation/state (re)making, and planetary salvation. Liu and Meng are childhood friends who grow into homosexual lovers. They are young professionals, Meng a recently discharged special forces soldier, Liu a master's student study-

ing mechanical engineering at a top-notch university. Their relationship embodies the Chinese military-industrial complex, one that is also visible in the friendship between Gu Yun and Shen Yi, the Iron Man and his personal mechanic, in *SoC*.

In *DotW*, the soldier and the engineer first lead a group of university students to escape the densely populated southeastern coastal area. Unlike many other zombie apocalypse stories that take the heterosexual nuclear family as the foundational social unit (Cady/Oates 2016), the opening scene of *DotW* homes in on a university, where students away from families begin to build their own social identities and networks. Following the protagonists, these students subdue heavily armed gangsters, take survivors into their community along the way, and keep a mini-society running thanks to their training, with engineers building Tesla coils to fight off zombies with high-voltage electricity. Agriculture majors are responsible for food, management majors are in charge of personnel, and philosophers take care of the human soul.[10] After a long journey across China, this community settles down in a small village named Yongwang (Eternal Hope) near Xi'an (one of China's ancient capitals). In the spring of 2013, the post-apocalyptic Chinese state approaches the Yongwang community, which agrees to be airlifted to the safe zone. With their local community merged into the national community, the two protagonists decide to stay behind and fight on behalf of the state to find survivor communities scattered across China and bring them to the refugee center, where the Chinese nation is remade.

The counterpart of Chang Geng, the economist and policymaker in *SoC*, is a team of researchers in *DotW* who work against the clock at the undersea base to study and communicate with the two strings. Headed by environmental scientists, they vehemently oppose the military's insane plan to bomb the entire mainland with nuclear warheads to wipe out the zombies. Using data collected by the protagonists and other special forces units, they argue that humans could not survive should other life-forms

[10] When the survivor community is still controlled by the gangsters, they demand that everyone who wants to stay report a useful skill. A young man claiming to be a poet says he can tell stories; he is kicked out. The students silently watch him walk toward the zombie horde with a book of poetry in hand. Later, Liu starts to keep a diary so as to tell stories to the future generations. This may be his way of keeping the memory of the exiled poet alive.

within the nonhuman environment be destroyed. The key to salvation is the transnational collaboration of all the remaining states in helping the Earth-string to exorcise the virus-string. But what they don't know is that the Earth-string is about to wield her divine power to get rid of the trouble-making humans. Only by proving to her that humans are not all greedy, self-centered creatures and are still able to be responsible for other life-forms will humanity stand a chance.

At the end of the novel, thanks to the protagonists' and many other characters' self-sacrifice, the virus-string is driven out, and the Earth-string, convinced that humans are redeemable, changes her mind and helps them to survive. She even revives the protagonists' dead bodies. What's fascinating is the self-deconstruction of the nation-states. Throughout the story, there is an implicit divide between the pre-apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic Chinese state. Although the transition from the former to the latter is never elaborated on, the continuity as well as the division between the two is noteworthy. The pre-apocalyptic state has indeed laid some groundwork for the resistance launched by its heir; however, the novel never invokes the Communist Party or its Politburo and presents the post-apocalyptic state as the Chinese branch of the Earth Rescue Alliance (ERA), a world institution formed by the surviving post-apocalyptic states that pull together their resources. After the global antizombie war is over, the ERA becomes a permanent fixture. The remaining states sign a treaty of disarmament and dissolve themselves into this world government, whose principle task is environmental protection. The era of unchecked development and cutthroat competition is over. The maddening vibration of the virus-string is replaced by the soothing rhythm of the Earth-string. What emerges under heaven is a planetary community, with humans learning to live with and take care of not just each other but, more significantly, nonhumans and the entire planet.

To sum up, *SoC* and *DotW* are stories of diverging and even contradictory ideologies. A Chinese steampunk novel, *SoC* enthusiastically envi-

sions the popularization of steam (and by extension, digital) technologies, implying an end to state monopoly and the promotion of privatization and commercialization. Moreover, through a series of top-down reforms, the imperial state succeeds in preserving itself, albeit in a radically transformed state. The liberalized monarchy, or the constitutional democracy that Liang transforms into, ends up a modern nation-state controlled by the old and new elites, who claim to represent the masses but instead exploit the internal and external others. Liang is a conflict-ridden hierarchical society, and the world is envisioned as a Darwinian battleground in which only the strong states survive. In the end, the "Anti-Traction" dream of *SoC* reverts into a Tractionist dystopia.

By contrast, *DotW* is a dystopian text that ends on a utopian note. Harking back to the early history of the zombie as a figure of slave labor, *DotW* presents zombies as alienated life-forms under capitalism. Putting a new spin on the old tale, the novel imagines the turning-back of zombified terrestrial lives. What is implied is that we still have a choice between a life of alienation and one of authenticity. And the invention of the planetary strings is *DotW*'s unique contribution to the genre of zombie apocalypse. Whereas Liang in *SoC* competes with Europe to colonize the barbarians, the post-apocalyptic Chinese state in *DotW* learns to work with the other states under the rubric of the ERA and eventually gives up power so as to rebuild an interconnected web of life. Unlike the sovereign states that represent the national interest (or the interest of the national elites), the ERA is a cosmopolitan human government (re) connected to the nonhuman entities, both the natural and the divine—that is, the Earth-string.

Despite their contrasting visions, the procapitalist *SoC* and the anticapitalist *DotW* do hit the same note in terms of foregrounding a powerful Chinese state constituted by a particular type of (super)heroic person. Both novels begin with a national crisis, accentuate some radical transformation in the power dynamic of the state as crucial to conflict resolution,

and end with the creation of a utopian world, although the utopia of *SoC* is the dystopia of *DotW*. The similar story arc is accompanied by a similar characterization: both novels have their main characters (the soldier and the engineer) standing for China's military-industrial complex, although the underlying logic of this complex is economic or ecological concerns, respectively, again represented by particular characters (the prince-reformer and the research team).

How to account for this sudden irruption of strong states and superheroes into popular culture? Why have sci-fi subgenres such as steampunk and zombie apocalypse been integrated into the popular genre of homoerotic romance? How did the latter become a contested ground for nationalist ideologies and consumerist principles, on the one hand, and grassroots creativity, on the other? In what follows, I address these questions.

Danmei in the 2010s: Commercialization, State Censorship, and the Growth of a Genre

A genre of popular romance that features the homosexual relationships between male characters, *danmei* was imported from Japan into mainland China in the 1990s, rapidly developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century as part and parcel of China's flourishing Internet literature, and entered a new phase in the 2010s. Since this new phase began, Priest and Feitian Yexiang have been among the most popular *danmei* writers. Their writings represent new developments in the genre—that is, the practice of self-censorship, endeavoring to incorporate other genres, and the rise of *yuanchuang* (original) novels. Before zooming in on the two writers and analyzing their works, I consider the tension that exists between commercialization and state censorship and how the *danmei* community struggles to survive and thrive in the gray area opened up by the tug-of-war between the market and the state, a struggle that has had an indelible impact on the formal and thematic spaces of the two novels.

The commercialization trend dates back to 2008. Starting that year, popular authors were invited to sign contracts with Jinjiang, which charges readers a subscription fee to access their novels chapter by chapter. The author-site split is sixty-forty for computer user subscriptions, fifty-fifty for smartphone subscriptions.[11] For a novel of about half a million characters, the author may earn a thousand to several hundred thousand yuan. Because regular presses are not allowed to publish *danmei* fiction, with the portrayal of homosexuality banned in print literature and other media, Jinjiang provided an "illegal" channel. It helped authors solicit preorders and publish their *geren zhi* (personal volumes)—that is, specifically tailored to readers' demands—as underground books without *shuhao* (registration numbers). The site took twenty percent of the revenue and left eighty for the authors, who could also choose to publish their personal volumes in Taiwan or independently.

Next, whereas most of the contracted authors make a small sum from electronic and print publications, media corporations pay huge amounts to top-ranking authors to buy the adaptation rights of their novels. The "IP" (intellectual property) era of China's entertainment industry dawned in 2013, as media corporations began to extract the monetary value of Internet literature by adapting influential works into films, TV series, web dramas, audio dramas, animations, and videogames. Over the years, *danmei* has gathered forty million fans, among whom are also aspiring writers. The sheer size of the *danmei* prosumer (producer + consumer) community makes it a labor reserve and a niche market that media corporations cannot afford to overlook. They are eager to lure this army of prosumers in with various queer-baiting techniques and are willing to risk testing the limits of state tolerance.

Back at the start of the 2000s, *danmei* was more or less a wild genre, combining erotica and romance while flaunting alternative sexualities and moral ambiguities (Chao 2016). However, in the 2010s, it has grabbed the attention of not only media capital but also the state, which has been

[11] For the business history of Jinjiang, see URL: https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=7225f0f4a729283da39a7382&lemmaId=&fromLemmaModule=pcBottom. Qidian started this business model. See Hockx 2015: 110–114.

implementing a series of puritanical policies to monitor public morality and strenuously attempting to control cultural production in general (Ming/Choudhury 2017).[12] As a result, when *danmei* novels are adapted into other media forms that help to publicize this countercultural phenomenon, homosexual attachment is carefully concealed but never completely excised. What is needed is a thick smoke screen that renders the invisible even more desirable and, as a worst-case scenario, stands on its own to attract consumers because the original text has been "castrated."[13]

The moment of massive "castration" occurred in 2014. In May, a *danmei* author named Zhangzhe chibang de dahuilang (Winged Wolf) was arrested in Nantong for distributing erotic and obscene materials via Jinjiang (Peng 2015). The knee-jerk response of Jinjiang was to rename the entire *danmei* section *chun'ai* (pure love). The readers were shocked to find that in already completed novels (including Feitian's *DotW*) as well as those works that were still being serialized, chapters with sexual content had been locked overnight. The *geren zhi* service of Jinjiang was discontinued as well.

Needless to say, the *chun'ai* novels produced in the post-2014 era can no longer follow the old path to feed readers graphic descriptions of sexual fantasies. Instead, their depiction of love must be "pure," with homoerotic romance transfigured into homoplatonic tales. This explains Priest's "fleshless" style and Feitian's desexualization after 2014. And this self-purification practiced by the entire *danmei* community is ongoing. Jinjiang is currently recruiting and training a new team of editors who will be responsible for online publications in the same way that traditional editors work on printed materials at official presses. Staying away from sex, writers themselves tend to avoid staging complicated relationships that involve conflicts between the lovers and/or involve more than two characters. The ideal love that readers now take delight in reading is characterized by mutual trust and care, with lovers staying loyal to each other and hardly seeking to bend, much less break, conservative moral norms

[12] In the summer of 2018, the government punished major literary websites such as Qidian and Jinjiang for circulating writings it considers politically incorrect, vulgar, and obscene. URL: https://www.yicai.com/news/5432029.html.

[13] By castration I mean the purging of sexual descriptions from *danmei* novels. Moreover, when novels are adapted into other media, a *danmei* story line, although crucial for plot progression and character development, can be easily remolded into an asexual bromance predicated on homosociality or into a heterosexual romance by inserting female characters or turning one of the male lovers into a woman.

and political rules. Within this environment, the merging of romantic love and nationalist sentiment was more than welcome. A Chinese version of homonationalism had emerged.[14]

Despite the puritanical milieu described here, the creative flame of *danmei* has not been extinguished. Profit is a strong incentive. Still, in contrast to the mainstream of Internet literature, such as Qidian sci-fi and fantasy and Jinjiang heterosexual romance, *danmei/chun'ai* is relatively less profit-driven and somehow still rooted in the community's desire for self-expression and socialization. In a most ironic sense, state censorship works as a control valve against the complete commercialization of *danmei* and creates a quasi-underground field of limited aesthetic autonomy. Likewise, the market challenges the tight grip of censorship and entices *danmei* writers to eke out a living in the gaps and fissures of state power.

The "illegal" business of *danmei* has thus persisted. In 2017, the *danmei* writer Shenhai xiansheng (Mr. Deep Sea), based in Wuhan, was arrested for printing and selling a large quantity of books with *danmei* content (Cai 2017). This time Jinjiang was not involved, but the *geren zhi* business run by individual authors came to an end as a result. Arrested around the same time, Lady Tianyi, a *danmei* writer from Wuhu famous for her homo-porn novels that defy the rules of "purification," was sentenced in October 2018 to more than a decade in jail for producing pornography and selling it to minors.[15]

There are always two sides to every story. The downfall of erotic novels coexists with the success story of "pure love," as exemplified by the careers of Priest and Feitian Yexiang. Instead of selling (literary imaginations of) sex, they paint the much-desired smoke screen. Priest is the pen name of a young woman who, as her fans report, was educated in Shanghai and Hong Kong and has a career in finance. Feitian, defying the stereotype of *danmei* writers as straight girls, is allegedly a professional screenwriter who does not attempt to conceal his gay identity. Highly prolific, they have each published more than ten novels at Jinjiang since

[14] Jasbir Puar (2007) proposed the concept of homonationalism, arguing that liberal politics has incorporated queer subjects into the fold of the nation-state and transformed them from figures of death into new subjects associated with life and productivity at the expense of the Orientalized terrorist bodies. In her view, homosexuality has fused with American imperialism. A similar assemblage has emerged in the field of Chinese *sci-fi–danmei* novels, not despite but precisely owing to the intersection of state censorship and commercialization. Although *SoC* is a typical homonationalist story, *DotW*, thanks to the planetary vision implicit in the genre of zombie apocalypse, does imagine a postnational and postcapitalist world order that is compatible with a queer political ecology.

[15] Her punishment triggered heated discussion online and was reported in Western media. See Hernández/Zhang 2018.

2010. Among these novels, quite a few have come out in print from official presses after being thoroughly purged of homosexual content. The two authors have also succeeded in selling the adaptation rights of their novels, at the price of at least several million yuan per work, to media corporations.[16]

With regard to the two novels under discussion, Feitian's *DotW* was picked up by Hunan Renmin Press in 2013, thanks to the popularity of zombie stories, and published as a two-volume novel—without any explicit depiction of homosexuality, of course. On October 10, 2015, Priest's *SoC* was available at Jinjiang for preorder, although the site claimed not to provide the *geren zhi* service any more. Priced at 180 yuan each, the 2,500 copies printed sold out in three minutes. In 2016, the novel was published in Taiwan again, this time in the traditional-character (rather than simplified) format. Both *SoC* and *DotW* have already been adapted into audio dramas and the latter into an anime series as well, and fans eagerly await live-action TV series and films based on them.[17]

Almost all the novels produced by Priest and Feitian are *yuanchuang* (original creations) rather than *tongren* (fan fiction based on existing works).[18] One prominent feature of *danmei* in the 2010s is the rise of *yuanchuang* and its eclipsing of the popularity of fan fiction. The new generation of *yuanchuang* authors no longer depends on preexisting source texts—that is, "canons"—to spin homoerotic tales. They pursue canon-making themselves, in that they produce original novels covering a dazzling array of styles, themes, and genres. These new canons generate their own fan communities that in turn produce fan art in various media forms and pave the way for media corporations to step in and reap the profits. By contrast, fan fiction proved from the start hard to commercialize because the canons it drew from are protected by copyright.

Unlike *tongren* writers who always have the canons to fall back on, *yuanchuang* authors take pains to design elaborate settings, intricate story lines, sophisticated narrative structures, and a whole range of char-

[16] For their publication records, see URL: https://baike.baidu.com/item/Priest/7730677; https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%9D%9E%E5%A4%A9%E5%A4%9C%E7%BF%94.

[17] The first season of *SoC* (audio drama) can be accessed at URL: http://www.missevan.com/mdrama/drama/9888#t=0&e=1. The first season of *DotW* (audio drama), URL: http://www.missevan.com/mdrama/drama/15273?pay_type=2#t=0&e=1. *DotW* (anime), URL: https://v.qq.com/x/cover/w6ra1s1f8j69icf/f002639e6zj.html.

[18] For scholarship on fanfiction, see Hellekson/Busse 2014; Busse 2017. For work on *danmei tongren* (slash fanfic) in Chinese, see Tian 2015.

acters. Their ambition goes well beyond the practice of textual poaching—that is, adding homoerotic stories to preexisting texts—but that does not mean that they do not rely on a whole range of cultural sources and social political issues for inspiration. They embark on what Henry Jenkins calls "world-making," which transcends the boundaries of themes, genres, and media (Jenkins 2006: 13–22). The small world of homoerotic romance can no longer restrain the ambition of writers or satisfy the curiosity of readers. Love stories are grafted onto other popular genres such as *wuxia* (martial arts), *xiuzhen* (immortality cultivation), *wangyou* (web games), *xingzhen* (crime and investigation), *lingyi* (supernatural horror), and, the focus of this article, *kehuan* (science fiction). Although these genres have always been present within the *danmei* tradition, they used to serve as the borrowed backgrounds for homoerotic romance but are now pushed to the foreground so that *danmei* can hide behind a fantastic smoke screen.

The smoke screen needed new material. Chinese *danmei*, both *yuanchuang* and *tongren*, has been nourished by popular culture in China and worldwide. Predominantly influenced by Japanese manga, anime, and games of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Chinese *danmei* has already begun to draw resources from Chinese films, TV shows, literary works, and historical records. Now there is a new wave of interest in American literature and culture, such as young adult dystopian novels and superhero movies based on Marvel and DC comics. In addition to Jinjiang, *danmei* writers and readers have also been active at the American fanfiction site AO3 (Archive of Our Own) and Suiyuanju, a Chinese site specializing in slash fiction based on American movies and TV dramas.

By hybridizing *danmei* with steampunk and zombie apocalypse, and Chinese literature with global popular culture, Priest's *SoC* and Feitian's *DotW* create a smoke screen with which *danmei* may more efficiently appeal to media capital and escape state censorship. This smoke screen happens to overlap with what the *danmei/chun'ai* community has been build-

ing in the genre's ongoing evolution. In her groundbreaking research, Jin Feng (2009; 2013) demonstrates that *danmei* fans sought excitement in transgressing the boundaries of conventional heterosexual romance and undermining established gender and sexual norms. One decade later after the period Feng treats, *chun'ai* fans, now forbidden to read (and write) about sex, gear their attention toward many other topics. They are no longer content with consuming and producing romance alone, heterosexual or homosexual, whether the pressure of purification exists or not. The real world around them, a canon beyond the canons as it were, piques their interest and seeps into the fictional space. In particular, the power of the market and the state, whether celebrated, problematized, critiqued, or debunked, has become a prominent theme in crossover novels such as *DotW* and *SoC.*

The fictional scenarios of *DotW* and *SoC* are based on current affairs—that is, on the efforts of the Chinese state to reposition itself in the global market and militarily. In 2011, the year that *DotW* was written, China was embroiled in disputes with several Asian and Southeast Asian countries on the South China Sea—an area rich in oil and natural gas (Suisheng Zhao 2018). The real-world Chinese state was busy building military outposts on some of the sea's contested islands (and artificial islands) as missile launching sites. In the north, it was refitting the ex-Varyag, a former Soviet aircraft carrier bought from Ukraine, transforming it into its type 001 aircraft carrier, which then started service in 2012. In *DotW*, which also draws from real-world events, the zombie-free safe zone built by the pre-apocalyptic Chinese state is located in international waters and consists of a series of islands as well as the infrastructure above and beneath the sea's surface, all guarded by a fleet of aircraft carriers, the main one named Varyag.

SoC also takes its blueprint from reality. In October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, while visiting Kazakhstan and then Indonesia, announced plans for the so-called "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "Maritime

Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century," a contemporary reiteration of the historical Silk Road (Yu 2017). It is no coincidence that the fictional Liang Empire in *SoC* works hard to maintain its own version of "One Belt, One Road"—that is, a Eurasian Silk Road and a maritime trade route. The novel opens with the two protagonists meeting on the northwestern border of the empire, along the Silk Road, and it reaches its climax when the Chinese navy defeats the Europeans on the sea in its effort to reclaim its lost territories and trade routes.

Through writing, reading, and discussing these novels, the *danmei* community has been reckoning with both China's position as a new global power and their own quest for a place for the individual in this brave new world. At this new historical conjuncture, the collective and the individual are both in crisis: the collective has been hijacked by the nationalist discourse of the state, and the individual has been forced into the model of the neoliberal subject as tireless producer, consumer, and entrepreneur.

In the previous section I identified one particular theme the two novels share: the celebration of a strong Chinese state led by a team of (super)heroic individuals. In the field of *danmei*/*chun'ai*, what fills up the empty space left by the removal of eroticism is the excitement of a national/global crisis and world-saving action. When "pure love" comes to mean that which is sexless, then nationalism, consumerism, and technophilia become sexy. The two novels' adherence to nationalist ideologies and market principles is *danmei*'s survival strategy. Moreover, I argue that this adherence may also serve as a camouflage, because the novels have attempted, although falteringly, to smuggle alternative visions of the collective and the individual into mass entertainment.

Reading mainstream novels produced in the 1980s and 1990s, Jianmei Liu (2003: 193) observed that "the rewriting of the theme of revolution and love is complicated by a globalized economy in which contemporary Chinese intellectuals face a political dilemma between Westernizing development and nationalist concerns, between the marketplace and their

individual positions." More specifically, Liu studies the opposition between local traditions (represented by Confucianism) and modernization (synonymous with Westernization), on the one hand, and that between moral principles and sexual desire, on the other. The *danmei* community struggles with some similar and yet already different tensions. For them, Confucianism is no longer the opposite of Western modernization but a reservoir of resources for envisioning an alternative modernity and a locally rooted cosmopolitanism. They also try to balance valorizing sexual desire per se with placing a new emphasis on the self's ethical responsibility to loved ones, human society, and extrahuman nature.

The Rise of China and the Reimagination of *Tianxia*

Both *SoC* and *DotW* are stories of national salvation, one featuring the collective fight to push China toward a dominant position in the global network of capitalist expansion and the other to pull China out of the claws and jaws of swarming zombies that appropriate the same network to destroy the world. The immediate milieu for both novels is the rise of China as a new global power in the twenty-first century. At a time when the Chinese government has been making plans for "national rejuvenation" and claiming leadership in regional and global governance, popular literature, among many other platforms, has provided a realm for thought experiments centered on pressing questions about China's cultural identity, its location in the existing global power structure, and visions for an alternative world order. In short, the question of the collective has resurfaced in official discourses, with its focus shifted from salvation to rejuvenation. However, the collective is in crisis at this very moment precisely because the state is invested in monopolizing the field of collective-making and foreclosing visions not in service to exclusive nationalism. This explains the inevitable tension between the censoring state and popular culture online.

For the *danmei* community, tapping into the national salvation/re-

juvenation discourse is not just a knee-jerk response to state censorship; their stories also provide an outlet for nationalism, which is both directed by the state and dependent on the populace's unreflexive anxiety over the perceived threats of globalization. Moreover, the *danmei* community is unwilling to give up on experimenting with the collective. Writers and readers are eager to participate in relevant discussions in the intimate public or affective alliance (Berlant 2008: viii; Kong 2012, 2014) that forms around specific online novels by young people who share a history and similar emotional experience of living in the world. Their visions of local, national, and planetary communities may or may not chime with the nationalist version of the collective desired by the state.

In the experience of the *danmei* community, China has risen, hence *SoC* dares to rewrite the century of humiliation and turn it into a story of triumph, and *DotW* boldly imagines a post-apocalyptic planetary utopia with Chinese characteristics. Both novels engage in world-(re)making and explore China's position in their brave new worlds, with *SoC* aligned with the nationalist claims of the sovereign state and a major player in the global arena of competition and conquest, and *DotW* striving toward (re) activating a transcendent authority beyond the nation-state. Their agendas resonate with the trend to retrieve the Confucian political concept of *tianxia*, which appears frequently within the novels and reader discussions.[19] Translated as "all under heaven," *tianxia* "refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical boundaries" (Ban Wang 2017: 1). Semantically unstable and historically fluid, this term can be used to refer to either the Chinese Empire in a narrow sense or the entire world broadly speaking, and it has always wavered between realpolitik ideology and cosmopolitan ideal.

In postsocialist China, thanks in part to the resurgence of *guoxue* (national studies) in the 1990s, the Confucian tradition, among many other traditions, is very much alive and still evolving.[20] And the state and its

[19] The reviews of *DotW* are available at URL: http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=1205245&wonderful=1. For discussion divided into topics, see URL: http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=1205245&huati=1; for *SoC* reviews, http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=2322969&wonderful=1; for discussion topics, http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=2322969&huati=1.

[20] Studying the fever of *guoxue*, Arif Dirlik (2011) sees its value in reviving non-Western traditions suppressed under the regime of Euromodernism, whereas Chen Jiaming (2011) warns against the rise of Confucian fundamentalism.

elites, on the one hand, and grassroots activists and artists, on the other hand, have sought to shape that discourse. The visions of *tianxia* in novels such as *SoC* and *DotW* are grassroots imaginaries produced by the *danmei* community under the dual pressure surveyed in the previous section. More often than not ingenious and flawed at the same time, these fictional visions reinscribe, complicate, undermine, and challenge dominant ideologies; I investigate them further later in this essay. Before I examine how *SoC* tells a story of national development and how *DotW* breaks away from that model, both novels utilizing the language of *tianxia*, a closer look at the genealogy of the term, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is in order.

In the Confucian tradition, the self, family, state, and *tianxia* were conceptualized as a series of concentric circles. The famous dictum "*xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia*" (one must first cultivate oneself morally before proceeding to establish order within the family, the state, and thereafter all under heaven) can be traced to the classic *Great Learning* (Davies 2009: 58). What replaced *tianxia,* a Sinocentric concept and practice of an international order, was the European concepts of nation (translated as *minzu*) and state (*guojia*) that entered Chinese consciousness in the late Qing and occupied a central place in major political campaigns in the twentieth century. In modern Chinese history, intellectuals developed an ethnic nationalism that worked to homogenize the inside rather than free the masses from ruling elites and at the same time to demarcate the outside world, which was threatening China's sovereignty. They also stressed the importance of the task to strengthen the state, especially the military, which was perceived as an indispensable instrument that guaranteed the survival and independence of the nation (Matten 2012).

The preceding survey explains why *minzu* (nation) and *guojia* (state) are closely entangled, and in fact conflated and confused, in the Chinese mind. Moreover, the positive image of the military (Gu Yun and Meng Feng are both soldiers in the novels) is rooted in the modern history of

China, a former (semi)colony. Meanwhile, the Confucian *jia-guo-tianxia* has never ceased being a haunting presence. The compound *guojia* consists of two characters, *guo* (state) and *jia* (family), suggesting that both the nation and the state are considered a family. How to interpret *jia* becomes key to understanding *guojia* and *tianxia*, as we will see in both novels.

In the twenty-first century, attempts have been made to revive *tianxia* as interests and confidence in China's own cultural tradition surge and, more significantly, discontent regarding the nation-state system erupt in the era of economic globalization and ecological crises. Pressured by the expansion of transnational capitalism, the state has been retreating from providing public services to its nation and has proven unable to cope with the ecological calamities brought on by the global expansion of capitalism (Duara 2017).

Zhao Tingyang (2009) has specified three meanings of the term *tianxia*: the land that extends across the world; the hearts and minds of all the peoples in the world; and a world government that maintains universal order by appealing to culture. Advocates of *tianxia* proclaim this Chinese vision to critique the expansionist nation-states and their antagonistic relations. They call for a universal community that pursues common good beyond national interests and wins support of all people regardless of their ethnicities and geopolitical locations. Critics of *tianxia* see it as a new hegemony fueled by nationalist hubris and worry about its approach to the other—that is, an approach that endeavors to assimilate various others by converting difference into sameness (Ban Wang 2017: 2–4).

Given the imperial setting of *SoC*, *tianxia* in this novel refers primarily to the Liang Empire, which, in the alternative history of steampunk, does not collapse but successfully transforms itself into a modern nation-state. This stands in contrast to Zhao's cosmopolitan *tianxia* and instead closely mimics nationalism, whose ambition is to expand into a Sinocentric global hegemony. The nation of Liang is extolled as sacred and imbued

with the power to demand the loyalty of myriad individuals and smaller communities. However, this power conflates the transcendent authority of *tianxia* with the sovereignty of the nation-state and leaves the latter unquestioned. The nation's transcendence is deeply limited and problematic, because it is "deployed for its tribalist goals: to constitute a coherent and bonded 'We'—to be sure, this is for the advancement of the people, but also to be able to compete in a non-ethical world" (Duara 2015: 109). In other words, this is a world-arena in which Liang must subdue hostile foreign nations and take the lead in controlling natural resources and the production, circulation, and consumption of commodities.

By contrast, the *tianxia* of *DotW* exceeds the boundaries of China and is literally all under heaven—that is, our planet Earth as a whole. The novel vividly illustrates the unsustainability of endless capitalist accumulation built on the subjugation of human life and extrahuman nature. Furthermore, this crisis of global modernity "cannot be adequately addressed by the existing system of competing nation-states and heroic histories of national progress, but only by recognition that our histories are shared and our destiny, planetary," as Duara (2015: 279) puts it. Hence the post-apocalyptic *tianxia* of the novel consists of the entire planet, interconnected human and nonhumans, and the ERA, a world institution that transcends nation-state boundaries. *DotW*'s *tianxia* is even more radical than Zhao's tripartite vision in that the former introduces the mythical Earth-string, a transcendent authority that is autonomous from modern secular regimes. The introduction of the Earth-string opens up possibilities for critiquing the disconnection between the regimes' representations of community and cosmological imaginaries and the consequential upholding of nationalism as a sacred ideology. In *DotW*, there is an ultimate sovereignty beyond globalizing capitalism and competing nation-states—that is, the livelihood of our planet.

In the online discussion boards attached to both novels, *jia*, *guo*, *guojia*, and *tianxia* were heatedly debated. Readers of *SoC* praised the novel

for its portrayal of *guojia* (which is coterminous with *tianxia*). They noticed that the Liang Empire is a *guo* headed by a particular *jia*, the royal family, but *guojia* is not to be confused with the royal family or the aristocratic clans. The old imperial system and the two protagonists who side with new technologies are in conflict. For the former, *tianxia* belongs to the rulers, whereas the latter identifies *tianxia* with the people, or the nation. The punk spirit of steampunk—that is, to emancipate technologies as well as the masses—dovetails with the democratic tendencies within the Confucian tradition that contemporary scholarship has reclaimed. For instance, in late imperial China, Confucian thinkers such as Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) and Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) made a distinction between the *tianxia* of the rulers or officials and that of the ordinary people. Huang critiqued rulers who placed their own interests above the people's well-being; Gu argued that the commoners' *tianxia* was not to be confused with the imperial state and that the fall of the state was to be distinguished from the fall of *tianxia* (Bell 2017: 132).

SoC's *guojia/tianxia* is a typical nation-state that does not challenge the capitalist global order but endeavors to create a unified nation to compete with other national players. Liang is portrayed as a polity run by Confucian scholar-officials and technicians and the place of origin for steam technology, capitalism, and the constitutional state. Confucianism is not just refashioned as compatible with Western modernity but is absorbed into the latter and consequently loses its potential to serve as a transcendent power capable of critiquing and transforming politics and the economy. It has transmuted into Confucian nationalism—Confucianism subservient to nationalism. One case in point is the role played by the Confucian Lingshu Academy of Technologies, where the moral authority of Confucian scholar-officials is reduced to the technical expertise of Confucian engineers and mechanics. More specifically, Shen Yi, one of Liang's best engineers and Gu Yun's sidekick, is a minor character whose occupation is to execute the protagonists' various plans and maintain their per-

sonal machines. This figure cannot be further away from the Confucian scholar-sage who acts as the double of the king. Whereas the state in early Chinese history had its double in a canon of texts, a source of charismatic moral authority resonating with, separated from, and critical of the realities in which it was created (Lewis 1999), the state of Liang simply deploys its machines, which more closely resemble preprogrammed laborers and citizens than human beings.

At the end of the novel, Chang Geng goes beyond strengthening the state to embark on a constitutional reform to secure the rights of the individual citizen. Readers rave about his punk declaration:

> I hope that one day my state will be strong and liberal; my people will all be employed; my territories will be free from warfare and my generals relieved of their duty to guard the frontiers. I will untie the deadly knot between the imperial power and *zili-ujin*. I want steam machines to cultivate the fields, air-borne ships to carry families on their journeys back home. My dream is that every human will be able to live with dignity.
>
> 我想有一天国家昌明，百姓人人有事可做，四海安定，我的将军不必死守边关，想……解开皇权与紫流金之间的死结，想让那些地上跑的火机都在田间地头，天上飞的长鸢中坐满了拖家带口回老家探亲的寻常旅人……每个人都可以有尊严地. (Priest 2015)

However, the novel allows "every human," a universalist claim that seems to transcend nationalism, to be used as an empty slogan, not bothering to demonstrate how Chang Geng would treat the "barbarians," his own people on the maternal side of his family. On the one hand, the novel, ostensibly a Confucian *jiaohua* story (that is, a story of transformation of the self and others through education), embraces cultural universalism and celebrates Chang Geng's assimilation into Han civilization via homosexual desire. In other words, it enacts a Chinese version of ho-

monationalism and celebrates *tianxia*'s openness toward the noble (and gay) barbarian who is even allowed to grow into a sage emperor. On the other hand, it portrays the Liang Empire, before its final victory over the European other, as suppressing labor insurgency caused by automation within its national boundaries and imposing unequal treaties on the northern and western barbarians, turning them into semicolonies. There is a fracture between the glorified notion of "every human" and those expendable bodies whose exclusion is the foundation of the unity of the nation. Inspired by reader discussion, I raise these questions: how to legitimize Liang's invasion of barbarian lands when the European invasion of Liang is condemned? Where is the rebellious worker located in Chang Geng's dreamland?

Quite a few readers discussed the novel's gender politics and found its depiction of Chang Geng's "evil" aunt disturbing, pointing out that this woman was a functional character meant to cut the tie between Chang Geng and his barbarian heritage and point him toward homosexual desire for Gu Yun, a Confucian gentleman and high-tech Iron Man. The narrative shows little sympathy for the aunt or the dead mother, who are gendered and ethnic others suffering the violence of Liang's aggressions, the Chinese counterpart of the Orientalized terrorist bodies in American homonationalism (Puar 2007). What's more, the aunt's name, *Huge'er*, is explained as the very term for *ziliujin* in her barbarian language. Does this imply that *tianxia*, *both* the nation-state of Liang *and* its global domination, is built on the anguish of internal and external others and the conquest of nature? What about the exploitation of the burnt-out human laborers and the polluted nature? What is lurking on the flip side of the enlightened citizenry, who are designated as "every human"? Is it perhaps what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls "bare life"—a less-than-human life that is at the core of modern politics? Would Liang's insatiable quest for power lead to a technological paradise or zombie apocalypse?

Discussion triggered by *DotW* also centered on *guojia*/*tianxia*. Just as

interesting as Chang Geng's declaration is the speech given by Lieutenant Lai Jie, an ERA soldier who arrives at Yongwang village in the spring of 2013. Talking to the protagonists on behalf of the post-apocalyptic Chinese state, a branch of the ERA, Lieutenant Lai orders that the survivor community give all their resources to the state, that former military and law enforcement officers report for duty, and that all civilians get ready for evacuation. Liu Yan refuses to obey and asks Lieutenant Lai to explain what rights the survivors hold before they fulfill their obligations to the state. Meng Feng also refuses to obey, claiming that he, a loser who cannot secure a job after leaving the military, has nothing to do with the state, which is an empty concept in its own right (not unlike Chang Geng's "every human"). Bypassing the issue of rights, Lai explains what the state (*guojia*) is, although what he actually talks about is the nation (*minzu*):

> "Where is *guojia*? It is not a fictional term." Lai Jie said solemnly, "Sergeant Meng Feng, it is this farm and all the people here, including your lover. Spratly Islands in the south, Mohe County in the north, the very place you are standing, each inch of the land you have walked to escape the zombies, the destroyed hometowns, the cities fallen into ruins—these constitute your ancestral land."
>
> "国家在哪里？它不是一个虚幻的名词." 赖杰漠然道, "蒙烽中士，它是这个农场，农场里的所有人，也包括你的爱. 南到南沙群岛，北到漠河，你所站的地方，你在逃亡里走过的每一寸土地，满目疮痍的故乡，变成废墟的城市，就是你的祖国." (Feitian 2011)

Responding to this passage, readers passionately discussed what *guojia* is. They invoked not only the liberal theory of the state that prioritizes the interests of the individual but also the Marxist understanding that the state is an apparatus of violence wielded by the ruling class, as well as the Confucian axioms *xiushen*, *qijia*, *zhiguo*, and *ping tianxia*. Whereas

some readers interpreted Yongwang village as a nascent civil society, others argued that it was more like a family and would naturally merge into the bigger family of the post-apocalyptic state. The former worried that Lieutenant Lai might be a fascist embodying the excess of state violence, but the latter predicted that the protagonists would join him to fight for the state/nation. As the story unfolds, the protagonists do not choose to work for the post-apocalyptic state, which was revealed as a utopia, not the dystopia found in most zombie stories.

The post-apocalyptic Chinese state, as discussed earlier, is a hybrid of the pre-apocalyptic nation-state and the ideal world institution yet to come. The novel leaves this transition as a mystery to push through its postcapitalist, postnational, and posthuman reinvention of *tianxia* without attracting the attention of the real-life state. Like Yongwang village, which merges into the larger family of the Chinese nation/state, the Chinese nation-state is eventually integrated into the still larger family called Earth, or *tianxia*. When Lieutenant Lai explains *guojia*, he invokes the geography of China ("Spratly Islands in the south, Mohe County in the north") as a territorial nation-state and the people living there. However, this *guojia* is part and parcel of *tianxia*, which consists of the lands (and oceans) of the entire planet and a human government in communion with the deity-like Earth-string. *Tianxia* in *DotW* is not just a cosmopolitan imaginary but a revival of the religious cosmology of ancient China, one that posits the correspondence among the natural, human, and divine realms (Wang Mingming 2012).

The Earth-string, the sovereignty of our planet and its planetary community, is the transcendent power missing in *SoC*'s *tianxia*, which is bogged down in the doctrines of global capitalism and state nationalism. The divine consciousness of Gaia, the mysterious string is also Heaven in relation to *tianxia* (all under heaven). Further, this Heaven is not some disinterested existence detached from the world; it watches over human and nonhuman entities and intervenes, when necessary, in life processes. This

line of thinking bears the influence of popular beliefs in a deified notion of *tian* (heaven) that miraculously responds to human ethical behavior, rewarding the virtuous and punishing the depraved.[21] Displeased with the novel's rather contrived happy ending, some readers questioned why the author resorted to deus ex machina and had the Earth-string—which could have been portrayed as more indifferent toward human desires—abandon her plan to eliminate humanity and resurrect the protagonists after their heroic self-sacrifice. I read the implicit message in the novel as a response from Feitian: because we, little selves, are *both* ready to devote ourselves to the greater self, to *guojia* (the state/nation) or *tianxia* (the planet), *and* expect the greater self to love us in return. Along this same line of thinking, Liu Yan demands that the state honor the rights of the individual rather than simply expect the individual to fulfill obligations to the state. Similarly, the author depicts the planetary sovereign, greater than any human collective, as always ready to honor the needs and desires of the individual. Put bluntly, the individual requires the planetary collective to protect and respect its human and nonhuman inhabitants.[22] The individual has risen.

[21] ***Tian* (heaven) is an extremely complicated concept in the Chinese worldview. One particular understanding of it in popular religion is that it is a divine entity that would respond to human requests. See Q. Edward Wang 1999; Chau 2008.**

[22] **The *tianxia* of *DotW* coincides with Timothy Morton's (2017: 101–120) vision of "subscendence"—that is, the whole does not transcend its parts but is always smaller than all the individuals put together.**

Individualization along the Trajectories of *Jia-Guo-Tianxia*

But like the collective, the individual is also in crisis. This crisis is twofold: the individual is always in danger of both disappearing into the collective and of being forced into the neoliberal model of self-enterprising and self-exploiting human capital. In response, the novels and their affective communities endeavor to reinvent the individual, whom they refuse to allow to become incorporated into the mega-machine of the nation-state or that of global capitalism.

Back in the first half of the twentieth century, as Haiyan Lee (2006) has demonstrated in her work on the genealogy of love in modern China, the Enlightenment structure of feeling centered on the autonomy-seeking individual, and striving to replace the Confucian structure of feeling

was subsumed into the revolutionary structure of feeling in the 1930s and 1940s. The thwarted processes of individualization resumed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as one of the many consequences of marketization that arose in the 1980s, the era in which *danmei* writers and readers were born and raised. These writers and readers are among those making claims for autonomy in social, economic, and political arenas. Within the fictional space, the protagonists are young people of about the same age as the majority of the community producing and consuming homoerotic romance. Through telling stories about fictional young characters, *danmei* novels such as *SoC* and *DotW* give voice to real-life young people's demands for material wealth, political rights, and romantic love as well as their enthusiasm for and apprehension toward building new collectives.

Studying individualization in contemporary Europe, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2010) attributed its cause to the application of labor market flexibility and the dismantlement of the welfare state. Various institutions require people to depend on their own capacities and can no longer rely on established relationships, which have been reversed by neoliberal social policy and economic globalization. Although their theorization may not be directly applied to the Chinese context, sociologists observe that the individual has indeed become a basic social category in postsocialist China. They also highlight the Chinese characteristics of individualization: the individual is not primarily conceptualized as a right holder in a Western-style welfare state; cultural democratization has been conspicuously absent; and collectives such as the family and the state remain particularly relevant (Yan 2009; Hansen/Svarverud 2010). Taking a step further, Jack Barbalet (2016) questions Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's categories of individualization—that is, detraditionalization, disembedment, and reembedment—and calls our attention to the specificities of Chinese society at given historical moment. He proposes that we pay attention to the continued relevance of tradition and examine the changes

in how people relate with others in preexisting institutions and organizations, especially the family and the state, that provide social meaning to them.

SoC and *DotW* encapsulate the rise of the individual in contemporary China. The individuals that rise in these novels assert their autonomy, but they must also confront the problem of the neoliberal subject—an entrepreneur of the self, a competitor against others, and a loner cut off from social relations and forced to rely on his or her own capacities for survival. The new individuals emerging in the fictional space do not enjoy this new freedom, but rather struggle toward rebuilding the collective by modifying traditions of modern and premodern China. They are not necessarily defined by their efforts either to resist some heteronomous authority identified as tradition or to transgress boundaries this tradition has set; instead, they tread the preexisting paths of *jia-guo-tianxia* in the Chinese context in their journeys of self-discovery.

First, the new individual is the Enlightenment self, which was repressed in the Mao era and is currently resurfacing to proclaim liberal visions still unfulfilled. Examples are Chang Geng's constitutional reform and Liu Yan's critique of excess state power. Even more significantly, the new individual is also the Confucian self, which was attacked in the May Fourth period but is reasserting itself in our brave new world where dangers lurk and hostile forces are rampant. This Confucian relational self is situated in a range of fluctuating social interactions. For instance, individualization as enacted in the two novels unfolds in preexisting institutions such as the family, the state, and the world, a series of concentric circles representing collectives of various scales.

Last but not least, the new individual is also the queer self who dares to reimagine tradition without breaking away from it. The protagonists of *SoC* and *DotW* are homosexual lovers. Their homosexual relationships, imagined by a community of young people, male and female, stand for a new foundational sociality beyond "reproductive futurism"—that is, the

persistence of the present power structures into the future and the solidification of heteronormativity (Edelman 2004). The radical reimagination of the family, the state, and the globe has as its point of departure the intimate relation between two people; in other words, the collective does not crush individuals but needs them at and as its very heart. Likewise, individuals do not stand in contradistinction to the collective but live within a network of relationships.

The new individuals do not disembed themselves from tradition. Instead, their existences are intertwined with the reinvention of tradition, which is not a set of tenets frozen in the past but a repository of resources to be creatively selected, adapted, and reformulated into new syntheses. *SoC* and *DotW* reconceptualize the notion of family, which differs from both the modern heterosexual nuclear family and the Confucian extended family. The ideal family promoted in these novels is the community of university students who run the Yongwang village in *DotW*, or the like-minded young people, engineers at the Lingshu Academy, and soldiers of the Xuantie Battalion who gather around Chang Geng and Gu Yun in *SoC*. This metaphorical family is more an affective community than a biological and/or social-legal unit. In both novels, the Chinese nation-state is imagined as an idealized family-like collective composed of individuals. This family-state may permute into the competitive nation-state in *SoC* or serve as a springboard for the planetary alliance in *DotW*, the two contrasting configurations of *tianxia*.

Earlier I described the protagonists of the two novels as (super)heroic individuals who are professionally trained and technologically enhanced, figures desired by both media-entertainment capital and the military-industrial state. But there is more to them than that. The two novels, we need to remember, are examples of *danmei* or, more precisely, *chun'ai* fiction. Purged of sexual content and preoccupied with national and planetary campaigns, how can these novels still be considered homoerotic romance? Furthermore, the physical, not to mention sexual, contact of

the lovers is very limited, because they are constantly on the move and oftentimes separated, thanks to a national transportation system. How to tell a love story when the lovers don't even get to see each other?

The absence of sexuality is filled not only by nationalism and technology fetishism but, more significantly, by sentimentality. Both novels are narrated from the perspective of one protagonist, Chang Geng in *SoC* and Liu Yan in *DotW*. Resembling the heroines in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European sentimental literature, they write letters and diaries to reveal inner feelings.[23] Although *SoC* and *DotW* are not epistolary novels per se, the insertion of letters and diaries helps to create a double narrative—that is, the main plot of national salvation and the parallel plot of a romantic affair. During the Sino-European war, Chang Geng, the character based in the capital, writes letters to Gu Yun, who rushes from one conflict zone to another, to discuss war strategies as well as express longing for his mentor/lover. Gu Yun sends back short poems and, once, a twig of blooming plum. Similarly, Liu Yan keeps a diary to record their zombie-fighting experiences and reflect on his relationship with Meng Feng, who makes several attempts to steal it so as to take a peek at Liu Yan's heart. All four main characters, with Chang Geng and Liu Yan cast as writers and Gu Yun and Meng Feng as readers, are portrayed as sensitive, empathetic, and self-reflexive. These are their emotive selves, with carefully constructed interiority and in pursuit of individual autonomy, and at least partly created from the absence of sex under state censorship; but in the main plot they are their heroic selves, courted and cultivated by media capital and engaged in endless action and adventure.[24]

In her book on contemporary Chinese web romance, Jin Feng contends that these romances are plot- rather than affect-driven, and she focuses on characters defined by social roles and heroic deeds. Invoking Haiyan Lee's work on the transition between structures of feeling, Feng argues that the Enlightenment structure of feeling and the modern emotive self may be absent in contemporary web romance (Feng 2013: 174;

[23] For more discussion on the epistolary tradition and its continuation in contemporary women's writing, see Campbell 1995.

[24] Charles Taylor (1989) makes this distinction between the premodern heroic self and the modern emotive self. Alan Kirby (2009) argues that in the age of new media, repressed heroic stories such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have resurfaced and challenged the domination of the emotive self in the modern period. The two types of narratives and selves actually intertwine in Chinese *danmei*-sci-fi crossover novels.

Lee 2006). *SoC* and *DotW* are counterexamples. These novels are double narratives, the new revolution-plus-love stories, in which the emotive self of *danmei* is the foundation for the heroic self—in other words, the sci-fi superheroes. The individual has become the point of reference for the collective. In the shifting relationship, harmonious or not, of the individual and the collective in the twentieth century, the minor self, although differentiated from the greater self, was fixed in its role in the collective project of nation-building. In the Internet-based popular literature of the twenty-first century, although endowed with a task of collective making, the individual is foregrounded as providing the foundation, energy, and legitimacy necessary for the collective, which may or may not overlap with the existing nation-state. The individual has risen, and is the collective-building individual who channels emotions into heroic endeavors and performs heroic deeds to shore up his or her sentimental self.

The superheroes of steampunk and zombie apocalypse are at the same time the sentimental lovers of homoerotic romance, who are portrayed as both selfish and selfless to resist the exclusive collective's encroachment on the individual and the competitive individual's undermining of the collective. On the one hand, they are selfish in their quest for romantic love and an enjoyable life free from strenuous struggles. Caught up in crises that unravel the social fabric, however, they become reluctant fighters for national salvation. On the other hand, they are selfless when willingly sacrificing themselves for the well-being of others. They painstakingly strive for interpersonal intimacy and collective formation. For them, the meaning of love has shifted from sexual desire to ethical obligation. According to Emmanuel Lévinas (1998) and Jacques Derrida (1996), the meaning of love is dying for the other—the altruistic sacrifice of the self for the sake of the other. Whereas the other receives the gift of love, what the "I" gains is death. And death, what is absolutely mine and entirely altruistic, cannot be exchanged. A truly ethical relationship between self and other is beyond calculation and reciprocity; it is noncom-

mercial and nonpolitical. In this light, love stories harbor the potential to transcend capitalist accumulation and state manipulation.

The protagonists of both novels are self-indulgent *and* self-abandoning. They are reluctant fighters for national salvation but do not hesitate to die for others. To borrow from Lieutenant Lai, *guojia* (or *tianxia*) is not an empty term but is the land (or, extrahuman environments) and the people (again, not an abstraction but one's family, friends, and fellow human beings). The collective is formed by human and nonhuman others, to whom the self is a "hostage" in Levinas's language. When soldiers of the Xuantie Battalion and survivors of the Yongwang village give up life, they do so to protect the other "little selves." Here I stress again that the totality of the other "little selves" in *SoC* does not exceed the limited national community, which is built on the exclusion of racial, class, gendered, and nonhuman others. The *tianxia* in *DotW*, by contrast, is a planetary community embracing a variety of selves and others. In both novels, the protagonists also sacrifice themselves. Most intriguingly, both novels resort to deus ex machina to save their heroes. In *SoC*, Gu Yun is fatally wounded during the Sino-European war but nurtured back to life by the empire's advanced mechanical and bio-technologies. In *DotW*, having been killed in the final suicide mission to defeat the virus-string, Meng Feng and Liu Yan are miraculously revived by the godlike Earth-string. Needless to say, the authors add these miracle stories to give their readers the much-desired happy ending. However, I read these miracle stories, or the poetic justice they offer, as a reminder that the collective, whether national or planetary, cannot just exploit those who sacrifice.

Whereas the individual is obligated to the others that form the collective, the collective is a greater self that must care for the lesser selves that constitute it. Collective action for the livelihood of the planet or the revolution must begin and end with genuine personal feelings among human and nonhuman beings—that is, love. Correspondingly, love is not restricted to interpersonal intimacy sheltered from the turmoil of the ex-

ternal world; instead, as an ethical obligation of the self to the other, both the individual and the collective, it needs to be publicly performed. Given this intertwined relationship between the collective and the individual, revolution and love, the two novels do not present the personal and the public/political as two divided and competing spaces. Moreover, the other is not just the human other, but encompasses all the life-forms of this planet.

In *SoC*, a typical "pure love" text, Chang Geng kisses Gu Yun only twice. The first kiss happens in the secluded space of their shared residence. But when Chang Geng musters up the courage to kiss him again, Gu Yun is drunk and mistakes him for a girl. Disappointed, Chang Geng does not try again until he and Gu Yun fight side by side to defend the imperial city against the European invaders. This time, Gu Yun reciprocates, and the loving bond between the protagonists ripples out to unite the Liang soldiers and motivate them to fight. In *DotW*, Liu Yan and Meng Feng split up before the outbreak; it is the zombie apocalypse that gives their relationship a second chance. However, when the post-apocalyptic Chinese state approaches their survivor community, Meng Feng again breaks up with Liu Yan, so that the latter can be airlifted to the safe zone with the other civilians. Refusing to be separated from his lover, however, Liu Yan volunteers to work for the military. He publicly cites the Confucian notions of *xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia*, claiming that he is willing to sacrifice himself for a zombie-free *tianxia* for the myriad little selves, his lover included. The revolution to end capitalist expansion at the expense of human and nonhuman lives starts with the lovers' devotion to each other.

The paradigm of revolution-plus-love has been rewritten. The remaking of the collective and that of the individual are intertwined and interdependent. Although both novels reimagine the individual as ethically obligated to others and privilege the individual as the source and goal of the collective, given its adherence to nationalism, *SoC* eventually fails

to break the competitive model that dominates the formation of both the collective and the individual. *DotW*, thanks to its fictional scenario of zombie apocalypse, succeeds in breaking away from both the tribalistic collective and the competitive individual. Alternative imagination, to be followed by social transformation, is possible only when state-sanctioned nationalism and neoliberal individualism are challenged simultaneously. Revolution and love are one and the same task.

To conclude, I return to the question I began with: how to account for the reemergence of the revolution-plus-love paradigm in *danmei* novels that adopt new sci-fi genres? I have demonstrated how the writers actively engaged political issues in their romantic stories and how readers enthusiastically debated these utopian visions, despite, or even thanks to, the greed of the market and the tightening control of the state. These two forces have made their way into the thematic and formal space of the novels, even as the *danmei* community has been striving to wrestle with them and, whenever possible, to resist their domination within, and potentially beyond, the fictional space.

Young people in China today have been labeled either as a hedonistic generation that is self-obsessed and politically apathetic or as "little pink," mindless nationalists echoing official discourses. Although media studies scholars attempt to debunk the myth of the "little pink" label, arguing that it has been invented in social media to stigmatize women involved in politics, they view homoerotic romance as an apolitical genre where *danmei* communities are concerned only with gender and sexuality (Fang/Repnikova 2018). This scholarly view actually attests to how *danmei* has been perceived by the general public. The value of the new revolution-plus-love stories, in this light, is that they offer space for misrepresented and misunderstood young women and men to assert themselves as *tianxia*-minded new individuals.

Glossary

bingdu xian	病毒弦
Chang Geng	长庚
changbi shi	长臂师
chun'ai	纯爱
danmei	耽美
danmei tongren	耽美同人
diqiu xian	地球弦
gangjia	钢甲
geren zhi	个人志
Gujian qitan	古剑奇谭
Gu Yanwu	顾炎武
Gu Yun	顾昀
guojia	国家
guoxue	国学
Huang Zongxi	黄宗羲
Huge'er	胡格尔
huoji	火机
jia-guo-tianxia	家国天下
jiaohua	教化
kehuan	科幻
kuilei	傀儡
Lai Jie	赖杰
lingyi	灵异
Liu Yan	刘砚
Meng Feng	蒙烽
minzu	民族
renmin	人民
Shenhai xiansheng	深海先生
shuhao	书号
Shen Yi	沈易
sijing manzu	四境蛮族
Suiyuanju	随缘居
tianxia	天下
Tianyi	天一
tudi	土地
wangyou	网游
wuxia	武侠
xingzhen	刑侦
xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia	修身, 齐家, 治国, 平天下
xiuzhen	修真

Xuantie ying	玄铁营
Xuanyuan jian: Fengzhiwu	轩辕剑: 枫之舞
Xuanyuan jian: Cangzhitao	轩辕剑: 苍之涛
Yongwang	永望
yuanchuang	原创
Zhangzhe chibang de dahuilang	长着翅膀的大灰狼
ziliujin	紫流金
xiyang fanbang	西洋番邦
zhuquan	主权

Bibliography

Adam, Heribert. 1990. "Exclusive Nationalism versus Inclusive Patriotism: State Ideologies for Divided Societies." *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 3, no. 4: 569–587.

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Barbalet, Jack. 2016. "Chinese Individualization, Revisited." *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 1: 9–23.

Beck, Ulrich. 2009. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2010. "Foreword: Varieties of Individualization." In Mette Halskov Hansen and Rune Svarverud, eds., *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, xiii-xixx.

Bell, Daniel A. 2017. "Realizing Tianxia: Traditional Values and China's Foreign Policy." In Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 129–146.

Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bowser, Rachel A. and Brian Croxall. 2010. "Introduction: Industrial Evolution, the Steampunk Special Issue." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3, no. 1: 1–45.

———. 2016. *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Busse, Kristina. 2017. *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Cady, Kathryn A. and Thomas Oates. 2016. "Family Splatters: Rescuing Heteronormativity from the Zombie Apocalypse." *Women's Studies in Communication* 39, no. 3: 308–325.

Cai Shanni 蔡珊妮. 2017. "Shenhai xiansheng bei zhuai" 深海先生被抓 (Mr. Deep Sea was arrested). *Sohu Entertainment* (Dec. 29). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): http://www.sohu.com/a/213468035_159592

Campbell, Elizabeth. 1995. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 3: 332–348.

Chao, Shih-Chen. 2016. "Grotesque Eroticism in the Danmei Genre: The Case of Lucifer's Club in Chinese Cyberspace." *Porn Studies* 3, no. 1: 65–76.

Chau, Adam Yuet. 2008. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Chen, Jiaming. 2011. "The National Studies Craze." *China Perspectives* no. 1: 22–30.

Christie, Deborah and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds. 2011. *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Crowther, Kathryn. 2016. "From Steam Arms to Brass Goggles: Steampunk, Prostheses, and Disability." In Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall, eds., *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 73–96.

Danahay, Martin. 2016. "Steampunk as a Postindustrial Aesthetic: 'All That Is Solid Melts in Air.'" *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8, no. 2: 28-56.

Davies, Gloria. 2009. *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1996. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dirlik, Arif. 2011. "*Guoxue*/National Learning in the Age of Global Modernity." *China Perspectives*, no. 1: 4–13.

Duara, Prasenjit. 2015. *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2017. "The Chinese World Order and Planetary Sustainability." In Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 65–83.

Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fang, Kecheng and Maria Repnikova. 2018. "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China." *New Media & Society* 20, no. 6: 2162–2185.

Feitian Yexiang 非天夜翔. 2011. *Erlingyisan/Mori shuguang* 2013/末日曙光 (Dawn of the world). *Jinjiang Literary City* (Aug. 3 to Oct. 23). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1205245

Feng, Jin. 2009. "Addicted to Beauty: Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese 'Danmei' Fiction at Jinjiang." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 2 (Fall): 1–41.

———. 2013. *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*. Leiden: Brill.

Hansen, Mette Halskov and Rune Svarverud, eds. 2010. *iChina: The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Hellekson, Karen and Kristina Busse, eds. 2014. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Hernández, Javier C. and Albee Zhang. 2018. "Writer of Erotic Novels in China Is Jailed for Producing Gay Pornography." *The New York Times* (Nov. 19). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/asia/tianyi-china-erotic-novels-prison.html

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

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge.

———. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kirby, Alan. 2009. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Kong, Shuyu. 2012. "The 'Affective Alliance': 'Undercover,' Internet Media Fandom, and the Sociality of Cultural Consumption in Postsocialist China." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24, no. 1: 1–47.

———. 2014. *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China.* London: Routledge.

Lee, Haiyan. 2006. *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1998. *Otherwise Than Being, Or, Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.

Lewis, Mark Edward. 1999. *Writing and Authority in Early China*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Liang, Qingsan 梁清散. 2016. *Xinxin ribaoguan: Jixie jueqi* 新新日报馆: 机械崛起 (From the new daily news: mechanical wonders). Changsha: Hunan wenyi.

Liu, Jianmei. 2003. *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Luckhurst, Roger. 2015. *Zombies: A Cultural History*. London: Reaktion Books.

Matten, Marc A. 2012. "'China Is the China of the Chinese': The Concept of Nation and Its Impact on Political Thinking in Modern China." *Oriens Extremus* 51: 63–106.

McNally, David. 2011. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. Leiden: Brill.

Mielke, Tammy and Jeanne LaHaie. 2015. "Theorizing Steampunk in Scott Westerfeld's YA Series *Leviathan*." *Children's Literature in Education* 46, no. 3: 242–256.

Ming, Cheang and Saheli Roy Choudhury. 2017. "China Has Launched Another Crackdown on the Internet—but It's Different This Time." *CNBC* (Oct. 26). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/26/china-internet-censorship-new-crackdowns-and-rules-are-here-to-stay.html

Morton, Timothy. 2017. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. London: Verso.

Peng Wei 彭玮. 2015. "Wangluo zuozhe 'zhangzhe chibang de dahuilang' huo huanxing, shubenxiaoshuo bei rending wei shehuang" 网络作者 "长着翅膀的大灰狼" 获缓刑, 数本小说被认定为涉黄 (Web author "Winged Wolf" was put on probation, several of her novels determined to be obscene). *Pengpai News* (Aug. 19). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1366172_1

Pho, Diana. 2016. "Punking the Other: On the Performance of Racial and National Identities in Steampunk." In Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall, eds., *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 127–149.

Priest. 2015. *Shapolang* 杀破狼 (Stars of chaos). *Jinjiang Literary City* (Jan. 23 to June 8). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2322969

Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Schillace, Brandy. 2017. *Clockwork Futures: The Science of Steampunk and the Reinvention of the Modern World*. New York: Pegasus.

Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱. 2018. "*Pujiang wenxue: women haoxiang zhen shi yinwei 'bu zhuanye,' cai zou dao jintian de*" 普江文学: 我们好像真是因为 "不专业," 才走到今天的 (Jinjiang literature: it's as if we got to today because we really were not specialized). *Wenxuebao* (July 27). URL (accessed 7/10/2020): http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2018/0727/c404024-30174366.html

Song, Mingwei. 2013. "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1: 86–102.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tian, Xiaofei. 2015. "Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1: 224–277.

Wald, Priscilla. 2008. *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wang, Ban. 2017. "Introduction." In Ban Wang, ed., *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1–22.

Wang, Mingming. 2012. "All under Heaven (*tianxia*): Cosmological Perspectives and Political Ontologies in Pre-Modern China." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1: 337–383.

Wang, Q. Edward. 1999. "History, Space, and Ethnicity: The Chinese Worldview." *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2: 285–305.

Yan, Yunxiang. 2009. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford: Berg.

Yu, Hong. 2017. "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank." *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105: 353–368.

Zhao, Suisheng. 2018. "China and the South China Sea Arbitration: Geopolitics versus International Law." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109: 1–15.

Zhao, Tingyang. 2009. "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-Under-Heaven (*Tian-xia*)." *Diogenes* 56, no. 1: 5–18.

Zheng Xiqing 郑熙青. 2018. "Danmei" 耽美. In Shao Yanjun, ed., *Pobishu: wangluo wenhua guanjianci* 破壁书: 网络文化关键词 (Breaking the wall: keywords of internet culture). Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 173–181.