PALACKY UNIVERSITY IN OLOMOUC

Faculty of Arts

Department of Asian Studies

MASTER'S THESIS

Specifika žánrů čínské internetové literatury *gongdou*, *zhaidou* a *zhongtianwen*
The Specifics of Chinese Internet Genres *Gongdou*, *Zhaidou* and *Zhongtianwen*

OLOMOUC 2024, Bc. Eliška Pospíšilová

Supervisor: Mgr. Kamila Hladíková, Ph.D.

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work, and it contains no other materials written or published by any other person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

In Olomouc: 28.11.2023

Anotace

Název: Specifika internetových žánrů *gongdou, zhaidou* a *zhongtianwen*

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Fakulta: Filozofická fakulta

Katedra: Katedra asijských studií

Obor: Čínská filologie

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Kamila Hladíková, Ph.D.

Počet stran: 72

Počet znaků (včetně mezer): 126 387

Počet zdrojů (včetně elektronických zdrojů): 43

Klíčová slova: *gongdou, zhaidou, zhongtian wen,* čínská internetová literatura

Cíl práce:

Cílem diplomové práce je představení diskurzu čínské internetové literatury orientované na ženy. Hlavním cílem práce je představení jednotlivých znaků a opakujících se prvků ve zkoumaných (pod)žánrech internetové literatury – *gongdou, zhaidou* a *zhongtian wen* – na základě četby internetových románů. Práce se také zaobírá možností, že jsou tyto žánry internetové literatury orientované na ženy pouhými podžánry žánrů historické romance, popřípadě se jedná o narativní prvky internetové literatury.

Annotation

Title: The Specifics of Chinese Internet Genres *Gongdou, Zhaidou* and *Zhongtianwen*

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Department: The Department of Asian Studies

Major: Chinese Philology

Supervisor: Mgr. Kamila Hladíková, Ph.D.

Number of pages: 72

Number of characters (including spaces): 126 387

Number of sources (including electronic sources): 43

Keywords: *gongdou, zhaidou, zhongtian wen,* Chinese internet literature

The aim of the thesis:
The aim of this Master's thesis is to introduce the discourse of Chinese internet literature, with focus on female oriented literature and related important terminology. The thesis examines selected (sub)genres of internet literature *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* in order to determine whether they are separate genres of female oriented online fiction or only subgenres of ancient romance genre or even just narrative devices of internet novels. Based on reading of internet novels, differentiative specifics and repeating motif of these subgenres will be introduced.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends and family for their support in writing this thesis. Special thanks go to Kateřina for helping with brainstorming and to Tereza as she was always willing to listening to my rambling about how unable I am to write this thesis.

Lastly I would like to also thank Mgr. Kamila Hladíková, Ph.D for her pointers and needed advices in writing this thesis.

Contents

EDITORIAL NOTE

For transcription of Chinese terms, I am using pinyin 拼音 without tones and simplified characters and for Japanese I am using Hepburn transcription. I state the novels under their Chinese names if they do not have official English translation and in first notice of the novels, I also present a possible English translation of the name. If there is not English translation of the works in the references, the parts of the books and terms translation are my original translations.

INTRODUCTION

With the spread of the Internet in the 90s, internet literature has become popular in China. Cyber space offered new possibilities to Chinese writers. Even though internet literature had been marginalized since its birth (Tao, 2018), it quickly gained popularity among Chinese citizens. With the new medium came new possibilities, so with the rising popularity of internet literature, the pragmatic Chinese pioneered new ways to commercialize internet novels. In 2003 Qidian website implemented one of the most successful models, the VIP microtransactional model.

The focus shifted from the writer to readers, fans of the work, and developed into the "fan economy" (Chao, 2013: 185.-186.). Writers create novels satisfying the desires of their fans. Therefore, many new genres emerged in recent years. After the transformation of specific elements and themes from genres, focused mostly on male readers, emerged female-oriented literature written from the viewpoint of a female protagonist (Shao, 2018: 169.). It has satiated women's desires for relatable characters, contrary to the perfect highly unrealistic "white lotus" heroines common in male-oriented internet literature.

Thus, this master's thesis deals with the problems of description and specifics and similarities of selected female-oriented (sub)genres *gongdou* (宫斗), *zhaidou* (宅斗) and *zhongtian wen* (种田文). My main sources of information in this work are books *Literature Guide in the Internet Age* (2015), *Interpretation of Internet Literature Classics* (2016), *Keywords in Chinese Internet Subcultures* (2018) by Shao Yanjun and *Internet literature in China* (2015) by Michel Hockx.

The thesis is divided into two parts:

In the first, theoretical, part, I will introduce the problematics of Chinese Internet Literature, the development of female-oriented literature, its evolution, and its classification. I will investigate the problems of genre and subgenre and what is the most fitting way to classify female internet literature. And before that I will explain terms relevant to female-oriented internet literature needed for internet literature discourse.

In the second, practical, part I will conduct an analysis of the aforementioned internet (sub)genres *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian* wen. Based on my reading of the internet novels, namely *Princess Agents* (*11 Chu tegong huang fei* 11 处特工皇妃) by Xiao Xiang Dongr (潇

湘冬儿), *"Quan Qi's Wife"* (*Quan Qi Zhi Qi* 权戚之妻) by Zhanggou Luoyue (长沟落月), *"Wicked Peasant Woman"* (*Nongjia E Fu* 农家恶妇) by Nan Dao Yingtao (南岛樱桃) and *"Startling Surprises with Every Step"* (*Bu Bu Jing Xin* 步步惊心) by Tong Hua (桐华), but also based on other novels I have read, I will determine the specific elements of the *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* (sub)genres as well as compare the possible similarities of (sub)genres present in the works.

METHODOLOGY

The main goal of this thesis is to introduce three (sub)genres of internet literature and their specifics. Based on the reading of primary literature and related internet sources like Baidu, but primarily relying on the theoretical discussion in scholarly publications such as *Literature Guide in the Internet Age* (2015), *Interpretation of Internet Literature Classics* (2016), *Keywords in Chinese Internet Subcultures* (2018) by Shao Yanjun and *Internet literature in China* (2015) by Michel Hockx. In the first part, I am going to introduce the development of internet literature, important terms related to it, female-oriented literature, sorting of the genres and the readers' most favourite female-oriented genres.

In the second part, I will conduct an analysis of the (sub)genres based on secondary sources and internet searches. Later, I will use novels as a source to find specifics and characteristics or potential similarities in (sub)genres. I will do my analysis namely on these novels:

- *Bu Bu Jing Xin* by Tong Hua
- *Princess Agents* by Xiao Xiang Dongr
- *Quan Qi Zhi Qi* by Zhanggou Luoyue
- *Nong Jia E Fu* by Nan Dao Yingtao

My analysis also includes other novels listed in the references. I have mostly chosen these novels based on recommendations on the internet around the years 2020-2023.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* genres or rather subgenres? How are they classified in secondary literature and on the internet?

- Is it more fitting to classify these as (sub)genres or simply tags serving to search for the most desirable content?

- What are the specifics of each (sub)genre?

- Are there similarities between the (sub)genres and if so, how are they similar?

1. PART 1

1.1. Development of Chinese Internet Literature

Internet literature (*wangluo wenxue* 网络文学), also known as web or online literature, has become a significant phenomenon in China in the last ten years. What exactly is defined as internet literature?

"[...], internet literature consists of any literary works which can be accessed over the internet." (Chao, 2012: 12.)

Shao offers this definition: *"Internet literature does not refer to all literature published and disseminated on the internet, but literature produced on the internet."* (2016: 3.)

Later the term internet literature stabilised into the literature published and produced on the internet as Shao argues.

Also, when searching for the definition of internet literature I have come across an early definition by Benly Zhang who differentiates between three types of online literature. The first one includes all multimedia and WEB interaction of the Internet, and that is all literary works that only exist on the Internet, such as joint novels, multimedia scripts and other forms. Second type are digitized literary works from printed media that are after publishing put onto the Internet on many novel collection sites. The last type are works created for the Internet with the use of traditional creative techniques. It is most common type, and it can be said this has become the most representative definition of Internet literature. Most of the literary website publish works of this type (Zhang, 1998).

I think the second definition is most fitting as what could be classified as internet literature and not just electronic versions of originally published books. In her book, Shao discussed the problematics of print and internet literature. So, I only deem it right to address internet literature as only literature produced on the internet, as Shao argues.

Keeping that in mind, Chao also concludes that there are two types of production **nonlinear** and **'original internet linear narration'** (Chao, 2012: 12.).

What is called non-linear narration is generated by computer programs. They are pictorial, interactive, dynamic, multilayered literary text viewed on computers monitors by readers without necessary following a linear order. It is like exploring a maze. The new literary genre hypertext writing is still in the early stages and only consists of small

percentage of works. Linear narration online can be divided into two types. One is text published in print and then digitalised and published online. These could be said to be 'unoriginal internet linear narration'. The other is works produced and published on the internet. These are the 'original internet linear narration'. The difference between the two is if the readership comes into the contact with the work through internet or not (Chao, 2012: 12.-13.).

Another important thing about internet literature is that, as in Jin says, that it has no taboos from the beginning, and the freedom of content gives literary creation spiritual liberation. (2000: 1.) And it is the marriage of literature and computer network and the product of the hybridization (Jin, 2000: 2.). Addressing the problematic of linearity of internet works, Jin also points out that the internet literature is nonlinear (Jin, 2000: 3.) and that *"the Internet will pay more attention to the process of formation of literary works, rather than to show its final product."* (Jin, 2000: 3.). Another important aspect is that readers can influence and shape the story and the works' characters (Jin, 2000: 3.).

But none of the development of internet literature would be possible without spread of the Internet in China in late ´90s.

First works of Chinese web literature seems to have appeared in *Huaxia wenzhai* (China news digest) established by Chinese students in the year 1991 in the United States, that is also first Chinese electronic magazine (Hockx, 2012: 30.).

Other influential literary publications that were published in the United States were *Ganlanshu* (Oliver tree) and *Huazhao* (Cute tricks) (Hockx, 2012: 30.). *"It is also noticeable because it focused mainly on literature for and by women."* (Hockx, 2012: 30)

In the year 1995 there started to be **Bulletin Boards Systems (BBS)** in mainland China on universities. Even though there existed some original works, it mainly consisted of copying Taiwanese works. The first serialized work on BBS in 1998 the work *Di-yi ci de qinmi jiechu* 第一次親密接觸 (*First Intimate Contact*) of Taiwanese Cai Zhiheng published under the pseudonym Pizi Cai (痞子蔡 Ruffian Cai) (Hockx, 2012: 31.). Internet cafes, after the year 1995, helped with spreading to this emerging genre (Ren, Montgomery, 2012).

The emergence of **discussion forums** differed from their predecessor BBS. It made it easier for the users to create new content. While a blog was only for one user to post, a discussion forum offered new possibilities to post their works and discuss the works of

others. The aspect of directed interaction between reader and authors is biggest difference in printed and web literature in China (Hockx, 2012: 32.).

In year 1997, the literary website **"Under the Banyan Tree"** (*Rongshu xia* 榕树下) was first launched, considered as the beginning of the Chinese internet literature era. Zhu Weilian turned his personal website into a full-fledged online literature portal, focusing solely on the publication of original Chinese works. As the first major Chinese website, it focused only on publication of internet literature works. It was transformed into a multimedia business linked to the Banyan tree company. It was subsequently sold to the German publishing company Bertelsmann and, in 2009, acquired by Shanda Interactive Entertainment, which owns most of the literary websites (Hockx, 2012: 34.-36.). None of the posters on the web were paid. In year 2002, the web-posted works started to be available in printed versions (Hockx, 2012: 38.).

> *"Banyan tree catered readily to the needs of knowing more about the authors of literary works. There were a few regular contributors to the site who had their own areas, accessible through the 'Special columns' (Zhuanluan) section. These areas contained much information about these authors' personal lives, as well as links to their writings, pictures of them, and other information they felt eager to share with their readers."*

(Hockx, 2012: 39.)

Later *Date with death*, a diary of a cancer patient **Lu Youqing** became popular, and many accessed it on Under the Banyan tree website. It was written in the form of diary and gained attention as it criticized medical treatment and standards in China. It was posthumously published in print (Hockx, 2012: 43.-52.). Another famous diary was of **Li Jiaming**, a HIV and AIDS patient who struggled to survive. Unlike his predecessor, it was not written as a death diary (Hockx, 2012: 55.-57.).

Around the year 2000, many new still non-commercial literature websites emerged, namely **"Fragrant Red Sleeves"** (*Hongxiu tian xiang* 红袖添香), **"Jinjiang Literature City"** (*Jinjiang wenxue cheng* 晋江文学城)[1] and **"Starting Point"** (*Qidian* 起点) which later implemented the commonly used VIP microtransactional economic model (Shao, 2015: 4.).

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[1] Commonly known under the abbreviation JJWXC.

After year 2003 **"leisure literature"** (*xiuxian wenxue* 休闲文学) quickly gained popularity, including most of the famous internet novels. It allowed and created space for the quick commercialization of internet literature and started to be centralized around readers (fans of the works) and developed into a model of **fan economy** (*fensi jingji* 粉丝经济). The new media allowed fans closer connection with writers and other fans, in discussion forums under each chapter where fans can express their wishes and expectation from the future development of the story. Thus, allowing them to possibly influence the storyline. Therefore, writers commonly started to accustom the storyline to liking of their fans. The internet literature fans are the core centre with great power to affect the story (and not the writers as it was traditionally in the past) (Shao 2016: 4.).

Fan economy (*fensi jingji* 粉丝经济) is also called the **"economics of love"** (*you ai de jingji xue* 有爱的经济学). The readers are both consumers and producers of novels. New word "prosumers" have been created for them. *"Not only the authors rely on them for living, but they are also a think tank and a group of relatives and friends, forming an 'emotional community' with the author."* (Shao, 2016: 5.) Also, it could be said that the emotional community of fan economy is retribalization of the people online (Shao, 2016: 5.).

For writers, the cyberspace offered easy publication of their work. Nowadays, anyone can be a writer and has a potential to acquire a greater reader base than before. Simplification of publication process allowed the development of many new genres that even influenced mainstream culture. With it came the monetization of Chinese internet literature.

In 2003, the **Qidian** website under Shengda Ltd, group (*Shengda wenxue youxian gongsi* 盛大文学有限公司, also known as Shengda Literature), first implemented currently the most successful business model known as **"freemium"** and **"VIP reading model"**. The website mostly operates based on ranking system that is based on the number of visits to a work, published reader's number of comments, number of recommendations from readers to other readers and also number of adding of the work into the readers' private collection (Hockx 2015: 112). On the website there are also employed 'VIP writers' (Hockx, 2015: 110.).

If we want to introduce the **VIP system** more deeply, it is a complete reading system set for online literature. In the early stages of the development of the Chinese internet literature website, there was no suitable business model in use. There were offline reading models and online paid ones (Shao, 2018: 229.).

Qidian network VIP system was inspired by banks' VIP services. Thus, the VIP concept was implemented on the literary website. It later became the industry standard. In the early stages of Qidian's VIP system, reader had to pay 50 yuan to obtain VIP status. From the whole amount, 20 yuan was allocated to the reader´s account that was used as pre-deposited reading fee (Shao,2018: 229.).

In October 2003, Qidian network launched the first few VIP online published works and thus the VIP membership program was officially launched. At beginning, the Qidian site offered a free month trial for members, but later established a 2-point fee per 1000 words. The VIP discount ended in the same year in November, and the website already had around 23 VIP works. To attract new writers, Qidian site offered to pay authors' manuscripts in full, and the whole subscription fee from readers was thus returned to authors. The first month, the writers' monthly fee exceeded 1200 yuans if the average subscription was around 500 people (Shao, 2018: 229.).

After that, Qidian has improved their VIP fee system. It started to be linked directly to consumption amount of a reader, and readers begun to be divided into different VIP levels. Based on the amount of reading and Qidian's currency consumption, readers are further divided into ordinary members, senior members (consumption of less than 19 000 Qidian's currency in a year), four levels of primary VIP (consumption of less than 120 000 Qidian's currency in a year) and advanced VIP (consumption of less than 360 000 Qidian's currency in a year) (Shao, 2018: 230.).

The current VIP fee starts with signing a contract and then becoming a *ren* V (人 V) a "VIP person". When work is serialized, the first chapters (which can be up to 300 000 words) are free to read. After the work receives a certain amount of clicks and reaches a certain level, the website editor can decide to make the novel for VIPs. When the work becomes VIP, readers are charged, and authors can get a basic subscription fee. It is possible to subscribe to VIP chapters separately. The Qidian's VIP fee system is considered a milestone in the development of Chinese online literature. It has become a core mechanism in online literature production (Shao, 2018: 230.).

The free trial and low subscription fee attract people to pay for reading. The VIP subscription makes it possible for online authors to become professional writers. The author's payment is solely based on the amount of clicks the novel gets. For this reason, writers will try their utmost to satisfy readers' desires. Thus, the whole system of online literature became

"reader-centred". The VIP system enables coordination of readers' desires and fulfilling their satisfaction through reading online novels supplied by authors that are specially tailored to readers' wishes. The VIP system can be considered the most important invention in the history of Chinese online literature (Shao, 2018: 230.-231.).

When producing internet literature, there are specific websites targeting either male or female readers. So *"[...], the Chinese fiction websites especially target female readers, with many of them featuring on their main page links to special subsites for women only."* (Hockx, 2012: 111.) Not only do they target women, but they also post other genre fiction like historical novels, science fiction, martial arts, fanfiction and erotica. Much Chinese online fiction has gotten the label YY *xiaoshuo* (YY 小说 YY literature) (Hockx, 2012: 111.-112.).

YY literature can be commonly seen; the word YY is an abbreviation of pinyin initials of characters yiyin 意淫 that can be translated as "to fantasize", "sexual fantasy", or "lust of the mind" (Hockx, 2015: 112.). It describes literature that makes reader feel good (Chao, 2013: 225.).

Even though the term has a strong sexual connotation, in the context of internet literature, it does not necessarily refer to sex or sexual desires, but it describes the sole desire that goes beyond reality, to daydream (Hockx, 2015: 112.).

YY is considered a core feature of online novels; therefore "YY novels" is commonly used for Chinese online novels. YY serves as compensation for the part of daily life, where people obtain imaginative satisfaction. Usually, the deeper the desire is suppressed in real life, the more it becomes huge and uncontrollable in YY. So called "excessive YY" novels feature specific pleasure-producing narrative (e.g. *hougong wen* 后宫文 "harem", *wugu liu* 无故流 "infinite flow", *ni hougong* 逆后宫 "reverse harem", *nü zun wen* 女尊文 "female honour text"). For this reason, YY novels can be regarded as a mental aesthetic and as dispelling of negative energy and can be used as coping or healing mechanism (Shao, 2018: 224.).

Even though the literary levels and style have evolved over time, and now I can differentiate between more commonly used *xiaobai* 小白 and *wenqing* 文青 (considered a higher literary level), the main purpose of YY is to satisfy readers' desires. Realism is used in a world imitating reality, but it cannot be comprehended in the realist literature sense. YY world is based as a virtual reality and structure the world as video games. It has its own principles and meaningful existence. The world is the most important part of YY novels.

A different world allows different rules and principles. That is why the setting is truly important for YY story patterns, motifs, and narratives style. The possibilities and limits of story setting can be seen in genres like *chongsheng* (重生 "rebirth"), *xuanhuan* (玄幻 "fantasy"), *xitong liu* (系统六 "system flow") that also illustrate different trends of YY (Shao, 2018: 225).

When addressing the literary styles, we first need to look at the definition of the term *xiaobai* (小白). The term *xiaobai* has three meanings: Firstly, it refers to readers who only read for free and do not spend any money. However nowadays the term is not commonly used in this meaning. Secondly, it is used for readers who are new to online literature and have limited reading experience. Thirdly, it refers to s*huang wen* (see next chapter) readers. It started to be used not only for new readers of *shuang wen*, but for readers that only read *shuang wen* novels. It is difficult to ascertain each reader's reading experience, that is why nowadays the main criterion for labelling someone as *xiaobai* is that they exclusively read *shuang wen* novels (Shao, 2018: 258.).

In early days, *bai* in *xiaobai* referred to "white reading", indicating free reading. Some readers were reluctant to pay for online novels, support the authors, and only pirated books (Shao, 2018: 258.).

In contemporary online literature communities, "*xiaobai*" has taken on the connotation of "little idiot" (*baichi* 白痴). This term is used by in-depth readers to describe new readers who only read *shuang wen* novels. Conversely, in-depth experienced readers sometimes call themselves *laobai* (老白) which can be translated as "old white". This "title" can be used for people with years long experience who started to read other genres too, not only *shuang wen* novels. *Laobai* readers typically reach this stage by long-term reading as opposed to *xiaobai* readers who only care for straightforward satisfaction provided by *shuang wen* (Shao, 2018: 258.).

Xiaobai wen (小白文) novels are characterized by simple plots, may miss a starting point, and are filled with words making the work extensive. The plots are very routine and do not have ideological content, while all the content is very shallow.[2]

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[2] 小白文. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B0%8F%E7%99%BD%E6%96%87/5922373

Xiaobai wen novels are aimed at junior internet users and remain mainstream, although the status of *xiaobai wen* has declined over time. Nonetheless, competition among authors remains fierce. *Tang Jia San Shao* (唐家三少) is among the main representatives of *xiaobai* (Shao, 2018: 259.).

Favourite authors depend on facing the absolute mainstream in online literature circles. Novels *Dou Po Cangqiong* (斗破苍穹 *"Fight Through the Sky"*) by *Tiancan Tudou* (天蚕土豆), *Tunshi Xingkong* (吞噬星空 *"Swallowed Star"*) by *Wo Chi Xihongshi* (我吃西红柿 "I Eat Tomatoes") are considered masterpieces of *xiaobai wen* masterpieces. (Shao, 2018: 259.)

On the opposite end of the spectrum from *xiaobai wen*, there exists a literary style known as *wenqing wen*.

The term **wenqing** (文青) is an abbreviation of *wenyi qingnian* 文艺青年 meaning "literary youth". It has a specific meaning in internet literature. It is used in contrast to *xiaobai* and is employed to belittle *shuang wen* novels. While both terms have vague meanings, "*wenqing*" is more commonly used when referring to writers, whereas "*xiaobai*" is typically used in reference to readers (Shao, 2018: 261.).

Wenqing holds significance in terms of literary style and ideological connotations. It prioritizes emotions over thrills, which are common in *shuang wen* novels. With the rise of *jingpinhua* 精品化, or "exquisite online literature", an increasing number of people consider *wenqing* writers to exhibit innovative appeal, both literary and ideological. There are less fans of *wenqing* than *xiaobai* fans, but *wenqing* readers have higher standards in cultural and aesthetic levels. *Wenqing* readers are great example and prominent representatives of *laobai,* although it does not encompass the preferences of older readers (Shao, 2018: 261.).

On online platforms, many websites refer to higher quality novels as *wenqing*. However, **wenqing wen** (文青文) includes all authors who write in the *wenqing* style, including young amateur writers. It could be said, that *wenqing wen* is an aesthetic style (Shao, 2018: 262.).

Novels *Jianke* (间客 *"Guest"*) by Maoni (猫腻), *Chenghong Niandai* (橙红年代 *"Age of Orange Red"*) by *Xiaoqi Xiao* (骁骑校), *Xue Zhong Han Dao Xing* (雪中悍刀行 *"The Path in the Snow of Fierce Knife"*) by *Fenghuo Xi Zhuhou* (烽火戏诸侯) and *Chenyuan* (尘缘 *"Carnal Thoughts"*) by *Yanyu Jiangnan* (烟雨江南) are examples of *wenqing wen*.

Chinese internet literature has also been highly influenced by **ACG culture (or ACGN)** (Shao, 2016: 6.). ACGN played and plays a big role in development of Chinese internet literature. It is a representation of Japanese "otaku[3] culture" (*yuzhai wenhua* 御宅文化) and is used as a collective term for anime, comic, game, and novel products in China and for Chinese subculture (also as a synonym for otaku culture) (Shao, 2018: 7.). "Otaku culture" in China is relatively short lived, emerging around 1980s and 1990s. Due to limited possibilities for purchasing goods, the market was initially constrained. Without the spread of the internet, hobbies could not be transformed into an industry, and without media, information transfer was challenging. During this period, fans often relied on fantasy and science-fiction magazines and, predominantly, on pirated works. The era of demonized otaku fans occurred around 2000 to 2010. After that, around 2011, otaku culture gradually became mainstream, as exemplified by Jay Chou's song "Sunshine Otaku" (*yangguang zhainan* 阳光宅男). The positive interaction between mainstream and "otaku culture" is now evident in literature and in artistic works, with dedicated websites such as Bilibili focusing on *donghua*. The influence of otaku culture is also reflected in the game industry (Arges, 2022).

Currently, animation mainly refers to Japanese anime, despite originating first in Europe. Many brands in the United States have also gained popularity (e.g., Disney, Pixar, …) and it has become a prosperous business. Still the A in the ACGN culture only refers to Japanese anime. Anime characteristics and aesthetics are almost entirely different from their Western counterpart (Shao,2018: 7.).

Comic (Manga) refers specifically to Japanese manga traditionally read from right to left. In contrast to colourful western comics, manga is mostly in tones of black and white. Even storyline, storytelling, and art style greatly differ from Western comics. In Japan, they developed a systematic and highly segmented publishing system including periodical serialization and magazine publishing. Because the general term "comic" also includes Western comics, comics produced in Japan are usually called manga (Shao, 2018: 7.-8.).

Games refer to Japanese games, particularly Galgames (*gyaru gemu* ギャルゲーム), also known as "*bishojo* game" (*bishojo gemu* 美少女ゲーム literally "pretty girl game").

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[3]"In Japan, the word can be most closely equated to the English word "geek," but the meaning is not as simple as that. Otaku is also defined in Japan as a word that defines a person who has obsessive interests, and can apply to a wide variety of topics, including anime, manga, cosplay, collectibles and more."
Otaku: Is it a dirty word? Online. CNN. 2023. [2023-11-26]. Retrieved by:
https://edition.cnn.com/2011/09/12/living/otaku-is-it-a-dirty-word/index.html

They are types of visual novels[4] targeted at a male audience, serving as a kind of dating simulator in which players interact with animated girls. This type of game and its aesthetic are unique to Japan in game industry, with a few similar games also existing in the USA and Europe (Shao, 2018: 8.).

Galgames belong to visual novel games, also known as novels (*xiaoshuo* 小说) or "light novels" (*qingsong xiaoshuo* 轻松小说). These terms originally meant "fictions that can be easily read" (Shao, 2018: 8.). The works focus mainly on fans of anime and manga, adjusting writing style and characters to their tastes. Light novels are deeply interconnected with Japanese otaku culture, and we need to take it into consideration when describing their development and specifics.

It is very common in otaku culture for manga to be adapted into anime or a visual novel to be adapted into manga, and so on. Thus, the "N" is implemented in the ACGN. Each adaptation of the same work can also have different art style and versions, similar as with Marvel and DC comics' works and cinematic universes. Media integration of otaku culture has enabled its fusion in a deeply interconnected industrial chain (Shao, 2018: 8.).

ACG (abbreviation of Anime, Comic, and Games) was first used in Taiwan. Cultural exchange between Taiwan and Japan has been and still are quite frequent. Therefore, teenagers in Taiwan were exposed to Japanese otaku culture earlier than in mainland China. With the quick rise of the internet, fans gathered in online forums where, in 1995, in the web forum Shanma Weiyun Art and Literature of Sun Yatsen University in Taiwan, a user named Alpus first created the "ACG review" section. From then onward, the term and phenomenon spread widely (Shao, 2018: 9.).

The ACG acronym is mostly used in Chinese speaking regions. The MAG (Manga, Anime, Game) abbreviation is commonly used in Japan. The different position of letters in acronyms and their popularity in certain regions are connected to the importance of each element in the otaku industry. In Japan, manga has a long history and is a core part of the industrial chain. However, otaku fans in China usually first come into contact with ACG culture through anime or *donghua* (动画)[5] as it is aired on TV. Therefore, it reflects

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[4] Visual novels are interactive games based on storyline and dialogue between various characters. By choosing different options in the dialogue, player influences the outcome in the game. With each answer there is usually different outcome and ending in the story.

[5] Chinese term for anime.

a different order of acceptance of each product but also highlights the different perception of the cultural product in Chinese-speaking regions (Shao, 2018: 9.-10.).

Even though light novels originated around 1970s, they did not start to be fully integrated into the industry till the 2000s. They were on the rise until 2005 when they reached the peak of popularity. Many award mechanisms were established, and promising works got anime adaptation. Afterwards, they began to be truly incorporated into the ACG industry, and the term ACGN started to be used more frequently. Nowadays, the term has become synonymous with otaku culture. (Shao, 2018: 10.).

The inability of central control of internet literature explains why it plays such a big role in China. It made it possible for anyone to become an author (Ren, Montgomery, 2012: 6.).

In 2004 Shengda Literature acquired 6 well-known online literature websites: Qidian (起点), Fragrant Red Sleeves (*Hongxiu Tianxiang* 红袖添香), Under the Banyan Tree (*Rongshuxia* 榕树下), Jinjiang Original Fiction Website (*Jinjiang Yuanchang* 晋江原创), Read Novel (*Xiaoshuo Du Wang* 小说阅读网), Romance Fiction Bar (xs8, 言情小说吧), and Xiaoxiang Academy (*Xiaoxiang Shuyuan* 潇湘书院). This turned the industry from predominantly amateur cultural activity into 'publisher' and 'content corporation'. Copyright started to be used as a mechanism to the monetisation of fan-generated content and as a trade asset (Ren, Montogomery, 2012: 9.).

Another major event was the establishment of the **Sina blog (Weibo)** portal in 2005 (Hockx, 2015: 57.).

After that since 2005 there are serialized online novels of hundreds chapters for paying costumers (Hockx, 2015: 108.). Many books are being published online without ISBN and are not as controlled by censors as the printed books (Hockx, 2012: 113.).

The most popular online literature websites today are Qidian, Zhongheng, Chuangshi, Jinjiang, 17k and Xiaoxiang. (Feng, Literat, 2017: 3.).

Regarding genres, serial novels are the most popular, and they can be categorized by themes such as martial arts, history, time travel, science fiction, etc. Sometimes, online novels are identified as a separate genre (Feng, Literat, 2017: 2.).

For female oriented website, Jinjiang Literature City stands out. It differs from the "author-centred" Qidian as it is "reader-centred" and has more of a **"loving fan culture"** (*you*

ai de fensi wenhua 有爱的粉丝文化). The website features a forum called **"the little pink"** (*xiao fenhong* 小粉红) composed of elite fans who judge internet content according to industry norms, thus forming a powerful monitoring system. The fan community has a significant influence on the direction of the website (Shao, 2015: 174.).

Around 2014, internet literature started moving towards **"pan-entertainment"** (*fan yule* 泛娱樂) as works were adapted into movies, television shows and games. Shanda sold the rights to the game adaptation of its popular works intensifying the trend of mobile gaming from 2013. The games even influenced the production methods and content of internet articles (Shao, 2015: 172.).

1.2. Important Terms in Chinese Internet Literature

Before delving into introducing the female literature and the analysis of each genre, this chapter provides a brief overview of important terms, or tags, appearing on Chinese internet literature websites. These terms are crucial for recognizing recurring motifs in internet literature and analysing (sub)genres. They usually appearing in the forms of the tags at each novel sites and could be easily mistaken for a genre of its own when they are more of a narrative convention. Good example of the narrative style is *shuang*.

1.2.1. *Shuang* 爽 "Feeling good/Thrill" and *Tian wen* 甜文 "Sweet"

Shuang is a core term in internet literature and can be described as "thrill" or literally as "feeling good". Shuang refers to the satisfaction gained from reading internet literature (Shao, 2018: 227.).

Shuang wen (爽文 "Thrill Works") are types of online novels created with interesting, thrilling climax parts that are called *shuang dian* (爽点 "thrill point"). *Shuang* has become basic feature of online novels, so it can be referred to as online *shuang wen* novels. It focuses on the feelings of thrill and happiness that help readers heal and deal with their wounds (or trauma) in the real world. The *shuang* element is used to satisfy people's desire to live happily and be a reasonable person. The novels can focus on satisfying "lowly" human desire such as a wish for a harem of beautiful women (harem novels are quite popular by male readers), the value of having a respect (concept of keeping a face) or a "highly" desire as a thirst for knowledge and expressing emotions (Shao, 2018: 227.-228.).

Contrary to "thrill works" there are also works with *tian wen*.

Tian wen 甜文 "Sweet" This refers to stories that are thoroughly sweet, without sadistic plots, and typically have happy endings.[6]

Both *shuang* and *tian* works are usually part of the *jiakong*.

1.2.2. *Jiakong* 架空 "Overhead/Alternate Universe"

The term "overhead" originally referred to architecture. Nowadays, it also describes a narrative setting in *donghua*, games, or internet novels. It denotes a world that differs from reality and is fictional in nature. The term consists of two parts: 空 part signifies a world or history with a fictional background, distinct from reality, and 架 can be translated as setting or represent a specific narrative type. Therefore, *jiakong shijie* 架空世界, or "overhead world" describes a virtual world in a specific time and space resembles the real world or history. Things and elements that cannot be explained and described in the real world are commonly used and established in "*jiakong* world". The world does not even have to represent or reflect a particular historical period. Thus, the *jiakong* setting can make a great use of imagination. For example, the world can simulate ancient China with the inclusion of witchcraft and magic as common elements. The primary inspirations for "overhead worlds" in online novels are often attributed to the Dungeon & Dragons game and the *Lord of the Rings* book series. Each "*jiakong* world" has a unique setting tailored to a specific narrative style or plot, adhering to its own set of principles (Shao, 2018: 271.-272.).

Jiakong specifics setting varies in different genres – in 'salvation by transmigration' (*chuanyue jiuwang* 穿越救亡) the original historical spacetime was altered and the part which were changed have no historical basis. For this reason, the genre that evolved from historical transmigration (*lishi chuanyue* 历史穿越) is sometimes called 'overhead/alternate history' (*lishi jiakong* 历史架空) or 'semi-overhead' (*banjiakong* 半架空). The story happens in the past, where the protagonist changes the history course (Mašková, 2020: 45.).

It could be said that the *jiakong* element is more used in the female-oriented Internet literature than in male-oriented, especially in genres with feminist tendencies and *danmei* that are difficult to set into the real world. *Jiakong* is for this reason the only possibility for the

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[6] 甜文. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-09-12]. Retrieved by:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%94%9C%E6%96%87/1414113

story types of female-oriented literature that are authentic in expression to its readers (Mašková, 2020: 45).

Based on the novels I have read I conclude that the world takes an alternative history where heroines utilize their golden finger (*jin shouzhi* 金手指)[7] such as modern knowledge to reshape history in said world. A good example of a *lishi jiakong* 'alternative history' is *Nong Jia E Fu,* where the main character transmigrated while retaining her supernatural power.

> *"Her strange power was brought about by time travel. In her previous life, He Jiaoxing and her parents opened a specialty restaurant in an ancient town. [...] However, she did not expect that the end of the world suddenly came, and along with it came global evolution, and overnight many people during this time had special powers.*
>
> *He Jiaoxing is not a superpower woman. She is an evolved human being. What she evolved is strength. In the apocalypse, she was only slightly better than ordinary people. After surviving for three years, she still died during a cleanup mission and woke up to find a fish. Quan Cun became the second daughter of the He family, Jiao Xing."*

(Nan Dao Yingtao, chp.1)

During the story setting there are not many other things about the world. But during the continuation of the story, we can clearly see how the main heroine He Jiaoxing uses her modern knowledge to cook, create new recipes and even help create modern technology gadgets, such as a fan. In doing so, she actively participates in altering the course of said world's history. With the story setting in *jiakong* it is important how the main characters come into being in each world. It often happens through *chongsheng*.

1.2.3. *Chongsheng* 重生 "Rebirth"

The term *chongsheng* refers to "rebirth" or being born again. Typically, the protagonist is granted a second chance at life after their death, allowing them to avoid repeating past mistakes. This motif appears in *Quan Qi Zhi Qi* when the female protagonist is reborn so she can relive her life and redeem her past mistakes in the future.

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[7] Objects or things giving the protagonist boosts in their powers and helping them easier get through the story.

The *chongsheng* motif first appeared in *dushi* (都市 "city/metropolis") novels. Knowing the future becomes a sort of "golden finger", an advantage that the protagonist earns, and it lets him easily and quickly level up and steady his position in the world. It brings a sense of *shuang* and satisfaction. In the stories there appears a different writing as to entice the reader in the story (Chao, 2018: 268.).

It is not surprising that *chuanyue* has many similar motifs with *chongsheng*. After the transmigration/time travel or being reborn, they have strong modern views on the world which differentiate them from the rest. Their *shuang* point seems very much alike, the protagonist uses his "golden finger" in modern thinking and modern-day technology knowledge. The lead mainly uses to counterattack and to earn *shuang* points (Chao, 2018: 268.-269.).

1.2.4. *Chuanyue* 穿越 "Transmigration/Trespassing"

The term *chuanyue* could have two meanings: "trespassing", and "transmigration". The primary meaning is transmigration, where main characters travel, usually back in time, to an unknown place, country, or even a whole world. Thus, the protagonist must deal with the problem of getting around and figuring things out in a society foreign to him. The lead typically transmigrates into the world as a reincarnation or taking possession of the body of an unknown person. In cases of time travel, they can travel into historical setting known to them, utilizing their knowledge of historical events as their "golden finger". In these foreign worlds they can also use magic which bring *shuang* point to the story (Shao, 2018: 263.).

In China, the *chuanyue* novel *"A Step into the Past"* (寻秦记 *Xun Qin Ji*) and the television drama *"Love through Time and Space"* (穿越时空的爱恋 *Chuanyue Shikong de Ailian*) helped popularize the *chuanyue* motif around 2001-2003. This led to the rapid rise of *chuanyue* novels, making it the most widely used story setting. It's inspiration in Japanese manga had especially great influence on female oriented *chuanyue* literature (Shao, 2018: 263.-264.).

The representative works of evolving female-oriented literature are novels set in the Qing dynasty. *"Dreaming Back to the Qing Dynasty"* (*Meng Hui Da Qing* 梦回大清) *"Startled by Every Step"* (*Bu Bu Jing Xin* 步步惊心) and *Yao Hua* (瑶华) are considered three main works of Qing dynasty *chuanyue* novels. They established the narrative and pattern in

Qing dynasty *chuanyue* novels. After the Qing novels, the female oriented literature started to turn to *chongsheng, zhongtian* and daily life. They also influenced *zhaidou* genre (Shao, 2018: 264.-265.).

The difference between *chongsheng* and *chuanyue* is also notable. In *chuanyue* the protagonist's consciousness is first transferred into a new body, while in *chongsheng* the consciousness travels back to their body before the troubles in the story occurred. They return to the same space and time continuum as before but retain memories of their previous life choices, using them as their "golden finger". Typically, characters are reborn into their teenage years, with their mental age remaining the same as when they died in their previous life (Chao, 2018: 269.).

Now with all terms describing the story setting of YY literature it is only natural to describe story settings of female oriented literature.

1.2.5. *Nü Zun* 女尊 "Female majesty"

It is a story setting where the main character transmigrates into a world where men are weak, and women are strong. The female protagonist is an enhanced version of a strong woman. It could be said that women dominate every aspect of life outside and inside the family. It is a reversed social system of women being supreme. Heroines even have the reverse harem. Even though this type was popular, later it only became a rebellion against the social norms and sheer fantasy. After the year 2009 this type has declined (Shao, 2018: 301.-303.).

Now is time to address the question what the reverse harem is.

1.2.6. *Ni Hougong* 逆后宫 "Reverse harem"

Harem (*hougong* 后宫) is a term for male protagonist emotional relationship with multiple female characters, resembling that of an emperor's imperial harem. Now reverse harem is the same setting, but in reverse, female protagonist has a harem of men which she established emotional connection with (Shao, 2018: 302).

After the definition of reverse harem, here comes defining of one last term needed before addressing the issues of genres and subgenres, *gongdou* subgenre heroines.

1.2.7. *Bai lianhua* 白莲花 "White lotus"

The term "white lotus" started to be used, especially in late *gongdou*, for heroines that remain pure, innocent, compassionate, and moral despite their troubles and dreadful life. They can be envisioned as goddesses (Shao, 2018: 310.).

However, the term can also be used differently, describing women who act innocent and virtuous while being corrupted and insidious in their approach to life. These goddesses and white lotuses are both imagination of the male and female readers. In the past it was very hard for them to fight the patriarchy which is why they created female heroines as the white lotuses in the first description, with some even being cast as the main heroines. The heroines became the "white lotuses goddesses" (*shengmu bai lianhua* 圣母白莲花). Writers and readers both shifted the meaning into this shallow and hollow empty "white lotus goddesses" (Shao, 2018: 310.).

As the term "white lotus" evolved, it began to be applied to hypocritical characters, and the term "reverse white lotus" (*fan bai lianhua* 反白莲花) emerged. They even changed to ones attacking a target. Venting their anger on one target and their hypocrisy bring about a new *shuang* point. The term became stigmatized and is commonly used in *gongdou* and *zhaidou* genres for princesses or stepmothers who are reborn and turn evil (Shao, 2018: 311.).

> *"They have a delicate and feminine appearance, a kind, fragile glass heart, a motherly love like a mother, a kind of harmless people who will break their teeth and swallow blood if they are aggrieved. They always burst into tears. Even if someone cuts them, as long as others repent and say I am sorry, they immediately sympathize, and forgive others with joy."*

(Shao, 2016: 209.)

Now after explaining all the relevant terms, it is only expected to look into Chinese female oriented literature.

1.3. Chinese Female-oriented Literature

The term female-oriented (*nüxing xiang* 女性向) originated from the Japanese 女向け (*onna-muke* "female-oriented"). It refers to the classification of literary works intended for a female audience. The start of the internet age provided Chinese women with an independent space, allowing them to combine feminist culture in the public space of the Internet. It initiated

a writing trend of literature from women's viewpoint for the purpose of meeting women's desire while escaping from the men's eyes (Shao, 2018: 166.).

The term "female-oriented" first appeared in the 1950s after World War II. In 1953, Japanese manga artist Osamu Tezuka (手塚治) began serializing the first girl manga *Princess Knight* (*Ribon no Kishi* リボンの騎士) in the magazine *Girls Club* (*Shojo Kurabu* 少女倶楽部) and proposed the idea of manga for girls' readers (Shao, 2018: 165.).

In the second half of the 1960s, the segmentation of manga market was complete, and the terms "girls'-oriented" (*xiaonü xiang* 小女向) and "female-oriented" (*nüxing xiang* 女性向) were formally implemented in the classification. In the 1970s, the development of female-literature was on the rise, and female-oriented anime started to emerge. Simultaneously, new themes of "juvenile love" (*shaonian ai* 少年爱) along with "boys' love" (*danmei* 耽美) were adapted into female-oriented manga (Shao, 208: 166.).

In 1994, Koei Company launched the first female-oriented game "Angelique" (アンジェリーク), a story-based video game that stirred up enthusiasm among female gamers. This later allowed for development of two main types of games: "*otome* games" (*otome gēmu* 乙女ゲーム "maiden game")[8] and "BL games"[9]. With the further expansion of the female market, the "female-oriented" label became an important part of the classification of products in Japan's ACGN cultural industry, and other labels as "male-oriented" and "kids-oriented" emerged (Shao, 2018: 168).

At the end of the 20th century, when Chinese versions of Japanese ACGN works gained popularity, Japanese ACGN culture's classification also appeared in China. When Chinese original works inspired by ACGN culture appeared, the classification begun to be used. Chinese female-oriented *manhua*[10] is quite similar to its Japanese counterpart and is also subdivided into "girl-oriented" and "*danmei*" *manhua*. Female-oriented games started to

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[8] The player's character is a girl and main goal (or part of the goal) is to develop a romantic relationship with one of the many male characters in the game.

[9] The goal of the game is same as in *otome* games, but the player's character is a male. It is produced mostly for female gamers.

[10] Chinese adaptation of the word manga (漫画) based on Chinese pronunciation (pronounced as *manhua*) of the characters. From this point I will refer to Chinese manga as manhua to easier differentiate the country of production of original works.

primarily consist of "reverse-harem" love stories, however the classification as female-oriented was rarely used in Chinese *donghua* (Shao, 2018: 168.).

After the integration of internet literature, the female-oriented classification reappeared. It is used to describe internet novels focused on female readers, predominantly created by female authors, but not excluding a few male authors (Shao, 2018: 168.).

Distinguishing the literature's focus is logical for commercial consumerism. It is crucial for referencing commercial literature websites to target their audience. Thus, some websites may choose to specialize only in one kind of literature, for example, Jinjiang Literature City contains only female-oriented literature, where female users account for the vast majority. Another common occurrence is the separation of websites into two channels – "boys' channel" and "girls' channel" that are differentiated inside the website, e.g., Qidian. Hence, the differentiating terms "male frequency" (*nan pin de* 男频的) and "female frequency" (*nü pin de* 女频的) are more common in the internet literature circles than "male-oriented" and "female-oriented" dividing them into two commercial territories of literary websites (Shao, 2018: 169.-170.).

In contemporary China, female readers receive the same education as men, so many male-oriented novels also have plenty of female readers. *Grave Robbers' Chronicles* (*Daomu Biji* 盗墓笔记) and *The King's Avatar* (*Quanzhi Gaoshou* 全职高手) are examples of work typically focused on male audience that became popular even among female readers and thus the author decided to add elements to please their female readers too. In contrast, female-oriented works that can attract male readers are very rare. I can conclude that *"male frequency is also female frequency, and female frequency is still only female frequency"* (Shao, 2018: 170.).

With commercial division into "channels", female-oriented literature has brought up the pursuit and trend of a feminist gender revolution. The low threshold of online platforms has enabled enormous number of female writers to express their discourse. In isolation from the mainstream media and the judging eyes of the public, female writers could project their desires and aspiration in writing. Without the need to consider men's aesthetics and values in literature, they could rebel against the inherent imagination and break stereotypes (Shao, 2018: 170.).

The emergence of the Internet provided Chinese women with a public space of their own, where they did not need to consider men's wishes. They could indulge in YY to release desire, relieve anxiety, and engage in self-healing. Additionally, narratives of the "internet generation" ("internet feminism") spread on the internet to describing real-time sex discrimination incidents in women's lives. This platform helped women express their opinions and engage in in-depth discussions on real and theoretical levels. Therefore, it has shaped the gender consciousness of the new generation of Chinese women. I can differentiate a long transitional period between women's online novels and traditional women's romance. Writers in "the grey area" (transitional period) still consider male readers' opinions and try to not offend patriarchal rules. As a result, these works can hardly be considered feminist. On contrary, the most gender-revolutionary female and *danmei* works tend to embody the most radical "female frequency" trends. Some authors experiment with seemingly traditional types and themes, infusing them with revolutionary and distinctive feminist elements (Shao, 2018: 170.-171.).

Also, since the development of internet literature in 2014, there has been "clean up network action" (jing wang xingdong 净网行动) a severe political intervention. (Shao, 2015: 174.) *"All major websites adopted a series of related 'self-purification' measures (such as self-censorship, deletion, locking, and removal from shelves, etc.)."* (Shao, 2015: 174.). Due to elements like boys' love, *tongren* and "female honour text" it has subcultural nature. Because of the "Big Gray Wolf incident" (*da hui lang shijian* 大灰狼事件), author Gray Wolf (hui lang 灰狼) was detained based on suspicion of illegal publication and dissemination of pornographic and obscene materials, it became a censored area (Shao, 2015: 174).

After the "Big Grey Wolf incident" there was a split from the original "*danmei* fan work station" (*danmei tongren zhan* 耽美同人站), which was renamed "pure love fan work station" (*chun ai tongren zhan* 纯爱同人站). It is divided into four parts – "romance novels station" (*yanqing xiaoshuo zhan* 言情小说站), "no romance novels station" (*fei yanqing xiaoshuo zhan* 非言情小说站), "original novels station" (*yuanchuang xiaoshuo zhan* 原创小说站), and "derived works station" (*tongren yansheng zhan* 同人衍生站). They also invited readers to review the works to save the website. This is only possible due to the reader-centred orientation of the website, as millions of novels' chapters were proofread. After opening the

review system, the power of censoring was spread from elite fans to large number of readers (Shao, 2015: 175.).

1.3.1. Genres of Chinese Internet Female-oriented Literature

Female-oriented (*nüxing xiang* 女性向) literature has become a big hit among young Chinese women, leading to the rise of various genres. I will give a brief introduction of the most common one before focusing on the main (sub)genres of this work: *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen*. It is without doubt that the theme of romance is the most popular among female readers. *"Whilst male users gravitate towards genres packed with action and adventures such as Eastern Fantasy or On-line Game, female users are mainly magnetized by romance."* (Chao, 2012: 159.) The main genres produced are romance, *danmei* and *tongren*.

The current successful leader in publishing Chinese internet novels for women and a representative of original female literature is website Jinjiang Literature City. It has helped with development of female book publishing. Jinjiang Literature City combines online publishing and print publishing of books written by female authors (Shao, 2015: 243.-260.).

1.3.2. Sorting of the Internet Genres or Subgenres

Before delving into the definitions of each genre and subgenre, it's essential to clarify these terms. The secondary literature gives this explanation of genre: *"a style or category of painting, novel, film, etc. characterized by a particular form or purpose."* (Chamberlain, Thompson, 2002: 1.) Subgenre is *"a genre that is part of a larger genre"*.[11] It corresponds with the translation of the Chinese term 类型 *leixing* which translates to "term, category, genre".

Another crucial term in describing internet literature is "tag". What is the definition of tag? It can be defined as *"a brief quotation used for rhetorical emphasis or sententious effect"* or *"a recurrent or characteristic verbal expression"*[12]. They are usually used to describe content online. Good example of it is a hashtag system of Tumbler website where the content could be searched with specific tags and the editors of the posts assign their own tags to the post. I have concluded that this is the way how tags are assigned to each novel, by their

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[11] Subgenre. *Merriam-Webster* [online]. 2023 [2023-09-26]. Retrieved by: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subgenre

[12] Tag. *Merriam-Webster* [online]. 2023 [2023-09-26]. Retrieved by: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tag

editors. It is just my guess as it is hard to find information about the working mechanics of each website and their genre classification.

Before explaining each genre, I will introduce the classification of novels on the Qidian website in previous years, as described by Chao in her thesis.

They were divided into these categories on the Qidian female website: 言情 *yanqing* "romance", 耽美 *danmei* "boys love", 玄幻 *xuanhuan* "fantasy", 都市 *dushi* "urban", 仙侠 *xianxia* "immortal heroes", 网游 *wangyou* "games", 历史 *lishi* "historical", 奇幻 *qihuan* "western fantasy", 科幻 *kehuan* "science-fiction", 言情 *yanqing* "romance" and 纯爱耽美 *chunai danmei* "pure boys love" (Chao, 2012: 114.-175.)

She does not focus onto the subgenres as probably many did not exist yet. I can see a difference between her classification and what I can see on the Qidian website now.

But first to get a broader view of the genre classification, I am going to explain how the genres are divided and classified on each website namely Xiaoxiang Academy, Qidian and Jinjiang Literature City nowadays. Each website has a different way of dividing genres and subgenres.

Xiaoxiang academy uses the easiest way to divide genres. On the website it is only divided into these genres or narrative conventions: 古代言情 *gudai yanqing* "ancient romance", 现代言情 *xiandai yanqing* "modern romance", 玄幻仙侠 *xuanhuan xianxia* "immortal hero's fantasy", 浪漫青春 *langman qingchun* "romantic youth" and 悬疑 *xuanyi* "suspense". The website does not offer any more sorting or tags.

Qidian website is divided into two parts, the men's and women's section. It is divided into eight genres or narrative conventions: 古代言情 *gudai yanqing* "ancient romance", 现代言情 *xiandai yanqing* "modern romance", 玄幻言情 *xuanhuan yanqing* "fantasy romance", 科幻空间 *kehuan kongjian* "science-fiction space", 仙侠奇缘 *xianxia qiyuan* "immortal heroes romance", 浪漫青春 *langman qingchun* "romantic youth", 悬疑推理 *xuanyi tuili* "infer suspense" and 游戏竞技 *youxi jingji* "game competition". The genres are further divided into subgenres or tags. For example, the ancient romance genre concludes 古代情缘 *gudai qingyuan* "ancient romance", 宫闱宅斗 *gongwei zhaidou* "fighting in the palace and house" 经商种田 *jingshang zhongtian* "business and farming", 古典架空 *gudian jiakong*

"classical overhead", 女尊王朝 *nü zun wang chao* "dynasty of a respected lady" and 穿越奇情 *chuanyue qi qing* "surprising travelling". Then clicking on the selected subgenre or narrative conventions directs the readers into search for novels fitting these specifics. The readers can make a further choice if they want to read a complete novel, ongoing one, a free one to read, VIP novel, or they can choose the length of the novel. As I can see the classification varies from the one presented by Chao, as there are more subgenres. Based on mere observation, I could say that new genres and subgenres emerged on the website.

The last and very user-friendly website is Jingjiang Literature City website where it is easy to choose what I want to search for. It is classified into four categories 言情小说 *yanqing xiaoshuo* "romance fiction" – heterosexual romance, 纯爱/无 CP *chuan'ai/wu CP* "pure love/BL/no clear protagonist love" – homosexual romance and no romance, 衍生/轻小说 *yansheng/qing xiaoshuo* "derived work/light novel" – *tongren* novels aka fanfictions, 原创小说 *yuanchuang xiaoshuo* "original work" – original works that are not plagiarisms. Later when clicking on the romance fiction section it takes me onto a website with the buttons 古代言情 *gudai yanqing* "ancient romance", 都市青春 *dushi qingchun* "urban youth", 幻想言情 *huanxiang yanqing* "fantasy romance", 古代穿越 *gudai chuanyue* "ancient time travel", 奇幻言情 *qihuan yanqing* "western fantasy romance", 未来游戏悬疑 *weilai youxi xuanyi* "future game suspense", 二次元言情 *erciyuan yanqing* "two-dimensional romance", 衍生言情 *yansheng yanqing* "derived romance" and 完结 *wanjie* "finished." Then I can search for a desired tag, the length of the novel etc. I can search in these categories and after choosing one and clicking on the search button, it takes me onto a webpage where I can select multiple categories and tags at once. It could be said that subgenres on this website work more like tags and many subgenres apply to one novel at the same time.

In contrast, on Baidu, I have also found these classifications of the main genres, but considering this division, the internet literature could have as much as 50 genres. It presents the main popular 15 genres where each could have subgenres 玄幻 *xuanhuan* "fantasy", 武侠 *wuxia* "martial heroes", 仙侠 xianxia "immortal heroes", 奇幻 *qihuan* "western fantasy", 科幻 *kehuan* "science-fiction", 都市 *dushi* "urban", 言情 *yanqing* "romance", 历史 *lishi* "historical", 军事 *junshi* "military", 游戏 *youxi* "games", 体育 *tiyu* "physical education", 灵

异 *lingyi* "supernatural, 同人 *tongren* "fanfiction", 耽美 *danmei* "boys love" and 二次元 *er ci yuan* "two dimension".

For example, the *yanqing* genre includes further distinction of tags (or subgenres) 冒险推理 *maoxian tuili* "adventurous reasoning", 纯爱唯美 *chun ai wenmei* "pure love/boys love aesthetic", 品味人生 *pinwei rensheng* "life experience", 爱在职场 *ai zai zhichang* "love at workplace", 菁菁校园 *jingjing xiaoyuan* "luxuriant campus", 浪漫言情 *langman yanqing* "unconventional love", 千千心结 *qian qian xin jie* "thousands of hearts", 古代言情 *gudai yanqing* "ancient romance", 宫廷争斗 *gongting zhengdou* "palace fighting" and 女尊王朝 *nü zun wangchao* "female dynasty".[13] There are many subgenres within the romance category.

If I go further, ancient romance is described as a (sub)genre/tag including the following (sub)genres/tags: 种田文 *zhongtian wen* "farming", 宅斗文 *zhaidou* "fighting in residence", 宫斗文 *gongdou* "fighting in palace", 仙侠文 *xiuxia* "immortal heroes", 武侠文 *wuxia* "martial arts"., 魔幻文 *mohuan* "magical", 玄幻文 *xuanhuan* "fantasy" and 历史文 *lishi* "historical."

As each of the websites offers a different way of genre and subgenre classification, the tag model seems to be the most fitting way to describe (sub)genres in the internet sphere as various novels can have more than one specific feature of each genre.

For example, the novel *Nong Jia E Fu* is classified with the following tags or narrative conventions on Jinjiang Literature City website:

- 原创 *yuanchuang* "original work"
- 言情 *yanqing* "romance"
- 架空历史 *jiakong lishi* "alternate history"
- 爱情 *aiqing* "romance"

It it obvious that the subgenres or narrative conventions are only mentioned in the tags of each novel. Thus, the tags are more important when searching for a desired novel.

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[13] 网络小说. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-09-12]. Retrieved from:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E5%B0%8F%E8%AF%B4/181706

1.4. Popular Genres of Female Oriented Literature

Now it is time to finally move onto the genre description. First, I am going to introduce two popular genres of female oriented literature *danmei* and *tongren* before moving onto the second part of this work, description of (sub)genres ancient romance, *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* and their narrative conventions.

1.4.1. *Danmei* 耽美 "Boys love"

The imported *danmei* culture and novels have become a huge part of female-oriented internet literature. Since the 90s, the new cyberspace provided a platform for literature outside of state-controlled publishing system. It allowed more freedom of expression and experimentation with motifs and genres. It has created space for exploring and satisfying the desires of female readers (Shao, 2016: 249.-251.).

It focuses on romantic and sexual relationships between two men, also described as "man-man romance" (*nan nan lianqing* 男男恋情). It is mainly produced by women for women (Shao, 2016: 249.). The genre was first introduced from Japan and is highly inspired by Japanese yaoi (やおい), contributing to the global development of "corrupt culture" (fu wenhua 腐文化). *"It continues to produce new character types, genres, and aesthetics. From a mixed perspective of women and queers, re-imagining and interpreting love, lust, intimacy, and gender roles in an unprecedented way"* (Shao, 2016: 249.-252.).

Danmei is very sensitive topic and so it is frequently questioned and censored, but it still has a significant impact. "*Danmei* paragraphs" (*danmei duanzi* 耽美段子) started to incessantly emerge on favourite Chinese platforms Wechat and Weibo and are highly popular. With increasing visibility of *danmei* novels, even authors that used to only publish on semi-closed (or completely closed) forums, only talking in small circles with their peers, started to gain increasing social influence and prestige (Shao, 2016: 249.-252.). *Danmei* novels became popular in the West, particularly through works by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu (墨香铜臭). The Novels are being published in English in collaboration with the original fan translators. In my opinion, the popularity of Chinese *danmei* in the West also grew thanks to TV adaptation of her book *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (*Mo Dao Zu Shi* 魔道祖师) under the name *The Untamed* (*Chen Qing Ling* 陈情令 - also available on Netflix, and *donghua* adaption also known as *The Founder of Diabolism* (*Mo Dao Zu Shi* 魔道祖师).

1.4.2. *Tongren* 同人 **"Dojin/Fanfiction"**[14]

The term *tongren*[15] describes a text that is built on already existing text, usually a popular culture work like *Harry Potter* series. It borrows the existing characters and their relationship from the original work and may use the original world or a different setting, with the degree of staying true to the original work varying immensely depending on the *tongren's* author (Shao, 2018: 74.).

The term *tongren* originates from the Japanese term *"dojin"* (同人/どじん) which was used to describe like-minded people. Since the Meiji Restoration in Japan in 1868, like-minded people traditionally gathered to publish their own creations in informal format. These informal publications are called *"dojinshi"* (同人志/どじんし),[16] initially focusing on literary works for literary enthusiasts (Shao, 2018: 74.).

After World War II, manga fandom begun to appear. While the current meaning of the term *"dojinshi"* refers to derived works, it was not initially used in this context. Even original creations published in informal formats were called *dojin* e.g., miracles of Japanese *dojin* world are *Touhou project* (*Toho Purojekuto* 東方), *"When the Cicadas Cry"* (*Higurashi no Naku Koro Ni* ひぐらしのなく頃に). These examples are original games sold in *dojin* exhibitions, not derived works (Shao, 2018: 75.).

The origin of *"dojinshi* culture" can be traced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first *dojin* exhibition, Comic market[17] (*Komikkumaketto* コミックマーケット), was held in 1975. It is the largest and longest ongoing fan exhibition in Japan's history. Many famous manga artists have entered the professional creative field from the fan publishing. However, the meaning of *dojinshi* in Japanese context has shifted from "informal publishing" to "derived work" (Shao, 2018: 75.).

The term *tongren* was first introduced in China at the beginning of the 20th century during the May 4th literary movement, where publication produced by people with similar interests were also called *tongren*. *Tongren* in the 2006 edition of *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* is

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[14] The Japanese term describing this phenomenon. Onwards, I will use the term *tongren* for the works of Chinese origin.

[15] The term includes all fan works (novels, art, video, games, …), but in the context of this thesis I will focus solely on written works.

[16] Chinese equivalent of the term is *tongrenzhi*. I will use this term for works created in China to differentiate them from the ones with Japanese origin.

[17] Also known as Comiket.

interpreted as *"people who work in the same unit or same industry and are also colleagues"* (Shao, 2018: 75). At the end of the 20th century, influenced by Japan, the term *tongren* was reintroduced as a rough equivalent of "derived work". There are still creators who print and publicly share their works in an informal form and the publications are also called *tongrenzhi* (Shao, 2018: 75.).

In *tongren*, the author can expand the original timeline, describe experiences of characters in deeper details, focus on the story of a side character, narrate events before or after original timeline, or even set the story in a different world (*jiakong* world/alternate universe[18]). But the author can also significantly rewrite the original plot of the story and alter the ending to satisfy the readers' wishes (Shao, 2018: 75.-76.).

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[18] AU is common abbreviation of the phenomenon.

2.1.Genre analysis

First, I will provide a brief overview of each (sub)genre and later introduce each book (or books) related to the genres. I will then give an overview of each books' narrative and storyline and later analyse how each book shows the specific or common shared traits of these (sub)genres. Later I will sum up everything in a separate chapter.

I selected the novels based on recommendations posted on the internet[19].

2.1.1. *Gudai yanqing* 古代言情 **"Ancient Romance"**

Romance novels have always been favourite genre sought after by female readers. In recent years, ancient romance novels became a popular genre and representative of female-oriented literature. Many of the novels are then adapted into mainstream media (TV dramas, films, printed books, …). The central storyline is love, with heroines striving to gain unconditional love and romance. The heroines, defined as "white lotus" were common in the early stages of ancient romance, and we can observe common pattern features of these heroines (Shao, 2016: 379.-384.).

Based on reading of selected works, the most important narrative devices are:

- Main character usually transmigrates or is reborn in ancient China.
- They must use their modern knowledge or knowledge of their supposed future to navigate through life.
- Through the story, they find their true love.
- Usually, the story develops into a happy ending.

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[19] 小说推荐 古言重生文 宅斗文《权戚之妻》. *Sohu* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by: https://www.sohu.com/a/636332272_121641874
推荐一点古言，宫斗类小说，像步步惊心，大漠谣，云中歌，金枝玉叶（九重凤阙），后宫甄环转，倾世皇妃。. *Baidu 知道* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by: https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/451005874.html
我 很喜欢看穿越的小说，最好是皇宫的哦。例几个我喜欢的小说《极品太子妃》，《穿越大唐：绝代村姑》… *Baidu 知道* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by: https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/355087283.html
种田文、美食文、重生、穿越古言文，推荐和排雷个人陆续更新. *知乎* [online]. 2022 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by: https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/382167419

2.1.2. *Gongdou* 宫斗 "Palace Fighting"

Gongdou 宫斗 can be translated as "palace fighting". Around 2007, it separated from *chuanyue* and *chongsheng* novels and became a genre of its own (Shao, 2016: 201.).

The theme of palace harem setting first started to emerge with the shaping of female-oriented literature. It emerged as a counter concept to the ideal woman (*lixiang nüxing* 理想女性) of male-oriented literature. The ideal female commonly appearing in male internet literature is described by the term "white lotus", which is a rough synonym to Mary Sue[20] archetype, as it embodies a heroine who is smart, virtuous, beautiful, without flaws, and can easily achieve anything (Kustritz, 2003: 380.) Shao conclude that *"[...] the most typical 'White Lotus' heroines, they are weak, kind, receptive and loyal to love. In fact, they are the embodiment of women in the masculine perspective"* (Shao, 2016: 209.). It is no surprise that young Chinese women could not identify with these perfect heroines that are held up to unrealistic standard (Shao, 2016: 379.-387.).

In the early stages, Chinese Internet novels were dominated by the white lotus heroines because, in the initial development of internet novels, they were mostly focused on male readers. Over time, the demand for realistic heroines that even female readers can relate to grew, giving space for creation of female-oriented novels. The story started to be told from the female perspective in the popular genre of ancient romance, set in the palace harem. From its emergence, female-oriented literature is characterized as "anti-white lotus". Thus, the heroine (usually a queen or concubine in the harem) is an imperfect character that does not strive to be perfect without fault, but she still judges things with a "white lotus" (perfect) moral. Nonetheless, the imperfections and failures are what makes them relatable to Chinese women (Shao, 2016: 379.-387.).

The wish to find true love is considered an original sin of *gongdou* heroines, which helped them transmigrate or to be reborn in the world of ancient China. They cross to the past world from their workplace. Life in the palace harem tests their personalities and self-identification (Shao, 2016: 379.-387.).

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[20] A Mary Sue is a character archetype in fiction, usually a young woman, who is often portrayed as inexplicably competent across all domains, gifted with unique talents or powers, liked or respected by most other characters, unrealistically free of weaknesses, extremely attractive, innately virtuous, and/or generally lacking meaningful character flaws. "Usually it is an original character, this archetype originated from fanfiction, and it is the resemblance of writers own idealized being. Mary Sue is driving the plot and absorbs the time of protagonists." (Kustritz, 2003: 380.)

The setting of the palace harem can be easily linked with the modern-day workplace. The novel's heroine struggles to survive by abiding by the strict rigid rules of patriarchal society. In the end, she realizes how meaningless her suffering might have been. It is a clear parable of trying to gain promotion and be successful in the current patriarchal society. All these problems may seem insignificant, but they are a big part of the trouble of self-identification and crisis of modern-time moral values in China. In a world fuelled by money, the definition of oneself and core values are problems that modern Chinese women are facing (Shao, 2016: 379.-387.).

The novel "*The Legend of Zhen Huan*" (*Hou Guan, Zhen Huan Chuan* 后官，甄嬛传) was important in the development of the genre and is a symbol of mature *gongdou*. *Gongdou* is one of the fast-changing genres, but in recent years, *gongdou* novels have decreased considerably, being surpassed by *zhaidou* novels. Both genres became popular at the same time, but after *zhaidou* novels transformed into female-oriented literature, their popularity began to rise. It gradually shaped into another genre, *zhaidou zhongtian wen,* and has developed into the mainstream genre of female-oriented novels. There is a trend in narrowing down the setting of story (Shao, 2016: 379.-387.).

On Baidu, this is how the *gongdou* is characterize mainly by the palace setting:

> "*Gongdou wen is a novel with the theme of palace fighting.*
>
> *It refers to the background of an ancient feudal dynasty that exists or is fictitious and tells about emotional entanglements or power struggles closely related to the struggle in the harem, competing among concubines, and forbidden gardens of former dynasties.*
>
> *Most of the novels with this theme are mainly humorous narratives, which cannot be generalized from the rigorous historical romance novels.*"[21]

As we can see, the summary resembles the description in secondary literature. In neither of the descriptions is it specified whether the novels are in *xiaobai wen* or *wenqing wen*. Based on my reading of novels, I have concluded that the *gongdou* subgenre is mainly written in *wenqing*. Why? Authors use archaic versions of addressing the emperor and the concubines,

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[21] 宫斗文. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AE%AB%E6%96%97%E6%96%87?fromModule=lemma_search-box

other terms for slaves and servants supposedly from ancient Chinese, as well as a lot of proverbs.

During my research, I have observed that the *gongdou* genre is quite often associated with the tags *shuang*, *chuanyue shikong* and *chongsheng*.

2.1.3. *Zhaidou* 宅斗 "Fighting in Residence"

The genre of *zhaidou* became independent at the same time as *gongdou* (Shao, 2016: 381.). But contrary to *gongdou*, its popularity has started to rise at a later time (Shao, 2016: 205.).

The storyline takes place in the house of a traditional large family (businessman's family, official's family, royal family, …). As in *gongdou*, the wives and concubines compete to gain favour with their husband (or other powerful and influential men). Love is still a core part of the plot (Shao, 2016: 348.).

It is like *gongdou* in narrative style and shaping of the protagonist. These two subgenres can be considered as having the same origin. So as in *gongdou*, the heroine transmigrates or is reborn in a world of ancient China. There she needs to use her modern knowledge to survive. The storyline revolves around trivial daily matters. However, it arouses reader's interest in the house fighting for power and influence (Shao, 2016: 348.).

How is the internet genre seen on internet? I have found this summary of *zhaidou* on Baidu:

> *"Zhaidou wen is the collective name for all zhaidou novels on the Internet and belongs to the category of ancient romance novels.*
>
> *The story backgrounds of zhaidou wen are generally set in ancient times or modern times, and the stage where the stories take place is mostly in the back houses of merchant families or official families.*
>
> *The plot is based on the power struggle between wives and concubines and the emotional entanglement of the hero and heroine as the core plot."*[22]

The *zhaidou* definition differs a bit from the secondary literature and my findings, as I have concluded that *zhaidou* novels are specially set in ancient times. I have not read

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[22] 宅斗文. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AE%85%E6%96%97%E6%96%87/1439589

zhaidou novel in a modern setting, but they may exist. I have come to the conclusion that the novels are written in *wenqing,* as concubines use an archaic way to refer to each other and when referring to their husbands. They also use an old way to refer to slaves and servants. Throughout the books, I have come across many proverbs, and in the case of *Hewei Xiang Qi* there were many references to history and other events.

During my research, I have found that the *zhaidou* genre is associated with tags *shuangwen*, *tianwen*, *chuanyue shikong* and *chongsheng*.

2.1.4. *Zhongtian wen* 种田文 "Farming"

The "Farming" genre evolved from the above-mentioned *zhaidou* genre. As with *gongdou* and *zhaidou*, the heroine also transmigrated or was reborn into a world of ancient China. The term "farming" (*zhongtian* 种田) originated from SLG (simulation games, strategy games) where player experience the simulation of a certain situation (for example, taking care of a farm field). The player must take care of fields by farming to obtaining rice and other important resources, build walls, slowly become stronger with the goal of becoming king. Later, they must develop their territories, protect them, and conquer other kingdoms to win new regions. *Zhongtian* novels are based on the principle of "levelling up" (Shao, 2018: 274.-275.).

In the beginning, the theme of farming was first used in novels with hegemony elements in male-oriented "historical" (*lishi* 历史) and "fantasy" (*xuanhuan* 玄幻) genres. Around middle of the story, the protagonist establishes his own base area and contacts. Then he step by step develops his military, economics, industry (clothing industry, food industry, ...) and political system. He then usually overwhelms his opponents through economic, technologic, and institutional advantage. Through the course of "farming" (gaining more power and resources), the protagonist choses to not have big conflicts with other forces but waits till he is strong enough to conquer the world (Shao, 2018: 274.-275.).

Women writers borrowed this narrative model from *zhaidou* and created a new genre of *zhaidou zhongtian wen* (宅斗种田文), also known as "parental essay" (*jiazhangli duan wen* 家长里短文) which focuses on trivial life matters of heroine that transmigrated to the world of ancient China to take care of family and run the house. After its transformation into female-oriented genre, it quickly became readers' favourite and turned into mainstream internet literature genre (Shao, 2016: 348.-349.).

How is the *zhongtian wen* seen on the internet? I have found this specification on Baidu:

"Early zhongtian novels refer to novels in fictional, fantasy, otherworldly and other types of novels, in which the protagonist establishes his own base and connections, and then develops agriculture, economy, military, and political systems step by step on this basis, and uses economic construction, science and technology. Focus on development and internal affairs operations, and overthrow opponents with economic and technological advantages. During this period, the protagonist will not have any obvious conflicts or wars with other forces and will conquer the world after becoming stronger.

Later zhongtian wen tended to be more literal in meaning, also known as short essays on family affairs. They generally refer to the background of ancient feudal society or the period of underdeveloped modern science and technology. They describe the shortcomings of small people and trivial matters in daily life. They pay more attention to highlighting details and psychological description of the characters."[23]

The description on Baidu gives more information about the later *zhongtian wen* and earlier *zhongtian wen*. Based on my reading, I am conflicted as to whether the novels are usually written in *wenqing wen* or *xiaobai wen*. There are only honorifics when addressing the family, and there are also proverbs in the novels. In the case of *zhongtian wen*, I would say it depends on each works if it is written in *xiaobai wen* or *wenqing wen*. Still, I conclude that *Nong Jia E Fu* is most probably written in *wenqing wen*.

During my research on the JJWXC website, I have drawn a conclusion that many *zhongtian wen* novels also include the tags *shuangwen, tianwen* and *chongsheng*.

Before further looking into specifics and similarities of said subgenres, I am going to give an overview of the story of each book, and based on it, I am going to summarize the narrative of read books and sum up the probable narrative of mentioned subgenres. But first I need to address the issues of classification of each genre or subgenre.

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[23] 种田文. *Baidu* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A7%8D%E7%94%B0%E6%96%87?fromModule=lemma_search-box

2.1.5. *Gongdou, zhaidou, zhongtian wen* classification

My conclusion is that *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* are most likely subgenres of ancient romance genre. Why is that? Especially *gongdou* and *zhaidou* novels, their narrative could not work in modern times setting as polygamy is not acceptable by current Chinese society. While farming would lose its effect and thrill with modern-day technologies. Thus, it must happen in ancient times, and since it is mainly female-oriented literature, there is a strong emphasis on the love narrative, fulfilling another criterion for *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* to be subgenres of the ancient romance genre. The second reason is that they appear in the form of a tag on the website and thus are not as important as the genre category.

But when looking at the tag classification, another option arises that the subgenres could be classified as merely narrative conventions and motifs used in the story, as there only seems to be one specific motif. In this case, it is possible to be a part of the ancient romance narrative and other genres, as I have come across novels even in modern settings of alternative history.

2.2. Books' summary

2.2.1 *Bu Bu Jing Xin*

Bu Bu Jing Xin was first published on JJWXC and was later published in print. I have found online that it is specified as a *gongdou* novel.

Zhang Xiao, the protagonist from modern-day China, gets into a traffic accident after getting from work and time travels back to the Qing Dynasty to the Kangxi Emperor's reign. She occupies the body of a young aristocrat Ma'ertai Ruoxi. She is a younger sister of Ma'ertai Ruolan, the concubine of emperor's eighth son, Yinsi. Trapped in the past, she becomes acquainted with other sons of Kangxi. Especially with the fourth prince Yinzhen and his brother Yinti. Still, she becomes close friends with Yinxiang, the thirteenth prince. Thanks to her charm and wit, she soon gains the emperor's favour and turns into his favourite lady.

While she resides in the Forbidden City, she and Yinsi start to become interested in each other. She only agrees to marriage with him if he gives up his ambition for the throne. Thanks to her modern knowledge, she knew it would lead into a lifelong imprisonment. Yinsi refuses, and for this reason she warns him to be wary of Yizhen and gives him a list of people who would support his ascension.

After falling apart with Yinsi, she falls in love with Yinzhen. In the meantime, Yinsi frames Yinzhen for plotting against Yinreng, the crown prince. Instead of Yinzheng, Yinxiang takes the blame and is under house arrest. Later, Yinsi realizes that Ruoxi is in love with Yinzhen.

The struggle for the throne begins when all the other crimes of Yinreng are revealed. The crown prince loses his freedom and position. The emperor starts to prefer Yinti and wants Ruoxi to be his concubine. As Ruoxi declines this offer, it leaves emperor enraged, and he demotes her to do laundry.

After a while, the emperor dies of illness. Longkodo, Nian Gengyao and Yinzhen seize the throne from Yinti, and Yinzhen becomes the Yongzheng emperor. He releases Yinxiang from his house arrest. After that, Yinzhen enters into a romantic relationship with Ruoxi. Yinzhen places Yinti under house arrest because he was named by emperor Kangxi to be the heir to the throne. Unfortunately, Ruoxi is stuck between the two fighting forces and in the turmoil.

Yinsi's wife, Gororo Minghui, is manipulated by Yintang, the ninth son, into saying to Ruoxi that Yinsi was against Yinzhen years earlier. This shocks Ruoxi and remembers how Yinzhi told her that he has now aspiration for the throne. Due to the situation and her desperation, she miscarries and falls ill. Yinzhen starts to blame Yinsi and his wife, forcing them to divorce. Yinsi's wife then commits suicide. Ruoxi decides to reveal the truth to Yinzhem and Yinxiang, which only leads to Yinzhen treating him coldly. Unable to face the stress in the palace, she decides to ask Yinti to help her leave the palace. In his plan, he reveals his past romance details, and then enraged Yinzhen allows Ruoxi to leave.

Ruoxi's condition is terrible as all the anguish has affected her health. She begs Yinti to send a letter so she can she see the emperor for the last time. Nevertheless, the letter ends up being thrown aside and ends up being unread. It took three days for Ruoxi to finally conclude that his feelings for her have changed, and she dies aged thirty-five. When Yinzhen hears about her death, he starts to regret his actions and finally realized that Ruoxi really loved him. The story comes into conclusion with history remaining unchanged.

2.2.2. 11 Chu Tegong Huang Fei

11 Chu Tegong Huang Fei, officially known in English as *Princess Agents,* was written by Xiao Xiang Donger, first published at "Xiaoxiang Academy". It is classified in the ancient romance and, according to web searches, also as *gongdou* genres by readers.

The main female protagonist, Chu Qiao, is a leader of secret agents completing a mission in current China. While on the assassination mission, she sacrifices herself and dies. She then transmigrates into an ancient China, supposedly into Xia dynasty time, into the body of a little slave girl aged around six or eight years old. In the first moment of her life in the new world, she is thrown into an arena with other little kids and hungry wolves.

She survives the first trial thanks to her martial arts and experience from previous life. She meets Prince Yan Xun from Yanbei, one of the nobles partaking in the game of shooting slaves. Later, she finds out that she was sold to be a slave in the household of the Zhuge family along with her other siblings. She later "diligently" servers the fourth young master, Zhuge Yue, of the Zhuge family.

Meanwhile, the emperor of Xia sends order to capture or kill prince Yan Xun. While he tries to help Chu Qiao once again and manages to escape from the city, unfortunately, they get ambushed, get captured, and are forced to live in the capital under emperor's watch. Yan Xun's family is implicated with supposed revolt and thus were executed.

After a time skip, we get to know about Yan Xun's and Chu Qiao's life in the palace. Yan Xun, with the help of Chu Qiao, plots his revenge and escape from the capital so he can return home to Yanbei. After a while, the emperor summons Yan Xun. He wants Yan Xun to marry Chun'er. It is a trap. Soon after, it is the day of Yan Xun's marriage with Zhao Chun'er. As he does not wish to marry her, he escapes from the groom carriage. There was a group from Xia empire trying to assassinate him. Close to this is the Southwest emissary garrison, and they help Yan Xun. Chu Qiao and Yan Xun, with their flamboyant escape, turn Zhen Huang city into ruins, leading to the decline of the Xia empire.

Chu Qiao is on her way to meet Yan Xun. During the time, she discovers the people sent back to escort Zhao Song and Chun'er. Zhao Song tried to assassinate Yan Xun earlier, and now he is tied and unconscious, and Chun'er is being raped by men. Angered by the situation, she decides to kill all the people escorting them. After that, she personally escorts them back to Zhen Huang city. After Chun'er gets back, she finds Zha Che to chase Chu Qiao.

For this reason, Chu Qiao decides to go back to Yanbei through The Tang empire. She is captured by the slaver-seller boss Mu and gets wounded. She gets thrown into an underground prison and later into cages made for selling slaves.

Fortunately, she was sold to an unknown person and ends up on a boat towards the The Tang empire. Chu Qiao meets their owner Zhan Ziyu, on a wheelchair, and talks with him. He tells Chu Qiao to get off at Wupeng city. After doing so, she decides to infiltrate Chengshou residence to gather more intel. She gets into fight with a man on the top of the cloister. It is Zhuge Yue again. Later, Chu Qiao gets trapped in a room with him, and Zhuge Yue decides to bring Chu Qiao with him to a meeting.

Left with no other option, Chu Qiao decides to follow Zhuge Yue in the carriage. She decides to leave when she sees the opportunity. On the way, the carriage gets ambushed, and the perpetrators ask Zhuge Yue to hand Chu Qiao over. Chu Qiao sees that and comes back to help him. After ensuring they are safe, they joined a convoy going to the The Tang empire. Later, they cause a ruckus and must leave. They hide in a cave, and Zhuge Yue goes to hunt. Chu Qiao uses the opportunity to leave.

In the meantime, Li Ce causes a scene as he does not want to get married. Chu Qiao arrives to the scene, then she faints and wakes up in the imperial palace. While Chu Qiao recovers, Xia's eight princess Zhao Chun'er arrived as future wife of Li Ce. Chu Qiao tells Li Ce that she wants to return.

Meanwhile, , the news about Chun'er being raped by Datong guild member spreads in the capital. The warriors and official want to unite with Xia to destroy Yanbei. Thanks to Li Ce, they do not make the the first move. Chu Qiao wants to leave and accompanied by Tie You, sent by Li Ce to protect her, gets surrounded as she gets labelled as the mastermind behind Chun'er's misery. Chu Qiao is wounded and faints.

She wakes up as she realizes that she is held captive by Zhao Chun'er, who wants to burn her alive. Chu Qiao manages to escape concealed as Zhao Chun'er, and gets chased by a stranger that matches her speed and abilities. It is Zhuge Yue.

Zhuge Yue takes Chu Qiao with him. Chu Qiao wants to leave, for this reason, he asks Yue Qi to escort her to the place where there are traces of Yan Xun. Chu Qiao reunites with Yan Xun and is not happy about the fact she realized he has changed. Chu Qiao still decides to go back with Yan Xun.

Yan Xun is mastering troops to counterattack the Xia empire. In the mantime, Beishuo city has almost fallen, but with the help of Chu Qiao and her South emissary garrison, she manages to win. To save Beishuo, she has abandoned Chidu city. Chu Qiao stays in the city to wait for reinforcements. Yan Xun arrives, and it is a crushing win. Chu Qiao falls ill, and Yan Xun asks Chu Qiao to marry him.

Yan Xun strips her of her right as the general. Chu Qiao becomes the commander of the military strategy department. After a while, Chu Qiao she leaves the military camp with the Southwest emissary garrison as she is displeased with their current general.

In the countryside, she starts to use modern technology to change Yanbei for better. Slowly the country becomes more and more self-sufficient. In her domain, she abolished slavery. She set her camp near Xiuli. Fort this reason, the troops became renamed as the Xiuli troops.

When Chu Qiao got back, old lady brought bridal gifts from Yan Xun to her and tells her that he is also building a palace just for her. She decides to go to the nearby camp to visit Yan Xun and tell him she does not want to be near him. This enrages Yan Xun, and he wants to kill Zhuge Yue. Yan Xun decides to trick Chu Qiao.

A scout goes to Chu Qiao and depicts a bloody situation in Yuegong city. Even though she is almost sure it is trap, she decides to go. It is a trap set on Zhuge Yue by Yan Xun. Zhuge Yue also leaves for Yuegong city. They get surrounded. Yan Xun and Zhuge Yue get met on the battlefield. Chu Qiao realizes Yan Xun's plan and goes to help Zhuge Yue. They get chased onto the lake. The Yanbei army then shoots countless arrows to break the ice. To save Zhuge Yue's life, she jumps into the icy lake. Under the water, he tells her to live on. Chu Qiao emerges from the water and desperately tries to find him again. She wrote a letter to all her acquaintances, so they know what to do. Chu Qiao leaves the wedding ring on table and leaves.

She starts to reside in Huihui mountains. Two years have passed, and Yan Xun steadied his position and took total control over Yanbei. Zhuge family is shunned after his death. Li Ce became the emperor, and in Song, Nalan Hongye took charge of the country's affairs. Southwest of Helan mountain, a new power known as the king of Qinghai appeared. He took power over Cuiwei pass, and Yan Xun had to send people to negotiate with him.

The Xiuli army surrounded the Houyun army with Chu Qiao. While Yan Xun arrives, but to her it is now a man that has betrayed her, and from now on, she wishes for no relationship with him. Chu Qiao manages to escape with the Xiuli army. Meanwhile, Chu Qiao's army got surrounded by Zhao Yang's army. They clash with the enemy head- on.

As the enemy is nearing, suddenly she is saved by Li Ce and his army. She falls asleep from exhaustion and wakes up in Mihe residence again. Li Ce visited her and gave her a riddle who really saved her. Chu Qiao figured it out that it was Zhuge Yue and left.

Two years later, Chu Qiao is yet again on the way to Tang Jing. On their way they meet people surrounded by wolves, which they help. The group is Zhuge Yue's. While talking to him, she decides to go back to Qinghai with him. First, she needs go to Tang Jing, so they part ways again.

One day Li Ce is assassinated. For the reason of taking care of his offspring and his empire, she stays in Tang. For strengthening her stronghold in the the Tang empire, Chu Qiao decides to posthumously marry Li Ce and become the imperial concubine. Soon rebels want to dethrone and kill Chu Qiao. After supressing the rebels, Chu Qiao begs the emperor to relieve her of her duties, thus she is stripped of her tittle of imperial concubine. On their way back, they board a boat. On the trip, she discloses to Zhuge Yue that she died before and time-travelled to this world. During their, they tell each other about their feelings. After that, they continue their journey to Zhen Huang city. They get to the grand marshal's residence as that is now Zhuge Yue's main residence.

As Chu Qiao hears the news about Yanbei soldiers breaking through Baizhi pass and about them decimating Tang empire's army, she decides to leave for the Tang empire. Chu Qiao planned to attack the Baizhi pass. Later, they travel downstream on boats made of sheep's skin. Chu Qiao ends up in Tang capital and waits for He Xian to come back with the emperor. Fortunately, she receives reinforcements from Zhuge Yue and is able to tell him that she is pregnant. After the battle, they decide to go into Qinghai together.

The main story comes into conclusion with the Zhuge family having three kids and the reunition of "China" against Quanrong people which they fiercely crush.

2.2.3. *Quan Qi Zhi Qi*

Quan Qi Zhi Qi is a novel written by Changgou Luoyue first published at JWXCC. In its tags, it is classified as a *chongxin, shuang* and *aiqing zhanzheng* (爱情战争 "love war"). But in discussions online, I have found it classified by the readers as the *zhaidou* genre. For this reason, I have decided to include this novel in my research.

The main character of the story is Shen Yuan, who, was poisoned and was rescued by a warrior. After dying of the poisoning, she is reborn and has a chance to relive her life again. Shen Yuan is the eldest daughter of the scholarly Shen family. In her previous life, she fell in love with Li Xiuyuan and kept pestering him since she wanted to become his wife. For this matter, she was sent to her grandfather to reflect on her previous actions.

On the boat back, she meets Li Xiuyao, the elder brother of the Li Xiuyuan. He is also a military official. The boat gets ambushed, and they are protected by Li Xiuyao. Shen Yuan only briefly thanks Li Xiuyao for saving her.

Upon arriving in Beijing after finishing her stay at her grandfather's place, she meets Aunt Xue at the gates. After arranging, she meets with her father. She uses the chance to show she understands her mistakes and wants to repent. She impresses her father. She starts to investigate why her mother fell ill. While trying to inquire into her mother's death, she finds suspicious traits that suggest the decease was caused by someone else's wrongdoing.

She finds out about the trouble made by Aunt Xue and Shen Lan. The two shops in Shen Yuan's dowry were sold by Aunt Xue. There is a power struggle in the house for Shen Chengzhang's affection. In the time there is probability that Aunt Xue will become the legitimate wife of Shen Chengzhang.

As Shen Chengzhang's fiftieth birthday approaches, they decide to order a small theatre group for him. After the party, Shen Yuan goes to her father to inquire about the jewellery shop since she could not get no information. The father wants to further investigate it and calls aunt Xue to question her. It does not go well for Aunt Xue, and she is reprimanded. Furthermore, he decides to make Shen Yuan in charge of the duties of the household.

Meanwhile, they return, and one of the Shen Yuan's maids, Cardamom, decides to tell her truth, thanks to the nice treatment of Shen Yuan. She was involved in the death of Shen Yuan's mother. She decides to testify against Aunt Xue to Shen Chengzhang.

Shen Yuan decide to set a trap for Xue Yushu, who kept pestering her younger sister and Shen Lan to get rid of them. After seeing the downfall of Xue Yushu and Shen Lan, servants also testified against Aunt Xue. However, Shen Yuan will not be satisfied unless Aunt Xue and her kids are dead. They decide to deal with Aunt Xue after the child is born because she is pregnant, but she miscarried, and thus they drown her in a pond. They also hand the servants that helped her kill Shen Yuan's mother to the government. Shen Yuan feels relieved after the problem is settled.

There are people from concubine An asking for Shen Yuan to marry Wang Xinrui. Shen Chengzhang is unhappy, but he unwillingly agrees to the marriage as it would otherwise influence his position in the court.

Shen Chengzhang calls Shen Yuan over and tells her about the arranged marriage. The only thing that Shen Yuan wants is to happen in spring because it will not happen. From memories of her previous life, there arose a problem, and Wang Xinrui dies. To elevate the situation, Uncle Guanping decides to bring the wedding invitation to Li Xiuyao to make peace with him. Instead, it makes Li Xiuyao very angry as Wang Xingrui is not worthy of Shen Yuan. He wants Shen Yuan to only marry him.

They hold a banquet for arranging Shen Yuan's marriage. She is very sad about the situation. Li Xiuyao went to stop her carriage and took her into secluded alley. She feels like the footsteps of Li Xiuyao and Yu Lang are the same. It confuses her as she only wants to marry Yu Lang in this life. When he tells her that she can only marry him, she just tells him about her desire to not marry anyone.

Because Shen Chengzhang got greedy for ink and took some home, he is imprisoned, and Wang Xinrui dies on the pretended battle in the field. For this reason, Li Xiuyao wants Shen Yuan to marry him. Shen Yuan decided to marry because she wants to save her father but still feels framed by him. This marriage is only a deal for her. After settling it, he accompanied her home. So happy, he quickly goes around to arrange marriage. The wedding goes smoothly, and they got married in three days from the proposal.

Li Xiuyao went to work and is scheming for the second prince to become an emperor. When he gets back home, he is trying to win Shen Yuan over so she would like him for being himself. Later, Li Xiuyao was also sent onto the battlefield.

Meanwhile, Li Xiuyao got hurt in the battle and is carried to see doctors. His left hand got injured. He hurries back to Beijing and stays in the cottage in the outskirts of Beijing. He sends someone to check on Shen Yuan and learns that she is pregnant. He is surprised and sneaks into the house to visit her. Shen Yuan feels sorry for Yu Lang, but she has already developed feelings for Li Xiuyao, and since she is his wife and is pregnant now, there is not much she can do. Still, she is not sure if Li Xiuyao is Yu Lang since he did not have scar on his left hand when she last checked. When Li Xiuyao sneakes into her bedroom, she is surprised and, in a haze, apologizes do Yu Lang thinking it is him. Li Xiuyao is surprised as it is his baby′s name. When she truly awakens, she checks his left hand and reveals the bandage to see the wound. Then she realizes that Li Xiuyao is truly Yu Lang. He lets her and let him go back.

The first prince died of smallpox, and the emperor is seriously ill and since Li Xiuyao is not already in Shanxi Li Xiuyuan tries to blame it on him for planning all of that. Li Xiuyao deals with him by sending him away from Beijing.

Shen Yuan gives birth to a boy. After recovering, she wants to clarify things and tell him how she really feels and does so.

The first prince dies of smallpox and the emperor is sick. For this reason, concubine Li Shu has to lean on Li Xiuyao for power.

As the emperor is dying, Li Xiuyao goes to the palace to investigate. After the death, the second prince became the emperor and Li Xiuyao is granted the title of Youzhu king, and Li Shu became the empress dowager.

Li Xiuyao is the governor and controls the government. To make sure his family will be fine, he does something very outrageous, he becomes the new emperor and makes Shen Yuan into empress. They had three kids, two boys and one daughter.

2.2.4. *Nongjia E Fu*

Nongjia E Fu is a newer novel that was first finished and published in 2019 on the JJWXC website. Even though on JJWXC it is just considered as a *yanqing* 言情 romance genre, but in the novel′s tags, it is described as including following elements: *buyi shenghuo* 布衣生活 "commoner life", *chuanyue shikong* 穿越时空 "travel through time", *zhongtian wen* 种田文 "farming" and *shuang wen* 爽文.

The main character He Jiaoxing time-travelled into a Taiping era from a postapocalyptic world where each person had a supernatural power. In the previous life, she had a supernatural power that she also brought into the Taiping era, and before coming to this age, she had run a restaurant and had two kids.

She came to this world and became a kid that was very sick. Later, she grows into a beauty feared by people in the village as she is not one to mess around. As she is around fifteen, sixteen years old at the start of the story, she starts to look for somebody to marry. She contacts a matchmaker that says the third son of Cheng family is in the marriage age. They meet at the bank of a river, and they both take a fancy of each other. At first, he is a good-for-nothing. It all changes when He Jiaoxing says that she is interested in marrying him.

To prove he is worthy of her, he starts selling food in the town. He Jiaoxing decides to start cooking. After tasting He Jiaoxing's food, Cheng Jiaxing comes with an idea to start selling her food in the town. He regularly goes to He Jiaoxing's family house, and they start planning to move, on together. They get married before autumn harvest and He Jiaoxing moves into her husband's family house.

Cheng Jiaxing and his friends start to expand their business into a neighbouring village and earn more and more money. Their business becomes sustainable since He Jiaoxing's cooking is excellent. With the business running smoothly, they start earning a considerable amount of money. They earn so much that they can even afford a brick house. More and more people want to buy their food. For this reason, He Jiaoxing starts including family members from Cheng Jiaxing's family in the business and teaches them how to make food. Including family in the business, the family starts to truly approve of He Jiaoxing as the wife of Cheng Jiaxing. They also move into the new house and open a shop.

They decide to take the business to another level - wholesale. Everything goes very well, and He Jiaoxing starts to make new food items. She finds out that she is pregnant. Cheng Jiaxing and He Jiaoxing try to include second brother Cheng Jiagui and his wife Zhou in the business too.

Meanwhile, , He Jiaoxing gives birth to a girl. She goes into a month of confinement. Huang moves in with them to help her. While she is idle, she comes up with a new idea to sell candy for the wealthy. It is important in the food business to come up with new things.

Liu wants to learn the craftmanship of making food from He Jiaoxing and open a shop like them too. Through time, Cheng Jiaxing becomed the most progressive man in Darongshu village.

He Jiaoxing decide to sell her recipes. Four companies that are willing to buy them. She not only sells the recipes but also teaches and shows them how to make the food. In the process, Cheng Jiaxing proves himself to be good at counting. So, they consider the possibility of him becoming an accountant.

There start to be even kids asking about their daughter that they gave the nickname Donggu. It looks like the little kid got the mother's look and her supernatural strength.

There is also happy news as Mrs. Liu found out that she is pregnant. They already have a son nicknamed Tiennu. She is very happy and decides not to go out as to not lose the kid.

Cheng Jiaxing decides to buy the shop in the county. Liu Zaohua decides to follow them. They start to include He Jiaoxing's family in the business. They bring Dongzi into the shop in county and teach him how to sell food at the counter. They decide to call the shop Cheng Ji. They start to sell various meals at the shop and not only sweet items as at the start. Business goes so well that they even help Liu Zaohua open her own shop.

Meanwhile, Dongzi wants to marry a girl in the county. It is easy as He Jiaoxing already has a girl in mind. While arranging the marriage, Liu Zaohua smoothly runs the shop and gives part of the profit to the young couple Cheng Jiaxing and He Jiaoxing.

While being idle, He Jiaoxing comes up with the idea of a fan. As the fourth brother is a carpenter, she explains how the fan worked in modern times and wants the fourth brother Cheng Jiawang to make it. He manages to do a prototype. This became a big hit, and it makes Yuan happy. She is the carpenter's daughter, and the girl Cheng Jiawang wants to marry.

During the autumn, the fans even reach the capital, and the emperor takes liking to them. He invites the craftsman into the capital. In the meantime, Cheng Jiawang gets married to Yuan. The fan also starts to be popular in Beijing, and the emperor ask the Cheng Jiawang to work in the Ministry of Industry. Upon hearing the news, they decide to celebrate the happy even with a banquet.

In Cheng Ji, Dongzi is still helping, and them when they closed the shop because they found out that He Jiaoxing is pregnant again, he decides to sell peanuts there. They even help Dongzi arrange a marriage with a county girl.

In the meantime, Cheng Jiawang already moved into the capital and bought a house there. He waits for a reunion with his wife that gave birth to their son.

The story concludes with Cheng Jiaxing and He Jiaoxing planning to go to the capital to visit, considering buying another shop, and with He Jiaoxing giving birth to a son.

2.2.5 Specific of *Gongdou, Zhaidou* and *Zhongtian wen*

Knowing the storyline of each book, I am going to look onto the specifics appearing in each book and present, how are these subgenres intermingled. Just looking on the summary of the books, it is evident that they share the same pattern of story line – from an underdog to a revelled human being.

Starting with *gongdou*, based on my reading the books of the discussed genre, I can summarise the narrative of these novels like this:

- The main character awakes in a new world, often through transmigration.
- Faced with this new reality, they must adapt.
- They benefit from a "golden finger", possessing knowledge they are not supposed to have.
- They use this knowledge to influence their lives and achieve desired outcomes.
- They die from age or illness but had a considerably happy life.

The narrative is often linear and straightforward. The novels are usually written in the third person (er) form, the only exception I have come across is the *Bu Bu Jing Xin* which is written in the first (ich) form. In the novel *Qing Chuan Zhi Paohui Rensheng,* the main heroine even becomes an empress reigning over the lands, so she has the same responsibilities and rights as the emperor. It could be said that the history is romanticized.

The question now is, what are the main specifics of *gongdou* genre? Through my finding I have come to this conclusion:

- The story takes place in an imperial palace.

Apart from the above-mentioned features, I have only found similarities with *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* genre, and so narrative of these stories and motif s cannot be considered specific.

Now taking in mind that the story happens in the imperial place in ancient times, how is the history dealt with? As Chao said there seems to be "historicising fiction" and "fictionalising history" (Chao, 2013: 140). Meaning internet writers mostly fabricated history to make dynasty that did not exist in history and there are no actual historical facts left (Chao, 2013: 141).

How is the motif implemented in the *Bu Bu Jing Xin*?

> "*My name is now Maertai Ruoxi and this older sister I acquired is Maertai Ruolan, the second wife of a rather well-known figure in Qing history: Prince Lian, also known as the Eighth-prince, Yinsi. [...]*" (Tonghua, chp. 1)

From the beginning, the whole story revolves around the life in the imperial palace and around how the heroine survives her days.

This motif of palace setting is implemented in Princess Agents later in the story when she needs to take care of Li Ce's son.

> "*I hereby specially decree that, you, Lady Chu, for your diligence, wisdom, honourable conduct, along with your kindness and generosity, I will bestow upon you the title of (_____). May you be blessed forever.*" (Xiaoxiang, chp. 234)

Now I will look at the world where the story takes place. *Princess Agents* presents romanticised history. All the history is used for romance as it seems to be revolving around the relationship of Chu Qiao with all the other protagonists and thus is not accurate. The world where the story takes place has the imperial family Xia, so it is situated to the uncertain dynasty of Xia[24]. For most of the story the author follows the historical setting, but sometimes there appear inventions such as matches. Not everything in the world is thus historically accurate.

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[24] The Xia dynasty was the first of many ancient Chinese ruling houses, thought to exist from around 2070 B.C.E. until 1600 B.C.E.

In *Bu Bu Jing Xin* the story takes place during the Qing dynasty and is also romanticised. The main love plot likely did not occur in real life, even though there was a historical figure named Maer'tai Ruoxi.[25]

Talking about the story setting we cannot forget how the heroines got into it. In *Princess Agents,* the main character Chu Qiao transmigrates into the body of a six or seven year old slave and from the beginning, she is faced with the harsh reality of old China. The author does not go into details as for how and why that happened, so the reader is just faced with the scene depicted as a bloody trial.

> *"Jing Yue Er stood up shakily, wielding her eyes with unbelievable shock as if she was petrified. Torn clothes hung on her body, her hair was messy, and her pale face was stained in blood. Cold winds blew over with a flurry, she seemed like she was a delicate blade of grass.*
>
> *Shoot! A sharp arrow shot in her direction. Jing Yue Er jumped back with her nimble body, dodging a fatal arrow but due to her weakened state, she was grated on her calf by the same arrow. Fresh blood flowed down her leg."*

(Xiaoxiang, chp. 4)

While in *Bu Bu Jing Xin* the reader gets to know that the main character transmigrated into the world by narrative of the main character.

> *"This feeling of melancholy is the same as how I feel now. It's already the tenth days since I've been her in ancient times, but I still feel as if it is all just a dream. I feel like I am only waiting to awake up in modern times and am not really in the forty-third year of the Kang'xi's reign. […]"*
> (Tonghua, chp. 1)

Thus, there is the transmigration introduced into the story which seems to be a prevailing motif in the *gongdou* novels. Transmigration is also typical for *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen.*

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[25] The real Maltai Ruoxi in history was discovered after seven years of death. After Qianlong found out, Long Yan was furious. *IMedia* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by:
https://min.news/en/entertainment/3ee9131a8ca9ac04cb439bf5b85ef3b8.html

While reading the *Princess Agents* it seems to be influenced by visual novels, especially the galgames, where the player decides which character they want to date. I see many potential lovers.

For this reason, I would also like to address the love narrative tropes appearing in the novel *Princess Agents*. Based on my reading of western Young Adult fiction, I have noticed similarities. First and foremost, trope appearing throughout the whole novel is the "enemies to lovers" trope[26] after countless times of fighting each other, Zhuge Yue becomes the true love of the main heroine. Second trope that I would like to point out is the "friends to lovers"[27] which could be the first one appearing in the story, when Chu Qiao is first in love with prince Yan Xun and they pose as a couple in the imperial palace and more times thorough the story. These tropes are very important for the main plot and add to the feeling of *shuang* in the novel.

Considering this, you can see how easily the *shuang* element was implemented into the story. Now I am going to discuss the presence of *shuang* in each book. Based on the description of *shuang,* the main story needs to include thrill and healing and mending your mental wounds. The stories in *Princess Agents* and *Bu Bu Jing Xin* both fulfil this criterion. Both main heroines have multiple love interests, further including the thrill of many potential love interests. Thus, the reverse harem comes into play. Throughout the story they suffer from their choices, but are also rewarded because of them. Through the story of *Princess Agents* there are many fights which give thrill when reading them and give off badass feelings. Unlike the *Bu Bu Jing Xin*, the novel *Princess Agents* has a happy ending which further increases the feeling of satisfaction and thrill. It could be said that *shuang* is also a prevailing motif appearing in not only *gongdou*, but also *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen*.

Now moving on to the specifics of *zhaidou*. The *zhaidou* narrative of the novels I have read is:

- Main heroine transmigrates or is reborn.
- Wives and concubine struggle for the attention of male protagonists or there is another power struggle within the family.
- The protagonist gains the attention and love of male protagonist.
- They start a family together.

[26]Writing the Enemies to Lovers Trope. *Between the lines editorial* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieve by: https://btleditorial.com/2021/02/16/enemies-to-lovers-trope/
[27]Romance Tropes: Friends to Lovers. *Rookwood editing* [online]. 2023 [2023-10-23]. Retrieved by: https://www.rookwoodediting.com/2023/01/romance-tropes-friends-to-lovers/

- The main protagonists become the emperor and empress.

As you can see, the narrative is very similar to *gongdou*, except that it takes place in a big family manor. In the novel *Hewei Xian Qi* about halfway through the story, there is even the shift of the genre from *zhaidou* to *gongdou*. The story does not come into conclusion with the main characters becoming the emperor and empress, but continues into their lives in the imperial palace. All the story is always very linear and written in the "er" form of narrative coming to its conclusion.

Now, what are the specifics motifs appearing in *zhaidou*? It can be concluded as follows:

The story unfolds within a large family manor.

Again, as in the *gongdou* genre example, the story in *zhaidou* is romanticized and the main heroine has a great advantage against others thanks to her memories and previous knowledge. The story setting also varies slightly, taking place inside a family manor and later within the manor of the heroine's husband. The narrative concludes with them ascending to the positions of empress and emperor. A similar motif to transmigration appearing in the novels is *chongsheng*. Rather than transmigration, the narrative device of *chongsheng* is more common for *zhaidou* novels. I have come across novels of the *gongdou* subgenre that are *chongsheng* too, but I have not read them yet. It just shows how closely all the subgenres are intermingled. The story in *Quan Qi Zhi Qi* starts with the main heroine thinking about her rebirth.

> *"Shen Yuan dreamed about her previous life. [...] At that time, she had realized that the medicine could no longer supressed the poison in her body and her sense of the outside world was slowly disappearing. The days when her feet could feel the coldness and comfort of the wooden floor would probably not last long, so she wanted to feel it more now."*
> (Zhanggou, chp. 1)

Like in *gongdou* novels, there is a power struggle among the family members. Thus, the motif of power struggle within either imperial or wealthy family is a similar trait of *gongdou* and *zhaidou*. The motif of uncertain power balance in the house is introduced in the story of *Quan Qi Zhi Qi* as this.

"Shen Yuan raised her head and looked at her, her eyes as sharp as razor blades, and she said in a sad and angry voice: 'I think no one knows how my mother died better than Aunt Xue.'

'What do you mean by this, Miss?' Aunt Xue quickly defended, 'You need evidence when speaking.'"

(Zhanggou, chp. 70)

While reading the novels, I get the sense of visual novel games where there can also be detective work. Through reading the novel, I follow step by step as the main heroine unravels the truth about her mother's death and the love of her life. It feels like the step-by-step progression of visual novel games.

At last, let's look at what tags appear in the novels? The novel is tagged as this "court marquis" (宫廷侯爵 *gongting houjue*), *chonsheng*, "fall in love and kill" (相爱相杀 *xiang ai xiang sha*), *shuang* and "serious drama" (正剧 *zhengju*).

The first tag that the novel fulfills is the *chongsheng*, as mentioned when analysing the narrative of the *zhaidou* subgenre. The heroine is reborn after her death and has the chance to live her life again. The novel does include in a sense *chuanyue shikong* as she travels to the time prior her death.

Secondly, the *shuang* is obvious in the story. From the start, the protagonist must do "detective work" to find the first killer(s) of her mother and later the love of her life. After she slowly unravels the truth and ensures that the perpetrators get their punishment, it brings the thrill in the story. Arguably the most thrilling scene is when she realizes her husband is her loved one from the previous life.

Now, lastly, let's investigate *zhongtian wen*. This is the narrative of the novels I have read, and it can be summarized as this:

- Main character transmigrated or was born in the world.
- The main character falls into poverty or is born into poverty.
- For most time of the story, the protagonist uses his means and knowledge to farm and sell their harvest or sell the thing they made (aka cooked).
- There is a motif of family.
- Family lives happily ever after (and moves into the city).

The novels are usually written in "er" form, and throughout the novel I can see many perspectives of different characters. Otherwise, the story is very linear. Now I will point out the specifics of the *zhongtian wen* subgenre and how they are included in the novel.

The specifics of *zhongtian wen* could be summarised as follows:

- The story happens in a family house in the countryside.

This one varies from the *gongdou* and *zhaidou* novels, but in a sense, it still shares similarities with them as there is a power struggle in the little family house in the countryside. The motif of the countryside is introduced into the story as this:

> *"Yuquan Village is a small village near the river in the southwest of Yan State. There are two major surnames in the village, He and Zhao, as well as some individual households who have moved here, totalling several hundred people."*

(Nan Dao Yingtao, chp. 1)

Same as in the *gongdou* and *zhaidou* novels the main heroine transmigrated into the world.

> *"[…] In her previous life, He Jiaoxing and her parents opened a specialty restaurant in an ancient town. They hired two relatives to help but they were still too busy. She was a young girl who could do everything and could manage purchases and sales. Helps with unloading, can mix vegetables and cook. Her restaurant occupied a good location. Although the store was not very big, the business was booming, and the profits were considerable. Her life can could be said to be peaceful and comfortable. […]"*

(Nan Dao Yingtao, chp. 1)

Again, as in the *gongdou* and *zhaidou* novels, the main female protagonist uses her "golden finger", previous knowledge of how to cook to alleviate her situation and earn money. She quickly becomes successful.

> *"Xing'er can always make delicious food that cannot be seen in other families. When she carries it out, people will pay money to try it. If she just tastes it but is not satisfied, those who are not short of money will*

come here every day to buy and eat for a while to satisfy their addiction.”

(Nan Dao Yingtao, chp. 60)

Same as in the other stories of *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen*, the story of *Nong Jia E Fu* comes into a conclusion with a happy ending, family planning to visit the city.

“One word to describe their days was sweet and spicy. Sometimes it's so sweet that they are cloying, sometimes they are so spicy that it's choking. It's a delicious life.”

(Nan Dao Yingtao, chp. 151)

During my reading of both *Nong Jia E Fu* and *Liufang,* I have come across the motif of levelling that appears in games of ACGN culture. At each stage, the heroine gains new skills, such as new recipes created or remembered, and thus achieves new milestones. The motif of levelling is prevalent throughout the novels, as it is also one of common traits of *zhongtian wen* and it seems to be including all three subgenres mentioned in the rising tendency. It first starts in *zhongtian wen* and later the story moves into *zhaidou* subgenre and at last in the end of the novel it comes into *gongdou* subgenre.

Lastly, *Nong Jia E Fu* is tagged like this: “commoners’ life” (布衣生活 *buyi shenghuo*), “trespassing time” (穿越时空 *chuanyue shikong*), *zhongtian wen*, *shuang* and “relax” (轻松 *qingsong*). Based on the tags used when describing *zhongtian wen,* there are three fitting tags: *chuanyue shikong*, *shuang*. *zhongtian wen*.

The prevalence of thrill in the story is brought by the protagonist’s success in achieving their goals, even to the point of running a successful restaurant. Another sense of thrill is derived from development of the protagonists’ relationship.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this work, there is a brief overview of internet literature development, important terms related to it, and the development of female oriented literature. I also explored genre classification, concluding that *gongdou*, *zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* are most likely subgenres of the ancient romance genre. Additionally, I concluded that the most fitting way to categorize genres on internet is not through the genre (or subgenre), but through their tags and therefore all (sub)genres could be said to be functioning as tags as observed on the Jinjiang Literature City website.

The second part describes subgenres as viewed on the internet and in secondary literature. I investigated narrative conventions of analysed books, important tags associated with the genres, and recurring motifs.

Similarities were found between the subgenres, with stories often starting with an underdog striving to improve their life and eventually finding success and glory. There seems to be a rising tendency in the narrative. The genres could be organized such as this is all included in the *zhongtian wen* narrative – first the story starts in *zhongtian wen* and then, when the protagonist enters the city, they start to live life in a residence thus starting the *zhaidou* subgenre and lastly, when they become the ruler of the country, the novel turns into *gongdou* subgenre.

The subgenres also share similar tags such as *shuang, chuanyue* and *chongsheng*. This recurring motif introduces the main protagonists to the ancient Chinese setting, illustrating how these subgenres are interconnected and complement each other. They can only be differentiated by the specific setting where the story unfolds. In conclusion the classification is often not distinctive and the examined subgenres share similar narrative device, conventions and motifs, being only differentiated by the setting from the imperial palace to a manor of a wealthy family to a commoner's house in the countryside.

RESUMÉ

This Master's thesis aims to introduce the problematics of description, specifics and similarities of selected female oriented (sub)genres *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen*.

This Master's thesis focuses on generic classification of Chinese internet literature. It aims to introduce selected female oriented (sub)genres *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* and to describe their specifics and similarities in order to determine whether they constitute separate genres or subgenres within context of romantic online fiction.

In the first part I introduce Chinese Internet Literature, relevant terms related to internet literature, the development of female-oriented literature, its evolution, and its classification. Following a brief discussion of the problems of genre and subgenre distinction, I provide an overview of existing systems of classification of Chinese female internet literature.

In the second, I conduct analysis of aforementioned internet (sub)genres. Based on my reading of the internet novels, namely *Bu Bu Jing Xin* (步步惊心 *"Startling Surprises with Every Step"*, 2005), *Princess Agents* (*11 Chu tegong huang fei* 11 处特工皇妃, 2011), *Quan Qi Zhi Qi* (权戚之妻 *"Quan Qi's Wife"*, 2017) and *Nongjia E Fu* (农家恶妇 *"Wicked Peasant Woman"*, 2019), but also based on other novels I have read I determine the specific elements of the *gongdou, zhaidou, zhongtian wen* (sub)genre as well as the possible similarities of (sub)genres present in the works. The analysis shows that *gongdou, zhaidou* and *zhongtian wen* may be classified as subgenres of a wider category of ancient romance that are connected through similar narrative patterns and motifs and can only be differentiated by the story setting.

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