

PERSISTENCE TO CREATE: NARRATIVE AGENCY AND  
FEMINIST IMAGINATION AMONG CHINESE FEMALE FANS

by

HUIXIN GONG

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Approved: Peter Alilunas, Ph D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

*The Social Network* (2010, dir. David Fincher) was very popular with fans around the world before 2015. Now, fifteen years after the film's release, a group of Chinese women continues to insist on making the film the object of their fandom. Like many fan works, the works of these Chinese female fans are often dominated by slash fan fiction—stories that imagine romantic or sexual relationships between male characters—and filled with pornographic narratives. Dating back to the 1980s, this phenomenon of women creating and obsessing about their fan works has already existed, and the controversies and criticisms of it inside and outside the fan community have never gone away. Through textual analysis of fan works and interviews with Chinese female fans of *The Social Network*, I examine his phenomenon in the context of the complex politics, culture and censorship systems of Chinese society. I argue that, for the female fans around the world, including Chinese female fans, such practices are a moderate and spontaneous feminist act, a love-driven attempt by women to deconstruct the official patriarchal narrative of mainstream culture, and a meaningful journey of self-discovery.

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Finally, I would like to thank myself for my perseverance in learning. The process of researching and writing this thesis was not easy. There were countless moments when I felt frustrated and even considered giving up. However, what kept me going was my sense of mission to speak out for the Chinese Tongren community. In June 2025, when I was about to complete my thesis, a group of Chinese female authors were arrested by the Lanzhou Police on charges of creating explicit fiction on the online website Haitang Wenxuecheng. Almost all public voices supporting them on social media in mainland China were concealed. I deeply

sympathize with the experiences of these female authors, but I strongly believe that the transformative power of creating is everlasting and will be passed down through generations. No matter how our voices are canceled, no matter how our existence is made invisible, as long as we persist in creating, we will ultimately overcome these hardships in the future.

## Table of Contents

Introduction: A Reappearance of the 1990s? Or a Time Slip? .....	6
Chapter 1: The Internal Pressure.....	16
1.1 Re-encoding and Re-decoding.....	16
1.2 The Imaginary World of <i>The Social Network</i> .....	21
1.3 Good Taste or Bad Works: Romance, Pornography and <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> .....	30
1.4 The Self-Criticism.....	36
Chapter 2: The External Pressure .....	45
2.1 Summer Camp and Censorship.....	45
2.2 Stigmatization: Unqualified Female Fans.....	56
Chapter 3: The Impact of Life and Conclusion .....	62
3.1 I Can Keep Writing.....	62
3.2 Tongren Work: An Ethnical Practice.....	65
Filmography .....	70
References.....	71

## **Introduction: A Reappearance of the 1990s? Or a Time Slip?**

In “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture”, Constance Penley (1991) discusses the phenomenon of slash fans of *Star Trek* at the time who were passionate about the “erotic fantasies” between two male characters (483). Penley characterizes such fantasy works created by fans as “a unique hybrid genre of the romance, pornography, and utopian science fiction” (480), referring to the slash phenomenon as the most radical appropriation of popular culture by women (484). Today, with the popularization of the Internet, the improvement of women’s educational level, and the gradual increase of women’s disposable income, this utopia built through the appropriation of mainstream culture continues to be enriched by generations of female fans from diverse backgrounds. As a branch of fan culture, the slash phenomenon is not only criticized by mainstream society for being fans, but is also often not understood by non-slash members of the fan community. Due to slash fans’ passion and excessive investment in “female-specific” fan behavior, they are considered by many fans to be unqualified as “good-enough fans” or “good enough representatives” to the outside world (Busse 2013, 74).

In addition to being seen as “not good enough fans”, many slash fans with both female and fan identities might also be considered as not good enough feminists. Penley (1991) mentions that in the 1990s, slash fans from the United Kingdom and North America felt that they were often not considered feminist by the well perceived morally anti-pornography feminism of the time, or rather that feminism was not enough to represent the slash fans themselves (491).

However, nowadays, with sex-positive feminism being more widely accepted, the debate over whether slash fans and their behavior align with feminism or embody feminist qualities is still unresolved. An important reason for this is that slash fan work has been criticized for its enthusiasm for sex between males, although Penley addresses that the slash phenomenon is not about female fans gaining a privileged position through phallic identification (488), many female fans with dual identities as both slash fans and feminists still struggle with integrating the two identities—as the absence of female characters in slash narratives is a marked fact. Fans today are still as passionate about slash culture as those in the 1990s, some of them are gradually shifting their attention away from science fiction to more diverse genres of the popular culture, but pornography remains an inseparable and dominant feature of slash fan fiction.

Such a feature—although the slash culture is a product of the particular era, the specific social context, and related to the unique and groundbreaking work *Star Trek*, it is not exclusive to the *Star Trek* slash fans consisting almost entirely of women from the United Kingdom and North America, instead, it is a trait shared by the creations of slash creations made by fans from different cultures and countries, even in East Asia, where attitudes toward women’s desires and LGBTQ+ are relatively conservative. For example, according to Archive of Our Own (AO3), the world’s largest fan creation website, slash works are most often created in English, then Chinese (Archive of Our Own 2025)<sup>1</sup>. However, Chinese slash creations are much more pornographic

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<sup>1</sup> The data here is from publicly available information on AO3 (<https://archiveofourown.org/>). As of May 1, 2025, English is the most widely used language on AO3, with 11,313,210 works. Chinese is the second most widely used, with 883,299 works, and the third most widely used language is Spanish with 184,464 works.

than those in English, both in terms of quantity and the degree of radicalization.

There has been a significant delay in the development of slash culture in China. Regarding the origin of slash culture in China, the popular opinion is that it was initially influenced by Japanese BL (Boys' Love) culture. BL culture emerged in Japan from shōjo manga (girls' comics) in the 1970s. It's a genre of Japanese manga that portrays male-male romantic relationships and created mostly by and for women (Welker 2015, 42). However, around 2015, with the popularization of Hollywood blockbusters led by superhero movies and online gay dramas adapted from Chinese BL novels taking over the dominant position of Japanese popular culture in China, Chinese slash culture began to develop independently. The participants of Chinese slash culture, as a group in a unique political and cultural environment and following an independent path of development, neither the Japanese term “fujoshi”<sup>2</sup> nor the Western term “slashers” can properly describe them. Therefore, in this thesis, I choose to use the term Tongren girls<sup>3</sup> to refer to them. In China, Tongren girls refers to women who create or are passionate about fan works for popular culture, which not only reflects the almost all-female composition of the community, but also implies that these members do not just create slash creations—though slash works is predominant in quantity—or even romantic works. Chinese Tongren girls' creative works are extremely diverse in content, form, and genre. In recent years, there has also been a

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<sup>2</sup> Fujoshi refers to female fans of the BL culture.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Tongren”(同人) is the Chinese translation of “dōjin” in Japanese fan culture. “Dōjin has a similar meaning to the English term “fandom.” However, with the development of fan culture in China, “Tongren” in the Chinese context has developed a meaning different from that of “doujin.” In addition, “Tongren girls” (同人女) has become the recognized term for a specific type of female fan in Chinese fan culture.

progressive increase in lesbian, asexual, and de-romanticized single character orientated fan creations.

Since the slash and Chinese Tongren communities are composed mostly of women, the identity as a female community is one of the most important characteristics of them. Although slash culture and Chinese Tongren culture are not identical phenomena, there are parallels between them, particularly in the criticism that slash fans faced in the 1990s, when some feminists argued that their works and behaviors failed to represent feminist ideals. These critiques reflect the ongoing identity dilemma that many Tongren girls continue to navigate today. One of the most important reasons for this dilemma is the imbalance between Chinese women's awareness of feminism and China's current economic and technological development. Although the conditions for the outbreak of feminist ideology—sufficient internet popularity and the increasing education level of women—have been widely achieved in Chinese society, Chinese feminism has not undergone an internally driven evolution in the same way as it does in the West. On the contrary, it often emerged in sudden “blowout” moments after being suppressed by conservative ideology for a long time, such as the online feminist campaigns caused by the Tangshan assault protests and the “Iron Chain Woman” incident (Ding and Sun 2024). This means that the development of feminism in China lacks a gradual process and thorough exploration. Instead, it is a case of borrowing feminist ideologies from outside that may not necessarily fit China's particular cultural and political context (Gordon 2023).

As a result, Chinese Tongren girls, as one of the groups of women who know the most about popular culture and the internet, often find themselves in moral dilemmas when dealing

with their dual identities as women and fans—that is, whether heterosexual and slash fan creations have the undertones of patriarchal ideology and phallicism, and whether the pleasure obtained from them is “justified” for their feminist identity. Delayed ideological development and relatively conservative dominant values make it difficult for Tongren girls to persist in creating under external pressure and internal anxiety.

An example of that external pressure is the fans of the *Hannibal* TV series. Over the past ten years, fans of *Hannibal* have actively expressed their yearning for more Hannibal stories through online petitions, social media, and even direct communication with the screenwriter and actors. However, so far none of the streaming media companies has expressed an interest in producing a revival of *Hannibal* (Rogers 2022). Actions of fighting for the rights of fans and speaking up for their favorite media products, such as petitioning and communicating directly with creators through social media, are almost impossible for Chinese Tongren girls to imitate. This is not only because the whole Chinese internet is isolated, but also due to the intersectionality of Tongren girls’ multiple minority identities of being women and fans of color, which undoubtedly makes them a marginalized group within the fan community. While “non-marginalized” fans are still struggling in their negotiations with media companies, the voices of Chinese Tongren girls are rarely heard or recognized. However, many dedicated Tongren girls never give up on the “hopeless” media products that they love. Instead, since they cannot change the status of media works from the outside, they have turned to seeking an internal transformation and complete control—reconstructing the original narrative through fan creations, or even building a new universe based on the media products that only exists in fan works. With

those fan works, the dependence of Tongren girls on the media products gradually decreases, their fixes and expansions to narratives actually reboot media products with no franchise, keeping them alive and appealing.

*The Social Network*, a 2010 commercial biographical film directed by David Fincher, was a critical and commercial success in its years. It has always occupied a special place in the hearts of fans. *The Social Network* explores the story of how Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook and the early stages of his business empire. However, Facebook's history and the business wars, which were heavily depicted in the film, are not what made this film stand out to fan works creators and consumers. In fact, the most attractive aspect of *The Social Network* for fans is the tangled and complicated relationship between the protagonists Mark and Eduardo. According to AO3, the earliest fan fiction in English for *The Social Network* was posted the day after the movie was released in the United States, and the peak in the number of fan creations happened between the first and second years after the film was released. Although there are still fans creating fan fiction for *The Social Network*, both the number and the views of these works on AO3 have decreased significantly (Archive of Our Own 2025). This phenomenon can be expected—since after one and a half decades, there is no official franchise for this once-popular film. Although there has been news of a possible sequel and fan creations have the effect of rebooting the original work, the limited narrative and the lack of vitality in the fandom over time have resulted in an unavoidable decline in the overall fan communities of *The Social Network* in the United Kingdom and North America.

However, the appeal of *The Social Network* in the Chinese Tongren community does not

seem diminished. According to AO3, as of May 2025, there were 2,727 fan works related to *The Social Network*. In the entire year of 2024, the total number of fan works on *The Social Network* is 237, of which the number of Chinese works is 174, while even at the peak days of 2012, the number of English fan creations was only 225. Considering that AO3 is the only English fan website that can provide valid data, but not the primary fan platform used by Tongren girls, I also collected data from Lofter, the main fan platform used by Chinese female fans, there are about 7,600 contributions related to *The Social Network*, with nearly 300,000 views.<sup>4</sup> Although the figures mentioned above cannot fully represent the fanbase of *The Social Network* in the United Kingdom, North America, or China, they can be used to compare and reflect Chinese Tongren girls' persistence in this media product after nearly fifteen years.

Why do Chinese Tongren girls still persist in creating fan works for a media product that is only 120 minutes in length after fifteen years of its release? In the era of online information overload and rapidly updated popular culture, the media products that Chinese fans pay attention to are often quickly replaced by new trends, and it is rare to find the same long-lasting and intense passion as the Tongren fans of *The Social Network*. What makes *The Social Network* so attractive to Tongren girls as a text to be constantly deconstructed and reconstructed?

Since Tongren girls often archive fan works of Western media on non-mainstream fan

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<sup>4</sup> Lofter (<https://www.lofter.com/>) does not have the same comprehensive filtering and categorization system as AO3, so the numbers provided here are approximations rather than exact figures. It is important to note that the figure of contributions mentioned here do not equate to the quantity of fan works, because Lofter counts posts with media product tags but not classified as fan works (such as question posts or character discussions) in contributions.

websites run on foreign web servers, the data of fan works related to *The Social Network* has remained relatively continuous and accessible, even under censorship pressure. At the same time, the active period of *The Social Network*'s Tongren community coincides with several key moments in the history of the Chinese Tongren community. Therefore, in order to study the vulnerable Chinese Tongren community, this thesis chooses *The Social Network* and its Chinese Tongren community as the research object. Through interviews with Tongren girls from different ages, backgrounds and professions, as well as textual analysis of their practices and fan creations, this thesis explores the specific characteristics of Chinese Tongren community and the challenges it faces in its internal ideologies and the external social pressure.

In this thesis, I argue that Tongren girls' behavior of creating fan works is a moderate, spontaneous, and almost unconscious feminist practice in China's distinctive political and social context. It is the way that Tongren girls to reconstruct the patriarchal narratives of mainstream culture and build a female-only utopia; it is also a form of emotional communication about love and self-exploration of identity within the female community. It is important to recognize the value of Tongren culture and its products. Firstly, Tongren culture, just like other fan cultures around the world, is born in mainstream culture but is inherently different in nature. However, as Fiske (1992) has suggested, fan creation is not a complete rejection of mainstream culture. On the contrary, it is a process in which fans take the positive aspects of mainstream culture and discard the negative aspects. The relationship between mainstream culture and Tongren girls is complex and entangled. While Tongren girls have repeatedly attempted to fix the problematic and dissatisfying parts of mainstream culture, they have also shown their love and expectations

for it. The ability to expect and fix the problematic narrative over and over again is not only driven by a willingness to adapt, but also by an increased feminist consciousness and acceptance of personal desires and identities.

Secondly, as one of the first groups that follows popular culture and contemporary liberal and feminist ideas, the Chinese Tongren Community, like all fan communities around the world, is often filled with self-criticism caused by the clash between “female identity” and “fan identity.” However, personal identity cannot be separated from social context, the constant self-criticism and self-reflection shown in fan activities and fan narratives reflect the survival habits of Tongren girls in a generally conservative social environment and the conflict between traditional and progressive ideologies. Therefore, the sensitive but evolving Tongren girls cannot avoid considering the moral dilemma of enjoying the products of mainstream culture. This self-criticism and reflection are subconscious, born from agency, not driven by external forces, and expressed through fan creations. This self-criticism and reflection affect generations of women in the Tongren community. It not only represents the reaction of Tongren girls to the changing external environment, but also their continuous exploration of their own identities.

Lastly, the development of Chinese Tongren culture and its current situation is a reappearance or even a time slip of the same cultural phenomenon occurring in different cultural contexts. However, the “reappearance” of feminist contradictions and challenges faced by slash fans do not mean a complete, exact replication of the slash culture and fan culture in the United Kingdom and North American of the 1990s. Considering the different social natures and cultures, it would be inappropriate to apply the existing theories and methodologies of mainstream

Western fan studies to the fan culture in the East Asia and China. Academia's focus on Western fans also reflects the fact that major fan studies and fan fiction studies are almost exclusively limited to Western perspectives and ignore non-Western fans. However, the reason why this thesis starts with the foundational theories of fan studies from the 1990s and analyzes their effectiveness and limitations when examining Chinese Tongren culture is to emphasize the shared qualities of Chinese Tongren works and Western fan works— “[created] by women, for women, with love” (Russ 1985, 82)—while pointing out the greater external and internal pressures faced by Chinese Tongren girls.

## Chapter 1: The Internal Pressure

### 1.1 Re-encoding and Re-decoding

According to Henry Jenkins's Textual Poaching Theory, the process and logic of using textual appropriation express fans' resistance to mainstream culture (2014, 35). The essence of fan work is to modify and expand narratives of popular culture that fans find unsatisfying. At the same time, fan work is also the essence of fan culture and the way fans enhance their enjoyment of media products. For general audiences, media products provide the most direct sensory stimulation through visual means, or in other words, the pleasure of looking. For fans, the pleasure of consuming fan creations lies in the process of understanding the appropriated text and actively participating—as a fan of fan creations—in textual poaching to complement their imagination. Stewart Hall's Encoding and Decoding model is also applicable to the process of fans consuming media products and then reproducing them through appropriation of text (1973). He argues that during the production of media products, the producer encodes the meaning of specific ideologies, social structures, and contexts into the media products. However, due to structural differences in the relationship and position between the producer and the consumer, the rules of encoding and decoding are not completely symmetrical. Therefore, the consumer—that is, the fan—also can decode the meaning based on their own social background, experiences, and cultural context when consuming media products.

Jenkins (2014) mentions that the reason he chose “poaching” rather than Stewart Hall's Encoding and Decoding model to analyze fan works is because the latter model implies a stable

position of the reader in their interpretation of the text, ignoring the process of creating meaning in fan works and the fluidity and individual differences in popular interpretations (30). However, the term “textual poaching” does not fully capture the appropriation behavior within the Tongren community, as fans are always generous and willing to share their creations. The term “poaching,” on the other hand, always carries an underlying assumption that media products and their narratives are owned by media companies and the industry rather than fans themselves. Therefore, I prefer to revert to Hall’s Encoding and Decoding model to explain this phenomenon.

As shown in Figure 1, Hall’s Encoding and Decoding model represents a stage that all audiences experience when consuming media products. For general audience, their consumption of media products ends at this stage, but for fans, they use the information obtained from decoding in this stage as a base to participate in the re-encoding and re-decoding, which is stage 2 and 3 in Figure 1. At first, fans create fan works by textual poaching from the original narrative, but at the same time, they also encode certain personal text into fan works. Other fans, when consuming fan works, will re-decode the personal text, since they have already consumed the original narrative, the personal text is more likely to be noticed. As Jenkins mentioned, the fan world is built on the creation of fan texts rather than existing official narratives (2014, 41). This means that, through creation and imagination, fans become increasingly less dependent on official narratives. When fans immerse themselves in the fan world, or when a particular fan narrative becomes sufficiently powerful and influential, fan creations themselves are encoded

and transformed into fan-made official narratives, or what is known as “fanon.”<sup>5</sup>

## Re-Encoding and Re-Decoding

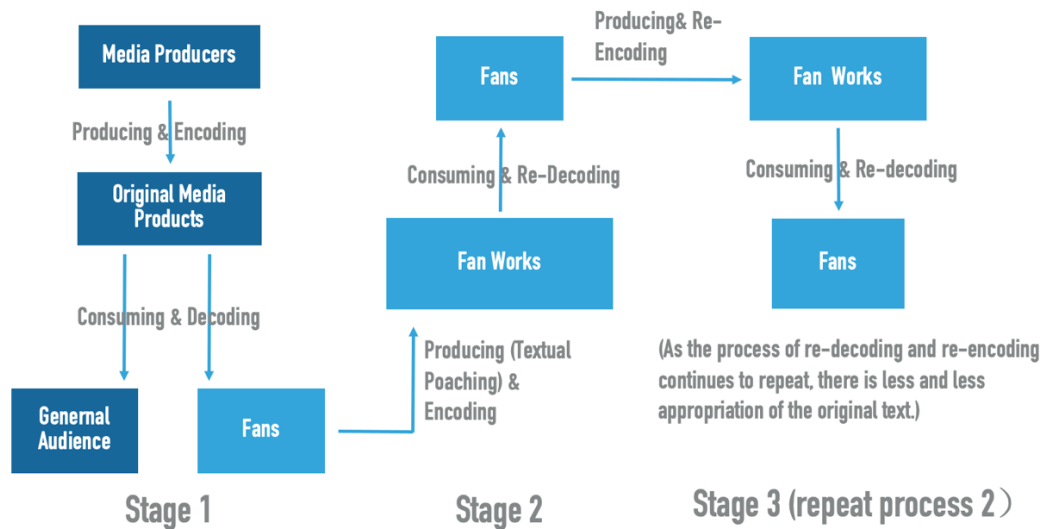


Figure 1. Re-encoding and Re-decoding

An example of fan-made official narratives is a character named Jayce from the video game *League of Legends*, whose surname was speculated by fans to be Giopara for a long time. However, in 2021, after the release of *Arcane*, an anime set in the same world as *League of Legends*, the official surname of Jayce was confirmed to be Talis. However, Jayce Giopara was not erased by the correction of the official narrative; instead, due to the influence of this name in the fandom, “Jayce Giopara” continues to exist in fan narratives as an alternative universe version of Jayce or an alternate persona of Jayce. Fan culture is inherently built on imagination and freedom, the products of the stage 2 of re-encoding and re-decoding are, to a certain extent,

<sup>5</sup> Fanon is a term widely used within fan communities, referring to fan-made canon, meaning that an event or narrative created by fans repeatedly appears in the fantext. (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 9)

reconstructed based on fans' shared values and universal expectations for modifying the dissatisfying original narrative, which serves as a foundation and facilitates for the subsequent stages of re-decoding and re-encoding. Therefore, the stage 3—the process of re-decoding fan works (consuming fan works), and the re-encoding (creating fan narratives) is more enjoyable for fans than the stage 1 of encoding and decoding. The reason for this is because that, as the original narrative's unsatisfactory elements have already been partly addressed in the stage 2, fans can focus on more unresolved narrative issues. Additionally, with the less pressure of the original narrative, fans can more comfortably engage in personalized reception based on individual understanding and feelings.

The essential feature of re-encoding and re-decoding is the gift economy. Only with the “stable nexus of giving, receiving, and reciprocity”, the process of re-encoding and re-decoding continue to circulate (Hellekson 2009, 114). In some fan-made official narratives, creators incorporate their personal information, but this information is not used to emphasize the ownership of the narrative; on the contrary, such personal information is used to allow other fans to relate to the narrative when they decode it. Therefore, the process of re-encoding and re-decoding is anti-commercial, and the means of production required for this process, which are fan-made official narratives, are collectively owned. Even if a fan-made narrative is created by a specific fan or originates from a specific fan work, it does not have a single copyright owner like mainstream media products. If anything, the ownership of fan-made official narratives belongs to all participants in the fan community.

The re-encoding and re-decoding process in fan works can be repeated multiple times,

and this repetition is what gives original works new vitality within the fan community. In particular, for mainstream media products like *The Social Network*, which have no official franchise, the world of fanon created through repeated re-encoding and re-decoding process is essentially the franchise created by Tongren girls and for Tongren girls. Although, as mentioned earlier, the repeated re-encoding and re-decoding process is influenced and shaped by fans' individual experiences, when a fanon narrative, an alternative universe, or a narrative genre appears frequently, it reflects not only fans' expectations of the original work but also something that transcends the fan world—it becomes a projection of the emotions and psychology of fans beyond their fan identity. Given the anti-commercial nature of fan culture and its low social class barriers, the social significance of Tongren girls' participation and creations in fan culture is particularly prominent. Therefore, by recognizing that the fan creation world of *The Social Network* is a fan narrative space made up of a small amount of text poaching and a large amount of fan-original narratives, we can consider it as a tower built on the foundation of mainstream culture but resisting it and reflecting social issues. In the following section, I will analyze the relationship between fan-made official narratives and internal pressures within the Tongren community through real fan works about *The Social Network* and interviews with Tongren girls. By studying the narrative conventions, formulas, and Tongren girls' receptions of fan creations, we can trace the social factors underlying internal pressures and Tongren works' connection to feminist narratives.

## 1.2 The Imaginary World of *The Social Network*

In October 2010, *The Social Network* was released and immediately became a global sensation, grossing a total of \$224.9 million at the box office, half of which came from international markets. However, unlike media products like *Harry Potter* or *Star Trek*, which had already cultivated a large fan base before being produced into films or sequels—thus naturally attracting fans to contribute to the box office—the reasons people went to the theater to watch *The Social Network* at the time were likely because of its positive reception, a favorite actor or director, or curiosity about the scandals or startup history of the internet tycoons who embodied the American Dream. In other words, even though *The Social Network* was a biographical film about Mark Zuckerberg, the majority (almost all) of the audience who paid for movie tickets were not Mark Zuckerberg’s fans. In fact, even though the story depicted in the film was adapted from real-life incidents and figures, the popularity of *The Social Network* among fans had very little direct connection to its real-life inspiration—fans seemed less interested in the lack of drama and emotional depth of the reality, and instead, the film sparked their desire to explore the real-life relationships portrayed in it.

Meanwhile, for Chinese fans on the other side of the Pacific, who were completely isolated from the Western internet by the Great Firewall which was fully implemented by 2010, their story with *The Social Network* didn’t truly begin until several years later. This is because fans in mainland China cannot access Facebook; they may know the name Mark Zuckerberg, but their knowledge of him is almost limited to that. Additionally, *The Social Network* was not

released in mainland Chinese theaters at the time<sup>6</sup>—meaning they were not the target customers, either for Facebook or for the film. Therefore, the origins of the Tongren community of *The Social Network* are solely tied to Tongren girls' love for the film.

As mentioned earlier, between 2012 and 2015, *The Social Network* was also popular among English-speaking fans, but gradually declined in the following years and today has almost disappeared. As the evidence, according to the data from AO3, in 2025, as of May, there were only 18 English-language fan works related to *The Social Network*, and many of which were English translations of Chinese works or works written in English by Chinese fans. In addition to the lack of franchises for the film, the real-world “sequel”, which is the real Mark Zuckerberg's story has undoubtedly played an important role in inhibiting the development of English-speaking fandom on *The Social Network*. Given the vitality that *The Social Network*'s Chinese fandom has maintained to this day, the influence of the real-life sequel does not seem to affect Tongren girls that much; but I need to point out that despite being in different social and cultural environments, Tongren girls and Western fans have similar judgments and reactions to the real-life sequel. According to the 18 interviewees, most of them said they found it very difficult to share their obsession with fan works about *The Social Network* with their friends and families in real life. “They think I'm a little weird, but they don't understand that what I really like is not the real Mark and Eduardo,” Interviewee 5 explained.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chinese audiences were able to watch *The Social Network* on streaming platforms a few years later, but it has never been widely shown in theaters in mainland China.

<sup>7</sup> Due to China's unique political and social context, and out of consideration for protecting the interviewees' identities and privacy, I have numbered the interviewees in order from

In 2000, Ang Lee’s transnational film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* established an “imaginary China” to help Western audiences overcome the lack of contextual information and enhance their watching experience (Zhang 2022, 54). Similarly, for those Tongren girls, when creating fan works and engaging in fan activities around *The Social Network*—a film set in the United States in the early 2000s, they also had to overcome cultural differences and a lack of contextual information. Therefore, Tongren girls established an “imaginary *The Social Network*” and an “imaginary Mark Zuckerberg” for themselves. As a biographical film, *The Social Network* naturally provides two narrative universes: *The Social Network* film universe and the real-life figures universe. The “imaginary *The Social Network*” and the “imaginary Mark Zuckerberg” belong to the third universe—the fan universe, which is established by female fans through the appropriation of text from the film universe and the real-life figures universe. Due to the Great Firewall and incomplete information sources caused by communication barriers, Tongren girls inherently possess enough imaginary space to construct fan narratives.

As fan-made official narratives evolve and expand, the influence of the real world and the official narratives of the original figures on the Tongren community will only weaken; for the film universe, the influence of its narrative is even more limited—though it is often used as the starting point for the development of the imaginary universe, it is also frequently modified and reconstructed. However, the visual elements of the film universe are crucial for fan works—as

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Interviewee 1 to Interviewee 18 and refer to them by number rather than by name. Although some of the interviewees’ interview content has not been directly quoted or used in this thesis, I still kept them in the serial number to express my respect and gratitude for their participation and contributions.

Interviewee 5 said, when she reads fan fiction, she imagines the faces of the film actors rather than the faces of the real-life figures. Therefore, before conducting research on real Tongren works, it is necessary to understand that the characters in fan works, although they do exist in the real world, they are actually actors who borrow the identities of real-life figures and the appearances of film actors to perform in female fans' narratives.

The appropriation of film actors by Tongren girls is not limited to their appearances when acting as Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, or Sean Parker. To maintain the vitality of a media product that is already dead—in other words, one with no hope of launching a new franchise—Tongren girls need to explore more possibilities. While Tongren girls enjoy being fans of media products with multiple franchises, official franchises are not a necessity for gaining their affection. Just like they can create fan-made official narratives, they can also create fan-made franchise. Have you ever imagined that Mark Zuckerberg's secret identity is a magician? Or Eduardo Saverin was so tired from seeking sponsors for Facebook in New York because he had another job at night—being New York's friendly neighborhood Spider-Man? Yes, Tongren girls will take other media products that have connections with the media products they follow and use them as their fan-created franchise. Thus, elements such as plot, characters, and worldview from media products like the *Now You See Me* series, *The Amazing Spider-Man* series, and the *Zombieland* series—which share the same actors as *The Social Network*—are appropriated to reboot the narrative of *The Social Network*. This phenomenon is not unique to the Tongren girls' works of *The Social Network*, but it is particularly prominent in this context.

The main factors cause this phenomenon include the lack of official franchise which give

fans creative freedom, as well as the magical chemistry between different media products. In some cases, fan-made franchise may evolve into fan-made official narratives. For example, in *Now You See Me 2*, Jesse Eisenberg's character, magician J. Daniel Atlas, performs a stunning rain-stopping magic trick. In *The Social Network*, the trigger event for the breakup between Mark and Eduardo is the scene where Mark forgets to pick up Eduardo at the airport; Eduardo, caught in a rare downpour, arrives at Mark's place soaking wet, but is told he's been left behind. For Tongren girls, this scene in *The Social Network* is undoubtedly one of the most dramatic and emotionally charged moments; as a result, they appropriated the rain-stopping magic trick from *Now You See Me 2* and used it in their fan works to stop the downpour in California. Rain-stopping thus became the most iconic fan-made official narrative in the Chinese Tongren Community of *The Social Network*.

Different fan works handle the rain-stopping narrative in various ways. For example, some fan works choose to have J. Daniel Atlas stop the rain for the upset Eduardo, some have Mark use the rain-stopping trick to apologize after their breakup, and some Tongren girls, deeply disappointed in Mark after watching the film, so they choose to have Eduardo become the magician who stops the rain for himself and then begins his revenge against Mark. As more and more Tongren girls create fan works centered around the rain-stopping scene, it becomes evident that fan-made narratives demonstrate both inclusivity and the infinite possibilities of re-encoding and re-decoding. The reason that the rain-stopping scene became a fan-made official narrative is not only because *Now You See Me*, as a fan-made franchise, provides fans with the convenience of appropriating existing text, but also because the rain-stopping narrative offers more dramatic

conflict and potential than the original film's narrative. "I hope the rain stops" was the fans' direct, immediate reaction to the scene in the original film, but those creators of fan works soon realized that simply stopping the rain cannot solve all the problems, because fan work is complex and richly interpretive (Kaplan 2006, 135). Tongren girls cannot accept stereotypical, flat characters and stories, therefore, they began to encode their own ways of resolving conflicts in different narrative developments, starting with stopping the rain.

The various narrative crossovers that fan-made franchises bring to *The Social Network* make creating and consuming fan works more attractive and further weaken the official narrative. One point I need to emphasize is that the concepts of fan-made franchises and alternate universes (AU)<sup>8</sup> are fundamentally different. The key distinction lies in whether there is a direct connection between the two universes of the two media products. For example, *Now You See Me* can be considered a fan-made franchise of *The Social Network*, that's because both films feature the actor, Jesse Eisenberg. However, fan works set in the *Harry Potter* universe can only be classified as alternate universes because there is no visual, textual, narrative or any other direct connection between *Harry Potter* and *The Social Network*. Given the large number of media products directly linked to *The Social Network*, fan-made franchises have become a popular way for Tongren girls to appropriate and create new narratives.

Fan works that appropriate the narratives of fan-made franchises actually have a certain

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<sup>8</sup> Alternate universe, or AU, is a widely recognized term in fan communities that refer to a narrative in which familiar characters are placed in new settings. (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 11)

threshold for consumers—they need to have either watched these fan-made franchises or at least have some knowledge of them. Therefore, in all of the fan-made official narratives of *The Social Network*, narratives based solely on the original films and appropriating real-world figures’ characteristics are more popular. Examples of such narratives include Mark, who is not good at expressing his emotions, writing love poems in coding, Mark and Eduardo’s lawsuit over Facebook shares is actually a divorce lawsuit, Mark has a supportive and warm family while Eduardo has trauma related to his original family and so on. These fan-made official narratives did not arise in a single moment or from a single fan work. They became fan-made official narratives because they repeatedly appeared in different fan works, or rather, the same information was encoded by different fan creators into their works; and then, their fans, when decoding and accepting this information, acknowledged them and subsequently spread them in various forms through their own works and fan activities. Ultimately, these messages become a “consensus” within the fan community.

Another consensus within the fan community is that fan creations contain a significant amount of pornographic content, and this consensus also applies to the Chinese Tongren Community of *The Social Network*. If fan-made official narratives and franchises provide continuity and possibilities for stories on *The Social Network*, then pornographic narrative is one of the results of such continuity and possibilities. In my interviews, all participants held positive or very positive attitudes toward pornographic narrative in fan works. Interviewee 7 mentioned, “The relationship between pornographic narrative and fan works is like that between the Sun and the Earth. Without the Sun, the Earth would not revolve. No one reads fan works because they

expect to see a Platonic relationship.” The metaphor of the Sun and the Earth effectively illustrates the importance of pornographic narratives to Tongren girls’ fan works—they require pornographic content to be complete. In fact, as I mentioned in the introduction, pornographic narratives are not unique to Tongren girls’ fan works. They are popular but not essential in both slash fan works in Western fan culture and BL works in Japanese fan culture. However, for Tongren works in Chinese fan culture, they are essential.

I need to clarify that Tongren girls need to be distinguished from slashers in Western fan culture and fujoshi in Japanese fan culture, because the pornographic content in Tongren works is not limited to male characters. Even in the Chinese Tongren Community of *The Social Network* where pornographic narratives are dominated by sexual acts between male characters, there is a significant amount of pornographic narrative involving single characters, male and female characters, and female and female characters. I do not use terms like “gay,” “lesbian,” or “heterosexual” because the sexual behavior described in Tongren works, whether between same-sex or different-sex individuals, differs from that in the real world. Driscoll (2006) argues that most fan works use specific pornographic approaches to make their het, slash, or gen genre classifications recognized (82).<sup>9</sup> However, for Tongren girls, such classifications and distinctions are very ambiguous, this is because just like the “imaginary *The Social Network*”, the pornographic narratives in Tongren works are also the “imaginary sexual behavior.” Therefore,

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<sup>9</sup> Het refers to narratives about heterosexual relationships in fan works. Gen refers to general stories in which there are no romantic relationships between characters in fan works. (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 10)

regardless of the genre of the pornographic narrative, they are homogenized and serve solely to fulfill Tongren girls' fantasies. Also, since these pornographic narratives exist in an imaginary world, their presentation in Tongren works is often more radical, explicit, or even extreme, especially those on AO3, as it served as a “parking lot”<sup>10</sup> for Tongren girls.

Evidence of this is that when posting works on AO3, perhaps due to AO3 is an English-language website, Tongren girls often ignore the proper and accurate use of category tags, but they often briefly include a warning about the pornographic content of the fan work in the introduction section. Most of the time, this warning is not meant to inform other fans that the work contains pornographic content—unless the pornographic content includes extremely explicit or violent sexual behavior. Instead, it is presented as the term “clean water” (清水), which signifies that the work does not contain pornographic content. Regular pornographic content does not need to be specially noted; however, the absence of pornographic content is what needs to be informed in advance. This reflects the prevalence and importance of pornographic narrative in Tongren works.

Similarly, the romantic relationships presented in Tongren works of *The Social Network* are also imaginary romantic relationships. The fan-made official narrative mentioned above, like the rain-stopping, is essentially a form of romantic expression. At this point, we can draw up a formula for Tongren girls' fan works: a complete subversion of the official narrative, a high

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<sup>10</sup> Parking lot (停车场) is a specific term used by Chinese fans to refer to a website or platform where they can safely archive fan works contain content which is pornographic, sensitive or likely to be censored.

degree of appropriation of fan-made official narratives and franchises, and women's imaginary sexual and romantic relationships.

### **1.3 Good Taste or Bad Works: Romance, Pornography and *The Cherry Orchard***

Catherine Driscoll (2006) discusses the relationship between fan fiction and romance novels in “One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance.” She points out that romance and pornography often define each other in fan fiction, but fan fiction can be classified into both genres without necessarily having the characteristics of (95). I mentioned above that pornographic content is essential to Tongren works, but this does not mean that works without pornographic narratives cannot be considered as Tongren works. Similarly, the absence of pornographic narratives does not mean that a Tongren work is not pornographic. Driscoll mentions that a lot of the pornographic narratives in romance novels happen offstage or are presented in a subtle way at the end (82); for Tongren works, a lot of pornographic narratives work in a similar way like the “offstage pornography”, because the sexual tension in Tongren works is the actual core of their pornographic nature.

In other words, pornography may not appear directly in visual or textual form, but rather exist more in the form of imaginary scenes. For fan fiction, even if the text directly describes pornography, fans need to re-decode the text when consuming it, and then re-encode the information into imaginary pornographic scenes in their heads. The forms of fan works discussed in this thesis are not limited to text-based fan fiction, but also include fan edits and fan art, but

regardless of the form used to portray pornography or whether the pornographic content is directly presented, pornographic content in fan work is always received in the form of visual imaginary scenes. In this case, it is very important to understand that the narrative of fan works has the potential to provide space for imagination off stage, this is also the evidence of the existence of sexual tension in the work. When it comes to Tongren works, the pornographic narratives are more directly provided by the creators and on stage. Every Tongren girl has different ways of perceiving and decoding pornographic narratives, but the anonymous nature of online Tongren communities protects Tongren girls from being judged, allowing them to express their desires for sex and romance without hesitation.

When the general public became aware of the relationship among fan fiction, pornography and romantic novels, as well as fan fiction's essence as being created by women and serving women, fan fiction was labeled with more negative tags that the public had attached to romantic novels and pornography. Driscoll (2006) mentions that "fan [works] inherited the most criticized elements of romance fiction and pornography as modes of popular culture, and where it does enter the public sphere, it is mostly seen as aesthetically inferior, morally dubious, or at best a curiosity" (95). Whether in Western popular culture or Asian popular culture, fan works seem to have never been regarded as serious creative works with any real significance. Interviewee 7 told me that one of the reasons she decided to take part in the interview was because she wanted to know whether being obsessed with fan works was just a meaningless hobby or if there were deeper reasons behind it. Interviewee 12 mentioned that reading fan fiction was her only way to relax after a busy day at work, so she wondered if reading fan fiction

was just a special form of escapism. When surrounded by the judgmental gaze of the public, some Tongren girls may be able to stick to their beliefs, but the immediate reaction of most of them is to self-reflect and question their own behaviors.

Throughout the interview, the most prominent self-doubt I noticed was the concern about the legitimacy of enjoying Tongren works and deriving pleasure from them. This concern has two aspects. First, as Interviewee 7 mentioned, there is a question of whether being obsessed with products perceived as “aesthetically inferior” by mainstream impressions makes the hobby itself completely meaningless and a waste of time. However, Tongren works on *The Social Network* are vastly different from the stereotypical “aesthetically inferior” image, the majority of them have good quality, and creating, or even consuming these works requires a certain level of knowledge. In fact, as the Chinese Tongren community has developed, the average quality of fan works has also been improving. Even though there is no substantial commercial competition among Tongren creators due to the anti-commercial nature of the whole community, creators still feel anxious about the quality of their work as fans’ tastes become more refined. For the Tongren community of *The Social Network*, as a relatively small, less competitive fan community, it raised the bar for work quality and fan expectations to a very high level when the community first formed and had its own well-regarded works. Interviewee 15 mentioned that she has followed dozens of Tongren communities focused on different media products, but the fan creations from the Tongren community of *The Social Network* are always the most valuable and remarkable works, making her want to revisit them regularly. A representative example of *The*

*Social Network*'s Tongren works is *The Cherry Orchard* (Majiang 2016)<sup>11</sup>, one of the community's "classics", often included in Tongren girls' "Top 10 Must-Read *The Social Network* Fan Fiction" list. *The Cherry Orchard* was inspired by Anton Chekhov's play of the same name, which tells the story of an aristocratic family forced to sell their ancestral estate and beautiful cherry orchard due to financial difficulties. The female protagonist, Lyubov, returns from Paris to save her family's estate. The young merchant, Lopakhin, proposes cutting down the cherry orchard to build villas for profit, but Lyubov refuses. In the end, Lopakhin buys the estate and destroys the cherry orchard himself. In the fan fiction version of *The Cherry Orchard*, Mark, who has already broken up with Eduardo and built his own business empire, watches the play with his family and friends. As the play progress, every act and every line of dialogue remind Mark of his past with Eduardo. After the play ends, Mark books a flight to Singapore to visit Eduardo, and the story ends here with an open ending.

In Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin is the son of a former serf who grew up on the estate of Lyubov's family and became a wealthy merchant. He experienced the hardships of the lower classes and deeply understood the significance of money and status. Although Lopakhin had affection for Lyubov, he was always despised by her for his lower-class background. Lyubov, on the other hand, represents the decline of the aristocracy. She is

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<sup>11</sup> *The Cherry Orchard* is a fan work written by Majiang (pen name) and published on Suiyuanju in 2016. I attempted to seek permission to reference the work from the author, but I was unable to contact them. Therefore, considering the community guidelines of Suiyuanju and ethical considerations, I will not directly quote the content of this work in this thesis, nor will I provide a web link to the work in the bibliography.

immersed in nostalgia and refuses to face the crises of the present. She deeply loves the cherry orchard but lacks the ability to deal with the challenges it faces. Lopakhin's decision to cut down the cherry orchard symbolizes the bourgeoisie's replacement of the aristocracy. In the fan fiction version of *The Cherry Orchard*, which reframes the story within the context of *The Social Network*, the author first appropriates information from the real world and fan-made official narratives—Mark comes from a middle-class family and becomes a new money billionaire after creating Facebook, while Eduardo comes from an old money family and opposes Mark's business strategies, which ultimately leads to their breakup. Mark's ambush of Eduardo—tricking him into signing a contract that dilutes his shares—is a parallel of cutting down the cherry orchard, which represents Mark cuts the emotional bond between him and Eduardo. The author notes that when Mark and Lopakhin cut down the cherry orchard, they were happy and arrogant, even feeling a sense of vengeance, but at the same time, when they saw Eduardo and Lyubov's heartbreak, they felt deep pain.

From the abundant metaphors and symbolism in the fan fiction version of *The Cherry Orchard*, it is evident that when creating it, the author not only had a deep understanding of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and advanced writing skills, but also rich life experience and a thorough understanding of intimate relationships to encode personal perspectives that align with the theme and tone of the original work. This means that to complete this work, the author first needed to decode *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Social Network*, then place *The Social Network* within the framework of *The Cherry Orchard*. After highlighting the irreconcilable class issues between Mark and Eduardo, the author encoded romantic elements and her attitude toward

romantic relationships in reality into the work. This process, like creating any “good and serious works” in the mainstream views, is complex and requires careful consideration.

Although the fan fiction version of *The Cherry Orchard* shares a similar framework with Chekhov’s original play and addresses similar social issues, the latter is regarded as a classic play with realistic and historical significance, whereas the former is categorized as aesthetically inferior due to its identity as fan fiction. In the Chinese Tongren community of *The Social Network*, fan works like *The Cherry Orchard* that have realistic and social significance are not rare. Despite being labeled as tasteless and indecent, the social issues and minority groups frequently reflected and addressed in fan works are often absent from the mainstream “good works”. Certainly, not every Tongren work is as high-quality and relevant as Majiang’s *The Cherry Orchard*, but as Interviewee 2 mentioned, “Reading Tongren works is essentially seeing the world through the eyes of other Tongren girls.” Whether a Tongren work is a classic adaptation with social relevance, a fluffy romantic story that offers emotional comfort, or pornography without a plot, it is a part of the diversity of the Tongren world and the result of female fan creators’ persistence in creation. Tongren works can be “serious works”, but it doesn’t have to be serious; however, it should be taken seriously, because it allows women to freely express their diverse thoughts and allows other women to freely accept others’ different perspectives, rather than setting a clear boundary to distinguish between good and bad, highbrow and lowbrow.

## 1.4 The Self-Criticism

Another aspect of the concern regarding the legitimacy of enjoying and deriving pleasure from Tongren works arises from the fact that Tongren creations of *The Social Network* are dominated by slash works, meaning that they are created by women for women but lack narratives related to women, or it is more accurate to describe it as female fan creators rarely cast “female actresses”. Interviewee 5 expressed her pain about this, she cannot understand why she is obsessed with fan works featuring two real-life cisgender men, and sometimes even avoids narratives involving female characters in *The Social Network*. She even questions whether she might be guilty of misogyny or phallocentrism. In fact, on Chinese social media, women who create or consume slash works are often accused of phallocentrism. When they attempt to refuse this accusation, the accusers often counter with: “Then why don’t you like heterosexual fan works or lesbian fan works that do include female characters?”

Just like how the lack of real-world character information and the fact that *The Social Network* doesn’t have any franchises give Tongren girls space to imagine and create, the absence of female characters in fan fiction also serves to stimulate Tongren girls’ imaginations. The role of absence here serves two functions. First, it helps female creators and consumers who are outside the original narrative take on the role of “director,” becoming the one who fully controls the narrative. Second, the absence of female characters prevents female consumers of Tongren works from directly identifying with female characters in the work. This is important, because since the birth of cinema, women for a long time were unable to be the person behind the

camera, but were instead required to stay in front of the camera, becoming the object of the gaze of the audience outside the screen. Fan works, as products dominated by female creators and audiences, completely subvert the traditional positions of the one who gazes and the one who is gazed upon.

Evidence of this is that in the Tongren community, it is taboo to treat female characters as mere tools to advance the plot. If a fan does this in her work that is posted publicly, she could expect to be criticized by other fans. However, empty and objectifying female characters are very common in mainstream media products, such as the female characters Erica and Christy in *The Social Network*. Audiences often find them beautiful and attractive, but they are limited to that because the excessive emphasis on their “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1975, 11), which prevents the growth of their character arcs. As the result, when Tongren girls take up the “camera” and become directors of fan works, the predicament of characters like Erica and Christy must be changed.

However, Tongren girls soon discover that they cannot change the objectification of these characters by building on their existing characteristics. While fans have a powerful corrective ability to reconfigure mainstream media products, they are not always able to fully break down the sexism that is deeply rooted in media products (Lothian 2020, 248). As mentioned earlier, the world of fan works is a fantasy tower built by female fans, but without a solid foundation, even the most talented architect cannot build a tower on top of it. When a character is inherently flat and lacks complexity, first of all, it is difficult for that character to spark fans’ interest in creating fan works; secondly, there is not much about text the character that can be decoded, so there is

very little possibility for fans to engage in the process of encoding and creating fan-made franchises or fan-made official narratives. Furthermore, just as female audiences may feel uncomfortable watching *The Social Network* because of their unconscious identification with Erica and Christy, such discomfort is also likely to occur when consuming fan works based on the film. Therefore, when creating narratives about Erica and Christy, creators must make an effort to explore even the slightest possibilities and be very careful about the patriarchal implications of these possibilities.

The need for extra caution does not mean that Tongren creators will avoid or reduce making new narratives about Erica and Christy. On the contrary, they appear much more frequently in fan works than in the movie, and they are often portrayed in a way that is completely different from their images in *The Social Network*. They are de-sexualized and re-contextualized; although they may not be the protagonists, they have more complete character arcs than in the film. Thus, we learn that Interviewee 5's doubts and pain regarding her "misogyny" are not caused by fan works, but rather come from problematic media products like *The Social Network*.

After exploring the issue of the absence of female characters, another self-reflection among Tongren girls comes up—is the obsession with slash works rooted in harmful stereotypes about homosexual people, and does it intentionally ignore the existence of other members of the LGBTQ+ community? First, as Penley (1991) pointed out, the romantic and sexual relationships between men in slash works are somehow not homosexual (488). As mentioned above, for Tongren girls, slash works serves as a means of expressing imaginary relationships. Therefore,

consumers can indeed find stereotypes and completely unrealistic depictions of LGBTQ+ groups in slash works, which can make these works unappealing, even unrespect to homosexual people in real life. The LGBTQ+ community is highly invisible due to traditional values, conservative ideas and censorship in mainland China. This means that China does not have a widely accepted literary or artistic genre dedicated to homosexuality or queer people, and it is difficult for non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities to express their views through official and mainstream channels (Tian 2020, 107). Although Tongren girls are one of the groups that interact most with Western liberal ideas, the lack of formal education about the LGBTQ+ community, restricted access to information, and being surrounded by conservative ideas and traditional values have led to their incomplete and even biased perceptions of the LGBTQ+ culture.

Interviewer 6 mentioned that the biggest difference between the fan works created by Tongren girls on *The Social Network* and those created by fans in the United Kingdom and North America is that the former often include plots about coming out, which often involve the characters' struggles with being homosexual, their panic about not being accepted by their families, and dealing with issues with their families of origin. In the latter, you don't see as much coming-out narrative; instead, you see more stories about family members being supportive and encouraging. When coming out narrative is so heavily encoded into Tongren girls' works and even becomes a signature of those works' homosexual nature, we can recognize that Tongren girls' attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community is not about opposition or stereotypes, but rather they are trying to support it. However, due to the influence of the social environment, they lack a comprehensive understanding of the real LGBTQ+ culture.

In most cases, the slash content in Tongren works achieves a separation of homosexuality and sexuality, meaning that even if there is a romantic relationship between two men, it is not a traditional homosexual relationship. This separation does not mean that Tongren girls are ignoring the challenges faced by homosexuals. In my opinion, as with the frequent “coming out” narratives in Tongren works, Tongren girls do not ignore the actual struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community in China. These struggles are repeatedly addressed in Tongren works with attempts to seek possible solutions. It is true that many Tongren girls who do not belong to the LGBTQ+ community cannot fully relate to their feelings, nor can they express them in their works, but the existence of Tongren girls and Tongren works does not have a negative impact on people’s views on homosexual people in real life. In fact, to a certain extent, Tongren works have increased the acceptance of homosexuality in China, especially among young people who closely follow popular culture. This is because China lacks sex and gender education, so Tongren works about romantic and pornographic relationships between people of the same sex serve to some extent as a means of educating people about homosexuality and the lives of homosexuals (Tian 2020, 107).

In addition, although I mentioned above that the Tongren community, like most fan communities around the world, is dominated by slash works, there are indeed a significant number of works in the Tongren community that depict romantic relationships between women and stories about single female characters. When well-developed and complex female and lesbian characters appear, they do, of course, become the protagonists of Tongren creators’ works. For example, the 2021 anime series *Arcane*, which was mentioned earlier, its delicate and

complex portrayal of the female characters Vi and Caitlyn and their romantic relationship has attracted fans around the world, including Chinese fans, to create fan works. Therefore, the absence of female characters in Tongren works is not due to the neglect of Tongren girls, but rather rooted in the invisibility imposed on them by mainstream perspectives and media products. Thus, to address the question of why the Tongren community of *The Social Network* prefers slash works over heterosexual fan works or lesbian works featuring women, we must go back to the film itself.

Compared to the concerns have about the meaningless nature of Tongren works and the potential negative impact of slash works on the LGBTQ+ community, Tongren girls do not express much concern or self-doubt about the highly pornographic nature of Tongren works. All of my 18 interviewees said that they had read pornographic Tongren works and supported their existence. Interviewee 18, a well-known creator in *The Social Network* Tongren community, said, “It’s not enough to just create stories about love; sex is a part of love.” This reflects that when Tongren girls attempt to supplement character relationships and create more complex and realistic stories, pornography is often used as a means of enhancement in Tongren works. Indeed, like traditional romantic novels, placing pornography in the off-stage is also a way to express sexuality and sexual attraction, but the more important reason why Tongren girls choose to abandon those implicit processes and directly make sexuality a part of the conversation is that, in Tongren works, the role of sex goes far beyond merely completing or supplementing relationships. Sex itself can be the entire conversation—in other words, the narrative can be entirely built around sex.

PWP<sup>12</sup> fan work is very common in the Tongren community. The challenges they face are not that their content is unacceptable for female fans, but rather that it is difficult to survive under the censorship system. Even within the relatively small Tongren community of *The Social Network*, pornographic narratives containing violence, explicit sex, or even potentially offensive content are quite common. As long as the creator includes a brief warning in the introduction, other fans will not criticize the content or the creator. However, fan works centered entirely around sex are fundamentally different from mainstream pornography. As Interviewee 14—another Tongren creator—mentioned, it is not easy to create pornographic content in Tongren works because Tongren girls have higher expectations for the quality of such content than for other parts of the work. They do not want to see just pornography, but pornography filled with emotional conflict, sexual tension, and complex character dynamics.

Additionally, over half of the interviewees stated that PWP fan works are not their preferred genre; they prefer pornographic content that follows emotional buildup and dramatic conflict. In this context, formulaic and symbolic pornographic narratives lack appeal for Tongren girls. Even within PWP fan works, Tongren creators consistently seek well-developed characters and complex emotions. Thus, the primary purpose of female fans consuming pornographic narratives of Tongren works is not driven by sexual desire; for them, sex is an essential component of emotional expression.

As mentioned above, the concerns raised by Tongren girls about the legitimacy of

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<sup>12</sup> PWP is the abbreviation for “plot what’s plot” or “pornography without plot”.

deriving pleasure from Tongren works, as well as their self-criticism regarding the absence of female characters and the stereotypical and misrepresentative portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community, all reflect anxieties within the Tongren community. However, it is important to clarify that these anxieties are spontaneous and arise from the long-term stigmatization of Tongren girls and Tongren works by the external world. They are self-reflections and self-critiques of Tongren girls themselves rather than a way to attack other Tongren girls. Self-reflection is not simply a direct reflection of external pressure, rather, it is more about Tongren girls, as a minority group and as women, actively empathizing with other minority groups and therefore being concerned that their pleasure is built on the suffering of others.

For mainstream commercial media products such as *The Social Network*, the media producers' primary purpose is not to consider the needs of minority groups or marginalized communities, but rather to cater to the interests of the mainstream audience and gain certain forms of benefit; at the same time, for the majority of the general audience of *The Social Network*, they don't need to question the legitimacy of the enjoyment they derive from watching the film, nor do most of them worry about whether consuming a mainstream patriarchal film might harm minority groups. That's because the general audience consistently position themselves as spectators, and their involvement in the film is limited to decoding it and consuming its content. However, as the constructors of the Tongren world of *The Social Network*, Tongren girls are different from media producers and the general audience because they have repeatedly gone through the process of decoding and encoding so many times, and they already fully own those fan narratives in a practical sense. These narratives were not originally

created for any material benefit, but rather out of the Tongren girls' agency to change and subvert the official narrative. Therefore, no matter how these narratives evolve or how different creators encode with personal touches, they cannot stray from the essence of fan works—anti-commercial, anti-mainstream, and anti-patriarchal—nor will they sacrifice the needs of minority groups to create appeal for the majority, as mainstream media often does.

## Chapter 2: The External Pressure

### 2.1 Summer Camp and Censorship

Although I believe that Jenkins's theory of Textual Poaching does not sufficiently describe Tongren works, which is why I adopted Hall's Encoding and Decoding model, I still cannot find a more appropriate term than "nomads," as proposed by Michel de Certeau—the foundation of Jenkins's theory of textual poaching—to describe Tongren girls (de Certeau 1984). However, the most important feature that makes Tongren girls the nomads is not their poaching, or appropriation of media product text, but their frequent migration due to external forces beyond their control, just like nomads who move from place to place influenced by seasonal and natural factors.

Migration is a common phenomenon in fan communities. Fans often have a positive attitude toward migration caused by changes in popular trends, shifts in interests, and personal reasons, and they consider it a routine occurrence. Fans' memories in the fan world are like a summer camp.<sup>13</sup> One summer, you develop a passion for a particular media product, so you come to its land—the fan community—to explore it more deeply. In the process, you meet many fans with similar interests and become friends with them. You hang out together every day, chatting, fishing, and building tree houses, just like being in a summer camp where you don't

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<sup>13</sup> The term "summer camp" originated from an interview with Jesse Eisenberg about *The Social Network*. It was first used by Chinese fans of *The Social Network* to describe specific content related to its Tongren community, and later became widely used in Chinese fan communities to describe brief, meaningful, and bittersweet relationships or experiences.

have to worry about the pressures of reality. However, as summer ends, people eventually leave the land where they built their summer camp, perhaps because they are tired of summer camp life, or maybe they are heading to the next summer camp, or they need to go back to their real lives. Especially in this era of information explosion and rapid changes in popular trends, constantly migrating between different summer camps, or fan communities, has become a habit for fans. Later, when you miss a particular summer camp and decide to revisit that land, you can still recall all the wonderful memories of the summer camp, because the tree houses you built with your friends are still there. Therefore, the foundation of a summer camp—or the fan community—is not the fans who participate; in most cases, the migration of participating fans also does not affect the stability of a fan community. The core and essence of a fan community is the treehouse, namely the fan works.

For Tongren girls, it is also quite common for them to leave the summer camp voluntarily due to changes in popular trends and personal interests. Just like the Chinese Tongren community of *The Social Network*, although it is no longer at its peak, fans who witnessed the community's golden age still occasionally revisit it—to review fan works that they loved in the past. Considering that fan works can reflect changes in fans' thoughts and have real-world significance, archiving fan works is not only a means of revisiting the past, but also a reflection of the social ecosystem within the fan community and the transformation of popular culture. However, for Tongren girls, regardless of which fan community they belong to, having a complete archive is nearly impossible. Whenever Tongren girls want to revisit the community, they find that the treehouses they built or loved in the past are gone. This is not only the biggest

challenge they face at all times, but also a characteristic of the Chinese Tongren community—vulnerable, unstable, and unarchivable.

Without archives, memories are often unreliable, and the fan community is always threatened by amnesia. The loss of fan archives is not because Tongren girls lack awareness of the importance of archiving; on the contrary, in most cases, Tongren girls value and understand the need of archiving fan works way more than fans from any other regions in the world, many of them can even be considered experts in archiving. The challenges faced by Tongren girls are not relevant to their actions, choices, or agency, but rather lie in a more powerful and controlling external force—censorship. Censorship is the greatest external pressure for Tongren girls, and it is the official narrative that Tongren girls cannot resist, it lingers over the past, present, and even the future of the Tongren community. Under this powerful official narrative, many Tongren works are labeled as not worthy or even not allowed to be archived, and the reason for this is rooted in two important features of Tongren works that fundamentally conflict with China's censorship system—pornography and slash.

As mentioned earlier, the idea that Tongren works are pornographic is a common understanding held by Tongren girls. In 2014, the Chinese government launched a censorship campaign called Internet Cleansing Movement (Jingwang Xingdong) which aimed to censor illegal content created and disseminated online, including and with a particular focus on pornography (Zheng 2019). Tongren works naturally became a key target of this censorship campaign. Before 2014, a large amount of Tongren works were posted on Baidu Tieba (<https://tieba.baidu.com/>), a social media platform that was not exclusively for fans and operated

in a similar way to online forums. Before 2014, Tongren creators could directly post pornographic content on Baidu Tieba or use simple methods to disguise the pornographic content of their works. However, during the Internet Cleansing Movement, Baidu Tieba's censorship system, which relied on keyword detection, resulted in a large number of Tongren works containing pornographic content or even just mentioning related keywords being censored and deleted without any warning. This was one of the main reasons for the decline of Baidu Tieba as a fan platform. Today, people can hardly find Tongren works posted on Baidu Tieba before 2014 unless they are archived in personal collections. As a result, a significant amount of early Tongren works has been lost permanently.

Another distinctive feature of Tongren works is the prevalence of slash content. Although it is not the primary focus of the Internet Cleansing Movement, its inherent nature and pornographic elements often make it a target of censorship and opposition from conservative forces. I mentioned that slash works do not accurately represent real homosexual relationships, the mainstream view does not acknowledge this fact; or rather, in the dominant perspective of Chinese society, where the LGBTQ+ community is already highly marginalized, whether the slash works depict real homosexuality or simply the same-sex bodies is not important. As a result, slash works are often perceived by non-fans and people as a part of the LGBTQ+ community or works related to homosexuality. Although the Chinese government decriminalized homosexuality and homosexual behavior in 1997 and removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses in 2001, its attitude toward homosexuality and homosexual behavior has remained "ambiguous and uncertain" (Lu 2020, 556). This is often referred to by the LGBTQ+

community and its supporters as “not supporting, not opposing, not encouraging” (Chen 2018). In practice, “not encouraging” also means “not mentioning” and “not advocating.” Recently, Chinese society has become more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, especially male and female homosexuals, but there is still a lack of legal and institutional support for them (Wee 2020). Due to the influence of Confucianism and traditional Chinese social norms, the actual environment for the LGBTQ+ community has not changed much. Tongren works that are labeled as “homosexual” in the public perception are obviously “mentioning” or even “advocating” the LGBTQ+ community. Slash content is not as strictly opposed and banned as the pornographic content in Tongren works, but they are not mentioned in mainstream culture, and the act of creating them is not supported by any official authority. Their existence can only be marginalized until it becomes invisible.

After the Internet Cleansing Movement, many Tongren girls could not tolerate Baidu Tieba’s sensitive censorship system and worsening environment, so they migrated to Lofter, a platform designed to serve Chinese fans. However, Lofter was not an exception to the strict censorship regulations of the Internet Cleansing Movement. As a result, “parking lots” began to appear in the Tongren community. Parking lot is the term used by Tongren girls to refer to platforms for archiving pornographic Tongren works, or at least the pornographic parts of Tongren works. At the time, these parking lots were very interchangeable and easily affected by censorship and policy changes, so between 2015 and 2019, the archives of Tongren works were very disorganized, and Tongren girls truly became nomads during this period. Parking lot platforms mentioned in interviews include Shimo Document (<https://shimo.im/>), VeryBin

(<https://blog.verybin.com/>), Write.as (<https://write.as/>), Wland (<https://hellowland.com/>), Ai Fa Dian (<https://afdian.com/>), and AO3. Among these, only AO3 is a comprehensive fan platform. Another platform that differs from all of the above is Suiyuanju<sup>14</sup>, which was established in 2003 and is one of the few fan platforms in the Chinese Tongren community that still exists today and is widely recognized. Although Suiyuanju is indeed a fan platform that belongs exclusively to Tongren girls and is relatively stable and secure because its servers are not located in mainland China, the platform has certain limitation—it is only for fans of Western media products, and Tongren works that are not related to Western media products are not allowed to be posted on the platform.

As internet censorship has become increasingly strict, Tongren girls have gradually realized that the nomadic lifestyle of constantly migrating between different platforms and “parking lots” cannot fully ensure the survival of their works, as many works are lost during these migrations. Thus, AO3, which has foreign servers and was unexpectedly unaffected by China’s the Great Firewall, became the most reliable and accessible parking lot for Tongren girls. At the time, AO3 did not become the primary fan platform for Tongren girls; it still served as a parking lot for archiving pornographic content. However, on February 27, 2020, the delicate balance and survival strategy Tongren girls managed to navigate between censorship and enjoying fan works was broken.

February 27, 2020, is the turning point, and perhaps the darkest day in the history of the

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<sup>14</sup> Considering the community guidelines of Suiyuanju and ethical issues, I will not include a link to its website here.

Chinese fan community in the past decade. The day later became known as the 227 Incident. On that day, triggered by internal conflicts within the fan community, AO3, which had previously been exempt from the Great Firewall, finally came under its restrictions. As a result, the last reliable platform for Tongren girls became history. While the 227 Incident was triggered by Tongren works created by a specific group of Tongren girls, this thesis will not go into the details or controversies of the 227 Incident, since its impact on the external pressures affecting the Tongren community is the main focus of my discussion<sup>15</sup>. Following the 227 Incident, the fan community experienced a period of chaos as Tongren girls attempted to find or create alternatives to AO3. In my interview with Interviewee 2, she recalled an event that occurred after the 227 Incident, in which someone announced that they had created a free archiving platform where Tongren works could be archived safely, so many Tongren girls moved their works to this new platform. When people thought they had finally found the perfect alternative to AO3, the founder sold the platform, so Tongren girls were unable to continue archiving, which they had spent so much time and effort on. After hearing Interviewer 2's description, I immediately realized that I remembered this incident, but I had almost completely forgotten about it. In subsequent interviews, I asked every interviewee who had experienced the 227 Incident about the details of this temporary archiving platform, but surprisingly, none of the interviewees could

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<sup>15</sup> In the 227 Incident, the behavior of some fans of singer and actor Xiao Zhan is the trigger and finally led to the result that AO3 was banned in China (Li and Tan 2025, 1). This thesis will not discuss the 227 Incident into further detail, not only because the reasons for the banning of AO3 are very complex, apart from influence of fans' behavior, there were greater external forces; but also because the 227 Incident is still very controversial within the fan community, and this is not the focus of my thesis. If further information is needed, see Li and Tan 2025.

recall the name of the platform or tell the story in full.

Interviewee 11 mentioned that there were too many such temporary platforms at the time, and Tongren girls had been disappointed too many times. I cannot confirm whether the memory of this temporary archiving platform is a case of the Mandela Effect or if the platform actually existed but, as mentioned by Interviewee 11, Tongren girls confused it with other similar temporary archiving platforms. Regardless of the truth, the story of this temporary archiving platform highlights the unreliability of memory and the consequences of the inability to archive Tongren works.

In “Survival and Migration Patterns of Chinese Online Media Fandoms”, Zhang (2019) also mentioned that if AO3 were blocked by the Great Firewall, the process of Chinese fans leaving their comfort zone of Chinese platforms and participating in English fan forums would be forced to end. However, this was not the case. While AO3 is no longer a platform that Tongren girls can easily access, it gradually moved away from the status of a parking lot after the 227 Incident and became the main platform for Tongren girls to post and archive their works. The reasons behind this outcome are complex, but I will break them down into two types of distrust.

The first type is the distrust in the stability of fan platforms and archiving platforms. As long as a parking lot platform’s server is located within mainland China’s internet, it is always at risk of being detected and taken down by the censorship system. For fan platforms, profit-driven platforms like Lofter and Ai Fa Dian are also likely to make decisions that are detrimental to the Tongren community for economic reasons. Second, there is distrust toward members within the

Tongren community itself. The 227 Incident unexpectedly exposed the existence of Tongren girls and Tongren works to the general public, and many people who were unfamiliar with the norms of the Tongren community took this opportunity to bypass the barriers and join the community. Furthermore, due to the worsening of the internet environment in mainland China over the past few years, there has been an increase in hostile attacks and reporting within the Tongren community. After being blocked by the Great Firewall, AO3, as a highly inclusive, non-profit fan platform with servers are not located in mainland China, naturally avoided the risk of censorship and reporting attacks, and it has been proven by international fans to be sufficiently stable. Although Tongren girls now need to use tools like VPN to access it, which means a certain level of internet technical knowledge has become a new barrier to accessing the core of the Tongren community, the importance of AO3 is irreplaceable.

It is important to keep in mind that, while AO3 is now widely recognized in the Tongren community, it has never been “owned” by Tongren girls. It is just another nomadic settlement for them. Tongren girls have never had a comprehensive, accessible, stable, and exclusive platform for archiving their works. Apart from the direct impact of censorship on Tongren works, the anxiety caused by censorship has also indirectly led to the loss of archives, which means that Tongren girls are often forced to delete their works under the pressure of censorship. Since Tianyi, a female author of BL novels, was sentenced to a fixed-term imprisonment in 2018 for illegally distributing obscene materials (Shepherd 2018), Tongren creators have lived in constant fear that their own works might be exposed and result in similarly severe legal consequences.

More recently, cases like Tianyi occurred frequently, as a result, whenever similar cases

are exposed to the public, a wave of Tongren creators deleting their works out of panic sweeps through the Tongren community. In December 2024, a profit-driven pirated application named 3AM, which was used to access AO3 without using VPN, caused widespread panic within the Tongren community. Many Tongren creators deleted works they had posted on AO3 due to concerns that the pirated application could lead to the illegal distribution of their Tongren works containing pornography, thereby putting them at legal risk. In April 2025, Feiwen (<https://www.sosad.fun/>), an online novel platform primarily dedicated to pornographic BL works (including slash Tongren works), announced an indefinite temporary closure due to concerns about the risks posed by the current environment. Setting aside the Tongren works archived on Feiwen, the platform's closure has triggered widespread anxiety and panic within the Chinese fan community once again.

After learning about the migration history of Chinese Tongren community over the past decade, it is clear that Tongren girls may face forced migration due to external factors, loss of archives, and even legal risks in real life. This means that creating Tongren works is never an easy or enjoyable experience for Tongren girls; sometimes, it can even be a predictable suffering in the future, accompanied by lingering anxiety and panic. The Chinese Tongren community of *The Social Network* is certainly no exception to this anxiety and panic. In my interviews, whenever I asked the interviewees about the most challenging aspect of their experience in the Tongren community, they always mentioned the loss of their favorite Tongren works.

Although The Chinese Tongren community of *The Social Network* was formed before the Lofter era, during the Baidu Tieba era, and it has more archives of early works than many other

Tongren community because it meets the requirements of Suiyuanju, the peak period of it was still similar to many popular Tongren communities, relying on Lofter. At that time, the common way for Tongren creators to post their works on Lofter is complicated. Tongren creators would take the parts that might be censored by the system out of the entire work and post them on a parking lot platform, while the rest of the work was posted normally on Lofter. This meant that often neither Lofter nor the parking lot platform had the complete Tongren work, but this method ensured that consumers of Tongren works could access the censored parts while maximizing the use of Lofter's function as a social platform—after consuming the entire work, consumers could go back to Lofter to make comments or feedback to the creators. The entry ticket for consumers to access the parking lot was a link provided by the creator. At first, external links effectively bypassed the censorship system, but as censorship was tightened, many Tongren creators were forced to use encryption software to encode the links to evade censorship. This is also the main way that how many Tongren works of *The Social Network* circulated.

Obviously, these encrypted links are often vulnerable and do not have archiving functions. Their purpose is mostly to provide access to fans at that time, which ultimately leads to the partial or complete loss of Tongren works after the links are blocked due to censorship. Not only is this unacceptable to the creators, but it is also extremely painful for those who consume Tongren works. In my interviews, many interviewees who are Tongren works consumers mentioned a frequently occurring situation: Tongren creators stop participating in the Tongren community of *The Social Network* for certain reasons, and their legacy is likely to be lost because the links expire or the censorship system evolves. When Tongren consumers who

once enjoyed these works want to revisit them, or when new Tongren consumers come looking for them, they will never be able to access these works. For Tongren consumers, these Tongren works are taken away from their world by official forces, becoming a missing piece and a trauma that lingers in their memories—you know they were there, but you can never find them.

In the interviews, interviewees who are Tongren creators mentioned that even though they have their own archives of their works, when some of their posts of Tongren works on Lofter are censored and deleted, the comments and feedback under the posts also disappear. This is the most painful thing for them. For the Tongren community of *The Social Network*, female fans can actively repair and construct the original narrative through various methods and then build their own narratives, but they are unable to preserve a part of the value of these narratives—the interactions and feedback that arise from them. Given the distinctive gift economy nature of the Tongren community, the more powerful official narrative, namely the involvement of censorship, prevents the gift economy from circulating fully and normally within the Tongren community.

## **2.2 Stigmatization: Unqualified Female Fans**

Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized that the Chinese fan community of *The Social Network* is a community composed mainly of female fans, but I have not denied the fact that there are a minority of male fans in this community. For male fans, do they encounter similar difficulties in creating fan works as female fans do? First, I need to point out that the Tongren

community is made up of fans who are passionate about creating or consuming Tongren works, but it is not the same as a fan community or fandom in the general sense, because the term “Tongren” has a gender connotation. In other words, although female fans in the Tongren community are called Tongren girls, there is no such group called Tongren boys. The Tongren community is part of the fan community, but the fan community encompasses more than just the Tongren community.

Second, Chinese male fans and Tongren girls have different behaviors, statuses, and mindsets in their roles as fans. For example, in the fan works created by Tongren girls, pornographic and romantic fan fiction are the most common fan works, followed by fan paintings and fan edits. In these works, Tongren girls enjoy pairing characters of the same or different genders who have dynamic relationships in the original media products to make romantic narrations. No matter what form the work takes, female narratives are always encoded into their works. For Chinese male fans, on the other hand, they do not have the same intense creative passion as female fans. Furthermore, most male fans do not even participate in the process of re-decoding and re-encoding. Even if they do participate, they often rely on official narrative text and official character pairings to create works that do not require a lot of appropriation, such as fan edits expressing their love for the entire media product or a particular character, or discussions based on the original work about a character or a particular plot. In other words, they may try to explore the original narrative, but they are not really interested in changing it or creating their own narratives. Therefore, the fan activities and the majority of fan works of Chinese male fans do not actually conflict with China’s censorship system in most

cases. And for them, taking legal risks to engage in fan activities is unnecessary.

Male fans and Tongren girls experience different pressures from policies and censorship when acting as fans, but male fans and the general public do not consider the additional pressure faced by Tongren girls to be problematic. On the contrary, they believe that this additional pressure proves that Tongren girls' behavior is questionable, which highlights another significant external pressure faced by Tongren girls: stigmatization. Male fans believe that Tongren girls are unqualified as good fans, because in their view, Tongren girls' obsession with romantic relationships between certain characters proves that they do not truly love the media product (Busse, 2013, 74); Male fans also believe that Tongren girls' active efforts to fix and create narratives are actually a sign of disrespect for the original narrative. This means that, in the view of Chinese male fans Tongren girls are actually obsessed with their fan works, not the media product that serves as the foundation for their fan works.

I once asked my male friends who are also fans of the anime *Attack on Titan* a question. I often see male fans fighting over their dissatisfaction with the ending of *Attack on Titan*. If you are dissatisfied with the ending, why don't you create a fan work to change the ending? They all answered that no matter how disappointing the ending of *Attack on Titan* is, it is already determined; no matter how good an ending they could create, it would not be the real ending. As can be seen, in the eyes of many male fans, the official nature of the author's identity is what defines the work, and fan works created by fans are inherently meaningless in some way. For female fans, the original author's status is equally irreplaceable, but the meaning of fan works lies in exploring possibilities, not in replacing anything.

Male fans' pessimistic attitude toward fan fiction has also made them the media companies' "favorite" type of fans, because no matter how dissatisfied they are with the development of the official narrative, its official status will never be challenged. Thus, in the world of male fans, hierarchical structures are well-defined and fixed. Media companies or original authors occupy the highest class, official narratives are in the second class, and fans are the lowest class in this structure. Tongren girls who engage in resistance against the original narrative are considered inferior to other fans, because their "disrespect" for the original work or author makes them ineligible to be loyal fans. For example, in the fan community of *The Social Network*, male fans often criticize Tongren girls for focusing on "non-existent dynamic relationships between characters" and ignoring the excellence of the film itself and take that as a reason to devalue Tongren girls' love and creativity. As a result, the essence of fans—excessive investment, perceived as a threat (Busse 2013, 79); the excessive obsession and investment in a particular character or work are labeled as femininity, stigmatized as meaningless and fan disqualification, or even deviant behavior.

In addition to being considered the lowest class in the fan community, Tongren girls are also a group that needs to conceal their identity in real life. Whether defining the love of Tongren culture as a hobby, a preference, or a way to relax, it seems difficult for it to have the same attributes of socializing as mainstream hobbies in real life—since people who are unfamiliar with Tongren culture cannot understand its essence and begin to participate in it through a casual conversation or by spending a couple of hours learning about it. For Tongren girls who love *The Social Network*, saying "I'm reading fan fiction about Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin" in

real life would be even more awkward. In fact, Tongren girls do not really care whether their love for Tongren culture is accepted by people outside the Tongren community or not, but they do care about the stigmatization caused by lack of understanding and stereotypes.

As a result, many of the interviewees in my interviews mentioned that they would intentionally separate their real-life identities from their identity as Tongren girls. “In real life, it’s hard even for my close friends and family to understand my love for Tongren culture,” said Interviewee 8. This “shame” and feeling of not being understood does not originate from Tongren culture itself, but from a socially constructed mainstream perspective—that is, society’s definition of what is an appropriate’ or normal form of female interest and expression. Furthermore, stigmatization reinforces existing structural inequalities between genders and power. Men’s interests are often accepted or even encouraged, male fans who make excessive investments in media products are seen as expressing true love, while women’s fantasies, creations, and expressions of desire are viewed as inappropriate, immature, or even dangerous.

Many Tongren girls do not view the separation of their real identities from their identities as Tongren girls as a bad thing. On the contrary, they tend to prefer having multiple separate identities. They believe that this separation of identities is not only a strategy for self-protection, but also an active construction of their own identities. By placing the identity of Tongren girls within the context of the online, anonymous Tongren community, they are able to safely express their emotions, engage in creative activities, and gain recognition without having to constantly worry about being misunderstood, criticized, or socially disciplined in the real world.

The Tongren community is not only a utopia for women, but also a utopia for women’s

free creativity. Within this community, women's identities are not defined by the official narrative of mainstream society as wives, mothers, or daughters, nor are they defined by social functional roles such as employees or students. Instead, they are defined and recognized by themselves as Tongren girls.

## Chapter 3: The Impact of Life and Conclusion

### 3.1 I Can Keep Writing

After learning about the internal and external pressure faced by Tongren girls, the most fundamental question comes up again: with so much pressure and difficulty, why do Tongren girls continue to keep passionate about Tongren works and what is the meaning of persisting in creating them? None of the interviewees gave a definite answer to this question. Instead, they tried to offer their own thoughts and assumptions based on their experiences and perspectives.

Since many of them primarily participate in the Tongren community as consumers, the answers I collected often focused on what consumers can get from consuming Tongren works. For example, consuming Tongren works is a way to relax, or it is an inspiration from the original works, a feeling that drives them to do something. To analyze the question more comprehensively, it is also essential to consider the perspectives and thoughts of Tongren creators. What does the act of creating Tongren works provide to the creators themselves?

In order to gain a more valuable perspective, I tried to contact famous Tongren creators from the golden age of the Chinese Tongren Community of *The Social Network*. However, due to the reasons mentioned above, such as a shift in interests, anxiety about the external environment, and pressures in real life, many of them have left no trace of their existence in the Tongren Community due to the passing of time and increasingly strict censorship systems. Fortunately, after three months of effort, I successfully connected with Interviewee 18, who is one of the most important fan creators in the Tongren community of *The Social Network*.

Interviewee 18 has been posting fan fiction related to *The Social Network* on Lofter since 2016. Several of her full-length fan fiction novels, such as *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other*, *The Long-Lasting Love Confession*, and *Reconstructing Love*<sup>16</sup>, have been praised by many Tongren girls in the Tongren community of *The Social Network* as some of the most representative Tongren works. *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other* and *The Long-Lasting Love Confession* belong to the same series. *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other* is a continuation of the original narrative of the film. It tells the story of what happened between Mark and Eduardo after the storyline of the film. Interviewee 18 explored the possibility of Mark and Eduardo repairing their relationship and resolving their issues from a romantic perspective. *The Long-Lasting Love Confession* is a continuation of *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other*. Following the happy ending of the previous work, Eduardo is involved in a car accident and struggles with PTSD and physical health issues. With Mark's support, he not only overcomes his physical and psychological trauma but also finds the best form for their relationship.

For consumers, to effectively engage with *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other*, they need to first watch the original film, and when consuming *The Long-Lasting Love Confession*, they also need to have fully decoded *We Were Right Not to Miss Each Other*. Although both works have romantic elements, they are not considered to be fluffy and romantic stories. Instead, like many Tongren works on *The Social Network*, they focus on heavy topics with real-world significance. In particular, *The Long-Lasting Love Confession* provides an in-depth and

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<sup>16</sup> These works are all published on Lofter. According to the preference of Interviewee 18, I will not provide online links to these works in the references.

professional discussion of PTSD.

Today, despite shifting her focus away from *The Social Network* toward other media products, Interviewee 18 remains dedicated to creating fan fiction. Interviewee 18 mentioned that the reason she continues to create Tongren works is not because it is an easy thing for her, even though she has over a decade of experience in Tongren creation; the pressure to meet readers' expectations, the stigmatization surrounding the Tongren community, the exhaustion from constantly resisting the censorship system, and the worsening internal environment of the community following the 227 Incident—all these factors have made creating Tongren works no longer the joyful and enjoyable process it was a decade ago. Additionally, as she has become older, the pressures of real life have also affected the amount of energy she can devote to creating Tongren works. Due to pressures from various aspects, Interviewee 18 took a short break and even considered completely stopping creating Tongren works, but in the end, she still chose to persist. During this struggle, Interviewee 18 was not always full of motivation. The reason she was able to persevere was because writing itself can become a way for her to fight against pressure and also a process of self-salvation.

During the interview, I asked Interviewee 18, “How many words have you written for *The Social Network*?” She replied, “I haven’t calculated it precisely, but I know it’s between 1.5 million and 2 million words.”

I continued, “How do you feel about that?” She said, “The only feeling I have is that I can keep writing.”

“I can keep writing” is such a simple yet deeply sincere response. This short,

straightforward statement sufficiently captures the significant meaning and emotional weight of continuing to create Tongren works. The total number of words in J. K. Rowling's seven *Harry Potter* novels is 1,084,170, and it has been made into eight movies. Although 1.5 to 2 million words in Chinese may not be entirely equivalent to the same number of words in English, the narrative that these words can carry and express is far beyond the narrative of the original *The Social Network* film. With over 1.5 million words, it is clear that Interviewee 18 has devoted her love, energy, and time to creating Tongren works; she has used words to construct a new narrative universe for *The Social Network*. This is her own world, one she has created, repaired, expanded, and generously shared with other Tongren girls.

### **3.2 Tongren Work: An Ethnical Practice**

People often talk about how a movie, a TV series, or even a song has made a huge impact on their lives, but not many realize that fan works, or Tongren works, can also have such a powerful influence on fans' life paths. For many Tongren girls, fan works offer more than just emotional experiences; nor are they merely rewritings of the original narrative to address feelings of dissatisfaction. The influence of Tongren works is no less significant than any mainstream cultural product, because within the Tongren community, they represent a unique space for women to connect deeply through shared feelings, resonance, and imagination. These narratives, with their limitless possibilities for re-decoding and re-encoding, serve as a medium for communication between women. Female readers and female creators, through repeated re-

decoding and re-encoding, can finally see each other, understand each other, and accompany each other through the moments of loneliness and confusion in real life. Therefore, I argue that these Tongren girls are not only creating narrative of characters or media products, but also expressing themselves. They use creativity to pursue freedom, use imagination to resist reality, and use love and perseverance to build their own narrative towers on the ruins of patriarchal narratives.

Many Tongren works appear on the surface to belong to the romance or pornography genres, but their deeper meaning often lies in the creators' encoded reflections on topics such as intimate relationships, gender roles, career goals, family structures, and even the meaning of life. For example, Interviewer 11 mentioned that she noticed many Tongren works in the Tongren community of *The Social Network* attempt to address Eduardo's issues with his original family, even though the original film does not go into detail about this aspect. In the fan-made official narratives of *The Social Network*, Eduardo is often portrayed as growing up in a repressive family environment where emotional expression is lacking, and his parents are overly strict and demanding of their children. The widespread popularity of this narrative in the fan community is no coincidence, but rather because it resonates with many Tongren girls in their real lives. They may be familiar with emotionally repressive family relationships or have experienced the pain of struggling between parents' expectations and the pursuit of self-identity. Therefore, when they incorporate these details into Eduardo's character, it is not only to create a complex character, but also a form of subtle self-expression.

This is the unique power of Tongren works—it allows female creators to use established

characters or narratives to encode their understanding and reconstruction of intimate or family relationships. In this case, characters like Eduardo often become objects of psychological projection for Tongren creators, collective expressions of emotional experiences. However, I need to clarify that this projection is not the same as identification, there are two reasons. First, the pre-established official narratives and real-world contexts cannot match perfectly in fan works, especially since Tongren girls prefer to stay behind the camera as directors, spectators, or controllers of the narrative. As spectators, they don't want to see themselves performing on the stage. Second, Tongren creators don't treat characters in their works as mere soulless tools that can be substituted by anyone in any situation; Tongren creators respect these characters as if they were imaginary friends—this is also one of their key distinctions from media companies. While maintaining their own agency, Tongren girls also want to give agency to the characters they are developing. Therefore, when creating fan works, appropriation and adaptation are, to some extent, constrained. However, such a constraint does not mean fan creators are bound by official narratives; rather, it represents a self-imposed boundary rooted in respect. In Tongren works, characters like Eduardo often ultimately reconcile with their original families and traumas, but this reconciliation does not mean covering up pain or eliminating conflict, but reemphasizing of the problems themselves.

Interviewee 10 mentioned that she does not believe Tongren works of *The Social Network* is meant to make up for the regret of Mark and Eduardo drifting apart in the original film. On the contrary, she believes that such regret needs to be there, as it is something that often happens in real life. Tongren girls have creative freedom, they could delete the heartbreaking betrayal scenes

from the original film, but in most cases, they don't do so; this is because without conflict, there is no room for reflection, and without reflection, the work loses its appeal. Tongren girls would rather explore solutions from hundreds of different perspectives than ignore the problem itself and pretending it doesn't exist. Therefore, rather than saying that Tongren works create a perfect and flawless fantasy world, it is more accurate to say that they are simulating possibilities. In these Tongren works, Eduardo might choose to forgive Mark and rebuild their relationship, he might gradually resolve the trauma caused by his original family, or he might even completely cut off ties with his family and redefine his personal value—whichever ending is chosen, it reflects Tongren girls' attempts to imagine a way out and explore different possibilities.

More importantly, all of these explorations and reflections takes place within the female-only utopia of the Tongren community. In my interviews, Interviewee 16, the youngest of all the interviewees, pointed out that she received education about love from older Tongren creators in the Tongren community of *The Social Network*. She said that she could not learn about this kind of education about love in school or from her friends of the same age. This demonstrates that Tongren work is a collective practice. Older female creators encode their life experiences, reflections on relationships, and challenges in their careers into their works, while younger female consumers gain power and insights through consuming. This kind of education and transmission that crosses generations is extremely rare but a valuable resource within mainstream social structures. As a result, Tongren works have become a secret channel for women to mutual support and grow together.

Lastly, let us go back to “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture”.

Penley (1991) states that in fantasy, consumers may find identification through the characters, the entire scene, or the narrative (490). In this context, the content expressed in fan works about equality, freedom of sexuality, and criticism of patriarchy, and even slash works themselves, are all meant to seek a sense of equality that fans can identify with. However, for Chinese Tongren girls, their passion for creating and consuming fan works is not necessarily because they wish to identify with the equal relationships in the works, but because they want to take on the role of the “director”—one who wields the power of control narratives. Their preference for slash works is not about identifying with the equality brought by same-gender relationships, but about enjoying the creative equality that comes from resisting official narratives and taking control of their own narratives. In this way, consuming Tongren works is not about seeking real-world meanings, but about exploring the power to transform in an imaginary world; creating fan works is not merely cultural consumption or entertainment, but a moderate and spontaneous form of feminist practice. Therefore, “[Tongren work] is an ethnical practice” (Derecho 2006, 77).

## Filmography

- *Arcane*. Created by Christian Linke and Alex Yee. Netflix, 2021—2024.
- *Attack on Titan*. Created by Hajime Isayama. Produced by Wit Studio and MAPPA. MBS/NHK, 2013—2023.
- *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Directed by Ang Lee. China Film Co-Production Corporation, Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, and Sony Pictures Classics, 2000.
- *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Directed by Marc Webb. Columbia Pictures, 2012.
- *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Directed by Marc Webb. Columbia Pictures, 2014.
- *Hannibal*. Developed by Bryan Fuller. NBC, 2013—2015.
- *Now You See Me*. Directed by Louis Leterrier. Summit Entertainment, 2013.
- *Now You See Me 2*. Directed by Jon M. Chu. Summit Entertainment, 2016.
- *The Social Network*. Directed by David Fincher. Columbia Pictures, 2010.
- *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Created by Gene Roddenberry. NBC, 1966—1969.
- *Zombieland*. Directed by Ruben Fleischer. Columbia Pictures, 2009.
- *Zombieland: Double Tap*. Directed by Ruben Fleischer. Columbia Pictures, 2019

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