❚ Article ❚

Xuanhuan Novels in the Context of Consumerism: A Reflection on a Social Trend in Contemporary China

Yehan Wang
University of York, UK

Abstract

Xuanhuan novels are a representation of the commercialization of online literature within consumer society, and they are also an expression of the divisions that exist between the social structure and culture. The appearance of Xuanhuan novels reflects the change in a new generation of readers' worldviews from a modern perception to a post-modern one. Xuanhuan novels combine characteristics of Eastern culture and Western imagination, generating a hybridity of the texts. This article analyzes Xuanhuan novels such as *Eternal Love*, *The Journey of Flower*, *Mortal Xiuxian Biography*, *Jade Dynasty*, *Fighter of Destiny*, and *Joy of Life*, and examines how these novels reflect the conceptualization of hierarchy, social trends, and globalization. Through the observation of online readers on Douban, this article explores the process of hybridization of cultural production and the reconstruction of the social value system by readers of Xuanhuan novels.

❚ *Keywords* : Xuanhuan novels, young generation, hierarchy structure, consumerism, hybridism

Introduction

The Xuanhuan novel is a genre of fictional stories that combines science fiction, time travel, historical military, and martial arts elements. Its success lies in the combination of historical facts with bizarre plots, absurd technology, and even the propagation of feudal superstitions, fatalism, and reincarnation. Fans who enjoy reading Xuanhuan novels are

often initially attracted by the plots of these novels, which involve imaginary, adventurous, and mysterious events. In the Xuanhuan world described by the writers of this genre, characters can fly, have extended longevity, and possess superpowers. For example, the Emperor of Ancient Ages *Ye Hua* and the Empress Nine-Tailed Fox, *Bai Qian* in *Eternal Love*,[1] possess longevity and powers that ordinary people do not have. Xuanhuan novels construct a virtual space; they break away from the constraints of the existing time and space and subvert both the laws of nature and historical development, as well as reconstruct core socialist values that Chinese readers are accustomed to. In doing so, they provide an effective transcendence of real life through the likes of time-traveling plots.

From the perspective of Xuanhuan novels, online fantasy novels not only embody a feudal hierarchical world, but also include ghosts and gods derived from a historical culture of tomb-robbing and the worship of a feudal centralized power system. Although these settings may violate contemporary social morals and values from the government's perspective, the imagination of the Xuanhuan world is more in line with real history. However, the culture industry has commodified fantasy and transformed it into a money-making machine. Xuanhuan novels are very "rapidly consumed" in China and attract a huge readership. According to the Ariely User Tracker Data Report (2019), until 2018, the entirety of China's online literature market was worth 15.35 billion CNY. The producers of online literature clearly recognize the psychological and spiritual needs of the younger generation and aim to satisfy them through Xuanhuan fantasy novels. In effect, the variation of values among the younger generations who have experienced consumerism and globalization is an opportunity for researchers to examine online Xuanhuan fantasy novels. Globalization has enabled people to reach out to other youth cultures across geographic boundaries; this freedom brings in its wake what has come to be identified as hybridization (Pieterse, 1994).

Literature Review

The Feudal Pyramid in Xuanhuan Novels

Xuanhuan novels[2] embody a new way of thinking about the world as a natural response by human beings for the unknown, since no matter how rapid the development of modern science, human beings are still unable to solve all the mysteries of the universe and life. Fans of Xuanhuan literature are mostly attracted by a description of this unknown. As Todorov (1975) pointed out, fantasy literature appeals to readers' ambiguous understanding of belief and assumption of supernatural events and stands between the "uncanny" and "the marvelous." Indeed, Xuanhuan novels involve traditional East Asian culture, which by giving access to this material to new generations of readers can facilitate their understanding of myths, Taoism, the feudal dynastic structure, and traditional etiquette from historical periods. In Chinese feudal society, the core ideology was the hierarchy that divided society into social classes: *shi* (gentry scholars); *nong* (peasant farmers); *gong* (artisans and craftsmen); and *shang* (merchants and traders) (Yuan, 2001). The criteria for these categories are the same as those used in the oriental fantasy world; characters are divided into different orders such as "gods," "fairies," "humans," and "demons." With this in mind, the characters in Xuanhuan novels often belong to a clan system with a strong feudal hierarchy. Within the clan, the rank and status of the characters are also displayed, which is essentially consistent with the spiritual core of the ancient feudal system.

Feudal society in China originated in the Warring States period. Kim (2015) argues that after the Qin Dynasty was established, the corresponding feudal system was formally established, and feudal society represents the social form in which landlords or lords exploited peasants or serfs. Accordingly, feudal society refers to the distribution of territory by the central dynasty to members of the royal family, lesser royal families, and meritorious officials. This can be seen in many respects as com-

parable to the feudalistic system in medieval Europe (Weber, 1948/2015). A feudal society is regarded as a part of an economic system, with the lords at the upper level. The peasants form the bottom of the pyramid and are associated with the land and responsible for production. In feudal society, this kind of relationship was based on blood relationships. There were specific mutual obligations between monarch and vassal. The oriental fantasy novel is based on a feudal hierarchy and the characters in the novels are placed into different levels.

The difference between the novels and historically accurate depictions of feudal societies is that an oriental fantasy novel involves more martial arts, magical abilities, and other elements that do not conform to the scientific laws of modern physics. In China, these extraordinary abilities are considered forms of superstition, which is generally defined as "a belief or behavior that results from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or opportunity, or a false understanding of cause and effect" (Goodall, 2010, p. 13). It specifically refers to fortune-telling, divination, astrology, superstition, and irrational beliefs or blind trust. In China, any act of spreading superstition is forbidden, but the government's definition of feudal superstition is vague because legislators realize that a feudal practice is not necessarily a superstition; instead, it may be a traditional custom or aspect of culture.

Though it is common to show a feudal hierarchy and supernatural powers in fantasy novels, the government might consider the representation of superstition as hindering the advancement of science and technology and "disturbing public order." Under the "management" of various power organizations in Xuanhuan novels, supernatural powers are unified in an orderly world. The power organization is usually represented as a social "pyramid" matching the various supernatural powers; for example, the "magistrate" and "lawman" take similar places in the hierarchy as they would in an actual historical society. In *Eternal Love* the hierarchy involves the Orders of the Nine-Tailed Fox, Phoenix, and other nationalities under the control of the Dragon nationality.

Therefore, the world of oriental fantasy is inspired specifically by

historical feudal society, a period in China that was particularly hier-archical with a "pyramid-shaped" social structure. In the settings of the novels, the royal families hold an especially privileged position in society because they are at the top of the pyramid. In this historically inspired setting, the plots often center around religious internecine conflict, royal brothers pursuing the position of emperor, or a protagonist who grows strong in a power vacuum between various power groups.

Government Control and Online Production

Xuanhuan novels are different from martial arts historical novels. They are constructed in what is often referred to as the "second world," which is a world drawing heavily on Chinese traditional culture but not an actual specific period of Chinese history (Townsend, 1992). Xuanhuan literature is removed from the space influenced by real world politics and social values and caters to the psychology of users of an unregulated Internet. Thus, it is common to see murder, violence, pornography, crime, feudal imperial power, "harem plots," and similar taboo elements in the novels.

Kong (2005) believed that this new literary space has stimulated the literary innovation of online writers. The field of creativity and new literature provided by the Internet is often considered a space of "low" rather than "high" culture. Throughout the 21_{st} century, the development of new media technology has propelled consumer culture, which has re-sulted in subculture groups evolving amid an inherent confusion regarding the nature of their own identity (Redhead, 2002). Consumerism influences subcultural groups in communities regardless of their age or social class. With the commercialization of subcultural products, it has become diffi-cult to distinguish subcultures from mainstream culture (Baranovitch, 2003).

Given the discussion above, it is crucial to note that Chinese popular culture has been controlled by the government since 1949, ostensibly to "maintain social stability." In order to control Chinese popular cultural

from a holistic perspective, the government has formulated several policy documents. The aim of the policymakers is to limit the excessive spread of the negative aspects of popular culture and ultimately control the development of mainstream culture. A corollary of this approach from a viewpoint sympathetic to government perspectives is that art should be subservient to politics and should stress the dark side of bourgeois life and the bright side of revolutionary life. All aspects of culture have become highly politicized since Liberation (1949) as a result. Writers and artists should produce work that can be understood by the masses while expressing their revolutionary aspirations (defined by the Party as their spokesman), until such time as the masses can produce "socialist new things" of their own (Golden, 1984).

Clearly, the themes of online literature go against the mainstream culture of patriotism and nationalism propagandized by the Chinese government. Despite this, in the online context of the 21st century, online Xuanhuan novels have become a new popular cultural phenomenon in China. One of the main reasons for this is that, unlike traditional ways of spreading popular culture, online literature is produced by freelancers who do not necessarily act as mouthpieces for government propaganda, giving them greater freedom in choosing the themes of their work. In addition, publication via the Internet means that online literature is directly influenced by consumers. In order to gain more commercial success, online writers need to meet the requirements of readers by creating attractive and possibly sensational plot elements, which include reincarnation and superstition. In a move by the Chinese government that differs from traditional Chinese publishing, online authors have the right to express their opinions without censorship.

Another significant reason for the popularity of the online literature is that since the 1990s, the Chinese government has loosened its cultural policy and expressed support for online literature. The term "cultural industry" was introduced by the government and formulated into state policy in 2000. During the years between the late 1990s and 2000s, commercial culture grew on a considerable scale. In the late 1990s, the Chinese

government announced that media organizations can be commercialized as individual enterprises (Keane, 2013). The transformation of the cultural market and industry represents the transformation from state control to a more flexible policy approach. The reformers consider supporting market freedom to be a mechanism of progress and a positive force for change in the culture industry (Keane & Zhao, 2014). Creative ideas bring new media into deeper alignment with the culture industry, hence, in view of this deregulation and the huge potential of market demand, free online publishing became "the second channel" for book publishing and a publishing "grey area." Although the new channel fell into a "policy limbo," it did not destroy the existing primary market and instead promoted the publishing market as a whole.

The Hybridization of Cultural Production

The Xuanhuan novel offers readers a great transcendence of real life. The rebellious spirit embodied in the stories constructs a virtual space that breaks the constraints of the existing space and time, subverting the rules, values, and morals that people are accustomed to. At the same time, the variety of Xuanhuan novels on the literary market is due to their hybrid nature, amalgamating Western fantasy, Chinese martial arts, ancient myths, and modern science fiction. The cultural nature of online fantasy novels can be explained through the theory of "cultural hybridization" (Nayar, 2006). As Wang and Yeh (2007) argue, Xuanhuan novels are a manifestation of the interaction between different cultures in the context of globalization and a special cultural product set in a "third space" beyond the world people inhabit.

Xuanhuan novels, as a type of popular culture, are fluid in nature and always in motion as a result of continuous interaction and dialogue between the internal and external world of culture. In this sense, culture not only hybridizes, but also may produce new features and differences in the process of hybridization and establish new connections. According to Bhabha (1994, cited in Shimoni, 2011), hybridization opens what he

calls "the third space," in which elements transform each other. Globalization itself may also accelerate this process, increasing or promoting certain new dimensions. With the rise of postcolonialism theories, the concept of "hybridity" (Kraidy, 2005) has become a new aspect of the global cultural debate within the social sciences.

Thus, hybridity in culture challenges the concepts of Romanticism, Nationalism, Cultural Essentialism, and other ideologies, with implications that these concepts could not exist in one form of culture. Arguably hybridization has always been part of cultural evolution in human history. Kraidy (2005) found that "decentralization," "actualization," and "denaturalization" have been used to characterize the process of the hybridization of cultural products.

Methodology

This research applies online observation methods to understand the variation of values among the younger generations of Chinese who have experienced both consumerism and globalization, and examines these ideas through the medium of Xuanhuan novels. The author collected posts and comments made on the Douban platform. Douban is a website that provides book, video, and audio recommendations (Jiang, 2016). It also offers a message-leaving service. After users publish a certain amount of information, Douban will automatically select other members with the most similar tastes according to specific algorithms. By joining the Douban fan group, the author was able to identify the personal values of the younger generation in several Xuanhuan novels. The first stage of online observation was to log onto Douban as an observer. Following this, the author searched for keywords such as "Xuanhuan novel," "criticize," and "favorite." However, only a small number of posts could be found using these keywords, and people who posted about these themes were not the most active fans. Hence, it proved difficult to gather useful insights in this way. Instead, when searching for a certain novel, more creative search terms provided better results. For example, if

Eternal Love, the title of a Xuanhuan novel, was used as the search term instead of "Xuanhuan novel," more posts and comments were returned.

The author found plenty of relevant speeches and in-depth commentaries using this method, and in the process became acquainted with confirmed interviewees, who were all active Xuanhuan fans. The author joined a Douban Xuanhuan group and gathered 921 popular posts and 1455 active fans. The posts and comments were mainly concerned with the content of Xuanhuan novels, "dislike posts" of certain Xuanhuan novels, networking between fans, and reviews of Xuanhuan novels.

Acceptance of and Resistance to Social Stratification

Although the "pyramid" structure in Xuanhuan novels originates from a conceptualization of ancient feudal society, it still reflects aspects of the modern era and supplies metaphors for the social gaps between the top and bottom levels of contemporary Chinese society. The rapid growth experienced by China since 1978 has resulted in political power and social wealth concentrating at the top of the pyramid and creating a widening gap between the rich and the poor. This paper argues that contemporary Chinese society is divided into different hierarchies and that such social structure in China is similar to the pyramidal hierarchies in Xuanhuan fantasy novels.

For instance, in the story of *Eternal Love*, the "emperor of ancient ages," Yehua, is the leader of the "Dragon nationality," ranking above all the gods in heaven. The other heroine empress, Bai Qian, belongs to the "Fox nationality," which is lower than the Dragon. When the two characters decided to marry, Bai Qian was disliked by the gods of the Dragon nationality because of her lineage. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that such divisions of the lineage in the metaphorical situation presented in *Eternal Love* represent the huge differences between social classes in contemporary Chinese society. The political and economic power wielded by the upper classes is replaced in the stories by super-

natural power possessed by immortals and the lower classes' struggles to achieve any mobility within a rigid hierarchy. On the one hand, the "pyramid" structure solidifies the younger generation's stereotypical view of society. On the other hand, the characters in fantasy novels have no choice but to struggle against people and fortune in order to gain greater wealth, power and freedom. For example, one of the posts on Douban from the fan "little rain" was a comment regarding *Eternal Love*:

> I think the marriage between Bai Qian and Ye Hua is a political marriage between the Dragon nationality and Nine-Tailed Fox nationality. Since Bai Qian was framed and turned into a mortal, this couple must overcome the barriers of nationality and hierarchy. This is the same as the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, where the couple fell deeply in love while they came from poverty and rich families. They have to challenge the social hierarchy.

According to the theory of "bureaucracy" (Weber, 1948/2015), institutional rules should create fairness among the population by ensuring rationality and equality. Labor is divided on the basis of function and professional ability is used as the basis for selection and promotion. However, a purely legal-dominated social hierarchy has not been fully established in China and the representation of society in Xuanhuan novels depicts a world that encourages competition. In this respect, it is worth noting that the protagonists are mostly ordinary people emerging from the bottom of society, such as Han Li in the *Mortal Xiuxian Biography* and Wei Suo in the *Road to an Immortal*. They are people without privilege, so their path to success is full of hardships. It is also important to note that Xuanhuan novels emphasize that such individual efforts are more challenging for ordinary people who do not come from a privileged background. This is evident from the protagonists' journeys from "no one" to "someone," following the logic that only hard work and effort can break the barriers between different classes. In this sense, the

Xuanhuan novels emphasize the absolute priority of power presented as a "pyramid" hierarchy, which also implies resistance to social equality. For example, Zhang Xiaofan, the protagonist of *Jade Dynasty*,[3)] is medio-cre in innate talent but had the good fortune to find magic weapons that allowed him to progress to a higher level. This logic is repeatedly em-bodied in Xuanhuan novels, which indeed mirrors the status and struggles of many people in contemporary society.

The hierarchical structure in the novels has generally resonated with the younger generation. This logic binds people to "habitués,"[4)] which places them in dilemmas and blocks other possibilities for enriching their future lives. Adorno and Rabinbach (1975) argued that the overall effect of literature is an anti-enlightenment effect; it hinders the development of autonomous and independent personalities. From Adorno and Rabinbach (1975) point of view, the "literature industry" pushes the capi-talist order, while the capitalist order is embedded in the existing social order. For example, in the *Mortal Xiuxian Biography*, the protagonist, Han Li, falls dozens of times into hostile traps set by his personal enemy and becomes the target of assassination attempts. Such intrigues and crises reflect the contemporary phenomenon of a "risk society." Another exam-ple can be found in *Jade Dynasty*, where the protagonist evolves from a cowardly bullied rascal to a superpowered man. This successful trans-formation gives hope to young people who love fantasy. In today's society in China, the young people at the bottom of society have no privileged background but still wish to be successful. When they are faced with obstacles and failures in the process of seeking fame and wealth, they became distressed and disturbed. What is worse, these young people have no space to vent their anger and desperation. Xuanhuan novels provide a space for them to release their frustrations. The success stories of the characters in Xuanhuan novels give them great psychological comfort and the courage to believe in themselves.

Therefore, the imagination, thinking, and spiritual communication of humans are the direct products of material actions (Leontiev, 2014).

The forms that literature and art take reflect people's real lives and the historical forms of human society. The theory further presents different stage characteristics, which is a reflection of the human economic situation. Meanwhile, the economic basis within society and historical ideology decide the form of literary art. With this in mind, China has experienced criticism of feudalism from the May 4th Movement and the New Culture Movement of the 20th century. On the basis of this economic transformation, the ideology has also changed, and the feudal hierarchy is thought to have gradually faded and transformed into a consumerist ideology.

A Reflection on Individual Desire and Consumerism

As Fuchs (2003, p. 138) has argued, Chinese society has experienced a transition from a "producer" society to a "consumer" society. In a "producer" society, a tightly organized society surrounds the "big factory" as the core production and regards work as the core of self-recognition. Laborers released from the traditional system of the factory became individuals in a society in which consumption replaces labor as the nature of existence. In such an individualized context, the individual gains unprecedented freedom and becomes separated from both the collective and the social system. In a "consumer" society, people have more freedom to choose their subcultural identity through their own style, habits, or tastes. This freedom means that identity and participation within consumerism culture is mobile and unstable. The function of Chinese online literature is to create a utopia where young people can express happiness, sadness, anger, or frustration so as to ease their unfulfilled desires and emptiness; furthermore, she refuted the view that such desires are completely vulgar and abnormal. Indeed, it is important for the academic community to understand the psychological and spiritual needs of the young generation from the perspective of youth culture.

From the author's perspective, Xuanhuan novels reflect the changes in the new generation's social view as both producers and consumers.

The popularity of *The Journey of Flower*, *Fighter of Destiny*, and *Joy of Life* demonstrate that traditional social values are being influenced by the impact of economic and cultural developments, and Xuanhuan novels are the product of this transitioning outlook. Additionally, the plight of individuals in contemporary society is highlighted in the written form of Xuanhuan novels; consumerism has had a profound impact on the new generation in China and, as a result, people have entered a symbolic system of consumption and are controlled by their desires, and in the process have become anxious individuals. In order to cope with the pressure of contemporary life, people respond by constructing an anxious image of consumption.

A typical example of the transition of Chinese society is Mao Ni's *Joy of Life*. The main character, Fan Xian, is an illegitimate child. As a child, he thought he was an orphan because his parents were exiled to remote areas. Because of his difficult childhood, Fan Xian grows up as a precocious, sensitive, and insecure youngster. The image of Fan Xian represents the typical anxiety of individual youngsters in contemporary Chinese society. First, being an illegitimate child, he was at the bottom of the feudal order. This is similar to the social situation of young people today without a privileged background. Second, Fan Xian grows into a young man in a remote area and must become self-reliant later in life when he goes to the capital city. This reflects the experience of contemporary Chinese migrants who move to Beijing to seek opportunities for success. Third, Fan Xian was a "no one" in his childhood, which mirrors the social identity of most of the young people who are still struggling to become "someone." Therefore, in the story, to change his current situation, Fan Xian began to cultivate his skills at the age of five and learned learnt to poison people at the age of ten. In order to find out how his parents were killed and learn the mystery of his family, he moved to the capital city at the age of 16 and began a more adventurous life.

Additionally, Xuanhuan novels show how the young generation might escape their predicament. The idiom "escapism" first appeared in

the field of fantasy literary criticism. It describes how fantasy takes the reader away from reality and provides pleasure instead of deep philosophy (Wang, 2017), which can also be identified in works such as *Back to the Ming Dynasty to be Emperor*, *A Step into the Past*, and *A Fairy of the Tang Dynasty*. In China, young people are encouraged to have positive energy, an idea consistent with the mainstream culture propagandized by the government (Cai, 2016). However, the ever-present pressure to study and work makes the new generation desire to escape from their existing life or lead them to live life with a passive attitude. Indeed, in contemporary China, it is difficult to find a collective space where solitary negative emotions are recognized without being transformed into something positive. In addition, De Kloet and Fung (2016) argue that post-90s China is characterized as an era of loneliness because most young people are single children. Once their communication with parents and friends is reduced, they lose their normal social connection to society and their psychological needs cannot be satisfied, often resulting in an addiction to an illusory world. Xuanhuan literature such as *The Longest Day in Chang'an*, *The Untamed*, *Love and Destiny*, and *Mortal Xiuxian Biography* provides occasions for the young generation to undergo a collective catharsis.

Another example, *Mortal Xiuxian Biography*, depicts an ethereal world into which the new generation can escape. The space created by the writer can be imagined and given any meaning. On the Douban social platform, the author discovered how readers described this space and their thoughts regarding it. For example, a fan named "happiness" wrote: "I really want to enter the world described in the story. It's much more interesting than outside." F. commented: "I wish I was a fairy. The Xuanhuan world is like heaven." Hundreds of similar comments could be found on the social platforms, which generally express people's dissatisfaction with real society and hopes to enter the world presented in the Xuanhuan novel.

Furthermore, the Xuanhuan writers are aware of the new generation's negative perception of contemporary society and their desire to enjoy

the rich sensory pleasures and material comforts brought by consumer society. As a typical narrative, the majority of Xuanhuan writers create a world similar to a "utopia." In order to satisfy the readers, Xuanhuan novels hide the fate of "good luck" at the end of the story, making the protagonists succeed via their own endeavors and means at the end. On the one hand, the expectation of readers reflects the profound anxiety experienced by the young generation as individuals in today's society. On the other hand, this in turn helps these youngsters to temporarily escape the dilemmas the anxiety causes by allowing them to identify themselves with the characters in the novels.

In the *Joy of Life*, on the one hand, the author describes the efforts of Fan Xian in his childhood; on the other hand, Fan Xian is portrayed as "dishonest, greedy for enjoyment, and fond of beautiful ladies" in his adult life. The writer of *Joy of Life* described Fan Xian in the novel "as a character who transcended from modern society to ancient times; Fan Xian was good at telling lies, even to children. He sometimes went crazy to the ladies he likes…"

While Fan Xian came from the bottom of society and was born with the label of "loser," he felt the pressure to make up for his "defects." However, in his adult life, he becomes lazy and does not want to improve any more. Therefore, Mao Ni, the author of the novel, says about Fan Xian:

> Thanks to good luck and his clever mind, he takes charge of the largest security agencies and the wealthy Nei Ku, who make him a noble Lord. However, all this glory comes from the fact that his unknown parents are the emperor of the Qing and a female scientist traveling from modern times to ancient times (Wang & Lei, 2019).

Through this character development, readers can escape from real-life and imagine themselves to be traveling from modern society to and ancient one where they can easily succeed in their life. The key

idea of *Joy of Life* is one of "idealism," where the author proposes a utopian imagination of the perfect society; through the heritage of Chinese class revolution, people can resist class oppression and achieve the same rights for the poor and the rich.

In another example, Lu Yun, a naturally disabled young man in *Legend of the Seven Kingdoms*, accidentally meets a wise man who teaches him skills and, with the help of divine soldiers, gains the status of God of War. In this sense, the characters in Xuanhuan novels use "good luck" to break their unfair fate, which is unlikely to bring success in real society. Another example can be found in *The Imagination of Eternal Life*, a fantasy novel that signifies the infinite exaggeration and imagination of the body, such as the desire of ancient human beings for eternal life. In the novel *The Biography of Han Wu*, the Queen Mother of the West uses a precious "Ganoderma herb," which can give anyone who takes it the gift of eternal life. Similarly, in *Eternal Love*, while the protagonist Mo Yuan is severely hurt by the evil antagonist, his apprentice Bai Qian prepared a magic pill that allows him to recover his physical strength. It is common in Xuanhuan novels that some sort of "immortal medicine" can help the protagonist overcome difficulties and increase his combat effectiveness.

To sum up, on the one hand, contemporary individuals are experiencing the plight of daily life, but also face the temptation of the symbolic system of consumerism. The appearance of Xuanhuan novels has filled the gaps of consciousness between an individual's ability, will, and desire. The imagination and setting of Xuanhuan novels are a representation of reality. The breaking of the Xuanhuan hierarchy is the non-realistic means to fix the gap in consciousness.

Reconstruction of the Social Value System

The variation of values held by those of the younger generations under capitalist and consumerist conditions encourages an examination of the issue within the larger context of culture. Chinese online fantasy

novels are products of a context of capitalism and consumerism that represents a hybrid culture of East and West, or even a "cultural mixture" of East and West. The oriental fantasy novel has emerged within the context of globalization, which has generated a new cross-cultural identity in the process of encoding and decoding. Globalization has accelerated the possibility of cultural mixing as never before, resulting in a national culture that has lost what some consider its "purity," but via "global" and "regional" interaction the process has continuously generated new culture. This process of collision, conflict, and integration of globalized cultures has produced new texts and discourses with continuous impetus and inspiration. As Pieterse (1994) has argued, global literature and local literature should not be considered two distinct, antagonistic phenomena but a hybridization. Kobayashi (2012) agreed with this viewpoint and considered the trend of the literature today to be an encouraging "intersection" and "hybridization." For example, *Phantom City* is a Xuanhuan novel based on the Western imagination but infused with an Eastern world view that is usually compared by readers to the Western saga of the *Lord of the Rings*. *Phantom City* integrates an East Asian value system with Western ideals of human nature and salvation as well as Western mythological concepts such as the "sword of light" or the "black dragon [that] descended to the world," to some extent contradicting traditional Chinese culture and mythological systems.

Because of the "intersection" and "hybridization" of characters of Xuanhuan novels, the authors of Xuanhuan novels are often criticized for a lack of literary merit by professional writers. By introducing logical gaps and using contradictory logic, some suggest these writers may mislead contemporary youth into addictive, restless, and illusive excitement. For example, Guo Jingming, a representative of post-80s novel writers, has been criticized on social media platforms. An anti-fan named "a cloud" writes about Zhi Hu:

Guo Jingming uses a mixture of Eastern and Western names

in the *Ice Fantasy*, but it is not professional at all. For example, the names of the Aslan empire and Galanz sound strange to Eastern people. I think his work is similar to the *A Song of Ice and Fire* written by George R. R. Martin. However, without a western historical background, his work seemed boring to me. I think the reason he is welcomed is that the young fans lacking social experience are easy to persuade. His work is full of utopian stories, a perfect main protagonist, and these have a great influence on the post-00 and post-10 generations.

Tao (2016) criticized the Xuanhuan novel as the embodiment of cynicism and nihilism. He takes a pessimistic view of the significance conveyed by these Xuanhuan novels; people live in an era of cruel reality and an uncertain future. Disappointment and frustration lead to the reversal of people's values, so they do not retain a set of "correct" values. A typical example is the key idea of Guo Jingming's *Ice Fantasy* mentioned above, in which he establishes the concept of "fatalistic tragedy." A prediction was made at the beginning of the novel regarding the main character CaSO: "CaSO, my young king, the red lotus is about to bloom, and the wheel of destiny has begun to roll; your bad luck will all pass." However, after finishing the novel, the reader finds that the prediction is false and misleading because CaSO commits suicide. Hence, the concept of "fatalistic tragedy" in the novel promotes a pessimistic and negative world view. The "fatalistic tragedy" can decide others' destiny at will and maliciously end other people's lives. A fan named "Sad Prince" reviewed Guo's novel on Baidu Post Bar: "CaSO is innocent, and it must be the 'fatalistic tragedy' that led to CaSO's death." As the scholar Tao Dongfeng (2010) argued, Guo Jingming created a logical trap for the readers. Within this logic, tragedy is magnified and human resistance is reduced.

In effect, the world constructed by these East Asian fantasy novels is a reversed and unreasonable world. In this case, the fantasy novel does not construct social value but eliminates it. Indeed, such fantasy

novels principally construct a world that deviates from normal social rules and human consciousness. In the author's opinion, the meaning conveyed by these fantasy novels reflects a change in the worldview of producers and consumers. Due to the impact of various cultural waves, individual and social values are no longer unified and there is an unprecedented spiritual fission: The traditional values and standards are challenged by the new culture wave, "central," "authoritative," "absolute," and other concepts are eliminated from traditional ideas, and a multi-worldview is constructed in its place. In a sense, the popularity of Xuanhuan novels is the product of this change of worldview. As another fan of Guo Jingming's work, "Queen," posted:

> In my eyes, Guo Jingming is a talented writer of the young generation who is different from the old generation writers. Those who do not understand his world view are fussy. He writes in a noble and solemn tone. I hold a different position towards his works because I think that human beings have to resist the 'fatalistic tragedy.' I totally agree with Guo Jingming's emphasis on the concept of 'fatalistic tragedy.' He is encouraging us to resist it.

The points above demonstrate how new generations have different understandings of Guo's work. This show that the author successfully constructed a new value and cultural system that appeals to the contemporary generation and that fits with their new value system. The reconstruction of the concept of "fatalistic tragedy" by the new generation of readers has resulted in the theory of "destiny tragedy" no longer representing a pure tragedy, but as reflecting a need to survive, thus strengthening the meaning of life. Compared with the pre-Internet era, online consumers in China are not merely influenced by a hegemonic ideology but inhabit a more flexible arena of online culture. This cultural consumption has become a means of individual value orientation rather than part of a broader cultural identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has analyzed typical examples of the Xuanhuan novel genre of Chinese literature, such as *Eternal Love*, *The Journey of Flower*, *Mortal Xiuxian Biography*, *Jade Dynasty*, *Fighter of Destiny*, and *Joy of Life*, and examined how these novels reflect the social trends and value systems of contemporary China. The feudal pyramid system in Xuanhuan novels has been discussed, along with the popularization of novels among online readers and the incorporation of "hybrid" elements in a globalized context. Through the online observation of active readers on the Douban platform, the author identified how readers accept or resist the various plots of Xuanhuan novels. Based on a critical analysis of the reaction of readers, the author has characterized those individuals as anxious, escapist, and hedonistic to some extent. Hence, the conclusion is advanced that in an age of consumerism and globalization, the value system of the young generation in China has been reconstructed. In other words, the analysis offered by this article is that the enjoyment of reading has broken the barriers between cultures in different times and places. Since the 1990s, Xuanhuan novels have become popular among the younger generation; however, they have attracted a readership in contemporary Chinese society, which is characterized by a hybridized and globalized culture, rather than merely reflecting the stereotyped image of a feudal China. If Chinese culture is just a mysterious spectacle for readers, then through reading the novels, readers will identify personal values in them. Hence, hybridization is an inevitable result of a new generation's value-oriented demand for fantasy and an ideological transformation. The success of Xuanhuan novels relies on imagination, intense narration, and reader-oriented commercial mechanisms to continuously expand the market on a global scale. This global interest is not in Chinese culture per se, but in the metaphors, magical systems, adventures, and discoveries in the fiction. The novelty and satisfaction of the Xuanhuan novel explains why it attracts the consumption of these readers. Werbner (2001) believes that all cultures are hybrid

and that the constant movement and merging of different elements brings to light new features, new differences, and new similarities within Xuanhuan literature. From this perspective, the author argues that hybridization and globalization have led to a certain loss of cultural products and cultural distinctiveness. However, by losing what was there, we are presented with something new, something fresh, something that represents yet another hybrid.

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1) *Eternal Love* is a story that involves the deities Bai Qian and Ye Hua falling in love. It is a romance of epic proportions that spans three lifetimes.

2) The term "Xuanhuan novel" is believed to come from *The Moon Demon* (1988) by the popular Hong Kong novelist Huang Yi.

3) *Jade Dynasty* (Chinese: 诛仙) involves the story of Zhang Xiaofan, a kind-hearted and pure village boy who is thrown into a world of chaos after his village is massacred; he subsequently becomes a disciple of the Qingyun Sect.

4) *Habitus* (/ˈhæbɪtəs/) is ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions. It refers the way that individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it.

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Biographical Note

Yehan Wang is a doctoral candidate in the School of Sociology at the University of York, UK. Her research focuses on the interaction between politics, popular culture, and resistance. Email: joymix@gmail.com