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Guest Editor's Introduction

The development and proliferation of digital technologies and the rise of the Internet have brought immense changes worldwide, and as this year's Kiriyaama Fellow and guest editor of *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, I had an opportunity to ask scholars from different geographical areas and disciplines to share recent research that touches on some of the ways that this "Digital Turn" has affected the Asia-Pacific region. The "Digital Asia" feature of this issue of *Asia Pacific Perspectives* includes articles on online gaming and online gaming fiction in China and their psycho-social implications; the profound effects of call centers and other aspects of the IT economy in India on Indian society, especially women; the groundbreaking work being done with a digital archive devoted to literary translation; and a review of a book-length study of online Sinophone Romance fiction. In addition to these essays, the editors of *Asia Pacific Perspectives* are pleased to announce a new feature that highlights work written by University of San Francisco graduate students whose research is relevant to the Asia Pacific Region.

"What's in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web-Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction," by **Heather Inwood** of the University of Manchester, explores the interactive dynamics of online multiplayer games and the online works of fiction that are both a response to and an offshoot of these games that have taken on lives of their own. By exploring the interactive qualities of Web-Game fiction, Dr Inwood argues against those who hold that such fictions and the games that inspire them are pernicious escapes from real life. She counters "Chinese critics who employ vocabulary such as *youxihua* ('gamification' or 'ludification'), 'YY' (*yiyin* or 'mental masturbation'), and *chenmi* (absorption or addiction) to warn of the dangers of allowing one's imagination to run wild in mediated fictional worlds." Rather, she argues, Web-Game literary works are complex and at times empowering modes for processing and integrating virtual and real experiences that are "emblematic of Chinese netizens' desire to take control of their own stories within a larger contemporary reality." Drawing on ludology research and a deep knowledge of online popular culture and literature, Dr Inwood sheds light on a heretofore unstudied area.

"New Indian Stories @ the Digital Frontline," by independent scholar **Laurel Steele**, explores several facets of the ever-evolving IT sector in India, with particular reference to how IT has changed women's lives. Whether Dr Steele is writing about women doctors working at night transcribing surgical procedures in Pennsylvania in real time, the economically precarious and socially isolated lives of the brides of Indian IT workers in the US, about a best-selling novel about IT workers, or about sexual assaults against female call-center workers, she brings first-hand knowledge as well as research and analysis. Steele's approach includes personal anecdotes that provide information and rich detail. By focusing on the social changes stemming from Indian women's involvement from the perspective of women in particular, Steele bridges the study of IT in India with that of the status of women there.

In “Chinese Literature in Translation after the Digital Turn,” **Jonathan Stalling** of the University of Oklahoma ponders the implications that a digital archive that collects the work of translators of Chinese literature will have for the situation of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in world literature. Arguing that “Continental Theory” and the linguistic turn have done much to marginalize translated literature, Dr Stalling proposes to make Chinese literature in translation accessible to scholars outside of Sinology by rendering transparent the process by which these works are brought into being. By enabling researchers and other readers to trace the complex sequences of linguistic and cultural decisions and multiple esthetic and ethical threads encountered by the translator along the way, Stalling lays out how the archive can bring them closer to something that had previously appeared indecipherable.

Hui Faye Xiao reviews Jin Feng’s study of online Romance fiction, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*. Xiao describes Web Romance as “doubly marginalized” (because its audience is primarily female and online publications lack the prestige of traditional books) and praises the author for paying serious attention to the genre. She highlights the author’s exploration of the implications of Web Romance for attitudes towards gender in light of its “gender bending” qualities and remaking of concepts such as Mr Right, along with a more open minded attitude towards homosexuality. In addition, Xiao offers a thoughtful discussion of the book’s strengths along with a few suggestions for improvement.

“Self-Reflection in the Tub: Japanese Bathing Culture, Identity, and Cultural Nationalism,” written by Masters in Asia Pacific Studies student **Lesley Wynn**, is a well organized and clearly presented overview of the relationship between Japanese bathing culture and cultural identity. Ms Wynn consults a variety of materials and assembles a brief cultural history of the Japanese bath, from early times until the present day. The diverse sources consulted for this paper include a fictional portrayal from the late Edo period, nineteenth-century Western accounts, semantic analysis, and works by leading anthropologists.

On behalf of the editorial committee, I hope that readers will find this issue of *Asia Pacific Perspectives* both informative and enjoyable to read.

Andrea Lingenfelter
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What's in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web-Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction

Heather Inwood, *University of Manchester*

Abstract

This paper uses a genre of online Chinese popular fiction known as Web-Game fiction as an entry point for exploring the influence of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) on linear narrative fiction. By offering a thick description of MMORPG gameplay and of gamers' movements between online and offline worlds, Web-Game fiction narrates and "deinteractivates" the subjective experiences of players as they progress through the levels of online role-playing games. This essay proposes that the genre offers an alternative perspective on transmedia production strategies in Chinese popular culture and on the nature of immersion in online environments, often viewed in negative terms by Chinese critics who employ vocabulary such as *youxihua* ("gamification" or "ludification"), "YY" (*yi yin*, or "mental masturbation"), and *chenmi* (absorption or addiction) to warn of the dangers of allowing one's imagination to run wild in mediated fictional worlds. By reading one novel from the perspectives of transmedia storytelling, remediation, and affective involvement in digital games, I suggest that Web-Game fiction is emblematic of Chinese netizens' desire to take control of their own stories within a larger contemporary reality, the rules and parameters of which lie beyond any individual control.

Keywords: Chinese Internet fiction, online games, *youxihua*, transmedia storytelling, immersion, YY

Introduction

The massive popularity of both gaming and narrative fiction on the mainland Chinese Internet is beyond doubt. Statistics released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that online games (*wangluo youxi* or *wangyou*) currently rank as the seventh most popular online activity with a user base of over 338 million by January 2014, equivalent to 54.7% of China's approximately 617 million-strong Internet population.¹ Since Chinese literature websites moved toward a pay-to-read model of online publishing in the early-to-mid 2000s, Internet literature (*wangluo wenxue*) has developed into a multimillion-dollar industry, worth 600 million RMB in 2011 and forecast to reach over 3 billion RMB in 2014.² According to CNNIC, the creation and consumption of literature is the eleventh most prevalent activity on the Chinese Internet, with a utilization rate of 44.4% and a population of over 274 million users at the end of 2013. On web-enabled mobile phones, games and literature rank as the sixth and seventh most popular applications after instant messaging, news, search, music, and video, with utilization rates of 43.1% and 40.5%, respectively.³

In recent years, the kinds of entertainment offered by online games and fiction have met with a range of critical responses from China's cultural elite, with some critics suggesting that they offer little more than lowbrow escapism from real-life responsibilities, and others expressing concern that the moral ambiguity present in genres such as Fantasy fiction could mean that its authors

and readers have become numb towards the “value vacuum” that characterizes today’s “era of cynicism.”⁴ Both the frequently censorious attitudes of cultural scholars working within China and the tendency of researchers outside of China to focus on socio-political aspects of the Chinese Internet have meant that only recently has English-language scholarship started to appear that analyzes the rich textual content of online popular fiction and its surrounding commercial operations. This delay reflects broader trends in research on Chinese popular culture, which, as Shuyu Kong notes, has tended to emphasize the ideological messages of end products over the active roles of audiences in consuming and communicating about pop culture.⁵

The research presented in this essay can be considered a response to Kong’s assertion that there is a need to “fashion new modes of critical inquiry and to adopt a new kind of methodology for researching Chinese popular culture that refocuses attention on the communicative practices of popular masses,” including practices such as decoding, responding, interpreting, and talking back.⁶ My choice to focus on the textual relationship between web games and online popular fiction is spurred firstly by the fact that these are among the most popular yet understudied forms of entertainment in the contemporary People’s Republic of China. Web-based games and fiction share many characteristics in common and exert a constant influence on each other, due not simply to an overlap in their user base but also to growing commercial ties between publishers of fiction and China’s gaming industry. Many of the companies responsible for licensing and publishing online fiction, including Qidian (www.qidian.com), Hongxiu Tianxiang (www.hongxiu.com), and Jinjiang (www.jjwxc.net), are now owned by the same parent company, Shanda Interactive Entertainment Limited (Shengda hudong yule youxian gongsi), which is also one of China’s biggest producers of video games; the companies NetEase (Wangyi) and Tencent (Tengxun, responsible for the QQ franchise of social networking sites, forums, and online games) also own both literature and gaming subsidiaries.

While the commercial links between narrative fiction and different forms of visual culture would be worthy of enquiry in their own right, the goal of this paper is to explore textual connections between online fiction and games, focusing on how game-based experiences are incorporated into, or “remediated” through, a gaming-inspired genre of online fiction known as Web-Game fiction (*wangyou xiaoshuo*).⁷ In combining typical elements of genres such as Fantasy (*xuanhuan*), Immortal (*xianxia*), and Competition/Sporting (*jingji*) fiction with descriptions of gaming environments and gameplay styles in the web games from which it takes its name, Web-Game fiction reflects the increasingly participatory nature of popular culture production and consumption in contemporary China. It exists among a myriad of fan-produced texts and grassroots creative communities active across the Chinese Internet that have sprung up both to meet the seemingly insatiable demand for the transmedia continuation of popular narratives and fictional worlds, and to make up for the failure of much commercially produced popular culture to satisfy the true desires and ambitions of China’s media consumers.

I begin this essay with an overview of English-language scholarship on Chinese online popular fiction and Chinese-language discourse surrounding the

term *youxihua* (gamification or ludification), highlighting arguments that warn of the potentially harmful effects of immersion or escapism on those who play games or consume game-influenced popular culture. Borrowing from scholarship on transmedia storytelling and world-building, I suggest that in remediating the interactive experience of playing games in a linear narrative form—a process one scholar terms “deinteractivation”—Web-Game fiction reflects authors’ desire to assert mastery of their own destinies, both in-game and in the offline world. A close reading of one representative work of Web-Game fiction leads me to argue that while immersion in fantastical works of fiction and online role-playing games may not offer a direct route to political participation or online activism of the kind examined in research by Guobin Yang, Yongming Zhou, and others, significant changes are nonetheless afoot in the ways in which Chinese netizens relate to others and make sense of their lives by narrating and incorporating different planes of fictional realities.⁸ Such developments may have more broad-ranging implications for the impact of information and communication technologies on Chinese popular culture as well as for the human quest for meaning in an ever more mediatized world.

Research on Internet Fiction and *youxihua*

Early scholarship on Chinese Internet literature focused primarily on the community functions of literary websites and the relationship between online literature and “high” culture.⁹ In more recent articles, scholars have begun to answer Michel Hockx’s call for a production-oriented approach to studying Internet literature, focusing in particular on the production of online narrative fiction.¹⁰ Xinkai Huang, for example, examines Chinese online Fantasy fiction, arguing that writers and readers produce content that satisfies their shared interests, such as the desire to transcend China’s political and socio-economic realities through the collective imagination of fantasy worlds.¹¹ Elaine Jing Zhao focuses on the monetization of China’s biggest Web 2.0 literature website, Qidian, remarking that involvement in the extended communities or “virtual worlds” inhabited by authors and readers results in the “line between the virtual and the real” becoming “fuzzy,” a critique echoed in much Chinese-language criticism of online fiction.¹² In another recent article on the changes brought about by Qidian to the Chinese literary field, Shih-chen Chao highlights the escapist nature of much online literary prosumption (a conflation of the words production and consumption), arguing that readers are drawn to stories with exciting plots that take them to imaginary worlds in which “anything can happen” as a way to “escape the harsh reality and repetitive daily routine of being human pawn in an aggressively industrialized/capitalistic society like today’s China.”¹³

In her research on the Romance genre of Chinese Internet literature, Jin Feng adopts the kind of audience-focused or fan-centered approach to online fiction that Shuyu Kong laments has typically been missing from Chinese popular culture studies.¹⁴ Rather than the “cultural dopes” implied by researchers who adopt a top-down, ideological approach to the production and reception of pop culture, female authors and fans of web-based romance novels are highly active readers and creators, employing popular fiction as a means of engaging in activities such as social satire and female identity construction, and in the

process blazing new pathways to literary success.¹⁵ Feng notes how online popular fiction is characterized by its incorporation of heterogeneous influences from other media and texts.¹⁶ Online games represent just one of the many media of inspiration of Internet fiction, alongside television shows, films, manga, international works of popular fiction, and so on. She offers a literal translation of *wangyou xiaoshuo* as “Web Travel” fiction, citing it as an example of the close collaboration between fiction and games being pioneered by companies like Shanda Interactive Entertainment in an attempt to lure younger technologically savvy readers to online literature.

Although the field of game studies (also known as ludology) is still in its infancy in the PRC, scholars there have begun to observe the widespread influences of digital games within contemporary Chinese culture. One term that is regularly employed in discussions of online games and their textual offshoots is *youxihua*, a neologism that literally means “turning into a game” and can be directly translated into English as either gamification or ludification. Scholars have adopted this term to explain developments occurring within the arts, the entertainment industry, and online popular culture more specifically. Shang Hui, for example, uses *youxihua* to explain the transformation of art from an educational medium into what he describes as “the entertainment-style concerns of aesthetic leisure,” while others analyze signs of gamification in online subcultures and the spread of counterfeit (*shanzhai*) television shows and films across the Internet.¹⁷

According to Tao Wenwen, a playful or game-like spirit (*youxi jingshen*) can be detected in films that ignore historical reality and the logics of real life, creating a narrative ideal (*xushi lixiang*) and postmodern artistic quality that acts in opposition toward high or elite culture. Tao employs his understanding of “gamified characteristics” (*youxihua tezheng*) to demonstrate how certain Chinese films—such as the 2004 romantic comedy *Waiting Alone* (Duzi dengdai), directed by Dayyan Eng (Wu Shixian) and the 2001 film *The Marriage Certificate* (Shei shuo wo bu zaihu?), directed by Huang Jianxin—tell stories in a fragmented, illogical, and non-linear way, making heavy use of montage and presenting “absurd,” “gamified” cinematic narratives.¹⁸ There seems to be something illogical here in Tao’s depiction as “gamified” of what is still, ultimately, a linear narrative presented in cinematic form under the sole control of the film’s producers. Playful, rather than gamified, may be a better English rendering of a concept that aims more at conveying the deconstructive mentality of certain film directors than any interactive, game-like approach to telling stories and engaging audiences in innovative ways through the cinematic medium.

Exploring a more philosophical understanding of *youxihua*, Xie Shenghua suggests that a “gamified aesthetic” (*youxihua shenmei*) rooted in emotional experience and intuition is a defining characteristic of Chinese popular culture in the new media age.¹⁹ One of the principle manifestations of a gamified aesthetic, he suggests, is the phenomenon known as “surrounding and observing” or the “surrounding gaze” (*weiguan*), a key feature of Chinese Internet culture, in which an online public gathers around a particular issue, spectacle, or event.²⁰ Hu Yong has noted that what was once an attitude of cold indifference along the lines of Lu Xun’s early twentieth-century depictions of the “culture of the gaze” (*kanke*

wenhua) has, in the age of the Internet, developed into a more positive form of public participation in which even the smallest expressions of opinions can “add up to a great deal.”²¹ According to Xie, surrounding and observing can be considered a means of participating in a game, with “game” understood in broad terms as entertainment that encompasses complex relationships among people, between people and nature, and between people and society. The typical gaming mindset is one that may appear relaxed on the outside but contains tensions within as gamers grapple with the “unbearable heaviness of living.”²² Like others who refer to *youxihua* in their discussions of game-like trends in popular culture, Xie shies away from defining “gamification” or games as a cultural category, using the term instead to illuminate a general shift in Chinese culture away from the pursuit of truth and beauty toward the expression of concrete aesthetics (*shenmei de juxianghua*) and perceptual experiences (*ganxing tiyan*).

Huang Fayou, one of a handful of scholars to have written about *youxihua* in Chinese Internet literature, identifies two main forms. The first is the tendency of online novels to emphasize their entertainment and gaming functions, evident in a trend toward a “light-hearted, mocking, amusing” writing style and the incorporation of “multimedia artistic techniques” into genres of Chinese fiction that have been popular since the Republican era (such as Romance, Martial Arts, Detective, and Science Fiction). The second refers to the mutual influence between online fiction and games, which manifests in the interactions between characters, plot, form, and structure. Huang adopts a markedly critical attitude toward the latter, arguing that

in terms of style, online genre fiction and games are pretty much the same across the board, standing out for their low quality and repetition, immersing themselves in the vulgar process of killing monsters and moving up the levels. Not only are they full of commercial elements such as violence and sex, they have also lost all historical-cultural and aesthetic content.²³

The moralizing argument on display here is a clear remnant of the traditional Chinese belief that literature’s primary responsibility is to educate, reflect reality, or “convey the way” (*wen yi zai dao*). Huang’s critique hinges upon his use of the term *chenmi*. There are several Chinese equivalents of the English word “immersion” as it applies to the experience of playing online games, including the relatively neutral *dairugan*, literally “the feeling of standing in [for the protagonist],” and *chenjin’gan*, or “the feeling of being immersed/absorbed.” The word *chenmi*, meaning “immersed and enthralled/lost,” carries the negative connotation of “absorption that cannot be helped”—or addiction. It regularly appears in discourse on Internet addiction, the dangers of which have been widely publicized in media reports on addiction-related deaths and crimes in the mid-2000s.²⁴

Huang proceeds to warn that “confusion between the virtual and the real world is a psychological trap from which those who are immersed in games have difficulty escaping.” He shares with other observers of *youxihua* an awareness of the broader transformations underway in contemporary Chinese culture, in which entertainment, leisure, and moneymaking have supplanted traditional cultural ideals of education and moral enlightenment. What all the above-mentioned critics fail to address, however, are the deeper structural changes occurring in the production and consumption of culture. One stand-out feature

of online fiction that has received scant treatment in English- or Chinese-language research is the way in which it remediates texts taken from other media such as films, television shows, and games, and in turn spurs further remediation back into these media forms, as when the online Fantasy novel *Legend of Immortals* (Xingchenbian) by I Eat Tomatoes (Wo Chi Xihongshi) was adapted into a popular MMORPG of the same name. As Jin Feng notes in her research on Romance fiction, a large proportion of online novels can be broadly considered Fan fiction (*tongren xiaoshuo*) in that they take inspiration from and expand upon the narratives and fictional worlds contained in existing texts that span a wide range of cultures, media, and time periods.²⁵ Although David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that all media work through a process of remediation, Web-Game fiction is especially transparent in its attempt to recreate the experience of playing games through the medium of online literature and is thus worth examining in more detail.²⁶

Henry Jenkins' ideas about transmedia storytelling can help us understand how specific texts can "spread" across media, for example from a film into a video game or from a novel into a television drama, and from there into fan-produced comics and literature. In two blog posts published in 2009, Jenkins built upon his earlier work on "textual poaching," fandom and gaming, and convergence culture to put forward his "Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling": "spreadability" versus "drillability," continuity versus multiplicity, immersion versus extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance.²⁷ While the expansion of fictional worlds through fan creation and cross-media promotional strategies is nothing new to global culture, the participatory nature of new media technologies has increased the opportunities for fans to get involved in the telling of stories, in many cases extending the fictional reach of preexisting cultural texts well beyond what was ever imagined possible by their original creators.²⁸

Viewed on the level of the medium rather than a specific text, Web-Game fiction can be understood as a form of transmedia storytelling in that it expands and extends the experience of playing web games into the medium of narrative fiction, remediating the interactive, player-controlled medium of games into the non-interactive medium of author-controlled linear text. Conceptualizing Web-Game fiction as a form of transmedia storytelling throws up some interesting questions about the relationship between games and narrative, already broached in work by game studies researchers, such as: To what extent can games be viewed through a narrative lens—is narrative the best tool for explaining what happens in the minds of gamers as they navigate their way through interactive game worlds? Secondly, and relatedly, what happens to audiences' subjective experience of gameplay when it is, to use the terminology of Mark Wolf, described and "deinteractivated" through the linear narratives of online Chinese popular novels? Finally, what implications do such forms of transmedia storytelling have for Chinese popular culture and the lives of its media-savvy producers and consumers?

Web-Game Fiction

Web-Game fiction is a broad category of writings that can be traced back to the popularity of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Domains, referring to text-based multiplayer virtual worlds) in China in the late 1990s. It has since developed into a major genre of Chinese Internet fiction that contains a number of sub-genres based on the type of gameplay, technology, setting, gender of the player-protagonists, and so on.²⁹ According to the Baidu Wiki entry on the genre, its popularity can be explained by the desire of gamers to explore the mythology surrounding their favorite online game and to experience things in writing that they cannot achieve within the game itself, such as reaching the top of the leader board.³⁰ In narrating the experiences of gamers as they move through a real (*shizaixing*) or imaginary (*xugouxing*) game, Web-Game fiction fosters an intertextual and mutually beneficial relationship with online games themselves, spurring readers to spend more time playing games to develop the skills they have read about in fiction and, in turn, giving game designers inspiration for new types of games to create.³¹ Most novels narrate the in-game adventures of a male protagonist, charting his progress through the levels as he earns money and weapons, wins over the hearts of female gamers, and establishes himself as the undisputed champion of the game. This plot type, known as the “game career type” (*youxi shengyalei*), tends to be goal-oriented and predictable, allowing the virtual fulfillment of the heterosexual male gamer’s every subjective desire.

One representative work of Web-Game fiction, examined below, is the hit novel *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* (Wangyou zhi zongheng tianxia), written by Fallen Leaf (Shiluo Ye) and serialized on the pay-to-read VIP section of the literature website 17K over the course of nineteen months in 2009 and 2010.³² *Traversing the Universe* is the second in a series of three popular Web-Game novels by Fallen Leaf and the first to bring widespread fame for its author after it topped the weekly popularity charts on 17K. It is now listed on many Internet forums and literature websites as a classic work of Web-Game fiction, and in late 2013 was still ranked as the thirtieth most searched-for complete work of Chinese Internet fiction on Baidu.com.³³

The novel follows the adventures of a young man called Ding Shusheng, a typical “loser” (*diaosi*) and impoverished online gamer who has the good fortune of rescuing a beautiful drunken woman outside his home one night. While she sleeps, Shusheng uses the virtual-reality headset he discovers poking out of her bag to gain illicit entry into the world’s hottest new MMORPG, a fictional game called Lingtong that is on the verge of being released to the general public. Like many MMORPGs, Lingtong features a variety of guilds, races, weapons, and skills, along with endless levels to ascend and “bosses” (Artificial-Intelligence-controlled monsters) to kill in the pursuit of experience, weaponry, money, and fame. Once inside the game, Shusheng names his avatar Frivolous Scholar (Qingkuang Shusheng) and begins to accumulate points and allies, rising through the ranks and engaging in fights with gamers who resent his success. He often plays alongside the woman whose headset he first used to enter Lingtong, a beautiful swordswoman named Clear Breeze Flying Snow (Qingfeng Feixue), or Lingxue in real life. Shusheng and Lingxue later fall in love, their romance developing alongside a number of ambiguous relationships with other female

characters who also appear in the course of the novel. Lingxue's twin sister, another talented gamer known as Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon (Qingfeng Lanyue) or Lingyue, happens to manage a gaming company, Blue Star (Lanxing), that later employs Shusheng to earn money within the game (a form of labor known as "gold-farming").³⁴

Partly in response to the chauvinistic or "stud" (*zhongma*, a genre of popular fiction that features one man and countless women) overtones of much male-authored Web-Game fiction, a sub-genre of female Web-Game fiction (*nüsheng wangyou xiaoshuo*) has also emerged online. Such novels tend to focus less on the upward trajectory of the protagonist's in-game adventures and more on interpersonal relationships inside and outside of the game, in particular romances between female protagonists and male gamers. The in-game environment, thus, functions less as an alternative universe in which the characters' exploits take place than as a background setting to the real-world romance between a female protagonist and her male admirer(s) that develops simultaneously within and outside of the game. One work often cited as a classic of female Web-Game fiction is *Weiwei's Stunning Smile* (*Weiwei yi xiao hen qingcheng*) by the female author Gu Man, part of which was published in print by Jiangsu Publishing House in 2009, after its serialization began on the literature website Jinjiang in 2008.³⁵ *Weiwei's Stunning Smile* offers a humorous depiction of the social interactions between a gamer and her friends and competitors; its frequent use of Internet slang such as the character *jiong* (an open-mouthed reaction to any stupefying situation) and hilarious insights into the psyche of a female gamer likely helps explain its status as a stand-out example of the genre.

Aside from its obvious indebtedness to MMORPGs, another feature of Web-Game fiction that deserves mentioning is its length. Most Chinese Internet novels are serialized in daily or weekly installments over the course of months or years and many end up running to several million characters long. This recalls similar practices in early-twentieth-century China, when the commercialization of the printing industry and the spread of the vernacular-literature movement of the 1910s and 1920s spurred the growth of commercial popular fiction, which became collectively known as the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School (*Yuanyang hudiepai*). Butterfly fiction was vilified by intellectuals at the time for its apparent lack of social concern, simplistic themes, and embrace of "low" cultural tastes at the same time as it was hungrily devoured by a growing audience of predominantly urban residents. Perry Link estimates the average length of a Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies novel of the Republican Era (1911–49) at 100,000 words or 200 pages, but notes that some works stretched much longer. Li Shoumin's Martial Arts (*wuxia*) novel *Swordsmen of the Sichuan Hills* (*Shushan jianxia*), for example, contained 357 chapters and 3.7 million Chinese characters.³⁶

At 4.6 million characters and 1173 chapters in length, *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* would have been considered relatively long by the standards of early-twentieth-century serialized popular fiction, but is by no means unusual among Chinese Internet novels, particularly those that loosely fall within the category of Fantasy fiction. As well as ranking novels according to their number of subscribers (*yuepiao*), recommendations (*tuijian*), "hits" (*dianji*), and bookmarks (*shoucang*), Qidian also keeps track of the number of characters, suggesting that

length is a similarly desirable characteristic. In early 2014, the longest novel on Qidian was a Web-Game novel titled *Starting from Zero* (Cong ling kaishi) by Thundercloud Storm (Leiyun Fengbao), still in the midst of its serialization at chapter 418 and at over sixteen million characters into the narrative.³⁷ All of the top-ten longest novels on Qidian's charts exceeded ten million characters, and even the highest-ranking novel on the list of works with the most monthly subscribers, a work of Web-Game fiction titled *Full-Time Expert* (Quanzhi gaoshou) by Butterfly Blue (Hudie Lan), contained nearly five million words.

For readers of Internet fiction who encounter these novels during the course of their serialization, their length serves as an invitation to become immersed in an ongoing narrative whose twists and turns can be experienced concurrently with other readers and fans, with the possibility of sharing one's subjective reactions in the comments sections that accompany each novel and on community forums. The economic need of authors to win readers' paid subscriptions and value-enhancing recommendations for as long as possible partly explains the epic lengths to which so many Internet novels stretch. It also accounts for the phenomenon known in Internet slang as "eunuchs" (*taijian*): novels that stretch on for so long that their authors eventually give up writing them, thus leaving them with "nothing down below" (*xiamian meiyoule*). As one of Jenkins' seven principles of transmedia storytelling, seriality is an indispensable means of strengthening audience investment in a story, distinguished in the case of transmedia productions (as opposed to single-channel works like a television soap opera or long-running comic series) by the dispersal of chunks of story information across multiple media systems.³⁸ If Web-Game fiction is to be understood as a transmedia adaptation of the subjective experiences of players of MMORPGs, then lengthy serialization, too, is an important means of remediating the sensation of being immersed over prolonged periods of time in a highly absorbing web game.

Remediated Gameplay

As Mark Wolf argues, the concept of transmediality suggests that "we are vicariously experiencing something which lies beyond the media windows through which we see and hear it."³⁹ All media make use of the five basic elements of words, images, sounds, interactions, and objects in their construction of "windows" through which we experience a fictional world. When one medium is remediated through another, these elements are transformed through processes of description (adaptation into words), visualization (adaptation into images or objects), auralization (adaptation into sounds), interactivation (adaptation into interactive media), and deinteractivation (adaptation from interactive into noninteractive media).⁴⁰ In Web-Game fiction, the processes at work are description and deinteractivation: the images, sounds, physical hardware, and interactive processes that comprise online role-playing games must all be represented in the form of words alone, arranged in a fixed linear form. Deinteractivation requires the removal of any element of choice when entering the game world, as readers of Web-Game fiction have no control over what the protagonist does next, unless they attempt to influence the author in the comments sections of literary websites while the novel is being

serialized. Description, therefore, is key to enhancing readers' sense of subjective involvement and investment in the psyche and experiences of the (usually) first-person narrator.

One feature of MMORPGs described in great detail in Web-Game fiction is the player-protagonists' linear ascent through increasingly difficult levels of experience or gameplay, a feature that is also closely linked to the seriality of online fiction, one of Jenkins' principles of transmedia storytelling. In *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe*, most chapters consist of the characters "practicing the levels" or "grinding" (*lianji*), a repetitive everyday activity aimed not only at moving up the leaderboard but also at accumulating experience and points to strengthen their overall gaming prowess. Chapters often end with the main protagonist, Shusheng, killing or on the verge of killing a boss and begin with his movement into a different area of the game world where fresh challenges await. His acquisition of new weapons, equipment, and skills, and the gradual development of closer relationships with fellow gamers also lift the level of play and lead to ever more thrilling, high-stake situations. Here is an extract from chapter 709, in which Shusheng and Lingxue are discussing an international competition for players of the game Lingtong:

"I've heard that the offline prize for the overall winner of the WSL competition is extremely generous and actually includes real-life magical weapons."

"Yeah, the levels prize is not bad either – if I become champion then I can progress ahead of time to level 255, at which point the system will give me a super big prize!"

"Oh! What prize is that?"

"It might be a weapon of the gods, or a super-magical tool, or maybe an ancient mystical weapon or something."

"Could it be the Axe of Pangu, the Sword of Xuanyuan, or some ancient mythical weapon like that?"

"Who knows, we can but hope!"

As games are by nature competitive, almost all the methods of moving up the levels in Web-Game fiction involve engaging in competition and conflict with other gamers. In this particular chapter, Shusheng and Lingxue proceed to embark on yet another violent PK (Player Kill) battle with a group of female gamers, taking great satisfaction in their bloody victory.⁴¹

Social interactions between characters in Web-Game fiction are defined by the gnarly nature of the competition presented by MMORPGs as well as the need to collaborate with other players in order to gain a sense of in-game community and to advance through the levels at a faster rate than might otherwise be possible. Relationships, as a result, alternate between strictly competitive or cooperative modes of interaction, with other characters serving either to aid or to hinder the protagonist's journey through the game. They are further categorized into two groups depending on whether they exist solely within the fictional world of the game that is described within the narrative ("non-player characters" or NPCs) or within both the everyday world and the fictional world ("player characters" or PCs). Characters who act as a hindrance usually meet with a sticky end, dying after a vicious bout of PK. Competitors often make an appearance in clans (*jiazu*), bonded by an offline connection or shared sense of purpose, such as unsettling Shusheng's position as one of Lingtong's top players in *Traversing*

the Universe. One such group of rival players known as the Disdaining the World Clan (*Aoshi Jiazhu*) pops up at regular intervals throughout the novel, concocting ever more determined strategies for defeating Shusheng and his group of friends but failing in every case.

In situations where the protagonist can benefit from the company or experience of others, he or she will enter into cooperative relationships with other gamers that either take the form of a fixed team that works together throughout the novel or manifest themselves in temporary agreements between gamers who cooperate on a specific challenge or spend a few hours “grinding” the levels together. Shusheng is especially fond of cooperating with beautiful female players, some of whom apparently see in him an opportunity to gain experiences and skills to which they would not otherwise have access. In other instances, Shusheng teams up with more experienced female gamers in order to enhance his standing within the game. As a result of his in-game interactions with Lingtong’s early leader Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon/Lingyue, Shusheng becomes the beneficiary of her more advanced skills and knowledge, allowing him to rise more rapidly through the levels. At one point in chapters 42 and 43 of the novel, he joins forces with all three of the female gamers with whom he has been interacting up to this point: the two Clear Breeze twins, and another female gamer called Purple Rhymes (Zi Yun'er):

In less than an hour we had managed to wipe the haunted temple clean of all its monsters and couldn't help remarking on just how vicious we were when working as a team. In just a short space of time Purple Rhymes had already advanced another level, bringing her up to level 32, Lingxue had advanced to level 34, I had long since reached level 35, and Lingyue had retained her status as the highest level gamer among us, having advanced to level 37!

Shusheng’s relationship with his female companions becomes a central theme in the narrative. *Traversing the Universe* ends with an offline reunion in a teahouse between Shusheng, the sisters, and another female friend named Iced Tea (Bingcha), who had disappeared for six months while she built up a successful national business running teahouses: she just so happens to be the owner of the particular teahouse where the characters had arranged, in-game, to meet. By this point, Shusheng and the Clear Breeze twins have achieved every goal they had set out to achieve within Lingtong, and the game itself has descended into an anarchic state of warfare, with new monsters on the loose and battles breaking out between players in the United States- and China-based servers of the game. Shusheng’s reaction upon discovering that Iced Tea is the owner of the teahouse suggests that human relationships are at the heart of his long-running commitment to life within the game: “Her soft body pushed into my chest and a familiar light scent wafted over me. I barely needed to look to know who it was, and couldn’t help crying out in happy surprise: ‘Iced Tea, you ... what are you doing here?’”

In competitive and cooperate modes of social interaction alike, most genres of Chinese Internet fiction tend to focus overwhelmingly on the subjective desires and experiences of the first person narrator and/or main protagonist, rarely if ever describing the action from the point of view of another character or even an omniscient narrator. This effectively closes the subjective gap between the protagonist and the reader, meaning that readers experience the fictional world

entirely through the mind and body of the protagonist, similar to the experience of playing First-Person Shooter games.⁴² Through this mechanism, Web-Game fiction allows its audiences the vicarious realization of subjective and frequently unrealistic desires, such as winning the friendship of the most outstanding player(s) within a certain game, becoming a global champion, or joining forces with a team of world-famous gamers like the Clear Breeze sisters. By consuming the author's imagined gameplay, in other words, readers are able to experience indirectly the player-protagonists' fictional success.

Combined with plots that are structured around the characters' ascension through the levels, this emphasis on the attainment of tangible yet lofty goals suggests a mode of writing known in Chinese as "YY" (also written *waiwai*). YY is the abbreviation of *yiyin*, a term originating in Cao Xueqin's classic Qing dynasty novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hongloumeng) that translates loosely as "lust of the mind" or "lust of intention," and which might be rendered in more contemporary language as "mental masturbation" or "mental porn."⁴³ In Internet slang, what has been described as a "semi-erotic" or "semi-chaste" ambiguity in Jia Baoyu's dreams of girls has come to refer to any creative expression of imaginative desires.⁴⁴ YY is no longer limited to sexual lust, but includes any kind of self-centered fantasy that can be constructed in the mind but less easily enacted in everyday life, such as flying, time travel, rebirth, or becoming a deity and ruling over the universe. There is some parallel here with the concept of the "Mary Sue" (or in male-centered works, "Marty Stu") character in English-language fan fiction, an idealized figure who is assumed to be a stand-in for the author and thus a means of enabling wish fulfillment through fiction-writing.⁴⁵ Although Mary Sue writings are often discussed in pejorative terms, scholars have suggested that their idealized characters serve as a symbol of subaltern critique and a means of empowerment for their authors.⁴⁶

Chinese critics have suggested that YY is the defining characteristic of all Chinese Internet fiction and can be traced back to such classic novels as Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*) and, more recently, the twentieth-century martial-arts fiction of Jin Yong.⁴⁷ Song Shoufu notes that the current parameters of YY discourse are extremely broad, covering hopes, yearnings, dreams, daydreams, acts of voyeurism, and shameless showing off.⁴⁸ The theme of dreaming is picked up upon in readers' explanations of why they like to read Web-Game fiction: as one fan puts it, "The imaginative story content of Web-Game fiction makes it stand out among popular fiction; the best Web-Game novels I have read differ from the magical powers and chaotic gods of Fantasy fiction in that they are like a beautiful dream, a dream that is logical and worth revisiting."⁴⁹

The dreamily self-indulgent YY nature of much Web-Game fiction relates closely to the issue of subjectivity in popular fiction and role-playing games. According to Gordon Calleja, human subjectivity is one of the trickier problems facing game-studies theorists: a game, after all, only becomes a game when it interacts with human minds, before which it is little more than "a set of rules and game props awaiting human engagement."⁵⁰ The need to maximize audience engagement by decreasing the subjective distance between players and their gaming environments has been at the heart of discussions of player involvement

in video games and is often described using the concept of “immersion.” Research on immersion is also dogged by conflicting definitions of the term and its conflation with related concepts such as involvement, engagement, and presence.⁵¹ Muddying matters further is the fact that immersion is variously seen by critics and industry insiders as a positive commercial strategy for strengthening player commitment to games and an emblem of the kind of escapism that some believe endangers gamers—and consumers of popular culture more generally—by weakening their grasp on “reality.”

According to Calleja and other scholars, the escapist understanding of immersion, common in Chinese-language discussions of *youxihua* and YY trends in popular culture and online literature, is premised on a false assumption that virtual environments exist in a dichotomous relationship with “an external real.” It tends to be put forward by those who lack an understanding of the specific features of digital games as well as a solid theoretical grasp of what escapism entails.⁵² In response to such critiques, Calleja proposes a “player involvement model” for digital games that emphasizes the six dimensions of kinesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, shared involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and ludic involvement.⁵³ This model has similarities with Wolf’s description of the three metaphors of immersion, absorption, and saturation in popular culture. Absorption, Wolf argues, differs from immersion in that it denotes a two-way process: at the same time as users are “pulled into” a fictional world by opening a book or interacting with a game, they also absorb and construct the world in their own imaginations. Saturation occurs when the secondary or fictional world occupies so much mental space that it crowds out awareness of the immediate “primary world.”⁵⁴ As a kind of YY fiction that describes an idealized experience of MMORPG gameplay, Web-Game novels encourage the affective involvement or absorption of readers in narrations of the gameplay experience, urging them to identify with the first-person protagonist whose fictional adventures they are consuming.

A further characteristic of Web-Game fiction that reflects its remediation of online gaming culture is the way that it allows characters to move between multiple realities or different planes of a single reality, a defining experience of people who spend their lives shifting between online and offline worlds. These movements occur when characters enter and exit the persistent world of the game in question by donning a headset or using a computer keyboard. As such, the boundaries between the fictional (in Wolf’s terminology, the secondary) game world and the (primary) offline world, while tangible, are easily permeable by characters within the novel. Meanwhile, the narrative blurs the boundaries further by letting the player-protagonist’s physical needs such as hunger or tiredness impinge on his or her performance within the game and by incorporating vivid descriptions of physiological and affective reactions to stimuli within the game.

In chapter seven of *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe*, for example, Shusheng suffers a minor injury while fighting a “fire bat” (*huoyan bianfu*), a level-five monster: “The fire bat suddenly flew at me in a vicious assault and my body felt a pang of pain: I glanced at my blood levels, and was surprised to see that the poison had only cost me 24 points!” Shusheng’s life outside of

the game, by contrast, is relatively unremarkable, characterized mainly by brief periods of sleep, washing and eating, and offline social interactions with fellow gamers that advance the overarching plot of the novel. Of course, it must also be noted that the primary (offline) and secondary (in-game) levels of reality that make up Shusheng's existence are both, for the readers of Web-Game fiction, fictional worlds: neither exists outside of the novel, and thus any imagination of the secondary game world should be considered what Wolf terms "subcreation within subcreated worlds."⁵⁵

Although Shusheng's social status within the game quickly becomes much higher than in his offline life, both the online/secondary and offline/primary worlds are clearly presented as belonging to the same overarching reality. This is evidenced, for example, by the increased respect that he earns from his colleagues in the gaming company, Lanxing, as he progresses through the levels of the game. Throughout the novel, it is apparent that the characters see no contradiction between the world contained within Lingtong and the physical reality that they must confront between stretches of gameplay. While absorbed within the game, the characters are adept at moving between different forms of media such as Internet forums, video-sharing sites, and the various screens and means of communication (on-screen statistics, private messaging services, and so on) built into the game. In the course of the novel, gossip regarding Shusheng and his relationship with the Clear Breeze sisters regularly surfaces on Internet forums dedicated to Lingtong and affects their reputations and battles within the game; Shusheng, in turn, gains insights into his rival gamers by watching video clips that are covertly recorded within the game before being circulated among fans on forums and other websites.

This question of how to negotiate and move between different levels or planes of reality can, again, be illuminated by the concept of "affective involvement" that Calleja uses to counter the claims of some critics that video games offer little more than trivial escapism from one emotional state or environment to another, more favorable state.⁵⁶ While "escapism" is often thought to imply a willful fleeing from a less than ideal point of departure, affective involvement emphasizes instead the role of the imagination in playing games and consuming media, allowing gamers to simultaneously maintain an awareness of past experiences and future possibilities, or the world they have just exited and the one in which they are currently immersed. Ultimately, what players achieve as a result of their involvement in video games is not escapism but incorporation, whereby players assimilate the game environment into their consciousness at the same time as they are incorporated into the environment through the actions of their avatar. While Calleja explicitly states that his definition of incorporation precludes its application to non-ergodic (i.e., non-interactive) media such as books or films, I hope to have shown how Web-Game fiction demonstrates, through its descriptive remediation of online role-playing games, that the successful incorporation of online and offline environments and identities is a central part of many Chinese media consumers' experience of life in a media-saturated world.⁵⁷

Conclusion

In a postscript to the novel *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* that was posted on 17K upon its completion in 2010, Fallen Leaf reminisces upon his experiences of playing online games and writing Web-Game fiction:

Time spent playing games is always so beautiful and nostalgic that it is only when you suddenly stop and turn around that you realize you are no longer the ignorant youth who was once lost [*chenmi*] within the game. It seems that a man approaching the age of thirty should not be so absorbed [*chenjin*] by that immature dream. But *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* fulfilled my dream of many years, and for that I am immensely grateful! ... *Traversing the Universe* is a dream, but also an undying classic within my heart! ... It is time to end. As I type out those characters, I suddenly feel full of reluctance: reluctant to give up those many characters who live within my heart and reluctant to leave that web-game dream that made us all so infatuated [*chimi*]. But end it must, as life must go on.

Fallen Leaf's comments here betray a contradiction. On the one hand, he feels pressured to leave behind the worlds of online gaming and Web-Game fiction, which he describes as both an "immature dream" and a "Web-Game dream," as playing games—and writing fiction about them—is, apparently, an inappropriate pastime for a man approaching his fourth decade of life. At the same time, he is filled with nostalgia for the imaginary world that he created within his novel and believes that he has achieved things by writing that might have been impossible by any other means. After producing 4.6 million characters and turning into a more famous Internet author in the process, Fallen Leaf has become "a man." Although he has realized his dreams by authoring popular fiction and immersing himself within a self-created secondary world that keeps him in its affective grip, part of his newfound maturity seems to lie in his acknowledgement that "real life" ultimately exists somewhere beyond the game.

For writers and readers alike, Internet novels like the Web-Game fiction explored in this article offer an imaginary space in which they can vicariously experience thrilling, challenging circumstances both fantastical, such as killing monsters or being attacked by fiery bats, and more quotidian, such as negotiating relationships with a number of women or balancing the demands of a "real-life" job with the pleasures of life spent immersed within an online game. This alludes to the more active understanding of immersion or absorption proposed by scholars of fan culture and new media like Jenkins, Calleja, and Wolf. Rather than simply functioning as a form of escape from everyday life and its accompanying pressures, as suggested in existing scholarship on this topic, Internet fiction presents an opportunity to become affectively involved in imaginary worlds, requiring that readers incorporate their existing knowledge of life, culture, and what it means to be human today into the reading experience. Thus, as Calleja suggests is true of video games, it is possible that authors and readers of Internet fiction are able to find pleasure in incorporating their past experiences with those of the main protagonist of the novel that they are writing or reading.

What implications might this remediation of online role-playing games in Internet fiction have for transmedia storytelling and the position of games in Chinese popular culture? As discussed above, there remains a wary attitude among cultural critics in China regarding the effects of online gaming—and the Internet more generally—on Chinese popular culture and its consumers;

the topic of Internet addiction continues to loom large in popular media-based discussions, even as Chinese academics engage with Internet fiction from an ever broader range of perspectives and as online fiction and gaming continue to grow in popularity among China's Internet population. The growing discourse of *youxihua* reflects preliminary attempts to make sense of the impact of gaming across different media of popular culture, with Chinese scholars suggesting (perhaps misleadingly) that the term be used to explain not only the shift in contemporary Chinese culture away from the serious connotations of "art and literature" (*wenyi*) toward "the entertainment-style concerns of aesthetic leisure" but also the prevalence of films, television shows, and works of fiction that tell stories in a fragmented, playful, self-referential manner.⁵⁸

What is arguably most interesting about Web-Game fiction, however, is not the "absurd" or fragmented ways in which it tells stories, as Tao Wenwen suggests is the case for "gamified" films. Quite the contrary, its popularity demonstrates that there remains a hunger for simple yet gripping linear narratives that depict the good fortunes of their protagonists in a way that puts fun and novelty before all else. As one fan related in an Internet forum discussion in 2012:

The reason I like [reading Web-Game fiction] is because I like playing games, I've played lots of games, so when I read Web-Game fiction I'm doing so from the perspective of games. As a game, [Web-Game fiction] must have playability [*kewanxing*], that is to say it has to be fun: even if it starts off fairly ordinarily, as long as there is innovation in the plot and design then I will read it. As for whether or not it has realism and emotions I simply do not care.⁵⁹

Web-Game fiction, in short, exists as part of an evolving media landscape in which what is deemed "real," "playable," and important is increasingly in the hands of consumers and fan-producers, rather than the intellectuals and cultural critics whose voices dominated China's cultural scenes for much of the twentieth century. It suggests that more than a means of escaping reality, the Internet and the transmedia worlds its existence enables represent a valid destination in their own right. As technology continues to expand the realm of the real, it is in the imaginative writings of China's army of online authors that some of the most exciting explorations of technology's effects on human existence can be found.

Notes

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- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁵² Calleja, "Digital Games and Escapism," *Games and Culture* 5/4 (October 2010): 336.
- ⁵³ Calleja, *In-Game*, 38.
- ⁵⁴ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 49.
- ⁵⁵ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*.
- ⁵⁶ Calleja, *In-Game*, 135–36.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ⁵⁸ Shang, "Lun xiaofei shidai de yishu renwen tezheng."
- ⁵⁹ See, again, the discussion section, <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/1554332666?pid=19261876322&cid=0#19261876322>.

Glossary

Absorbed	<i>chenjin</i>	沉浸
Absorption, addiction	<i>chenmi</i>	沉迷
Art and literature	<i>wenyi</i>	文艺
Blue Star	Lanxing	蓝星
Bookmarks	<i>shoucang</i>	收藏
Butterfly Blue	Hudie Lan	蝴蝶蓝
Clans	<i>jiazu</i>	家族
Clear Breeze Flying Snow	Qingfeng Feixue (Lingxue)	清风飞雪 (凌雪)
Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon	Qingfeng Lanyue (Lingyue)	清风揽月 (凌月)
Competition / sporting	<i>jingji</i>	竞技
Concrete aesthetics	<i>shenmei de juxianghua</i>	审美的具象化
Counterfeit	<i>shanzhai</i>	山寨
Culture of the gaze	<i>kanke wenhua</i>	看客文化
Dayyan Eng	Wu Shixian	伍仕贤
Ding Shusheng	Ding Shusheng	丁舒升
Disdaining the World clan	<i>Aoshi Jiazu</i>	傲世家族
<i>Dream of the Red Chamber</i>	<i>Hongloumeng</i>	红楼梦
Eunuch	<i>taijian</i>	太监
Fallen Leaf	Shiluo Ye	失落叶
Fan fiction	<i>tongren xiaoshuo</i>	同人小说
Fantasy	<i>xuanhuan</i>	玄幻
Female Web-Game fiction	<i>niusheng wangyou xiaoshuo</i>	女生网游小说
Fire bat	<i>huoyan bianfu</i>	火焰蝙蝠
Frivolous Scholar	Qingkuang Shusheng	轻狂书生
<i>Full-Time Expert</i>	<i>Quanzhi gaoshou</i>	全职高手
Game career type	<i>youxi shengyalei</i>	游戏生涯类
Gamification	<i>youxihua</i>	游戏化
Gamified aesthetic	<i>youxihua shenmei</i>	游戏化审美
Gamified characteristics	<i>youxihua tezheng</i>	游戏化特征
Grinding	<i>lianji</i>	练级
Gu Man	Gu Man	顾漫
Hits	<i>dianji</i>	点击
Hongxiu Tianxiang	Hongxiu Tianxiang	红袖添香
Huang Jianxin	Huang Jianxin	黄建新
I Eat Tomatoes	Wo Chi Xihongshi	我吃西红柿
Iced Tea	Bingcha	冰茶
Imaginary (Web-Game fiction)	<i>xugouxing</i>	虚构型
Immortal	<i>xianxia</i>	仙侠
Infatuated	<i>chimi</i>	痴迷
Internet literature	<i>wangluo wenxue</i>	网络文学
Jinjiang	Jinjiang	晋江
<i>Journey to the West</i>	<i>Xiyouji</i>	西游记
<i>Legend of Immortals</i>	<i>Xingchenbian</i>	星辰变
Li Shoumin	Li Shoumin	李寿民
Lingtong	Lingtong	灵恸
Literature conveys the way	<i>wen yi zai dao</i>	文以载道

Loser	<i>diaosi</i>	屌丝
Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School	Yuanyang hudie pai	鸳鸯蝴蝶派
Martial arts	<i>wuxia</i>	武侠
Mental masturbation	<i>yi Yin</i>	意淫
Narrative ideal	<i>xushi lixiang</i>	叙事理想
NetEase	Wangyi	网易
Nothing down below	<i>xiamian meiyou le</i>	下面没有了
Online games	<i>wangluo youxi (wangyou)</i>	网络游戏 (网游)
Perceptual experiences	<i>ganxing tiyan</i>	感性体验
Playability	<i>kewanxing</i>	可玩性
Playful spirit	<i>youxi jingshen</i>	游戏精神
Purple Rhymes	Zi Yun'er	紫韵儿
Qidian	Qidian	起点
Real (Web-Game fiction)	<i>shizaixing</i>	实在型
Recommendations	<i>tuijian</i>	推荐
Shanda Interactive Entertainment Limited	Shengda hudong yule youxian gongsi	盛大互动娱乐有限公司
<i>Starting from Zero</i>	<i>Cong ling kaishi</i>	从零开始
Stud fiction	<i>zhongma xiaoshuo</i>	种马小说
Stupefied	<i>jiong</i>	囧
Subscribers	<i>yuepiao</i>	月票
Surrounding gaze, surrounding and observing	<i>weiguan</i>	围观
<i>Swordsmen of the Sichuan Hills</i>	<i>Shushan jianxia</i>	蜀山剑侠
Tencent	Tengxun	腾讯
The feeling of standing in	<i>dairugan</i>	代入感
<i>The Marriage Certificate</i>	<i>Shei shuo wo bu zai hu?</i>	谁说我不在乎?
Thundercloud Storm	Leiyun Fengbao	雷云风暴
<i>Waiting Alone</i> (film)	<i>Duzi dengdai</i>	独自等待
Web-Game fiction	<i>wangyou xiaoshuo</i>	网游小说
Web-Game of Traversing the Universe	Wangyou zhi zongheng tianxia	网游之纵横天下
<i>Weiwei's Stunning Smile</i>	<i>Weiwei yi xiao hen qingcheng</i>	微微一笑很倾城
Wu Cheng'en	Wu Cheng'en	吴承恩
YY	<i>waiwai</i>	歪歪

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New Indian Stories @ the Digital Frontline: Women, Work, America, and Sex

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Abstract

“New Indian Stories @ the Digital Frontline: Women, Work, America, and Sex” examines aspects of India’s experience with the digital age. While it is a commonplace to speak of a digital revolution, its specifics are rarely well delineated. Focusing on individual experiences and on the narrative portrayal of those experiences is one path to understanding the larger impact of the digital revolution. This paper begins by looking at interactions in the 1990s in Chennai (then Madras) at the beginning of Indian immigration to Silicon Valley. This first narrative should be considered as field notes from a working environment. This paper then examines the writings of Chetan Bhagat, and how his novels and the subsequent films they inspired have illuminated the new dynamics of the workplace in the digital age. Another novel, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Miss New India*, is discussed in this context. Finally, recent journalistic representations of the effect of the digital age on lived lives, particularly women’s lives, are explored. News stories of sexual violence, rape, and dangers to women workers are examined. Within these intertwined narratives from anecdotes, novels, films and news stories, two themes stand out. One theme is the increased, and deepening intimate cultural connection between India and the United States. The second theme is the sexual danger, both perceived and real, that the new Indian workplace presents to working women.

Key Words: Internet, Chetan Bhagat, digital revolution, India, call center, working women, rape

Introduction

While it is a commonplace to speak of a digital revolution in Asia, the specifics of such a revolution are not well delineated. Are we speaking of the spread of the internet or the spread of cell phones? Computer literacy or e-commerce? This paper examines aspects of India’s experience with the digital age by looking at new narratives from India. While thousands of pages have been written about the arrival of the digital age in India, this paper tries to see the picture more clearly by examining stories being told about this new universe. Focusing on individual experiences and on the portrayal of those experiences is one path to understanding any larger impact of the digital revolution. Examining three linked narratives about the digital revolution in India, and identifying similar themes in the narratives, can help us grasp some of the changes it has wrought.

The related narratives discussed in this paper form an arc from the 1990s to the present. They range from personal experience and anecdote to novels and films and then to newspaper stories. While one can approach these stories in light of theories of India’s economic reforms, the rise of the “middle class,” (a problematic category in any discussion of India because of the difficulty of defining “middle class”) or the emergence of consumer India, it was helpful at the outset just to read the stories without any particular agenda. Then, after

an initial reading, I looked for common themes in these unmediated stories of call centers, the new Indian workplace, and young Indian workers. This search brought to light repeating themes that bear examination and that suggest a larger public engagement with these themes.

The first story related here is an extended anecdote about the early call centers in Chennai (then Madras) that serviced the United States and the initial wave of young Indian men and women leaving for Silicon Valley in the 1990s. The intention of this first-person section is to provide what one can regard as field notes. This is the raw data of experience. The second narrative in the paper focuses on novels and films about call centers and young workers in the digital environment. Chetan Bhagat's runaway and unprecedented success as a novelist over the last decade as he documents, in English, the new Indian digital workplace is indicative of how powerful these stories are, and how eager his readership is to hear about themselves. The section also looks at another novel, *Miss New India*, in this context.

Finally, recent journalistic representations of the effect of the digital age on lived lives, particularly women's lives, are explored. News stories of sexual violence, rape, and dangers to women workers are examined. What links these three different narratives—personal anecdotes, novels and films, and then news stories—are the changed perceptions of the “foreign” and the continued theme of sexual violence.

The changed relationship to the “foreign” and the theme of intimacy with Americans looms large. It encompasses biz speak, the American consumer, and the desirability of marrying someone who works for Google. Increased, and deepening, cultural connections and—in the case of the Indian worker—profound frustrations with the United States stem from this shared digital universe. The second theme that emerges from these new stories is that of sexual danger and violence, and especially rape, and women workers. The Indian workplace itself has changed, of course, from the workplace of forty years ago. There was no outsourcing forty years ago—no call centers. With the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, business in India changed its character. For working women—young women, women out at night—the threat of rape loomed as old protections and behaviors have evaporated.

This paper argues that these particular stories about India's experience with the changed nature of the workplace and with call-center workers are important in understanding the political and social consequences of work in the digital universe. At the very least, it is in these stories that the workers themselves, and the society at large, see themselves.

Other Writings on Digital India

As mentioned earlier, much has been written on India's growth, economy, and use of new technologies. The subject is so vast that it welcomes any number of approaches, from purely academic assessments to more popularized accounts of change. No one author or approach can capture it all. Nonetheless, other writings often allude to the two themes that have emerged in the narratives under discussion here—of a new familiarity with the foreign and of sexual danger—though these issues may not be the focus of the analyses.

Authors usually concentrate on one or two issues, while acknowledging that other authors may have other focuses. For example, in *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (2006), Leela Fernandes notes that

On the one hand, existing analyses have either focused on estimating the size of the middle class or have pointed to the growth of such intermediate classes as a potential base of support for liberalization. On the other hand, culturally oriented research has tended to analyze the middle class through the lens of consumption, an approach that has rested on an underlying conception of the middle class as a consumerist class.¹

In her work, Fernandes attempts to address these lacunae. She looks at the political processes that occur in the intersections between the middle class, consumption, and liberalization. In her analysis, the issue of rape of working women arises in the context of the right-wing political party Shiv Sena's attempt to restrict the hours of waitresses and bar workers in Mumbai. Fernandes sees the conservative right-wing movement as raising rape as a red-herring issue in order to enforce conservative social norms (i.e., limit activity in bars). But she also notes the problems for young women working in Mumbai of where to live—if they live on their own, and not in a hostel, they are harassed by men. In her case studies, Fernandes captures the voices of some of these women, as they try to find physical space to accommodate themselves in order to safely go out to work. So, in effect, her work does touch on the issue of women workers, their claim for space, and threats against them.²

Other authors, writing as actors from inside the economic boom, have other emphases. For example, the issues that engage Nandan Nilekani, a founder of Infosys, are his company's growth and the remarkable changes that occurred after the economic reforms in India in the early 1990s. In *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* (2008), Nilekani writes about the old license raj, when business was controlled by government offices that issued licenses for any activity. He also discusses, with an insider's knowledge, why the Internet so benefited from liberalization and why liberalization sped the export of Indian computer expertise.

But perhaps more interestingly in the context of this article, Nilekani writes about the place of Englishness and "foreign-ness" in today's India. He notes the importance of English in a global market is unquestioned and that

English had rapidly become the language of creative discourse—and while Indian writers who were writing in English have remarked that they often face hecklers at their readings who demand to know why they do not write in their mother tongues, such criticism has become marginal in recent years.³

In fact, to take Nilekani's observations a step further, we can reflect that Chetan Bhagat, who writes novels about this new India of computers and call centers, and the lives of techies, is the biggest-selling author in English that India has ever produced—and he is almost unknown outside of India. The global did indeed become local, as much of Nilekani's writings reflect. And with new understanding of the foreign, "foreign-ness" was no longer taboo as Nilekani notes: "... the children of post-reform [the economic reforms of the early 1990s] India have no time to listen to tales about conspiracies of the "foreign hand";

they are too busy tapping into the vast opportunities that are emerging for them.”⁴

It is this new familiarity with the foreign, and with America, that is a theme that emerges in the narratives that are the subject of this study. English and foreign-ness are part of an economic construct and a necessity for economic well-being, and now they are part of a larger Indian story that is popularly accessible.

Of course, this essay can note only a tiny fraction of the authors who have dealt with the myriad subjects related to the digital economy in India. Even so, Xiang Biao’s *Global “Body Shopping”: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (2007), is one work that is useful to look at because of its resonances with the subject of the first story examined here. Xiang analyzes the raw experiences of Australian temporary work visa holders and H-1B workers in the United States. His work documents, with case studies and statistical underpinnings, the relationship between work, visas, dowries, and the lure of young men with jobs in Australia or the United States. Xiang was drawn to his research material because he met many of these workers when he was doing doctoral research on Indian immigration in Sydney, and he realized that the salient story was not immigration per se, or what he saw as the jargon-heavy “diasporic space”; rather, the story was how people were being “body shopped,” or recruited for IT temporary jobs.

The narrative inside this situation—of dreams, workers, exploitation, and institutions—is potent material, as it was when I first encountered it in the 1990s in Chennai. It is this narrative that Hari Kunzru uses in his English language novel about body shopping, *Transmission* (2004). It is also the narrative of increasing intimacy and familiarity with the “foreign,” one of the themes examined in this essay.

As Amartya Sen sees it, “the growth story” of India (those are his quotation marks) often has not acknowledged how limited the societal reach of that growth has been.⁵ I argue that the two themes explored in this essay have infused the Indian imagination. Familiarity and intimacy with foreigners, as they utilize Indian workers, and the night workplace, with its dangers to young women, are now part of the narrative. This is a form of societal reach of economic growth—if not an improvement in living standard, it is a long reach into the new stories people know and tell.

Wet Cement and Indian Doctors: A Story from the Field

We can regard the following section and its continuation later as extended field notes from my own experience, which explains the voice of this narrative. There is no intentional mediation—literary, historical, anthropological—in its telling. Readers are asked to regard it as raw data.

In 1995, almost twenty years ago, two American businessmen contacted me at the U.S. Consulate in Madras. They had started a little company in that southern Indian city and they wanted to show me their operation. “It’s a new kind of business,” one of them told me on the phone. “You should come and see it.” I was doing business outreach for the Consulate, so I made an appointment to drop by.

John and Dave greeted me at the door. They had just flown in from Thailand, where they lived, to look over their on-going operation. Middle-aged, relaxed, tie-less, they were typical of the kind of expatriate businessman you could meet in Bangkok any day. But I had never seen men like that here in Madras.

John escorted me around the building. It was a brand-new three-storey structure that smelled of wet cement and fresh plaster. “Wet Paint” signs were hung on the walls. It had just opened, but John and Dave had been running the business for almost two years in another location. Their profits had built the new place. About twenty women sat at individual tables, with headphones on their ears. They were typing at computer keyboards. Large black screens glowed in front of them.

“They’re all doctors,” said John. “They are transcribing as surgeons do surgery in State College, Pennsylvania.”

In real time, as the surgeon in the U.S. dictated what he was doing, the Indian doctor in front of me was typing rapidly.

“Here, look. The phone number is the same as an area code in Pennsylvania.”

Later, John said, “We only hire women. They are loyal. These ladies are all married, or if they aren’t, they get married right after they get the job. Why, they take time off to have a baby, and they come right back.” With a bit of awe in his voice, he added, “Do you know, we have never had anyone quit in two years?”

Unstated was the precariousness of the Indian workplace for women. It was one of the reasons the Consulate was such a good place for working women. They wouldn’t be sexually harassed. They would be paid what they were told they would be paid. Why, a little van even went round to pick up the “ladies.”

I could see that John and Dave were running an operation like that—they needed the workers and they wanted to retain them. Who you knew would not get you this kind of job. The workers had to be good, maybe better than good. Why would a hospital tolerate any mistakes or problems? And think of how much money the hospital was saving. So John and Dave didn’t want any problems.

“We need to send one of our managers to Pennsylvania so he can see the layout,” Dave told me, back in their office. He guided me to a chair, and warned me not to lean back. The paint on the walls was not dry. “That’s why I wanted you to see this—it is hard to explain.”

It was the first time I had ever seen an office like this. In fact, I had never heard of this happening in Madras. I knew that the Philippines had businesses where court cases were transcribed onto a disk and then sent round to subscribing offices—I had worked in an office like that. But this was new. This was real time, not just a better way to keep legal files.

As John and Dave explained the activity—accent training, working round the clock, more hospitals in America to sign contracts with them for transcription, I could feel the ground shifting. And even then, the accent training was only so the women could understand the American doctors. The idea of being trained to sound like Americans, as Chetan Bhagat’s *One Night @ the Call Center* would record, was still far in the future.

They were paying the women about \$50 a month. I was stunned. There won't be a transcription job left in America—my aunt had been a legal transcriptionist. There goes Aunt Janie, I thought. As I left, I maneuvered around workers spreading cement for a larger driveway. Again, the smell of cement and paint hung in the air.

Later I told people, particularly when I was back in the U.S., about this strange building in Madras that now existed, virtually, right in Pennsylvania. How could there be a transcribing job left? Those lady doctors were working for peanuts. And that seemed to be just the beginning.

The Missing Necklace and the Battered Women: Field Notes, Continued

John and Dave's manager showed up to apply for a visa so he could go look at the hospital in Pennsylvania. In fact, the number of young Indian men began to increase daily at the visa window at the Consulate. The visa category they were applying under, H-1B, meant they were going as temporary workers, usually for information technology companies. They were educated at Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and other prestigious places. They were engineers and computer scientists. Some had studied in the U.S. but the majority had not. For the most part, they were coming straight out of Indian engineering schools. In five years, between 1994 and 1999, worldwide the number of these work visas tripled, from around forty thousand to more than a hundred thousand.⁶ India was the main supplier of these temporary technical workers, and Madras was the place they were issued.

These men—always called “boys” in India—were just the marriage age in India. Normally an Indian boy, well-educated with a good job, was desirable marriage material. If a couple got married and he had a green card, or legal permanent residence status, it would take years to file a petition and get a new bride to the United States. In the past, a distant chance at U.S. residence had been enough to enhance desirability.

But the H-1B category was different. This kind of visa had a spouse category: H-4. And H-1Bs were virtually always issued—denying them because the consular officer believed the applicant intended to move to the U.S. was illegal. If the company filing for the young man (and of all the thousands we issued, only a handful were to women) had done its work, the boy was in. And the spouse was approved if she was his legitimate spouse. As word spread in Southern India, in Bangalore and Madras, more and more young men appeared with new brides. The wife's visa was given immediately. Hennaed hands, sparkling jewelry, red saris, last week's wedding invitation in hand; hundreds of young women appeared at the visa window. There was no wait to leave for the United States, the economic solution and dream destination for educated Indians.

But it seemed too good to be true. The parents of the girls had bargained a lot—a big dowry for a boy who was working in America. There would be instant residence in the U.S. Of the thousands of young brides I saw over two years, maybe two or three had married in a “love match,” which merely meant that the two people had chosen to marry each other on their own. All other marriages had been arranged. For immediate residence in the U.S. the girl's parents had

provided the dowries, the girl, and the gifts to the groom's family. The girls were very pretty and, mostly, very educated. Was a boy in the U.S. and an immediate move to America too good to be true?

So the families hedged. What if she didn't get the visa? It all seemed too easy. If her parents had spent the tens of thousands of dollars thinking they would get a girl settled in America, and then for some reason she did not get the visa, they would have spent all the money for nothing. We noticed the girls gradually appeared for the interview—which was really just a token conversation, because if the boy's H-1B was fine, and they were married, then the H-4 was virtually automatic—looking decidedly unmarried.

The girls had begun to apply for the spouse visa without wearing the *mangala sutra*. This is the traditional heavy gold necklace that Indian brides, particularly in the South, always wear. If there was no *mangala sutra*, there had been no rites. No rites, no sacred fire, no seven steps, no pandit (priest) in attendance. If these things had not occurred, the girl was not married with the proper Hindu religious ceremony. And the girl in front of us was not in red, and her hands had no henna. So, in effect, the girls were not married. The parents had registered the marriage as a civil marriage and were waiting for the visa before going through with the real wedding.

We cabled back to the Department of State, which punted the question to South Asia specialists at the Library of Congress. The researchers agreed—without rites, no Hindu girl was married, unless she had declared she was not a Hindu. If her parents and her society did not think she was married until she had performed certain rites, then she was not married.

So we told them no, they had to really get married. But this brought back an old worry. What if the visa was refused? The parents worried they might have paid the dowries and gotten their daughters married for naught. Word now got around that a civil marriage, without religious rites, did not satisfy the requirement of being married. The girl must be truly, ritually, married. Even the U.S. Consulate had said so.

The feeling that things were too good to be true persisted. We began to get applications from fathers who were going to visit their newly married daughters to see "how things were going." A picture began to emerge. The boys had strangers arriving to live with them. Neither had lived outside of India until that first trip to some suburb in the United States. He was gone all day at work. No one knew anything about sex—the traditional, Victorian-like middle- and upper-middle-class Indian attitudes had seen to that.⁷ What was the girl going to do? It was the first time any of them had been away from their families.

Tales were filtering back to Madras, tales of domestic violence and spousal abuse. Then, organizations in the U.S. began to contact us with flyers and through congressional representatives. We knew there was an increase in wife-battering because Apna Ghar (Our House) had started up in Chicago. This was a shelter focused on South Asian women. As its literature noted, "because of cultural differences in language, dress, food, religion, family structures and values, Asian-American women were reluctant to seek help from existing shelters and social service organizations."⁸ Throughout the nineties, more centers were started: in Boston, in North Carolina, in Oregon, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The rush to the United States using the new visa category had had unintended consequences.

From IIT to Call-Center Nights: A Guy Gets the Zeitgeist

The world of Madras in the nineties—of Indian women doctors and phone rooms, of boys studying computers at universities that were impossible to get into, of Indian techs going to the U.S. and Indian girls marrying the techs, and the girls in the States with no family support—was all around us. Bangalore, the center of the Indian IT industry, was booming. But so far little was being written about this world, about the new young people, about the women working in phone rooms, about the back and forth to America. The rush to marry these H-1B grooms was certainly having some unexpected consequences, and yet the fundamental changes stemming from the digital revolution seemed to be taking place almost without record.

Signs of change were everywhere. The names of computer companies—Oracle, Wipro, Infosys—were on everyone’s lips. Economic liberalization had started in 1991 and then taken off, and that was why these Indian companies were growing.⁹ The talk was of computers, and IT, and the fight to get into the technical institutes with the big American job-payoff. But this was talk. Who was going to tell this tale in writing? Would it all just evaporate?

In Hong Kong, working for Goldman Sachs, was a man named Chetan Bhagat. Like the thousands who had appeared at the visa window in Madras, he had studied at the best places, married, and gone off to make his fortune. But he was different from the others—he had plans to tell the story, and was writing it all down. Bhagat’s novels and their film adaptations have stunned the Indian publishing world and become blockbuster hits. In 2004, the Indian publisher Rupa released his *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT*, a novel based on his experiences as a student at the IIT, Delhi. The story is set in the nineties, and Bhagat captures the momentum and pressure of doing well at IIT, and the lure of the United States. The novel is funny and, as the *New York Times* noted, deliberately sentimental like a Bollywood movie.¹⁰

The next year, 2005, he published *One Night @ the Call Center*. The book sold out 50,000 copies in a week—an unheard of figure for an Indian novel in English.¹¹ As of this writing, it has still not dropped off the best-seller list in India. By 2010 Bhagat was named one of the hundred people who most affect the world by *Time* magazine, with A. R. Rahman (the Oscar-winning composer for *Slum Dog Millionaire*) writing: “I’ve seen the effect Chetan has on his readers. He often writes about following your dreams and not bowing to others’ expectations. That isn’t easy in India, where family opinion matters and some professions are regarded as more serious than others.”¹²

Digital India had found someone to tell its story, at least in part. Bhagat’s two early novels, with this focus on the digital universe, have unusual narrative hooks, a very interesting voice—the voice is young, middle-class, a speaker of both Hindi and English—and frank presentation of sexual relationships, with emphasis on women’s responsibility for their own sexuality.

The narrative hook, in which the author is driven to tell the story, hearkens back to the very newness of the material in 1990s Madras. It was difficult to talk

about many aspects of the digital universe, because it had no antecedents. The universe was truly unheralded. How to describe a call center in the middle of the Madras night, staffed with women doctors, taking dictation from surgeons in Pennsylvania? Bhagat has created a new language that reflects the newness of the situation. He has to write in this new idiom to be genuine.

In comparison, Bharati Mukherjee's much later (2011) *Miss New India* (to be discussed below) is told in the third person, with no colloquialisms, no Hindi-English or Hinglish, and no real neologisms. The language's distance from the immediacy of Bangalore as it is experienced hurts her story. Bhagat has accustomed his readers to a free-wheeling, ungrammatical, mash-up that describes the digital world, a language that was ubiquitous in the India of the nineties. Fernandes discusses the mixing of Hindi and English in her study of the new middle-class, and indeed this linguistic intimacy with English has been a hallmark of the boom feel of the times.

"Meri skin bahut oily hai" ran the TV ad—"My skin is very oily." This is Bhagat-style language. In India, there has long been speech in two languages, with Hindi and English used in the same sentences. It is typically both chatty and to the point. Salman Rushdie has used it from *Midnight's Children* (1980) onwards, and a century earlier the dictionary Hobson-Jobson cataloged the words that sat on this permeable border: memsahib, moghul, bungalow. In the late 1990s, this language was everywhere—Hinglish for the masses—and by 1999 everyone was singing this English line from the Hindi movie *Haseena Maan Jaegi* (The Beauty Will Accept Your Proposal/Agrees): "What is mobile number?"

The world of cosmetics, fashion, perfume, travel, cars, and all the other ephemera of a rising consumer class was being discussed in this language. "Yehi hai right choice, Baby," went the Pepsi slogan: "This is just the right choice, Baby." Even the title words of Bhagat's first novel, "five point someone," are a kind of college slang for students who, like the three main characters in the book, are stuck in the fiftieth percentile.

Besides Bhagat's style of narration (he is always compelled to tell the tale; it comes down to his bearing witness) and his fresh language, Bhagat's books include female characters who personify the romantic and sexual dilemmas that confront Indian women. His women are the call-center workers, the mistreated wives, and the victims of the temptation to marry for money. His women capture on paper the unwritten experience of Madras in the nineties.

Although his writing was increasingly dismissed as "not literary," in fact his first effort went through fifteen drafts. In many discussions and interviews, Bhagat simply (and I think, disingenuously) agrees that he is not literary, and closes off the topic.¹³

As a first person narrator in both his novels, he is at once the writer (Chetan) and not the writer. He—the real Chetan—is an IIT guy, a business guy. Why must he write and what is it he is writing? This is how he explains his engagement with the story of *Five Point Someone*:

Before I really begin this book, let me first tell you what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to live through college. On the contrary, it is probably an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don't think straight. But then this is my take on it. You're free to agree or disagree. I expect Ryan and Alok, psychos both of them, will probably kill me

after this but I don't really care. I mean, if they wanted their version out there, they could have written one themselves. But Alok cannot write for nuts, and Ryan, even though he could really do whatever he wants, is too lazy to put his bum to the chair and type. So stuff it boys—it is my story, I am the one writing it and I get to tell it the way I want it.¹⁴

In *One Night @ the Call Center*, he explains how he is coerced into telling the story by an emissary from God. On a train, he sees a beautiful girl. She tells him the beginning of a story. "One night God has called into a call center." Chetan is also told that in order to hear the full story of that night, he must promise to write it down. The emissary insists it must be told in a book if Chetan wants to hear it now—and Chetan decides to use the character Shyam of the call center to tell the story.

This is the voice of Shyam in *One Night @ the Call Center* as he explains who he is and his job:

By the way, hi. I am Shyam Mehra, or Sam Marcy as they call me at my workplace, the Connexions call center in Gurgaon (American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam. If you want, you can give me another name too. I really don't care).

Anyway, I am a call center agent. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of agents like me. But this total pain-in-the-neck author chose me, of all the agents in the country. He met me and told me to help him with his second book. In fact, he near as well wanted me to write the book for him. I declined, saying I can't even write my resume or even other simple things in life, there is no way I can write a whole damn book. I explained to him how my promotion to the position of team leader had been put off for one year because my manager Bakshi had told me I don't have the "required skillset" yet. In my review, Bakshi wrote that I was "not a go-getter." (I don't even know what "go-getter" means, so I guess I'm not one for sure.)¹⁵

He goes on to describe the demand made upon him to write:

But this author said he didn't care—he had promised someone he'd do this story so I'd better cooperate, otherwise he would keep pestering me. I tried my best to wriggle out of it, but he wouldn't let go of me. I finally relented and that's why I'm stuck with this assignment, while you are stuck with me.

I also want to give you one more warning. My English is not that great—actually, nothing about me is great. So, if you are looking for something posh and highbrow, then I'd suggest you read another book which has some big many-syllable words. I know only one big, many-syllable word, and I hate that word—"management." But we'll get to that later. I told the author about my limited English. However, the pain-in-the-neck author said big emotions do not come from big words. So, I had no choice but to do the job. I hate authors. For now, let us go back to the story.¹⁶

In Bhagat's female characters we find the outlines of the young women who populate the digital and urban workplaces of India today. Neha, the professor's daughter in *Five Point Someone*, has a long affair with the protagonist, Hari, and eventually they part, but keep in touch. Hari goes to Bombay to work, and the book ends with Neha trying to get a job in Bombay as well. There is sex before marriage, love, autonomous decisions, and the demands of earning a living for both characters.

Neha's independence and sexuality is a foretaste of Priyanka's behavior in the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship with Shyam in *One Night @ the Call Center*. But the dilemmas of the three female characters of *One Night* are also each an

aspect of the problems of autonomy, money / security, and sexuality. None of these characters escape exploitation or commodification.

Priyanka, Shyam's girlfriend (their story told in an extended series of complicated flashbacks), finally agrees to an arranged marriage with an Indian who lives in Seattle and works for Microsoft. Only a Google search, quite late into the plot, exposes him as a fraud. Radhika, who is married, is tortured by her mother-in-law and takes tranquilizers to calm down, but is desperately in love with her husband. He is exposed as unfaithful to her through a prank phone call.

Esha, the girl who has left her family and village to become a model in Delhi and can barely hold body and soul together working all night at the call center, finally sleeps with a modeling agent. She thinks it is a path to a job, but he abandons her. These women, one agreeing to an arranged marriage, another suffering mistreatment in a marriage, and a third agreeing to sex to further a career, inhabit the novel with a kind of gripping reality. We all know them. We met their older sisters in the nineties. And, in fact, the characters were little altered when *One Night @ the Call Center* was made into the Bollywood Hindi movie *Hello* in 2008. They rang very true, and their problems were the young audience's problems.

Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*, made into the Hindi film *Three Idiots* (2009), struck a similar chord of reality and did even better at the box office. Its focus is more on the absurdities of the training for the digital universe, but America and the problems of love loom large. Again, attention is on success and finding happiness on one's own terms. Parents, and the pressure to "succeed," are compelling the characters to lead unhappy lives. As the character Farhan says about one of his friends: "Today my respect for that idiot shot up. Most of us went to college just for a degree. No degree meant no plum job, no pretty wife, no credit card, no social status. But none of this mattered to him, he was in college for the joy of learning, he never cared if he was first or last."¹⁷

Significantly, in the digital terrain that transcends boundaries, this movie's message of excessive pressure to attain a university degree at the expense of both thinking and finding love was understood in China. Overworked students flocked to see *San ge shagua* (literally "Three Idiots"). It was one of the special "New Year" releases, and one of the few Hindi films to be released in theatres in China since the 1970s. *The Hindu* reported that it was prescribed in some courses in Chinese universities to promote "stress relief." One Chinese blogger, named Neiyi Guojiang, wrote last year in praise of the film: "Rote learning made me rigid, stupid and I ended up like a machine. I felt like a real idiot compared to the three in this wonderful movie."¹⁸ The slangy, hip tagline of the movie, the English phrase "all izz well," used when all was *not* well, became the catch phrase of the moment.

Success, Love, and Danger Rewritten for the Miss New Indias

It is not surprising with social and economic change building in India during the nineties, with increased immigration to the United States for those with technical expertise, with burgeoning call centers and outsourcing, and with Bhagat's novels stacked in bookstores all over India, now selling in the tens of thousands, that other authors, outside India, tried a hand at capturing the zeitgeist. In 2006,

Canadian film-makers produced a documentary, *Bombay Calling*, about young Indian call-center workers.¹⁹ A television show about outsourcing and a call center called *Outsourced* (2010–11) was made in the United States. It lasted only one season, but attracted critical attention.²⁰

At around the same time, another novelist attempted to tell the digital story. Bharati Mukherjee, an established Indian-American writer, then in her seventies, published *Miss New India* in 2011. Like its counterparts written in India, Mukherjee's novel is centered on the themes of a young person's search for personal autonomy and love. More importantly, this tale never loses sight of the danger young Indian women confront when they transgress boundaries. The sense of this danger has recently reached a crescendo in the Indian press and been picked up by the international media, with stories of call-center workers being raped. Before turning to the journalistic stories and the narrative that they use, it is useful to look at one fictional character, Anjali, whose story is reflected in the many current news stories of call-center workers.

In the case of Mukherjee's *Miss New India*, the main character is not the IIT guy, or the cell phone / tech-savvy character of Shyam, but a young, naive girl who moves to Bangalore from her provincial town in Bihar to work in a call center. Using Anjali Bose as her third-person protagonist, Mukherjee tries to communicate this social upheaval, and indeed, tries to enter the same world that Chetan Bhagat recreates. Her version, as noted earlier, lacks the slangy authenticity of Bhagat's. Mukherjee simply does not talk the talk. At the same time, her focus on Anjali Bose, and Anjali's sexual experiences, presages India's own most recent journalistic narratives of young women, call centers and rape.

America—always there, as the destination of success in Madras in the nineties, as the place where the good teacher studied at IIT in *Five Point Someone*, and as the stupid customer on the end of the line in *One Night*, is also present in *Miss New India*. In Mukherjee's telling, America is present as the helper in Anjali's move to Bangalore. Her teacher, Peter Champion (!), is an American who has lived in her provincial home town of Gauripur for decades. Thus, in the beginning of the novel, America is not the distant goal or the distasteful customer, but the kind teacher. At the same time, complicating the sexual landscape of the portrayal, Peter is gay. This also solves a dilemma for the author, for Anjali's relationship with him can be complex, but since it is not romantic, she can leave town.

Anjali, Peter's brightest student, is pressured by her middle-class parents to agree to meet potential husbands. She refuses each one. Finally, she allows herself to meet one of the boys, Subodh: "And she felt comfortable, secure, in Subodh's company. This is how she had imagined it, driving through the countryside in a red car with a handsome, confident husband. It could work. She felt certain that her mother and sister had never known such a moment."²¹

The suitor takes her away to a field near her house, and rapes her in his car. He says, during the assault, "Don't be stupid. I'm going to marry you.... Your father almost begged me to."²²

That night, Anjali flees to her teacher Peter's house and leaves the next day for Bangalore. In that fast-growing city, with the help of Peter's money and advice, she will find a place to live, and train to work in a call center.

Anjali's plight, and her solution to her situation is an echo of Bhagat's Esha of the call center, who has abandoned her family and birthplace. These are women on their own. In the *New York Times* review of *Miss New India*, Akash Kapur reminds us, accurately but perhaps with not too much originality: "Nations are narratives. Every country is shaped by its particular set of ideas and myths. Inevitably these are simplifications, often clichés, but they hold a country together, imposing a certain coherence on diverse populations. The narrative of modern India has changed over the last few decades."²³

Kapur is correct, of course. The young brides lining up for H-4 visas in Madras all those years ago and the young women working in the call centers are part of the new narrative of India. Were the women going to the United States who barely knew their husbands going to be alright? Were the women working at night safe?

More recently, another narrative has gained ground, one that had been building but that exploded in December 2012 with the rape of a young woman in Delhi, who was going home one night with her software-engineer boyfriend after watching *The Life of Pi*. The stories making up this narrative were news stories, and they owed nothing in the style of their telling (on the surface) to the novels and movies of call centers and/or to the changes in the workplace. They were simply stories of assaults on women. From the very beginning of the technical revolution, there have been stories of the dangers to women. People knew that the women doctors working at transcription centers needed to have transport at night. The growth of women's shelters in the United States that focused on South Asian women pointed to another danger. But the huge numbers of call centers, young working women, and even cell phones (used to contact gang members and rapists and track potential victims) now became part of the narrative.

On December 29, 2012, the Delhi rape ended in the death of the young victim, in Singapore, where she had been medically evacuated for expert treatment. By the following September the rapists had been convicted. During that time, follow-up international news stories gave the world a picture of the victim, and India underwent, by all accounts, an almost frenzy of rape awareness, and for politicians an acute demonstration of the power of an incensed citizenry.

Many stories were written to explain the circumstances of this particular rape—by now generally referred to as "the Delhi rape." The following report, in England's *Daily Mirror*, focuses on the victim's ordinary life and economic situation. Headlined "35 Pence an Hour: Delhi Rape Victim Jyoti Singh Worked Nights at IBM Call Centre," the story supplied these details:

Delhi rape victim Jyoti Singh worked night shifts in an international call centre for just 35p an hour, the *Sunday People* can reveal. The Indian medical student, 23, worked from 7 pm to 3 am for IBM to pay her way through college. Despite her fluent English she earned as little as £60 a month, her family say. Dad Badri, 53, also worked double shifts as an airport worker. Jyoti's brother Gaurav, 20, said: "She worked very hard. She slept only two hours and we had to wake her up so she could get up early in the morning." IBM refused to confirm Jyoti worked for the firm saying it was "safeguarding the victim's identity," though the family has allowed her to be named.²⁴

When the assailants were convicted, international news outlets again used the story to reiterate that the rape had become a symbol of the dangers to and mistreatment of Indian women. Reporting for the Associated Press on Yahoo, the story was told in this way: “An Indian court Friday sentenced to death four men for the gang rape and murder of a young New Delhi woman, ordering them to the gallows for a brutal attack that riveted India, where it became a symbol of the widespread mistreatment of women and the government’s inability to deal with crime.”²⁵

But even while that case was wending its way through the courts—fast-tracked because of the political fallout—a photojournalist was raped in Mumbai on August 26, 2013. The *New York Times* picked up the story from Mumbai only in October, after the verdicts in the Delhi case. Reporting on this Mumbai story in the U.S. press was spurred by widespread discussion of “the Delhi rape.” The *Times* noted:

At 5:30 p.m. on that Thursday, four young men were playing cards, as usual, when Mohammed Kasim Sheikh’s cellphone rang and he announced that it was time to go hunting. Prey had been spotted, he told a friend. When the host asked what they were going to hunt, he said, “A beautiful deer.” As two men rushed out, the host smirked, figuring they did not like losing at cards.

Two hours later, a 22-year-old photojournalist limped out of a ruined building. She had been raped repeatedly by five men, asked by one to re-enact pornographic acts displayed on a cell phone. After she left, the men dispersed to their wives or mothers, if they had them; it was dinnertime. None of their previous victims had gone to the police. Why should this one?²⁶

And, of course, like Anjali Bose in Mukherjee’s novel, there is an endless supply of young women in India. Just days after the Delhi rapists were sentenced to death, the *Times of India* reported yet another story. Again, call centers, cell phones, and ultimately, information about the rapes on-line are the motifs. “Call centre employee gang-raped in Gurgaon,” reads the *Times*. Gurgaon is the place where Chetan Bhagat’s fictional call center is located. This all-too-real story continues:

A 19-year-old call centre employee was raped by three men here early on Wednesday, police said.

The young girl was returning from her friend’s birthday party in sector 46 of Gurgaon post-midnight on Wednesday, police said.²⁷

The rape stories do not end, and their connection to the digital world of work, women, and call centers that connect with customers globally will not end. There will be studies, investigations, and more coverage in the international press. In 2013, Harvard announced a study of the rape crisis in India, focusing on the legal system in India’s persistence in not criminalizing marital rape. In late 2013, the *Wall Street Journal* devoted an entire inside page to the suicide of a young Indian policewoman who had been bullied by her new spouse. This story would have had no particular journalistic significance in America, if the United States and India were not united by the digital universe—the technical labor of Indians in the U.S. and the outsourcing of jobs to India, those many jobs performed at night, when America is awake.²⁸

Now that the conversation about India's digital environment has moved into mainstream American media, the subject of Indian women and call centers is being discussed there, even as the call centers receive calls from their customers in America. Writing in *The Nation*, Lakshmi Chaudhry thoughtfully points out some issues with this New India:

The young girl who paid an astronomically steep price for an evening out at the movies proved that the so-called "new India" exists in a bubble built on the delusion of safety. A bubble that can be breached at will by the other India that we try so hard to insulate ourselves from. All you need to do is jump on the wrong bus.²⁹

Afterword

Obviously, when something is completely new, we cannot know what is important about it, what will grow, and what is not relevant. We cannot know how the new thing will change us. When computers became small enough for home use, and digital communication replaced analog dial-up, could we have predicted massive shifts in the economy and social experience of India's middle class? Maybe. But the nature of what those changes may have been, or how they might affect society, was a mystery. We can look back over the past twenty years and see the glimmerings of what the Indian digital workplace would bring.

Early on, even the raw data from the U.S. Consulate in Madras revealed certain emerging themes. Women's experiences, in particular, seemed to be on a new and unfamiliar path. But who could have known that years later, the issue of the public safety for young women would be paramount in the minds of many in India, and that the public-safety issue was linked to cell phones and workspaces? Twenty years ago, American companies were already clearly engaged in a new economic relationship with India. But who could have predicated the subsequent easy familiarity, or even mild amusement, with things American in India? Or vice-versa? Could anyone have foreseen that in 2013 huge posters of Amitabh Bachchan, the great Indian film star, would hang over arriving passengers at the Caltrans commuter station in San Francisco, counseling wise investments? Nowadays, hundreds of South Asian techies rush under those posters on their way to jobs in downtown San Francisco. The digital economy was the catalyst for it all.

In the second edition of *On the Internet* (2009), Hubert L. Dreyfus, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, and a frequent commentator on technology and the issues arising from new technologies, makes an observation that seems to speak to some of the problems in thinking about the ways the digital age has affected India. Dreyfus says, here speaking of the Internet, that it is not just a new technological innovation, but a new type of technological innovation; one that brings out the very essence of technology.

He notes that inventions have created unexpected side effects: that Henry Ford thought of the automobile as giving people cheap, reliable, individual transportation, but he did not imagine it would destroy the inner cities and liberate adolescent sex. Dreyfus thinks the Internet (and I am adding, by inference, the digital universe) is different. "It is too gigantic and protean for us to think of it as a device to satisfy any specific need and each new use is a surprise."³⁰

Each new effect that the digital world now has in India—on India's social structure, on women, on work, and on India's connection with the rest of the world, especially with the United States—seems as utterly unpredictable as the effect of the invention of the mass-produced car on the inner cities. We are only beginning to understand even the simplest effects of India's digital age. Chetan Bhagat's novels, films about call centers, and stories in the press about women workers all catalog and describe these effects. The curious connection between different phenomena, from H-4 brides to India's best-selling author to call centers, is just our initial glimpse of these unexpected consequences and unanticipated events. The connections, and the writing about them, in whatever form— anecdotes, novels, jokes, films, news stories, are just the beginning of the new narrative.

Notes

- ¹ Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii.
- ² *Ibid.*, 161–64.
- ³ Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 92.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁵ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4–8.
- ⁶ “New/Initial H-1B Visas Issued Worldwide by State Department through Consular Offices over Two Decades,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 11, 2013, http://travel.state.gov/visa/statistics/nivstats/nivstats_4582.html.

Year	H-1B
1990	794
1991	51,882
1992	44,290
1993	35,818
1994	42,843
1995	51,832
1996	58,327
1997	80,547
1998	91,360
1999	116,513
2000	133,290
2001	161,643
2002	118,352
2003	107,196
2004	138,965
2005	124,099
2006	135,421
2007	154,053
2008	129,464
2009	110,367
2010	117,409
2011	129,134
2012	135,530

“Indian H-1B and H-4: In the three years that correspond to the stories about the H-4 brides, these are the numbers: In 1995, 22,309 Indians were issued H-1B visas. That year, 9,213 spouses and children were issued H-4 visas. In 1996, the figures were 29,239 H-1B issuances for Indians, with 12,292 H-4 visas. By 1997, the numbers exploded: Indian H-1B issuances were 66,829 and H-4 issuances were 27,588,” in “Yearbook 1995–1997,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/1997>.

- ⁷ This is a frequent observation about India—that its sexual mores are Victorian. Most recently, the *Harvard Gazette* carried an interview with Jaqueline Bhabha, director of research for the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health. This discussion covers many cultural points, including India’s legal persistence in not criminalizing marital rape. See Christina Pazzanese, “Understanding India’s Rape Crisis: Q and A with Jaqueline Bhabha,” *Harvard Gazette*, September 20, 2013, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/09/understanding-indias-rape-crisis/>.

- ⁸ More information about Apna Ghar can be found on its website <http://www.apnagar.org/> (accessed, retrieved December 02, 2013). There had been a slow buildup of focus on violence against South Asian women in the United States with the creation, and then the spread of information, about these centers. There were some early news stories as well, describing centers as “little hubs of hope scattered throughout the USA, especially in cities that have a sizable Indian population,” in “Kiran: Ray of Hope for Abused Women in US,” *Times of India*, September 16, 2002, accessed November 12, 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2002-09-16/mumbai/27291344_1_indian-women-south-asian-women-domestic-violence.
- ⁹ All of the works I discussed in the first few pages of this essay deal with the effects of the economic reforms in India of the early 1990s. There is an excellent brief article “India’s Economic Reforms: Can India Work?” in *The Economist*, June 10, 2004.
- ¹⁰ Donald Greenless, “An Investment Banker Finds Fame off the Books,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2008.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of the astonishing sales figures and the clever marketing of the book at under Rs. 100, see “Priceless @ 95,” *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, India, May 11, 2008, accessed November 22, 2013, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080511/jsp/7days/story_9254827.jsp.
- ¹² A. R. Rehman, “Chetan Bhagat: The 2010 Time 100,” *Time*, April 29, 2010, accessed November 10, 2013, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1984685_1984940_1985518,00.html.
- ¹³ Greenless, “An Investment Banker Finds Fame.”
- ¹⁴ Chetan Bhagat, *Five Point Someone* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2004), 1.
- ¹⁵ Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005). This section of the novel is reprinted in “The Rediff Special: Chetan Bhagat,” *Rediff India Abroad*, February 28, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ *Three Idiots*. Movie. Produced by Vinod Chopra (India, 2009).
- ¹⁸ “Success of 3 Idiots Breaks China’s Bollywood Great Wall,” *The Hindu*, January 02, 2012, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/success-of-3-idiots-breaks-chinas-bollywood-great-wall/article2766764.ece>.
- ¹⁹ *Bombay Calling*. Documentary Film. Directed by Ben Addelman and Samir Mallal. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, 2006.
- ²⁰ *Outsourced*. Television Series. Based on the John Jeffcoat film of the same name and adapted by Robert Borden of George Lopez (In Cahoots Productions) and Universal Media Studios for NBC. September 23, 2010–May 12, 2011, and “Outsourced (TV Series 2010–),” accessed December 12, 2013, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1593756/>.
- ²¹ Bharati Mukherjee, *Miss New India* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 58.
- ²² Ibid., 62.
- ²³ Akash Kapur, “A Parable of the New India,” review of *Miss New India*, by Bharati Mukherjee, *New York Times*, July 01, 2011. Kapur’s own work, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* (2012), tackles the change in India with a journalist’s eyes.
- ²⁴ “Delhi Rape Victim,” *Daily Mirror*, U.K., February 24, 2013, accessed December 05, 2013, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/delhi-rape-victim-jyoti-singh-1728827>.
- ²⁵ “4 Men Given Death Sentences,” *Yahoo News*, September 13, 2013, accessed December 03, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/4-men-given-death-sentences-india-gang-Rape-090906857.html>.
- ²⁶ Ellen Barry and Mansi Choksi, “Gang Rape in India, Routine and Invisible: In Mumbai Case, a Group of Assault Suspects Had Little Fear of the Law,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2013, accessed December 02, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/world/asia/gang-rape-in-india-routine-and-invisible.html>.

- ²⁷ "Call Centre Employee Gang-Raped," *Times of India*, October 30, 2013, accessed December 05, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/Call-centre-employee-gang-raped-in-Gurgaon/articleshow/24932295.cms>.
- ²⁸ "Delhi Policewoman Finds Tradition Mightier than the Badge: Enforcing Women's Rights at Work, Cop Faces Age-Old Home Battlefield," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2013. This paper has not used material from Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), but I wish to mention this work as another example of the discussion about Indian women workers taking place in the United States.
- ²⁹ Lakshmi Chaudhry, "Rape in the New India," *The Nation*, February 04, 2013.
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Chinese Literature in Translation after the Digital Turn

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Abstract

The digital turn in the humanities brings with it a potential for paradigmatic changes, and one of these could be a reevaluation of what constitutes a “translation” of a literary text. In the past, translations were thought to be the bound commodity object sold and read as a self-complete version of the original. But because these objects did not expose the negotiations taking place in the process of translation, they have not been considered sufficient textual bodies to support literary criticism. Literary critics are discouraged from publishing criticism on literature in the absence of recourse to its original language. Since the digital turn, however, translations can include digital archives of drafts, correspondence, notes and other textual embodiments of the translation process through open access archives. With such a wide range of materials to draw upon, scholars from a wide range of other fields can engage not only the content of the texts but create methodologies of reading work in translation. This essay asks how such archives might impact the reception and study of Chinese Literature in relation to the current popularity of world Anglophone Literature.

Key Words: Translation, Digital Archive, Chinese Literature, Documentation, World Literature, Cross Cultural Literary Criticism.

Chinese Literature in Translation after the Digital Turn

The Chinese Literature Translation Archive at the University of Oklahoma came about as a practical response to an abstract question: Can we expand our sense of what constitutes a translation to include digital archives, and, if so, how would this expanded sense of translation transform the way literature in translation is studied, taught, and (ultimately) read by non-academic communities? In this short piece, I will only touch on a small fraction of these questions by exploring a hypothetical question: Why has Chinese Literature—and much other world literature in translation—not acquired the same kind of cultural capital as Anglophone world literature in American academia, and how could an expanded sense of translation change this?

To open this line of inquiry further, I would ask why Chinese Modern Literature is not studied on a par with the work of writers like Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Seamus Heaney, and others. The answer at one level obviously comes down to one of language competency and complacency, but there is a wider range of theoretical and critical obstacles undergirded by “print cultural beliefs,” which have in aggregate made it more difficult for scholars to write on and teach literature in translation. One reason for this may lie in the fact that after the “linguistic turn” (poststructuralism/semiotics), literary analysis has performed been grounded in the materiality of signification. This trend has inadvertently reinforced practices and habits of thought nourished

by a Platonic view of mimesis as a deviation from originality. Despite the seeming theoretical contradictions, the fact remains that translated literature was far more likely to be read and discussed outside of language-specific fields prior to the “linguistic turn.” So-called “theory” did not cause this problem, but it has been disappointing to witness how little it has helped either.

The fact is that literary scholars need more than the black box of a printed translation (a commodity form) of a work to write on. If such works were to be opened up by way of a wider and deeper archive of drafts, correspondence, notes, and parenthetical or critical commentary documented by translators during the process of the final commodity translation formation, scholars from outside the translators’ language disciplines would be able to ground their work on a far more richly nuanced semiotic field. My argument is pretty straightforward—during the nearly year-long period a translator spends working on a novel, they accumulate a wide range of material resources (correspondence with authors, editors, other translators, etc.) and a tremendous amount of intellectual work that is not routinely captured or documented (linguistic and cultural questions, negotiations, insights), and this “intellectual property” has never had a place in the form of print-commodities. After the digital turn, however, we are no longer limited to the economics of print economies, and there is almost no limit to the material documentation that can be archived and made available in digital workspaces. The print commodity of a book of poems or novel is rarely the “director’s cut” (translator’s version) of the text, but reflects instead the decisions of editors and others, while excluding any parenthetical intrusion by the translators themselves.

Rather than accepting the market commodity form of translation as a “final” version, translators can create (if compensated) archives of earlier drafts, correspondence between translator, author, and editor, and, ultimately, drafts with as many parenthetical asides and as much critical apparatus as a translator desires (or, depending on the digital spaces these are curated in, contributions from scholars, readers, and others). By expanding the scale in which we imagine the translated text, the very foundation of translation studies can be altered, which I believe would have a wider effect in literary criticism and pedagogy. However, there are two steps to this process. The first is to collect and archive existing translation documentation and papers. Some of this work has been undertaken at the Lilly Library at the University of Indiana over the last decade (although not for Chinese Literature in translation). Secondly, these materials need to be digitized and made available to scholars around the world in well-maintained and organized open-access depositories, or in other curated or collaborative digital work spaces.

How Would Open-Access Digital Translation Archives Change Literary Criticism?

In the academy, literary scholarship is almost exclusively undertaken by scholars who specialize in the language of the original text (Sinologists in the case of Chinese Literature). Due to this convention, literary scholars who are not able to read the original rarely write on Chinese literature because translation is not seen as an adequate substitute for the “source” text. Furthermore, in addition to being

affected by the taboo against relying on translated texts for literary criticism, it must be stressed that Chinese literary texts are often thought to be so “other” that many literary scholars do not feel they have the agency to even enter into a closer proximity to Sinophone texts or their translations. I would like to argue, however, that if translations were not measured on the scale of equivalency with source texts in any conventional sense they could (and should) be read as if they were “just literature” alongside other literary texts in classrooms and in the public at large. But more importantly, this expanded vision of a translated text transforms them into far more than this—each is an historically specific nexus of intercultural and hermeneutical semiotic material fully capable of generating serious scholarship and rich literary and learning environments. Libraries collect and digitize the papers of authors, but translation documentation archives offer a different set of opportunities for scholarship and cultural production.

After the “linguistic turn” it is no longer possible to discuss “referents” or “meanings” without first situating them within the differential structures (contexts) from which they signify. Under these conditions, how can one discuss Kafka, Camus, Sartre, or Kawabata’s work without reference to the chains of signifiers of the original? One thinks of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “minority language” using Kafka as an example. Such nuanced, linguistic theorization requires close structural attention and meta-critical speculation grounded in the original language(s). Following this turn, suddenly, what was previously an afterthought (the language of composition) became a linguistically specific semiotic space which raised new concerns that the “work” of literary criticism could not be done through another language’s “version” of the original, for the “text” itself became inextricably tied to the language of that text. One of the great ironies in this, however, is that theory itself became one of the most successful genres of translated literature, as most Anglophone theorists adopted French or German terminology, methods, and approaches but did not read or cite the originals in their work. In other words, “Continental thought,” as it was called, was primarily consumed in English outside Europe because it was read at the level of reference and not in its specific forms of signification. It has ironically seemed to escape the traps it has helped lay for literature in translation.

For over forty years, the prevailing theoretical idea that literature is imbedded in a given “language” offered a variety of incredibly productive nodes for critical and literary inquiry; but it also provided a new set of enabling reasons to ignore literature in translation and gave rise to the limited economies of exchange taking place in language-specific academic habitats. Given the perceived need to do critical work within the “original” systems of signs, literary critics have often sought literary texts composed in English but written from within vastly differing global structures of feeling, cultural difference, and historically specific realities. When these realities were not anticipated by literary methodologies generated in English literature, this deficiency was ameliorated by postcolonial criticism. Intralingual cross-cultural reading spaces like these appear to have created economies of value that could satiate theory’s need for source language proficiency, while also fulfilling the humanist charge to make literature the primary space for an ethical encounter with the Other. I do not want to draw too simplistic a binary of translated World Literature versus Anglophone

World Literature, but the following example should help articulate the kind of structural problems facing literatures like those written in Chinese when it comes to gaining proximity to readers outside the field of Sinology.

It is striking to note that English Literature graduate students and faculty routinely teach Anglophone works of world literature like those by Achebe or Roy without much grounding in the cultural contexts of Nigeria or Kerala; and yet they often shy away from teaching Chinese short stories by Su Tong or Mo Yan, because they feel unprepared or under-qualified. I would argue that the reason for this sense of disparity in hermeneutic agency arrives on the heels of the operative methodologies created in literary critical circles specific to questions that can be productively asked of Anglophone postcolonial literary texts but that are less well-suited for literature in translation because these works are almost always excluded from the broad conversations taking place in literary studies outside of world language departments.

If the literary critics who have popularized critical nodes like nationalism, gender performativity, or race theory had been reading Chinese literature from the 1980's forward, then migrant labor and other issues around bio-environmental concerns attached to rapid urbanization would have likely been at the forefront of the pedagogical questions we ask literature to engage. Crucial questions about Aesthetics and politics would necessarily have been adjusted. If Modern Chinese Literature had been a part of our common discourse, when Negri and Hardt came to write their critique of postmodern theory in *Empire*, they would likely not have ignored China to the degree that they did; and this work, along with countless others, would have contributed more significantly to rethinking cultural and political thought under the transnational capitalism of the Pacific Era.

My point is simple. Cannons are created by the questions we ask of literature, but we cannot generate productive questions if literature is locked away into the insular silos of language-specific disciplines. Therefore, we need to study and talk about literature in translation while not pretending that literature in translation operates within the same semiotic, cultural, economic, or historical networks as intralingual literatures. It follows that we need new tools drawn from and suitable for use within the expanded materials of digital archives.

When we take a translation to constitute a wider network of textual traces (as opposed to the "bound" commodity version), we will find a cultural and institutional space to rethink translation as a vital practice of deep hermeneutic, aesthetic, and cultural engagement. Unfortunately, many translators do not archive their work in this way and thus these materials, which are such a vital part of intellectual and literary history, remain highly vulnerable to damage and, ultimately, loss. To make archiving practices more successful, therefore, the benefits of documentation must be made more explicit to translators themselves. One of the most obvious benefits to translators is the tax deduction they can receive for giving their papers to libraries (usually this would be for late-career translators who have done a good job collecting such work). And of course, examples of other translator archives can inspire those whose works have not been collected to imagine their work receiving the same long-term care as it is preserved and made available to researchers long into the future. However, it is

my hope that a richer form of documentation could also become a “deliverable” with a more direct form of monetization in the form of supplemental pay from publishers or research collections.

The Translation Documentary

The shift from print to digital media means that we are no longer bound to the single commodity version of translations but can host as many iterations of texts with extensive additional material as can be imagined. If such work could become considered intellectual property, then it is possible to imagine economies of exchange capable of valuing the storehouse of additional cultural materials that attend to the making of any substantial translation of note. On the “consumer” side one could imagine texts as having a “translator’s cut” that, like DVD extras, could provide a running commentary, discussion of key points of difficulty or other important elements in their process. Within the economic structure of print culture, such “critical editions” would not have been possible, but reconsidered under the material conditions of the digital humanities, such versions could become available in different ways as per the specifics of each negotiation with publishers, translators, and authors. Critically expanded versions would not threaten the sales/IP of the commodity version because of their different goals and readers. Of course, such drafts or annotated versions need not contain the whole narrative/text either (think Google Books). In the end, a shift in the material foundations for translation must account for the economics, however, and the prototypes or proof of concepts would likely need humanities funding rather than look for profits from pay walls or other monetization models. In the end, translators need a system of valuation that will allow for a return on these extra efforts. In some cases the cultural or prestige capital might be sufficient: e.g., translation documentaries as a species of academic production akin to peer-reviewed essays, books, papers, etc.; or having one’s documentary “published” in the domain of digital humanities. Others, especially non-academic literary translators, would need supplemental pay in one form or another. As the quality of critical versions rise, the likelihood of potential uses and value would also increase and we would see a more developed economy of exchange rise to handle these transactional flows. In other words, the economy for such documentaries does not yet exist, but library archives with open access policies (like the one pursued by the University of Oklahoma) can lead the development of such resources and help establish working models upon which others can build.

What Would a “Translation Documentary” Look Like?

In addition to collecting drafts, correspondence and other “papers” collections would likely need to encourage translators to reflect on their experience of translation in order to bring out and make legible the diverse forms of intellectual and artistic and creative labors that coalesce in the form of the work they do. One way to do this may be to have them engage set questions about process. For instance, translators may be asked to respond to how they overcame the four difficulties George Steiner identifies when discussing difficulty of interpretation: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological difficulties.

Contingent Difficulties: Things a translator must look up. Obscure references, vocabulary, dialect, idiolect vocabulary, etc. Learning about these will key the non-Chinese reader into the different layers of difficulty embedded in the original text between the general language of the text (say Mandarin Chinese) and these moments of interpretive obscurity.

Modal Difficulties: Moments of difficulty that cannot be solved by dictionaries or other reference materials (or recourse to native speakers, authors, etc.).

Tactical Difficulties: Hidden patterns deliberately obscured by the author. Here translators often must reference either scholarship about the text being translated or discuss “intentions” with the author to decode in order to re-encode the English version in a cognate fashion.

Finally, Ontological Difficulties: This difficulty arrives from the a-priori cultural worldview which gives a text its logic and its reason for being. These in turn impart, even if in a deeply encoded or imbedded way, a perspective and even a cosmology that cannot be explained in translation but that does nonetheless find a way into one’s translation in subtle ways. The translator can reflect on what aspects of these difficulties carry over and how. Translators are close readers of the texts we translate, but we are not necessarily trained to ask such questions directly about our process, and we certainly are not rewarded for doing so. Such speculative digressions might even be thought of as a distraction (again remember we are already talking about \$3 an hour, so halving that is not an option). This is why translators will need to find a way to make such labor recognizable as a valued form of time/energy exchange.

Conclusion:

If literary criticism cannot accommodate the particular textual condition of World Literature in translation, then the content of this important work will remain locked within the limited economies of language-specific disciplines and only tangentially reach the broader conversations of literary and cultural theory and criticism. Even now, Chinese Literature’s productive churnings of cultural materials drawn from the experience of its rapid urbanization, migrant labor, cyber statecraft, and new micro-macro capitalist politics have yet to be widely introduced as important critical nodes. If we do not ask these questions, the canon will have no need for literature that addresses them. In the end (by which I mean now), do we want to pursue literary and cultural studies and theory that enables only a critique of Western power formation? Do we want to produce forms of literary criticism that fail to find anything interesting in Chinese literature due to its illegibility? We are already operating in this epistemologically self-enclosed literary space, and I would argue that the field of cultural studies and literary theory as a whole cannot remain vital in a world of transpacific capital and cultural flows unless these fields change. While I am not suggesting that translation archives can “answer” these challenges, I do believe they are one way to imagine new forms of literary criticism based on the new digital conditions of material production and dissemination that could address primary obstacles lying between readers and the texts that need to be included in the broad conversations of our time. If scholars who cannot read a primary in text in Chinese (or another language) can critically engage (write on) works of

literature in translation by learning to write within the translative space of world literary production, then we may be able to bring attention to and derive new methodologies from World Literature.

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**Jin Feng. *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*.
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013, 193 Pages**

Hui Faye Xiao, *University of Kansas*

While the mainstream history of Chinese literature continues to be a history of canonical works and writers, today's young readers often turn to the Internet to experience an alternative time-space mediated by literary imagination. This wide gap between canon and readership has caught the notice of an increasing number of researchers in recent years, and scholars have started to pay attention to the seriously under-studied field of online publications and fan production and consumption of literature.

Jin Feng's pioneering book *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* deals with the doubly marginalized genre of Web romance. Romance is often deemed a feminine—and hence insignificant—literary genre, and its online publication has served to remove it even further from what is enshrined as “serious literature.” Challenging these deep-seated biases, Feng undertakes the ambitious but much needed task of examining the immense (and ever-expanding) volume and vibrant culture of Web romance to investigate the ways in which contemporary Chinese women's reading and writing experiences “help them to reinvent their gender and cultural identities.”

Drawing from other academic disciplines such as cultural studies and anthropology, this innovative audience-focused literary study adeptly employs various analytical tools, including close reading, linguistic and discourse analysis, sociological data, focus group study, one-on-one interviews, and participant observation. Feng's multiple identities as a scholar, (female) reader, writer (of a Chinese-language blog), and administrator of Yaya Bay, an online forum for romance fiction, provide her with easy access to the virtual community and first-hand data on various links in the chain of production, circulation, and consumption of Web romances in contemporary China. At the same time, she maintains a certain critical distance, which allows her to reflect upon her own position in this intricate and intimate network. In short, Feng is ideally situated to conduct this significant interdisciplinary research.

Romancing the Internet contains an introductory chapter, five main chapters, and a short coda. Chapter One offers a genealogy of the online publication of romance fiction. It traces the history of the genre back to Zhang Jie's canonical piece “Love Must Not Be Forgotten” (1979) as well as to the bestselling romance fiction from Taiwan (authored by Qiong Yao) and Hong Kong (by Yi Shu) in the 1980s. Given that the latter two writers' works are often put into the disparaging category of *yanqing xiaoshuo* (literally, “fiction that speaks of feelings”), while Zhang Jie's work has been placed in the more high-brow category of “feminist literature,” a reader might wonder how their writings, though grouped together

under the same English umbrella term of romance, engage differently with the literary discourse of *qing* (feelings, passion, sentiment), which originated in imperial China. Feng's argument would be strengthened had she provided a more careful analysis of the reasons behind such hierarchical classification—the most likely culprits being the deep-rooted biases against commercial bestsellers and “excessive” sentimentality in mainstream literary historiography, as well as the different socio-political conditions under which these works have been published, distributed, and received, and in particular the role played by the market economy. Feng then provides a comprehensive account of the essential political and economic issues around Web publishing, including state regulations and censorship of the Internet, the increasing commercialization of Web publishing, the demographic make-up of Chinese-speaking netizens, and the narratological characteristics of Chinese-language Web romance.

In this rich study of online romance writing and reading, Feng mainly investigates two “habitats”: Yaya Bay, “a U.S.-based Chinese-language website that circulates novels, especially popular romances, that were originally published on other websites”; and Jinjiang Literature City (jjwxc.net), arguably “the largest Chinese-language women’s literature website in the world.” These two websites not only vary in scale and location, but also exemplify two kinds of online fiction website: Yaya Bay is a smaller and more user-friendly virtual community for Web fiction writers and readers, while Jinjiang is famous for its profit-driven expansion and commercial ambition.

Chapters Two to Five examine the different subgenres that add diversity of narrative devices and conventions to the fast-growing repertoire of Web-published romance fiction: *danmei* (tanbi in Japanese, literally “addicted to beauty,” referring to “male-male homoerotic fiction”), *nüzun* (“matriarchal fiction that features women’s dominance in a matriarchal society”), *tongren* (fan fiction or fanfic), and *chuanyue* (time-travel). While drawing inspirations from Qiong Yao-style romance narratives, today’s Web fiction writers, Feng argues, modify Qiong Yao-style character types and ideals of feminine virtues, and take advantage of more possibilities for discursive forms, audio-visual expressions, “textual poaching,” and writer-reader interactions in the current multimedia environment.

The writing and reading of various subgenres of Web fiction bend gender norms, explore alternative cultural imaginations and practices of masculinity and femininity, and generate a group of what Feng refers to as “androgynous readers” who tend to hold a more liberal attitude towards homosexuality. One prominent feature in these Web romances is an inward-turning trend: the fictional narratives focus, almost exclusively, on domestic and psychological interiors. As has been noted by many scholars including myself, this is also a dominant trend in post-Mao Chinese women’s literature and film. This common quality, shared by online and offline writings, invites an important question: How shall we situate our reading of the Web romance in the larger context of contemporary Chinese feminist writings, theories, and practices?

Feng’s probing study not only expands the boundaries of mainstream scholarship on Chinese cyber culture, which has tended to focus more on “issues of state censorship and civil liberties,” it also challenges the conventional wisdom

concerning what should be regarded as “good literature.” The chapter about the U.S.-based Yaya Bay also ventures into the study of Sinophone literature and diaspora identities. However, it is a bit surprising to find that some of the most popular Web romances, such as *Suspense at Every Step*, *Palace Locked the Heart of Jade*, and *The Tale of Zhen Huan*, are only mentioned in passing. A close reading of these texts, which have achieved cult status among Web romance fans, and an analysis of the political economy of their production, circulation, and reception will shed new light on our understanding of the genre and its fan culture. Furthermore, since all these canonical works have been republished as books on paper and have been adapted into television megahits, perhaps more could be said on the intricate relationships between cyber culture (often deemed *xiaozhong*, meaning non-mainstream or unofficial) and traditional print culture (usually considered more official or high-brow in comparison). The relationship between new media (particularly the Internet) and traditional mass media (such as television networks) also merits discussion.

Overall, Jin Feng’s *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* is a timely and welcome contribution to a multitude of disciplines, including literary studies, Internet studies, cultural studies, fandom studies, and gender studies. It breaks new ground and explores new directions in the field of contemporary Chinese literature and culture. Feng’s writing is clear and engaging, and several attractive color reproductions of webpages discussed in the text enhance the book’s visual appeal. This solid and accessible book will interest students and scholars of Chinese literature, new media, and youth culture, as well as general readers who might want to learn more about the global phenomenon of online publication, fan fiction, virtual community-building, and the meaning of subculture in a media-saturated world.

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Self-Reflection in the Tub: Japanese Bathing Culture, Identity, and Cultural Nationalism

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Abstract

This research looks at the development of Japan's bathing culture as a nationally and culturally significant activity. The goal is to show that ideas about bathing both reflect changing Japanese social norms and project an idealized form of cultural identity. This has been done by examining local and foreign sources that reference baths in Japan, academic articles, "Japanese interest" non-fiction, and scholarly works on the emergence of national nostalgia as a byproduct of modernization around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: bathing, cultural nationalism, Japan, nostalgia, *ofuro*, *onsen*, *sentō*.

I. Introduction

Nightly baths are an essential and beloved tradition in almost every Japanese household. Family members, usually in order of seniority, soak in the bath after washing to relax and end the day, reusing the same clean hot water. While this practice is common to Japanese people now, baths were not always available for each individual family. Until the mid-1960's, only 60% of Japanese homes had bathtubs; the remaining population frequented communal neighborhood bathhouses called *sentō*.¹

Although there has not been a great deal of critical scholarship addressing Japanese bathing customs, they are a distinctive component of Japanese culture. Communal bathing has been an important facet of Japanese life since its inclusion in the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*, an eighth-century chronicle of Japanese myths and the earliest known Japanese text published), and is viewed both internationally and locally as an iconic tradition in Japanese society.² In general, the role public baths play has been usurped by private *ofuro* (bathtubs) due to availability, convenience, and the desire for privacy, but *onsen* (hot springs) and *sentō* are still extremely popular destinations for both tourists and locals.³ Attitudes toward hygiene also play a role in the diminishing use of public baths, along with a purported loss of interest in the social aspects of the bathhouse. These changes not only reflect the values and needs of modern Japanese society, they also show how the country views itself. *Sentō* and *onsen* have become much more than mere recreational activities—they are irrevocably tied to Japan's national identity and viewed with nostalgia for traditional, "purely Japanese" ways. It is important to understand how bathing practices have changed over time, and the role this history plays in adding value to the current incarnation of bathing culture.

Although all practices and methods of social interaction, such as eating, dancing, or even patterns of speech, reveal cultural values and codes, bathing is unique in that not every culture has as complex and culturally loaded a

relationship with the mere act of immersing oneself in water. As anthropologist Scott Clark wrote, “to take a bath in Japan with an understanding of the event is to experience something Japanese. It is to immerse oneself in culture as well as water.”⁴ Clark refers not only to being surrounded by the cultural tropes that provide instructions for how to bathe, but how to derive meaning and enjoyment from it.

While the changes in bathing practices cannot be divided into definite time periods, this research seeks to examine its cultural significance throughout various incarnations over time, specifically: the importance of bathing as spiritual cleansing or a religious practice; the use of *onsen* and *sentō* for medicinal or healing purposes; the bathhouse as a location for social interaction and public discourse; the bathhouse as a center of entertainment; and the nostalgic view of bathing as a traditional Japanese practice.

Though bathing is often touted as a static picture of an unspecified “traditional Japan,” it has undergone numerous changes and been appreciated for very different reasons. Bathing culture transformed due to a series of religious, social, cultural, and economic pressures—while many traditions have stayed the same, practices continue to alter as needs and values change. Disparate historical events, such as the introduction of Buddhism, the rise of cities, and the end of *sakoku* (Japan’s closed-country policy) have all played key roles in shaping bathing culture into what it is today.

Bathing as a cultural practice has come to represent the very essence of what it is to be Japanese. Indeed, *sentō*, *onsen*, and *ofuro* have all become intertwined with the presentation and enactment of a national identity. This form of “cultural nationalism” is significant and has much in common with other cultural practices and values presented as specific to the Japanese people—it can even be used to assert or “reinforce...‘Japaneseness’ or ethnic identity.”⁵

It is difficult to ascertain exactly why this national identity is created and preserved, but by analyzing the examples presented by Hotoka, Reader, and Yoshino in conjunction with other sources related to Japanese baths, one can posit a number of hypotheses as to what end bathing culture is presented as the epitome of Japanese culture and values. Having symbols or practices that allow one to “feel Japanese” are important in establishing individual and national identity. Indeed, appreciation for one’s own culture provides self-satisfaction as well as a collective identity, and being able to “enact culture” provides people with a sense of community even when they are alone.

This research will explore the development of Japan’s “bathing culture,” including its religious/spiritual origins, function as both a social and practical public utility, and the unique geographical features of Japan that enabled the creation of thousands of *onsen*, paying special attention to the regulation and eventual subsidization of *sentō* by the Japanese government. It will present a brief outline of the history and representations of Japan’s relationship to bathing from its earliest recorded instances to the modern day. In this way, readers can trace the development of bathing culture into what Lee Butler calls a “social and cultural institution of significance,” as well as the manner in which representations of bathing both reflect changing Japanese social norms and project an idealized form of a shared cultural identity.⁶

II. Methodology

In approaching this topic, it is first necessary to be aware of stereotypes and preconceptions of Japanese culture. I hope to adequately address the complicated nature of identity as viewed through specific practices—that it is possible for baths to simultaneously be a uniquely Japanese phenomenon as well as objects onto which an oversimplified national identity are projected.

This article draws on historical accounts of public bathhouses and other institutions that promoted bathing for different reasons to understand why the justification for bathing changed over time. It cites articles that depict and describe Japanese bathhouses to a Japanese audience as well as the English-language scholarship written about them. In an effort to reach interdisciplinary sources, it also covers the presentation of Japanese bathhouses in less formal sources, such as travel websites and travel guides. Lastly, readers will note the linguistic and etymological approach used in analyzing the language used to describe bathing culture. This is particularly relevant for the original Japanese terms for practices and items related to bathing as many characters contain hints at deeper or historical meanings.

III. Definitions

In order to understand how bathing reflects upon and is in turn informed by perceptions of Japanese culture, it is useful to present a more detailed description of what makes this style of bathing different from the traditions of other cultures. This section briefly outlines the components, etiquette, and practices that encompass Japanese bathing culture as it stands today.

Sentō

When standing alone, the characters that make up the word *sentō* translate to “coin” or “money” (a *sen* is a discontinued coin worth 1/100¥), and “hot water” or “bath.” Nowadays, entrance to an average *sentō* in Tokyo costs 450¥ (approximately \$4.39 as of February 2014), with reduced prices offered for children.⁷ Though every public bath is slightly different, the process of using the *sentō* usually resembles the following: guests are greeted by the proprietor and pay entrance fees. They receive a locker key, sometimes on a chain worn about the wrist or ankle, and are directed to the appropriate changing room based on gender. After stowing away clothes and other personal articles, guests enter the gender-separated bathing areas naked—children of both genders generally bathe in the women’s section with their mothers or other female relatives. Armed only with bathing amenities and a small wash towel, guests shower sitting down on a stool, using the towel to scrub and get clean. Once washed, guests are free to enter any number of baths available. Though it is not allowed in the clean water, the towel can be used to wrap around the forehead or hair as a cooling device. Guests often strike up conversations and make small talk, particularly if the *sentō* has a regular neighborhood clientele.⁸

Public baths are currently not as commonly used as private *ofuro*, but this change was not necessarily an unavoidable, predetermined outcome. A great many factors influenced the progression of bathing culture into what it is today, from the development of indoor plumbing and rising fuel-import prices, to

the demand for the convenience and discretion of a personalized bath.⁹ As of 2013, there were approximately 5,200 public bathhouses throughout the entire country, but this number decreases by an estimated 300 *sentō* closed per year.¹⁰ Eric Talmadge argues that the dwindling numbers of authentic Japanese *sentō* are part of what prompted the Japanese government to intervene and “subsidize those that remain” in order to maintain important sites of cultural heritage.¹¹ Even though numbers of *sentō* continue to drop, they are still common enough to warrant inclusion in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) handbook for foreigners living in Japan, whose small or traditional-style lodgings may necessitate use of an outside bath.¹²

Onsen

The two *kanji* (characters) that make up the word *onsen* are those for “warm” and “spring” or “fountain.” Both characters contain *sanzui*, the radical representing water, as does the *to* in *sentō*. These distinctions are relevant because while all three of these practices are related, they are at heart different. Where the etymology of *sentō* emphasizes payment, the background of the word for *onsen* is a simple description of its most definitive qualities. All three words are the *onyomi*, or readings based on Japanese approximations of the original Chinese pronunciation of the characters. This can denote older origins of a word based on when the characters and readings were originally imported from China, and further serves to establish all three terms with historical weight and legitimacy.

Onsen have many of the same components that *sentō* do (communal bathing, cultural significance, entertainment and social value to the community) with a few important differences. *Onsen* rely on natural springs and are located outdoors, providing a direct view of the natural landscape. Seen typically as a vacation destination, *onsen* do not fulfill the same practical, every-day uses as *sentō*. Their primary function is to provide a site for relaxation and social bonding—as John W. Traphagan relates: “sitting outside and enjoying the manicured Japanese gardens that usually surround these bathing areas is considered a way to relax deeply and enjoy nature.”¹³

In order to qualify as a legitimate *onsen*, the water used for bathing must contain nineteen different minerals and include certain levels of hydrogen ion, fluorine ion, and sulfur as specified by the *Onsen* Law enacted by the Japanese government in 1948.¹⁴ The law also requires the temperature of spring water to fall within a specific temperature range, although cold baths are often included at both *onsen* and *sentō* as a way to invigorate the body and provide other health benefits. The government’s involvement in regulating and monitoring *onsen* speaks to the importance of these outdoor baths as a symbol of Japan’s cultural heritage, and the necessity of preserving them in a reputable state.

Onsen have also become a fixture around which many *ryokan* (Japanese style inns) operate.¹⁵ In addition to bathing facilities, these inns provide guests with *yukata* (light summer kimono or bathrobes), and traditional Japanese-style rooms furnished with *futon* (traditional frameless mattresses), *tatami* (straw floor mats), and *shoji* (sliding paper screens). Often, traditional refreshments like tea and small treats are served, and meals provided by the establishment harken back to older times as well. Guests are encouraged to roam the grounds of the

ryokan in their *yukata*, the uniform reinforcing the same comradery felt as naked equals in the *onsen*. As Robert Leutner writes, “the public bath is, to be sure, a leveling institution, for the superficial distinctions of social rank come off with one’s clothes, and a shared humanity is evident enough in the irregularities of the flesh.”¹⁶ This is especially interesting, given that hierarchies may still exist elsewhere in bathing culture, as will be discussed in the next section.

Ofuro

Unlike *sentō* and *onsen*, *ofuro* does not contain any overt references to water. When separated, the characters that make up *furo* are *fu*, which can be translated to “wind,” “air,” or “manner,” and *ro*, meaning “spine.” It is also interesting to note that only the word for “tub” is preceded by the honorific marker *o*. While one can refer to the tub as a *furo*, the polite or respectful variation, *ofuro*, is most commonly used (for context, many other Japanese words are qualified with honorific markers—some of which represent objects of significant cultural importance, such as rice, and the words for family members, like mother and father).

However, many of the practices associated with taking a bath in one’s own private home are closely mirrored after those associated with public bathing. For example, the verb used is not “to take a bath” as it is in English, but “to enter the bath” (*hairu*), perhaps reflecting the fact that one does not wash inside the tub, but steps into it once clean. Traphagan provides an excellent description of how “entering the bath” in Japan differs from the American method:

In general, Japanese take baths in the evening, often after dinner, and may spend as many as 45 minutes in the process of cleaning the body and soaking. The water is kept at a comparatively high temperature ... (104°–107.6°F), and the tub, rather than being elongated, is deep enough that the water is normally up to one’s neck.... Japanese do not wash themselves inside the tub. Instead they lather, scrub, and rinse outside the tub. The room in which the bath is housed is separate from the toilet and is designed like a large shower stall with a tub at one end; thus it is acceptable for the entire room to become wet.... Part of the reason for cleansing the body outside of the tub is that Japanese do not normally change the water between each bath.¹⁷

Though Traphagan does not mention it, it has become increasingly popular to reuse the gray water from bathing for other household tasks, such as doing laundry or watering plants. Because bathers enter the tub once they are already clean, the bath water contains little soap or dirt. According to an online survey conducted in 2006, 55% of over 6,000 respondents reuse their bath water, adding another layer of cultural importance to the *ofuro*.¹⁸ By adapting and “greening” the practices surrounding bathing, modern Japanese people have made this important cultural practice more sustainable for future generations.

Certain habits associated with taking a bath are common throughout Japan, such as bathing nightly before bed. According to the same survey noted above, 85.3% of respondents take baths on a daily basis. Approximately 73% prefer to bathe in the evening, though many young people have adopted the “American” pattern of showering to get ready for the day rather than end it.¹⁹ Traditionally speaking, baths are associated with nighttime and relaxation rather than energizing mornings.

Anthropologist Scott Clark elaborates upon another interesting facet of bathing culture—that of bathing order within a household. He writes that Japanese culture possesses “an emphasis on social position” that requires a continual awareness of one’s position in relation to others.²⁰ This awareness translates to and is reflected in numerous cultural activities. Understandably, the freshly-drawn water is the hottest, cleanest, and therefore most desirable. It may have also at one time been seen as an extra privilege to not have to wait for one’s turn to enter the bath. Clark notes the historical origins of this practice:

Countless times I was informed that the proper order in traditional Japan was for the household head to enter the bath first, followed by other male members of the household in order of descending age. After the males had bathed, the females bathed in order.... This tradition of a bathing order is known to have existed among the warrior class at the time of the Meiji Restoration. Documents from earlier periods also indicate that prominent warrior and noble families followed a bathing order.²¹

Clark goes on to state that while many households still uphold these hierarchies today, just as many bathe in order of convenience—such as who arrives home first or who has the earliest bedtime. This is a perfect example of how the once inflexible rules of bathing have adapted to fit modern society’s desires—in this case for convenience and practicality.

Another example of how “traditional” bathing culture has been altered to fit society’s changing needs is found in Traphagan’s short article on the intersection of cultural values and social services for the elderly. He provides an excellent summary on the way bathing culture is utilized in improving quality-of-life care for Japan’s growing elderly population. He describes options of in-home care (visiting portable bath services) and community-based care (public bathing facilities at elder-care centers) for Japan’s senior citizens. In the former, professional care workers visit family homes to bathe elderly clients when their family members can no longer do so. In the latter, more able-bodied elders use a special *sentō* with modifications to suit their physical needs, where they can enjoy a soak and chat with friends. These services, offered through Japan’s national healthcare system and insurance program, demonstrate the nationally recognized importance of bathing not just as a way to become clean, but a necessity for a full life.

IV. Stages of Development

Religious Origins: Bathing as a Spiritual Practice

Some of the earliest recorded manifestations of bathing culture highlight its connection to religious rituals and institutions. Lee Butler’s 2005 article, “Washing off the Dust: Baths and Bathing in Late Medieval Japan,” helps lay the foundation for the later development of *sentō* and *onsen* by identifying the conventional starting point in the timeline of communal bathing. He extensively recounts the religious and therapeutic origins of community baths in the medieval period, focusing on purification rituals, various types of outdoor bath therapies for elites, and the establishment of early “charity” baths for the poor located at Buddhist temples.

Butler cites the earliest evidence of commercial baths as appearing in a fourteenth century diary kept by Shinto priests at Kyoto's Gion Shrine. The priests reference a "penny bath" (*sentōburo*) opening at Gan'aiji, and speculate that it would help generate revenue for the shrine.²² This differs from earlier references in the *Kojiki* to a uniquely Japanese form of communal bathing as it indicates a factual commercial enterprise rather than myths regarding spiritual practice.

Peter Grilli and Dana Levy's *Pleasures of the Japanese Bath* is another text that provides a general overview of the history of bathing and its current incarnations, specifically focusing on Shinto (the indigenous, animistic religion of Japan) as an inspiration for the creation of traditional bathing practices. The book is well-researched and contains a close examination of what real *onsen* and *sentō* are like. However, the imagery in the book is also somewhat problematic. Filled not only with pictures from traditional Japanese artists, it also contains photographs of modern baths and bathers. While the images of Japanese men are relatively discreet, the photographers enact a distinctly Western gaze with overly sexualized photographs featuring demurely posed Japanese women. The soft focus of the lenses adds to the slightly pornographic feel of the photos that seem to unnecessarily and almost hilariously contain gratuitous breasts and buttocks. Given that people do bathe in the nude, some degree of nakedness is natural, if not expected. However, Grilli and Levy's prose also drips with Orientalism, praising the ingenuity of the Japanese in keeping their culture safe from Western encroachment, and oversimplifying the intentions behind each bather as Zen moments of reflection. Perhaps without being aware of it, this exotification feeds into stereotypes of cultural uniqueness promoted by many Japanese, which will be explored later in more depth.

Shinto (literally, the way of the gods), places a great deal of emphasis on purity, and accordingly has numerous rites associated with physical and spiritual cleansing. The connection between these practices and modern bathing culture specifically credits two Shinto rituals, *yuami* (the term now translates to simply mean "hot spring cure") and *misogi* ("purification ceremony"), with the origination of the first Japanese baths.²³ Interestingly, one of the two ways of writing *misogi* includes the character for the physical body, suggesting that it is necessary for spiritual purification to include a physical component.

Shinto also draws connections between the physical land of Japan and its people (as well as to that of emperor). Given the location of the islands on volcanic belts that provide heated groundwater, it seems only fitting that the *kami*, or indigenous gods of Japan, would be linked to this naturally occurring geological phenomenon. This fact also provides further justification for the idea that bathing is intrinsically tied to Japan, which I will visit later in the essay.

Surprisingly, the relationship between the imported religion of Buddhism and communal bathing is even more frequently documented. Japanese Buddhists easily incorporated their existing bathing culture into new religious practices. In the Nara period, "charity" baths for the poor or infirm were located at Buddhist temples and sponsored by local elites or royal families.²⁴ Baths could even be held in honor of one's ancestors or the recently deceased, in which case bathers would offer prayers for the dead and perform other Buddhist rites.²⁵

These religious baths not only represented literal and spiritual purification, but were sometimes thought to be acts of devotion in and of themselves. For example, members of a sect honoring the Bodhisattva Kannon chanted Buddha's name before entering the bath and while in it.²⁶ These rituals both attracted followers who desired the material comforts of warmth and cleanliness in addition to the formation of spiritual community and salvation.

Spiritual aspects of the communal bath were also felt in a less institutional context. In the late Edo period, comedic writer Shikitei Sanba introduces his book of humorous bath-time tales with a surprisingly touching and poetic treatise on the true meaning behind communal bathing. He describes the public bath's theoretical capacity to create a Buddhist-inspired utopia where the hierarchies that so clearly define Japanese society are broken down:

The nakedness of infancy purges them of all sorrow and desire, and renders them selfless, be they Sakyamuni or Confucius, Gonsuke or Osan. Off with the wash water come the grime of greed and the passions of the flesh; a master and his servant are equally naked when they rinse themselves. As surely as an evening's red-faced drunkard is ashen and sober in the morning bath, the only thing separating the new-born baby's first bath from the cleansing of the corpse is life, fragile and a paper screen.²⁷

By listing the names of divine or enlightened religious figures along with two generic names often associated with members of the generic serving class, Sanba speaks to concepts of the dissolution of ranking, while hinting at the transformative power of communal shared water itself. Though his writing is not an official religious text, its references to Buddha, Confucius, and the Shinto rituals of washing a corpse set the reader up to consider deeper spiritual meanings behind his stories, and perhaps even their own next visit to the *sentō*.

Over time, Butler posits that religious ties were abandoned for commercialized communal bathing practices with a greater emphasis on hygiene and social interaction. The following section will cover the shift in viewing bathing as a bridge between physical and spiritual, to one centered more on the improvement of the physical body itself.

Healing Waters: Medicinal and Therapeutic Baths

Hot water has long been viewed in Japan as an all-encompassing natural remedy, and this is all the more true for the water issuing from hot springs. The healing effects of natural springs were at one time reserved for samurai, Buddhist priests, or locals. As these baths became more established, travelers from all over the country with medical problems would frequent them to soak away their ailments.²⁸ Edo-period medical texts recommend bathing in hot water as a cure for sicknesses as disparate as diarrhea, colds, colics, stomach aches, skin diseases, and mental issues.²⁹ The diversity of these illnesses in no way negates the legitimacy of the claims, but it does make them difficult to believe. Whether or not all of the claims are valid, it is fascinating that water cures were not only supported by traditional Eastern medicine (with allusions to Chinese culture and Daoism) for things like "imbalances in *yin* and *yang*," but also by eighteenth-century imported European "hydrotherapy" that claimed bathing in hot water would "properly flush out stale fluids and any obstructions in the body by means of sweating or excretion."³⁰ In this way, despite the uniquely Japanese nature

of the healing waters, foreign sources were used to provide extra proof of their effectiveness and merit.

Hot springs are still portrayed as aiding in the treatment of various ailments, such as “neuralgia, myalgia, rheumatism and dermatosis[,] ... high blood pressure and arteriosclerosis” due to their heat and mineral compositions.³¹ Newspapers as established as the *Japan Times* validated and endorsed these claims, along with scientific journals and studies. Called “balneotherapy,” the specific treatment of various diseases and infections through bathing is attributed to the “effect of the heat of the water on the body, the effects of the minerals in the water, and the psychological benefits of the spa environment itself.”³² This legitimizing exercise is important, not just because it demonstrates the importance of bathing to the Japanese press and public, but also the “contemporary Japanese need to seek for alternate ways to market and legitimize hot springs and bathing in general.”³³

Naked Friends: The Bathhouse as a Locus of Community

Though medical uses of baths still continue to this day, over time, Buddhist and Shinto ties were abandoned for commercialized communal bathing practices with a greater emphasis on hygiene and social interaction. Social bathing among families and clans was a common practice in the late medieval era.³⁴ By the time of the Edo period, the public bath was “not just a hygienic facility but a vital social institution, a natural daily (or for many a twice-daily) gathering-place where the full range of neighborhood social business could be transacted.”³⁵

Robert W. Leutner’s book *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction* is a translation and analysis of the four parts of *Ukiyoburo*, a famous novel of the late Edo period that takes place in a public bathhouse. The novel is originally written in a colloquial style featuring multiple, often unconnected dialogs of bath patrons. In addition to containing descriptions of the type of interactions common to bathhouses, this work firmly identifies the *sentō* as the social center of Edo. It is also important in that it highlights the way the bathhouse provides a locus for community building among a particular neighborhood within a common social caste.

Reading Shikitei Sanba’s *Ukiyoburo* in the original Japanese reveals that Shikitei uses *furigana* (phonetic renderings of characters) alongside almost all characters. This could suggest that he 1) has used difficult *kanji* but wanted a more diverse (or less educated) audience to have access to his work, 2) intended the audience to be diverse in terms of age and reading ability, 3) used words or readings specific to a particular region that would be unrecognizable to Japanese not from that area, or a combination of any of the above. Each possibility speaks to the universality of the bathhouse as a recognizable and important location for Japanese of all ages, regions, and education levels.

Ukiyo can either mean “urban life” or “the floating world,” referring to the transience of existence, and *buro* simply means “bath” (a modified pronunciation of *furo*). According to Leutner, the accepted definition most likely highlighted the urbanity of the stories within. Though fictional, this short passage describes a friendly social interaction common to an Edo period *sentō*:

Two men were in the dressing room after their baths. One of them was Hachibei, from whose head steam was still rising in little puffs[,] ... the other, Matsuemon, was holding one end of his loincloth under his chin, in the old manner....

“Hachibei. Look over there,” said Matsuemon. “See that guy walking along with the big hat pulled down over his face? ... He’s a sad case. He’s what’s become of a big landowning family that had thirty-odd pieces of land.”³⁶

Each vignette is followed, often without comment, by another random interaction between strangers or friends. The strength of the novel is in its continuous and diverse array of urban encounters, speaking to the centrality of the bathhouse in the lives of people from all walks of life.

Super sentō and Sex: The Bath as Entertainment

In the early Edo era, *sentō* sometimes employed female attendants (*yuna* literally translates to “bath girl”) that would perform sexual services for an added cost.³⁷ In 1657, the Tokugawa shogunate officially banned these additional services and replaced female with male attendants. However, according to Leutner, prostitution was the outlier rather than the norm:

Some bathhouses, most especially those near the entertainment districts[,] ... on the outskirts of Edo—Shinjuku, Shinagawa, Senju—doubled as brothels, but that seems to have been the exception to the general rule. Most *sentō* were ... upright neighborhood service institutions that observed the sorts of rules laid down by the Edo *machibugyo* city magistrates to govern their conduct that Sanba parodies ... including the injunctions against mixed bathing.³⁸

Historians are divided as to exactly when and why this change was officially made. Some historians say that the Japanese government abolished mixed-gender bathing as a result of “the culmination of a very long campaign dating from as far back as the early eighteenth century.”³⁹ Others draw a direct connection between negative Western reception and changing laws, mentioning further legislation passed during the American occupation of Japan after World War II.⁴⁰ Regardless of who initiated the reforms, the government involvement speaks volumes, and the image of shame tied to Western perceptions of Japan most likely influenced those that knew of it. Ironically, this may have led the Japanese to embrace bathing all the more as a cultural phenomenon that outsiders could not understand.

Appearing as part of MIT’s *Visualizing Cultures* project, John Dower’s essay and visual narrative, “Black Ships and Samurai: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853–54)” shows how Western influence is portrayed as having shaped Japanese cultural practices. This is particularly apparent in the reception of an illustration of a mixed-gender bathhouse by one of Commodore Perry’s men, William Heine. The image shocked the American public with culturally loaded insinuations of indecency and was later banned from publication. When juxtaposed with classic Japanese woodblock prints like artist Torii Kiyonaga’s *Interior of a Bathhouse*, it is interesting to see the differences between Japanese and Western interpretations of *sentō*.⁴¹ While Torii’s print depicts a collection of mostly modestly posed females and one child bathing with strategically placed robes and washcloths, Heine’s shows both genders washing right next to each other.⁴² The breasts of the Japanese women are quite pronounced. This is not to say that Torii’s print did not attempt to titillate—a

male peeping tom can be seen in the upper left-hand corner of the print. These images and others like them formed a collective image of Japanese culture to both foreigners and Japanese alike.

Rather than involve patrons in illicit activities, *sentō* provided other forms of entertainment that cemented the place of the bathhouse as one of culture and class. Leutner describes the settings Shikitei wrote about, stating, "... the second floor ... normally offered tea and light refreshments for a few coppers more, and a place to relax with conversation or a game of *go* or *shogi*."⁴³

Another example of bathhouses expanding to offer different features can be found in the past few decades with a new genre of bathhouse. The so-called "super *sentō*" has emerged to engage younger demographics, evoking imagery more in line with the electric Tokyo cityscape than traditional or neighborhood bathhouses. These super *sentō* are often multi-level complexes that offer a myriad of themed baths ranging from perfumed water; fantastical interpretations of Roman, Greek, Turkish, or Russian-style baths; to baths with mud, clay, or electric currents. *Time Out Tokyo* describes a local super *sentō* that "boasts a dizzying array of facilities: once you've finished soaking in the open-air *rotenburo* and bubbly massage baths, you can go and sample one of the multitude of beauty treatments on offer, or check out the high-tech saunas."⁴⁴

While most *sentō* are open six days a week with limited hours, many super *sentō* run on 24-hour cycles reminiscent of casinos. Though super *sentō* do not exactly fit in with the general paradigm of bathing culture being associated with relaxation and tradition, they are an important manifestation of the ways in which *sentō* are continually adapting to fit current cultural needs. They represent the version of a modern, technologically advanced Japan that is just as important an aspect to cultural identity as tradition. Super *sentō* also often include sections devoted entirely to the re-enactment of traditional Japanese bathing practices, further complicating their relationship to both tradition and modernity. Perhaps this overt and almost anachronistic blending of traditional and modern will be the next wave to change the national view of bathing culture once more.

Looking to the Past to Inform the Future: Cultural Nationalism

Yoshino Kosaku's theories on national identity can be applied toward the many ways Japanese baths have been altered in order to stay culturally relevant. In addition to applying his analysis to bathing culture, this work incorporates some of the theories and critiques of Ian Reader's 2013 piece from the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, "Back to the Future: Images of Nostalgia and Renewal in a Japanese Religious Context" and Tsukada Hotaka's "Cultural Nationalism in Japanese Neo-New Religions." Though these two pieces specifically refer to religions in Japan, they offer a useful lens of "reinvention" through which baths can be viewed. Hotaka also brings up the discourse on Japan's cultural distinctiveness, referring to discussions among Japanese scholars and lay-people defining "Japanese-ness" and how this affects the way that Japanese people experience their own culture.

In order to understand the use of baths as a culturally loaded symbol and the use of nostalgia as an ideological tool, it is helpful to view both in the context of nationalism as defined by Kosaku:

Nationalism is the collective belief that “we” are a community that possesses a history and cultural characteristics distinct from other groups, as well as the will, emotion, and energy to maintain and promote that distinctiveness within the framework of an autonomous state.⁴⁵

Kosaku’s theories on how national identity can be objectified provide a fascinating interpretation of the changing face of Japanese baths. In applying his analysis to bathing culture, one can posit that culturally distinct icons or symbols such as *ofuro*, *sentō*, and *onsen* are needed to promote nationalism and a collective character.

This also offers a useful lens of “reinvention” and historiography through which baths can be viewed. Hotaku cites theories of Japanese cultural or racial specificity, known as *nihonjinron*. This concept refers to discussions among Japanese scholars and lay-people as to what it means to “be Japanese,” and if this spirit can be distilled.⁴⁶ The involvement of the government in subsidizing public baths, creating laws around what constitutes an *onsen*, and providing public service baths as part of nationally funded insurance programs complicates the presentation of bathing culture significantly. Though many communal bathing traditions appear to be losing popularity with the public and relevance to the market, government intervention keeps the practices alive and makes sure they follow a specific representation of “Japanese-ness.”

As mentioned above, the foreign interpretation of bathing culture also has an effect on how it is viewed within Japan. Quasi-orientalist books on Japanese cultural practices produced for Western audiences tend to overlook the complex development of bathing culture into what it is today, focusing instead on a stereotypical representation of a sort of Buddhist spa.⁴⁷

In his essay on the use of nostalgia in promoting Japanese religions, Reader created a “table of dualities” that addresses qualities and items commonly presented as polar opposites. By showing this dichotomy, Reader creates a clear sense of how traditional values are conflated together to form a picture of Japanese identity. Though he was highlighting techniques specifically designed to bring patrons back to particular Zen Buddhist sects, the collection of terms is shockingly apt in describing both *sentō* and *onsen*. Presented here is an incomplete list of his dualities, where applicable categories are shown:

City	Country
Modern	Traditional
Concrete	Wood
Dehumanizing	Humanizing
Separation	Unity
Disharmony	Harmony
Spiritual decline	Spiritual revival
Western	Japanese ⁴⁸

Bathing culture represents all of the qualities on the right-hand side—many sources promote the idea that bathing is a traditional practice native and precious to Japan. *Onsen* in particular are conflated with pristine and secluded locals, destination points out in the country that will refresh city dwellers exhausted by the harshness of overcrowded and increasingly modern cities. Many *sentō* also

feature wooden bathtubs made of *hinoki* (Japanese cypress). Perhaps this list can be expanded to further illustrate the dichotomy between bathing-related objects and practices seen as uniquely Japanese with foreign and “modern” objects:

Western dress	Yukata
Soda and other beverages	Green tea
Isolation	Community
Foreign	Local, indigenous
Morning	Evening
Outsiders	Family

Reader further argues that there is a direct correlation between the development of modernity and that of nostalgia. Though he was using this point to illustrate how religions utilize tradition to create “emotive appeals to an idealized spirit of the past,” it can also be applied to the way traditions are newly viewed and imbued with a nationalistic meaning.⁴⁹ By showcasing baths as uniquely Japanese, a collective spirit is promoted for people to bond over and to which they can feel allegiance. Since it formed in relation to foreign influences and a changing social and cultural landscape, this form of nostalgia has become an integral part of and reaction to modernization itself.

V. Conclusion

When viewing a nation through specific practices, it is vital to acknowledge the complicated nature of identity—as stated earlier, it is possible for the bathing culture of Japan to simultaneously be a legitimately unique cultural product as well as an object onto which an oversimplified national identity is projected. Bathing communally in bathhouses or at hot springs can be traced back to Japanese religious practices, both Shinto and Buddhist, as well as the natural formulations of the land itself. It has a rich history, including a period of time where bathhouses functioned as social halls or information centers in addition to therapeutic and hygienic institutions. The government of Japan has long been involved with the industry of hot springs and *sentō*, for both economic reasons and those of cultural preservation. Hot springs are identified as “by far the country’s most lucrative domestic tourist attraction,” stimulating travel and trade within the archipelago and internationally.⁵⁰ People visit *onsen* and *sentō* to relax, to enjoy a traditional Japanese experience, and to escape the demands and trials of modern life. Super *sentō*, the newest phenomenon to emerge in bathing culture, seems to subvert this paradigm in the opposite direction, capitalizing on the Japanese love for technology, convenience, and variety by creating the ultimate modern Japanese bathing experience.

Whether deliberately or by accident, this complex collection of meanings is evoked in the presentation and perception of Japanese baths as an icon of tradition and nostalgia. By conflating the idealized image of a simpler, more “Japanese” past with public baths and hot springs, Japan follows the pattern that comes with the development of modernity—one of looking back to ascertain what constitutes an authentic national identity.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Brador and Masako Tsubuku, "Dip into the History of the Japanese 'System Bath,'" *Japan Times Online*, July 03, 2012, accessed February 15, 2014.
- ² Lee Butler, "Washing off the Dust: Baths and Bathing in Late Medieval Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 60/1 (Spring 2005): 2.
- ³ Eric Talmadge, *Getting Wet: Adventures in the Japanese Bath* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 238.
- ⁴ Scott Clark, *Japan: A View from the Bath* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 1.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁶ Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 35.
- ⁷ Bath Federation of Oota Ward, Tokyo, 2009, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://ota1010.com/sentou.cgi?code=e>.
- ⁸ To learn more about proper Japanese bathing manners, I recommend the helpful website maintained by the Bath Federation of Oota Ward, Tokyo, that acts as a database of public baths in the region and a guide to Japanese bathing etiquette. The site is maintained in Chinese, English, Korean, and Japanese, but appears primarily geared toward tourists afraid of committing cultural taboos—all the more horrifying when one is naked.
- ⁹ Jacob Adelman and Ichiro Suzuki, "Natto Makers to Public Baths Suffer in Abenomics Divide," *Bloomberg News Online*, June 16, 2013, accessed February 15, 2014.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 21.
- ¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), "Guide to Living in Japan," last updated November 01, 2013, accessed February 17, 2014, http://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/visa/pdfs/guide_living_en.pdf.
- ¹³ John W. Traphagen, "Culture and Long Term Care: The Bath as Social Service in Japan," *Care Management Journals* 5/1 (Spring 2004): 53–60.
- ¹⁴ Hiroko Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs Part of Social, Geologic, Historic Fabric," *Japan Times*, January 22, 2008, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/01/22/reference/japans-hot-springs-part-of-social-geologic-historic-fabric/#.UIN5WrwmxUW>.
- ¹⁵ Maido Nippon Corporation and the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), site last updated January 04, 2014, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://selected-ryokan.com/>.
- ¹⁶ Robert W. Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction*, (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Asia Center, 1985), 109–10.
- ¹⁷ Traphagan, "Culture and Long Term Care," 54.
- ¹⁸ Ken Yasumoto-Nicolson, "Over Half the Japanese Reuse Their Bath Water," *What Japan Thinks*, November 28, 2006, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://whatjapanthinks.com/2006/11/28/over-half-the-japanese-re-use-their-bath-water/>. As part of an effort to locate more recent and scientific sources, blogger Ken Yasumoto-Nicolson's translation of a research study conducted by Japanese company DIMSDRIVE on Japanese attitudes toward bathing was included in this article. DIMSDRIVE polled 6,436 people using their internet monitoring group with a variety of questions ranging from how often people bathe on average, to preferred times for bathing, and level of enjoyment. Conducted in 2006, this data was helpful in forming a picture of how personal use of the *ofuro* varies based on factors like gender, age, and whether or not one lives alone.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Clark, *Japan*, 68.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ²² Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 20.
- ²³ Peter Grilli and Dana Levy, *Pleasures of the Japanese Bath* (Boston: Weatherhill, 1992), 26.

- 24 Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns (Voices of an Era)* (Santa Barbara: Westview Press, 2011), 56.
- 25 Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 8.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 27 *Sakyamuni* is the name for Buddha transliterated from the original Sanskrit; Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 137, citing Shikitei Sanba.
- 28 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 20.
- 29 Keiko Daidoji, "Water Cures in Japan: The Case of a Health Manual in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Asian Medicine* 5/1 (January 2010): 80–107.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 31 Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs."
- 32 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 47.
- 33 Adam M. Merry, "More Than a Bath: An Examination of Japanese Bathing Culture," (CMC Senior Theses, 2013), 10, http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/665.
- 34 Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 23.
- 35 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 37 Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*.
- 38 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 40 Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*, 56.
- 41 Torii Kiyonaga, *Interior of a Bathhouse, 1787*, accessed November 2013, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/interior-of-a-bathhouse-467811>.
- 42 William Heine and W. T. Peters, *Public Bath at Simoda*, accessed November 2013, http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/black_ships_and_samurai/gallery/pages/01_408aL_narr_bath.jpg, as cited by John Dower.
- 43 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 44 "Tokyo's Top *onsen*: Where to Enjoy a Relaxing Hot-Spring--Without Leaving the Capitol," Time Out Tokyo Editors, January 25, 2013, accessed February 23, 2014, <http://www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/feature/536/Tokyos-top-onsen>.
- 45 Yoshino Kōsaku, "Globalization as 'Internationalization': Perspectives on Nationalism in Japan," in *Asian Nationalism in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Roy Starrs (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 46 Tsukada Hotaka, "Cultural Nationalism in Japanese Neo-New Religions," *Monumenta Nipponica* 67/1 (2012): 133–57.
- 47 Bruce Smith, *The Japanese Bath* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs-Smith, 2012).
- 48 Ian Reader, "Back to the Future: Images of Nostalgia and Renewal in a Japanese Religious Context," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14/4 (1987): 298.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 287.
- 50 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 21.

Glossary

English Translation	Transliteration	Characters
Bath girl	<i>yuna</i>	浴女
Bathtub	<i>ofuro</i>	お風呂
Closed-country policy	<i>sakoku</i>	鎖国
Coin	<i>sen</i>	銭
Enter	<i>hairu</i>	入る
Go (board game of capturing territory)	<i>go</i>	碁
Honorific marker	<i>o</i>	お
Hot spring	<i>onsen</i>	温泉
"Hot spring cure"	<i>yuami</i>	湯浴み
Indigenous animistic religion of Japan	Shinto	神道
Indigenous gods of Shinto	<i>kami</i>	神
Japanese "chess"	<i>shogi</i>	将棋
Japanese cypress	<i>hinoki</i>	檜
Japanese-style inns	<i>ryokan</i>	旅館
Japanese characters	<i>kanji</i>	漢字
Light summer kimono or bathrobe	<i>yukata</i>	浴衣
"Penny bath"	<i>sentoburo</i>	銭湯風呂
Phonetic renderings of characters	<i>furigana</i>	振仮名
Public bath	<i>sentō</i>	銭湯
"Purification ceremony"	<i>misogi</i>	禊 or 身滌
Radical representing water	<i>sanzui</i>	氵
Reading based on Chinese pronunciation	<i>onyomi</i>	音読み
<i>Records of Ancient Matters</i>	<i>Kojiki</i>	古事記
Sliding paper screen	<i>shoji</i>	障子
Straw floor mat	<i>tatami</i>	畳
Theories of cultural/racial specificity	<i>Nihonjinron</i>	日本人論
Traditional frameless mattress	<i>futon</i>	布団
Type of open-air bath	<i>rotenburo</i>	露天風呂
"Urban life" or "floating world"	<i>ukiyo</i>	憂世 or 浮世

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