**Keeping it Unreal - Online Dating with Chinese Characteristics**

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The success of *The First Intimate Contact*, a novel written by Taiwanese student Cai Zhiheng in 1998, created a frenzy about online romance in China. Many envisaged the romantic experience of meeting a loved one online just as depicted in the novel. Though the hype surrounding online romance may have dissipated, the practice has certainly not gone out of fashion. As the country with the largest Internet population in the world, dating somebody met online has become a mainstream mode of courtship for many Chinese, similar to Internet users in the West. In fact, existing studies suggest that Chinese Internet users embrace social media more extensively than their Western counterparts. For example, according to business consultant group, BCG’s press release dated 12 April 2012, 79 percent of Chinese used instant messages (IM) compared with 21 percent of U.S. Internet users.[[1]](#footnote-1) *Sina Weibo*, the most popular microblogging service provider boasted 300 million registered users by the end of 2011 in less than three years of operation,[[2]](#footnote-2) compared with Twitter which has operated since 2006 and is reported to have 100 million users as of September 2011.[[3]](#footnote-3) The results of an online survey involving Chinese and American youths showed that the Internet was much more appreciated in China than in America.[[4]](#footnote-4) For instance, 77 percent of the 1,104 Chinese participants agreed with the statement “the Internet helps me make friends”, compared to only 30 percent of the 1,079 American participants. The study also showed that 66 percent of the Chinese surveyed thought that online interactions had broadened their sense of identity only 26 percent of American respondents reported to have this benefit.

Yet despite China’s exponential growth of its Internet population, and enthusiastic embrace of social media, our understandings of online relationships are mostly limited to studies based in the Western context. The development of the information and communication (ICT) industry in China is even more astounding if we take into the consideration of stringent state control, monitoring and information censorship. My research into China’s online dating scene has revealed culturally unique understandings and practices of online romance, reflecting the impact of the country’s on-going socio-cultural transformations.

Since the economic reforms in the late 1970s, the state loosened it controls on labor, capital and commodities markets to stimulate growth. Individuals were liberated not only to pursue their own economic activities, but also to reclaim their private life from the control of the party-state and parental authority. The new culture of courtship and marriage that emerged as a result of state sponsored structural changes emphasizing freedom of love and material comfort is at odds with the old ideal of romantic love founded on feelings and emotional satisfaction.[[5]](#footnote-5) The relentless pursuit of materialism and economic growth has rendered many feeling bewildered and with a strong sense of emotional emptiness. My study shows that many Chinese are increasingly turning to relationships online to satisfy their unfulfilled emotional needs.

The following discussion is based on the findings of my online participant observations in *Love Apartment*, a relationship site, *Renren*, China’s equivalent of Facebook, and the *Tianya* bulletin board system. The online participant observations took place for 10 months beginning from May 2009. Love Apartment was chosen because of its unique game-like appeal.[[6]](#footnote-6) *Renren* is the ideal site to observe the online interactions of Chinese Internet users, especially among students. Tianya has several discussion forums dedicated to relationships, including online romance. This is where personal stories of online romance, concerns, problems encountered, and others’ opinions towards online romance can be heard and shared. For ethical reasons, my identity as a researcher was made explicit in my profile on these sites and was stated upfront to all users with whom I came into contact. The analysis of participants’ views on online romance suggested that there were three ways in which Chinese Internet users conceptualized online romance. I referred to the three categories as ‘pragmatic fantasists’, ‘romantic realists’ and ‘sceptics’, each holding different attitudes towards online romance. Participants’ quotes in my discussion are credited to the authors’ user names on the site. I also relied on my participants’ narratives of their online romance to elucidate these categories and how their different experiences demonstrated the diverse social potentials of online romance.

All data collected were originally in Chinese. My role as both researcher and translator may have ensured greater transparency and consistency, but translation is more than a technical issue of transferring meanings from one language to another. Translation decisions have epistemological and ontological implications.[[7]](#footnote-7) My translation added another layer of meanings, despite my desire to feature participants’ own voices more prominently and allow readers an active role in interpreting the original messages. Following Birbili’s advice, to best represent participants’ words, in my translation, the structure, tone and style of participants are preserved as closely as possible, but not to the extent where word-by-word translation would seriously invalidate English grammar and risk distorting the meanings and undermining readability.[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, minor grammatical error is tolerated and since I prioritize semantic equivalence over structure, I occasionally rearrange sentence sequence if it helps to better convey participants’ meanings in English.

In this chapter, I will also introduce ‘Platonic emotional love’ and ‘play’, the two keywords in Chinese discourse of online romance. I will examine the theoretical underpinnings of these two words and how they relate to the three categories. This chapter begins by exploring the meanings of online romance in China. My study shows that there is a conceptual ambiguity associated with the term ‘online romance’ and this has resulted in confusion among Chinese Internet users.

**Meanings of *Wanglian (*Online Romance)**

Although the term *wanglian* is frequently used, its precise meaning varies and contains ambiguity to all Chinese. Some of my participants referred it to romantic relationships initiated online and gradually expanded into the offline world, maybe even cumulating into long-term relationships or marriage. But substantial numbers of Chinese Internet users also understand online romance as the act of romancing online, or referring to exclusively Internet-based relationships. By definition, *wang* means net and *lian* refers to love. Online romance would, indeed, imply romantic relationships happening and confined within cyberspace. Some users were confused. For instance, Zhang Caiyuan wrote on the forum at *Renren*,

I think I have a misconception of online romance. Online romance is a romantic relationship taking place online without any offline interactions. I met her online, but our relationship developed in the offline world, I think strictly speaking, it cannot be categorized as online romance. This is a very ambiguous concept.

Similarly, when discussing if online romance could become an offline reality at *Tianya* forum, Jipingliuer replied that “I think online romance is not the same as turning an online acquaintance into a courtship partner.” The answer suggests that the user thinks the two are different romantic experiences that should not be conflated. Other nuanced differences that cause confusion include whether online romance applies to romantic relationships that developed only after face-to-face meetings, and amorous affiliations developed online between partners who were first introduced by an offline friend. For example,

I met my current partner through a colleague’s recommendation. We first contacted each other online and because of the distance, we rely on the Internet to keep in touch. I am not sure whether this counts as online romance or not (Nakai).

In short, *wanglian* does not denote a single homogeneous type of computer-mediated relationship. Its contestable meanings have led to different implications depending on the way the term is used.

For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the two main types of online romance as defined by a Chinese scholar in his theoretical discussion of online romance.[[9]](#footnote-9) The first is romantic relationships that exist exclusively online in which couples refrain from having any offline contacts with each other. The second is relationships that rely on the Internet merely as a tool for communication in which couples first meet online but gradually expand their relationship into the offline world. These relationships are ultimately not very much different from conventional courtship. A similar definition was also used in research of online romance involving 4,811 students across nine provinces in China.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the report, online romance is defined as Internet initiated relationships that flourish into romantic bonds, remaining either exclusively online or materializing into the offline world. The definition provided in Chinese literature nevertheless seems to emphasize the presence of romantic sentiment prior to any offline interactions. In other words, in the Chinese definition, couples that meet online but only become romantically involved after meeting in person and spending time together offline would not be considered as online romance.

The definition of online romance in China intrigues me because Western literature on online romantic relationships is concerned mostly with only the second type. For instance, Merkle and Richardson highlighted how online relationships develop through an inverted sequence that eventually leads to face-to-face meetings;[[11]](#footnote-11) McKenna, Green and Gleason conducted a path analysis to explore the sequence of moving online relationships offline;[[12]](#footnote-12) Baker defined successful online relationships as those that cumulate into long-term courtship, cohabitation or marriage in the actual world.[[13]](#footnote-13) I once came across a personal advertisement in a *Tianya* online romance forum, dated 15 September 2009, from a male aged 22, specifying that he was looking for a strictly online romantic relationship, precluding any face-to-face interactions. This may seem almost inconceivable in the West, but is rather common among Chinese Internet users. An online survey involving Chinese and American youths showed that 61 percent of the former said they had a parallel life online, compared to only 13 percent of the latter. In fact, 63 percent of Chinese participants agreed with the statement that “it is perfectly possible to have real relationships purely online with no face-to-face contact” compared to only 21 percent of Americans.[[14]](#footnote-14) Chinese Internet users’ tendency to demarcate the online and the offline world, and their motivations for doing so, appeared to me as a culturally distinct phenomenon.

This is not to say that exclusively Internet-based relationships do not exist in the West, or all Western online daters desire to move their relationship offline, it does, however, show that this type of relationship is not on top of Western scholars’ agenda, presumably because it is perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be insignificant or impossible. For example, Ben-Ze’ev argues that ‘profound online only romantic relationships’ are transitional and unsustainable because without embodied interactions offline, these relationships are incomplete.[[15]](#footnote-15) His underlying assumption is that people typically want to expand the relationship offline, but this does not apply to all Chinese Internet users as some of them make their choice to confine their romantic liaisons online. The ‘incompleteness’ is actually desirable for them, because by confining it within cyberspace, the effectiveness of the relationship to fulfil couples’ emotional needs is enhanced, yet without creating many complications in their everyday life. This group of individuals is what I referred to as ‘pragmatist fantasists’, who tend to understand online romance as a kind of ‘Platonic emotional love’. To fully understand the motivations of pragmatist fantasists, we need to first examine the notion of Platonic emotional love as used in the context of Chinese online discourse.

**Platonic Emotional Love**

‘Platonic love’ is often used interchangeably, or sometimes together, with ‘emotional love’ to refer to exclusively Internet-based romantic relationships with a strong emphasis on emotional gratification. During my participant observations, I regularly came across participants talking about how online romance could provide emotional solace (*jingshen weiji*) to lovers that would help to rejuvenate their worn-out self.

Online romance, even if you can’t be together, you can, at least, enjoy the illusionary quality, the purest emotional love. Even if heartbreaking, it is still a wonderful and unforgettable [experience] (Luohuarumeng).

Most people’s everyday life is full of regrets and adversities, and the dull daily routine makes everyone crave for excitement. In the real world, too many worries and inhibitions make it difficult to relieve tension. The Internet can satisfy these needs and stir people’s imagination. Albeit just virtually, it is a way to relieve tension. People can then get on with their study or work when back to the real world. Online romance is the emotional supplement [that invigorates] the everyday life (Jimogaoshou).

Life is full of frustrations. Unable to find what you wish for in real life, then the Internet is the best you can count on… Nothing wrong with going online to unwind and readjust your emotion. So moderate online romance is actually good [for the individuals] (Xueshangfeier).

The last two arguments are underpinned by a utilitarian attitude to strategically make use of online romance to promote lovers’ psychological wellbeing. It reflects the pervasive therapeutic ethos of contemporary society, in which emotional life, as pointed out by Illouz, is “in need of management and control and on regulating it under the incessantly expanding ideal of health.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Achieving emotional competence, “namely self-awareness, the ability to identify their feelings, talk about them, empathize with each other’s position and find solutions to a problem”, becomes imperative to success in both public and private lives.[[17]](#footnote-17) Online relationships are particularly good at helping participants to develop their emotional competence as the performance of intimacy online relies on constant verbalization and exchange of private inner feelings. Nevertheless, not all online daters are content with mere emotional interactions, yet their physical separation makes regular corporeal interactions difficult.

The warmest of online love you can hope for is in the form of text, at best the voice of the lover. When in trouble or feeling upset, emotional support is what you can get … there isn’t a shoulder for you to lean on … no open arms to comfort you. When you needed him/her the most, you might not be able to get hold of him/her, like a loose kite flying on the sky… (Fanfan).

Describing online romance as largely an emotional affair excluding actual bodily interaction coincides with the way some Chinese Internet users understand online romance as romancing exclusively online. Although the relationship can be extended to the offline world, ideally, it should be confined within cyberspace for safety, moral and practical reasons.

Online romance should only be online. It cannot be extended to real life. The Internet is a virtual world, people you meet online are not the same person offline. You can’t be sure of his/her character, life or family circumstances. Therefore, it is alright to have online romance, but you can’t transfer the relationship offline(Hongsexianrenqiu).

In cyberspace, emotions become even more crucial. Social interactions seem much purer. Romancing online, everything turns illusory yet wonderful, like a fairy, untouched by worldly concerns… If everything stopped here, it would be fabulous (Stefanie).

Online romance is largely about emotional solace; it brings emotional support and happiness but when the relationship grows deeper and becomes an offline reality, everything will not be the same (Fanfan).

Online romance literally means romantic relationship online. So what can you rely on to maintain the relationship? Occasionally seeing each other using webcam? Getting intimate through the keyboard? Sometimes online romance indeed provides us a unique feeling, a sense of emotional comfort, but… (Ermodang).

‘Platonic emotional love’ is frequently used to refer to these exclusively Internet-based romantic relationships because of the absence of actual bodily interactions between the dyads. For example, Internet user Maio Chenlin wrote, “Platonic love ~ ~ very much the theory of online romance ~~~~”, while Zhe said, “online romance is the legendary Platonic love. If you wish for true love … arrange a meeting with the loved one in the real world.” Similarly, another Internet user, Keerhu argued against using the Internet to pursue ‘Platonic-style emotion love’ as he considered it wrong to exclude corporeal interactions in a relationship.

Some online daters choose to partake in ‘Platonic love’, by which I mean they have no intention or desire to expand the relationship offline and are content with the relationship’s mere online existence. Others reluctantly become Platonic online daters as they are either unable to overcome the physical distance that separates them or to defy the social norms that discourage their amorous liaison. Despite their longing for corporeal intimacy, this latter group of online daters unwillingly accept that their relationship cannot goes offline. As they call themselves Platonic lovers, they unintentionally broaden the meaning of Platonic love to include also relationships with erotic impulses which regrettably cannot be consumed. In other words, *Platonic[[18]](#footnote-18)* love used in Chinese discourses of online romance refers to emotional love without physical interactions, but might not necessary preclude sexual desire.

Those pursuing *Platonic* online romance by choice seem to approach their relationship strategically for self-gratification. They rely on this relationship for the excitement or distractions needed to spice up their banal everyday life, satisfy their unfulfilled emotional needs, and provide solace in the face of life’s adversities. They carefully demarcate the online and offline world to limit the negative impacts their online activities may have on their offline life and show no sign of confusing the two. There is a clear priority put on the offline reality and they utilize their online relationship to improve the quality of their daily life. They are, therefore, content with the disembodied presence of their lover in the virtual world, motivated not by physical intimacy. Calling their online romance *Platonic* love not only conveys a sense of lofty spiritual love unsullied by carnal lust, it also softens the image of a cheating partner as a mere online emotional liaison is allegedly innocuous. Although there are also *Platonic* online daters who genuinely appreciate the coming together of the two minds, and treasure the deep emotional bonds that developed as a result of their regular mutual self-disclosure, most express a rather practical attitude towards online romance. For instance,

Life pressure in contemporary society is enormous. There is nothing wrong with using online romance to rejuvenate one’s life. Many people’s family life is not perfect anyway. Chatting with several boyfriends and girlfriends online doesn’t make it worse. It can perhaps even improve the family relations (Wodeaizaoyibuzai).

Family life is tedious and boring, but most people refuse to be content with the prosaic life. Everyone is longing to re-experience passion and romantic love, and inject new exciting elements into life, but there is a heavy price to pay for infidelity... Online romance easily fulfils this emotional void... (Baobeibuku)

In the post-Mao China, Marxist ideologies and class struggle no longer dominate the political discourse and are replaced by pragmatism, which also becoming the guiding philosophy of the society.[[19]](#footnote-19) Deng once said that “it doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice” to make the argument that socialism is not strictly defined by a planned economy, and a market economy can also serve the socialist state to promote growth and improve the living standards of the people.[[20]](#footnote-20) As the nation embraced the late Deng’s exhortation that “to get rich is glorious”, this has had profound implications on the society as most people adopted an instrumental approach in their everyday life. Compounded with the party-state’s ideological commitment to atheism, many in the society experienced a sense of moral vacuum, emotional emptiness and spiritual bankruptcy.[[21]](#footnote-21) Furthermore, since the market reforms, individuals have been told to take greater personal responsibilities in life as the state withdraws the social supports that once catered for each individual from the cradle to the grave.[[22]](#footnote-22) Yet the development of individualization in China is curtailed by the absence of a democratic culture and welfare system to protect and support individuals.[[23]](#footnote-23) The lack of constitutional protection and social support render life in contemporary post-socialist Chinese society highly competitive and stressful for many ordinary people. This explains the motivation of pragmatist fantasists who strategically make use of online relationships to romanticize their everyday life and as a means to seek emotional comfort. In the following section, I will elucidate the practice of pragmatist fantasist through the story of one of my participants.

**The Pragmatist Fantasist**

Online romance presents pragmatic fantasists the opportunity to re-experience the stereotypical romantic love, or at least the fantasy of it. This can be seen in the way many online daters describe the experience of being engulfed by the flame of passionate love beyond their rational control. The outpouring heightened emotions have a mysterious self-transforming and transcendental quality. It allows lovers to put aside all worldly concerns, such as money, status, background differences, social norms, and concentrate only on their innermost feelings with the ideal lover. These feelings of stereotypical romantic love also provide pragmatic fantasists with the therapeutic function of distraction away from the miseries felt in everyday life and through the constant practice of ‘disclosing intimacy’ online,[[24]](#footnote-24) they also come closer to being a self-reflexive subject. Therefore, they treat online romance as an effective means to the end of self-help and improvement.

Despite the romantic undertone, couples engaging in this type of online relationship may not necessarily consider their relationship a serious romance. Often, they are regarded as flexible, contingent and open forms of emotional relationship, not always motivated by sexual desire. Although some participants may have longing for physical intimacy with their partner, this desire is usually not acted upon. The decision not to have anything to do with each other offline is made for several reasons. Firstly, to limit the online relationship’s potentially negative impact on the primary relationship or family life offline; secondly, to help sustain its magical quality that is crucial to invigorate their tedious everyday life and make them feel rejuvenated. The kind of relationship they desire, in fact, thrives in the virtual enclosure because its distance from reality is crucial for the relationship to fulfil its therapeutic function of self-discovery and romanticizing everyday life. In other words, pragmatic fantasists pursue largely *Platonic* emotional love. The nature of relationships of this kind is akin to Giddens’ notion of pure relationship, the self-gratifying relationship.[[25]](#footnote-25) The relationship is ‘pure’ because it is no longer organized by the network of kinship and community, but driven by the reflexive self, and it is continued so long as it is fulfilling to the individuals involved.

Giddens’ pure relationship is in practice difficult to achieve or possible only among the privileged. In China, despite the emergence of a nouveau riche and growing middle class, making ends meet is still the daily preoccupation of the majority. The high cost of marriage, the social anxiety of being single, family responsibilities and reputation give many no liberty to walk out regardless of how dissatisfied they are with their relationship. It is only within cyberspace that many have the opportunity to experience the therapeutic self-satisfying pure relationship based on equality of emotional exchanges. Acting as a release valve, online romance provides feelings of being understood, happiness, gratification, hope and intimacy, hence hard-pressed Chinese feel invigorated when they go back to the reality of everyday life. Some of them may occasionally be tempted to cross the online and offline boundaries. However, such boundary crossing does not serve their purposes of seeking emotional sustenance and distraction, and thus, reaffirm the distinction between the two realms.

AZ (not real name) is one of my participants who, like so many other pragmatist fantasists, turned to online romance for solace, emotional support and self-experimentation. He is a married school teacher I met on *Love Apartment*. He disguised his actual occupation and used somebody else’s photograph in his profile because he was worried that his activities on the site would compromise his role model image for his students and raise suspicion of extramarital affairs. He told me that so far he had had about 10 experiences of online cohabitation with different female members, mostly initiated by him, lasting from six months to just a few days. With just one exception, he mostly refrained from having any offline contact beyond the site with his female partners. “I don’t know and don’t want to know their real names, addresses or telephone numbers.” He took none of these relationships seriously, nor did he perceive them as romantic. “What I am looking for is fun, nothing significant or meaningful, which means I am not going to expand these relationships into the real world. They are merely emotional.” His statement suggests that ‘emotional’ is secondary to his life in the physical world in which he has established social roles to play and maintain. “To be honest, I enjoy the freedom and excitement online. I am lacking in these in my life. I have no opportunity to pursue these needs due to work, family, finance, norms and other social strictures.” He perceived the site as a place where he can relax and unwind himself. “When I am feeling tired from work and prosaic daily routine, I come here for relaxation. Perhaps here helps me to adjust to my everyday life.” The easy availability of distant intimacy from the site is liberating and entertaining to AZ. He light-heartedly enjoyed the therapeutic functions of his online relationships. These included a boosted sense of self and feelings of invigoration, but at the same time a dismissiveness of the significance of these relationships.

Pursuing *Platonic* emotional love that is devoid of physical embodied interactions should, however, not be mistaken as embracing the Cartesian view of the superiority of the mind over the body. All the Chinese Internet users I encountered during the course of my study had no doubt on the importance of the body in romantic relationships. Neither were they enthusiastic about cyberspace’s disembodiment in general. They are taking advantage of the Internet for what it does best, in this case, connecting people, extending human communication capacities which, in the process, fulfils their emotional needs and promotes their psychological wellbeing.

In addition to *Platonic* emotional love, ‘play’ is another important conceptual term that Chinese Internet users draw on heavily in their discussion of online romance. Cyberspace provides a perfect playground for self-immersion and exploration, reflecting the view of the ‘sceptic’, the second category of Chinese online daters which will be discussed after examining the notion of ‘play’ in the Chinese discourse of online romance.

**Play**

It is perhaps not a surprise that many associate online romance with game as most users I observed online, indeed, met their lover while playing games online. They often expressed doubt in the seriousness of their relationships. Relationships originating from the play domain have often been the target of online romance critics. These critics are suspicious of online daters’ levels of commitment and the authenticity of the relationships. My study showed that critics’ scepticism often also turns into cynicism as they urge online daters to adopt a playful approach to the relationship to avoid getting hurt. Not surprising that this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for ‘players’ as they fall in and out of love more quickly than those who take the relationship seriously.

Online romance can be described as a type of adult game. It is illusory and cannot be materialized (Wodeaizaoyibuzai).

… online romance is only a play, a dream (Guoguo).

Online romance is love play, whoever becomes serious, he/she will be the loser (Taxiangyu).

Games are governed by rules. Online romance also has its rules. The rule is never to take it too seriously. If not, it would turn prosaic. Frustrations would also ensue. Plagued with too many miseries, it would no longer be online romance (Baobeibuku).

The commentator of the last quote suggests that online romance’s enchantment would vanish when it stops being a game. She continues to argue that there are advantages in deliberately treating online romance as play. Online romance is fascinating because

it has no responsibilities. Love without responsibilities is relaxing, but at the same time illusionary … just by talking everyone can enjoy being in love, no monetary investment required, not much obligation and is mutually entertaining. Such a good deal should indeed be encouraged!

The playfulness of online romance renders it unreliable, but a low-investment, low- risk romantic pursuit, in turn, encourages Internet users to explore and experiment with love online. Players have low expectations on what they can hope for because commitments are rare and they are therefore unburdened by the weight associated with serious love affairs. Turning online relationships into play also implies that the relationship ought to be enjoyed as an intrinsic activity in itself, not as a means to find an offline date or a long-term partner. Play by nature is short lived and the only purpose is to have fun, enjoying the excitement and amusement play brings. Huizinga defined play as

a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.[[26]](#footnote-26)

This definition’s emphasis on the separation between play and reality is especially germane to the discussion here. According to Huizinga, to play means stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with its own governing rules. Play is captivating and satisfying in itself, complementing life in general. Without such separation, playing make-believe of a second reality would be difficult and it is the rules that create and sustain the frame of play within certain limits of time and place.[[27]](#footnote-27) Playing at love online could be liberating, stimulating and transforming, if not at least entertaining and relaxing. The engrossment provides a form of escape or distraction from the mundane and often disappointing everyday realities.

Whitty also theorized online relationships as a form of play, external to everyday reality, fragile and ephemeral as it can only be sustained if players play by the rules and thereby keep its own frame alive.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the psychodynamic view, play can promote the development of self and facilitate psychological growth and general health. The Internet provides a safe place for users not only to play with the relationships, but also their identities that could lead to increased self-awareness and acceptance with improved self-esteem.[[29]](#footnote-29) This indeed reflects the motivation of some *Platonic* daters who pragmatically turn to the Internet to promote their emotional wellbeing. But for sceptics of online romance, when using the term ‘play or game’, they tend to downplay its psychological benefits, but focus instead, on its spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality, which, according to Simmel, in his article about sociability, are the gaming principles that also govern most social events.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The ‘ludus’ way of loving, a casual and noncommittal game playing romantic relationship, is nothing new as suggested in Lee’s typology of styles of loving,[[31]](#footnote-31) but the Internet provides a context particularly suitable for this style of love. Participants of ‘ludic(rous)’ Internet relationships often show “an utter lack of concern for depth, solemnity, seriousness, civility, and respect.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Getting sexually or emotionally closer to someone met online, yet calling it mere play has the effect of trivializing the relationship and making it innocuous because play is not real. The ‘only pretending’ consciousness of play makes everyday moral ethics, virtues, manners, social norms and strictures less readily applicable to play.[[33]](#footnote-33) This explains why transgressive love affairs are likely to be condoned if confined within cyberspace. A transgressive online relationship that expands into the offline world would stop being play, hence needing to be regulated.

Through play, players can exercise their agency, try to take control, defy and oppose the status quo. Henricks summarized Huizinga’s work on play as

to play is to take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently to build it anew. So understood, play for Huizinga is a protest against determinism, a claim that humans need not merely endure existential conditions but can reform these according to their own desires and insights.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Although players are unable to directly challenge and immediately undermine the dominant ideologies, play, nevertheless, is a way for them to express themselves, to tell their stories, and form a community of support. As argued by Scott, symbolic resistance and defiance by society’s underdogs should not be dismissed lightly.[[35]](#footnote-35) Furthermore, play may seem opposed to everyday reality, but it is also simultaneously part of it. The relationship between a society and the games it likes to play is reciprocal and mutually reflective of one another.[[36]](#footnote-36) In other words, games affect the culture of the society as much as being affected by it.

Other advantages of a playful approach to online romance include allowing incongruous motives or conflicting interests to co-exist and minimizing the risk of failure, lightening the pain of rejection, and making exploration or experimentation possible. “Online romance is not real romance, so even if split up, it would not result in too much pain”, pointed by participant Jitenglian. Becoming a playboy or playgirl online and feeling desirable is also a boost to one’s self-esteem.

Online daters’ playfulness may appear superficial to sceptical outsiders, but it requires digital competency and emotional rhetoric to successfully manoeuvre between play and reality. Just as the boundaries between the offline life and the online world are permeable, the border of play and ordinary life is not always clear-cut. When and where reality stops being reality, and play stops being play is not always obvious or undisputable, therefore each can have considerable influence on the other. For example, excessive playing of flirtatious relationships online can have negative effects on the primary relationship despite the idea that play would normally imply not having real and serious consequences in the wider world. In his study of games as social encounters, Goffman argued that what makes the encounters fun is a selective connection to the world beyond. Too much separation may render the play trivial and boring, too little separation may discourage players’ engrossment in the play.[[37]](#footnote-37) In summary, successful play is one where players themselves control the level of separation to achieve the right balance, simultaneously maintaining the sense of both connection and disconnection. However, ideal it may seem, only seasoned players would have the competency to negotiate between the two for maximum joy. Most would risk turning initial pleasure into compulsion, enjoyment into obsession, a casual and responsibility-free relationship into a serious love affair.

**The Sceptic**

Those users not in favor of online romance are mostly sceptical about its feasibility and authenticity. Their apprehension is based not only on the problematic tendency to contrast the virtual with the real, but also the conviction that online romance is a free play of make-believe, an imagined fairytale that is fun but transient, therefore should only be consumed incorporeally within cyberspace.

Online romance has enchanted beauty. Online romance makes some people obsessive. Online romance makes love even more romantic. Online romance embellishes life with the beauty of confusion. But no matter what, regardless of how much more beautiful is online romance, it is just too virtual (Ermodang).

The virtual nature of online romance that frees participants from social norms and moral obligations is the main worry of online romance sceptics. Those who desire to move the romantic relationship offline would be regarded by the sceptics as confusing play with reality and representing a futile attempt because transcendental romantic affairs are always short-lived. They argue that the excitements and enchantments of online romance lie precisely in its virtual nature with a distance away from reality. It allows misrepresentations and sustains the illusion of a fairytale with heightened and volatile emotions.

I think online romance is only suitable in cyberspace. When it goes offline, its quality deteriorates (83gzhuazi).

Reality is never as good as the virtual world. It is romantic, because the Internet hides its ugly side. Only when keeping the online romance within cyberspace, does it remain perfect (Heizi).

Sceptics of online romance subscribe to the realist model of prosaic love. They are critically aware of the incompatibilities between idealistic online romance and the semantic and phenomenological properties of everyday life which is tedious and occupied with earthly petty concerns and chores.[[38]](#footnote-38) Therefore, they are critical of the fantasy online romance creates but encourage recreational consumption of this fantasy by playing along and enjoying the feel-good effects it brings. In other words, play has become the rhetorical answer for the sceptics of online romance. It resolves the significance of their concerns and allows them to conveniently enjoy the online romantic’s romantic ideals while at the same time cynically laughing at its triviality.

As opposed to the sceptics, the romantic realists have the aspiration to turn online romance into a social reality. They perceive online romance as not essentially different from romantic relationships initiated in the face-to-face world. In fact, relationships online built upon a foundation of constant emotional exchange and deeper mutual understandings are considered to be more meaningful by this category of online Internet users which will be discussed next.

**The Romantic Realist**

Romantic realists argue against the idea of ‘romancing online’ and understand online romance as initiated online but gradually expand offline and potentially cumulate long-term courtship, cohabitation or marriage. This perception of online romance is consistent with the dominant understanding of online romance. As romantic realists harbor the intention to move online romance offline, sustaining the heightened emotion and turning it into offline reality is the challenge. Embracing realistic expectations and not deliberately misrepresenting oneself online are advice given to couples to help overcome the challenge of transition from online to offline. *Jian guang si*, orperish upon exposing to the reality offline, is the most commonly discussed problem facing the romantic realists. It refers to the inevitable end of an online relationship when the dyad crosses the boundary by expanding their relationship offline. It is not the only worry that puts many online daters off from meeting in person. Physical distance between the two can also be a practical problem. Until either one relocates to be with the other, regular bodily interactions are impossible. Having to endure romantic love devoid of embodied presence is one of the serious drawbacks of online romance for romantic realists. Many online daters in this category lament the pain of being deprived of corporeal intimacy.

Romantic realists’ concerns are closely related to their realization that technologies do not liberate human beings from the constraints of physical distance and embodiment which are paramount to the maintenance of romantic relationships. Advice given to online daters often includes regularly spending time together offline to truly understand each other and to make sure both get along well. If the relationship survives *jian guang si* and is successfully transferred offline, it will then be subjected to the same influence of social conventions, cultural practices, familial norms and values that affect people’s dating behaviors, for example, “we dated online for two years and went offline. It went well, but was eventually destroyed by family members…”, a personal experience of Wujunnan.

Of course in reality, the three categories (pragmatist fantasists, sceptics and romantic realists) identified in this study are not mutually exclusive. An individual may pragmatically choose to pursue *Platonic* emotional love online, but in the process get carried away by the intense romantic affection that leaves him/her contemplating the possibility of expanding the relationship offline. Meanwhile, he/she remains sceptical because of the conviction that the reality of everyday life is simply incompatible with the idealistic online romance. In the next section, I will discuss the similarities and differences of the three categories.

**The Dynamic of the Three Categories**

One thing in common between sceptics and pragmatic fantasists is they see online romance as a fairytale, too good to be true in the offline world and it is the virtuality of the Internet that sustains the wonderful illusion. The difference between sceptics’ playful approach and pragmatic fantasists’ utilitarian approach to online romance lies in the former’s ruling spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality. According to Simmel, non-instrumentality means that socializing and playing is engaged in for its own sake, not as a means for attaining certain goals; while inconsequentiality insists on the importance of not being in earnest and just having fun.[[39]](#footnote-39) Pragmatic fantasists, on the other hand, are motivated to use the relationships to help meet those emotional needs unfulfilled in everyday life. The relationships could turn serious and meaningful for some couples.

Chinese romantic realists desire to gradually expand their mode of communication, often from the initial textual interaction online to face-to-face meetings in due course. While the Internet may eventually become obsolete in their relationship as they shift flexibly between the online and the offline, this is however the opposite of how sceptical online daters and pragmatic fantasists experience their online romance. Romantic realists see the intertwining between the online and offline world as natural and inevitable, but the other two groups on the contrary, attempt to re-enact the boundaries between the online and offline world by repeatedly emphasizing on the benefits of keeping two realms apart from one another. In their discussion of online romance, the Internet is constantly being contrasted with the real life, the reality of offline world, the physical, the tangible, and the actual. Many of them opposed the idea of expanding online romance to the offline world, either because of their belief that the idealistic relationship can only live within cyberspace or it is morally wrong or irresponsible to let online activities affect the primary relationships or family life.

Residing in a northern province of China, Nakai (not real name) aged 24 in 2010, worked as an administrator at a careers service center. She shared her personal experience of online romance with me. Her narrative showed how she flexibly shifted between the three attitudes and how the Internet empowered her to pursue a homosexual relationship.

**The Self-empowerment Story of Online Romance**

At the time of my study in 2010, Nakai was in a relationship with someone met online. She revealed to me that “my current partner is a woman. My previous partners were all men.” The relationship began after her colleague passed her contact number for QQ, a Chinese online instant messaging service, to Mei (not real name). Mei contacted her online and their relationship developed as they chatted regularly. Mei came to visit her after three months of online liaison and their first face-to-face meeting functioned to affirm and consolidate their romantic relationship. Mei later relocated to be with Nakai, but moved back after four months because the job she had there was not suitable. However, Mei planned to come again the following year.

Mei had been Nakai’s colleague’s offline friend of two years. Since they became romantically involved, her colleague was apologetic as she did not know that Nakai had a homoerotic impulse and regretted making the introduction which was initially intended to be merely a social relationship. This homosexual relationship has been hidden from Nakai’s parents because she anticipated their strong reaction and prohibition. However, she became determined that when Mei returned in 2011, she would move out of her parents’ home to live with Mei, without confessing the nature of their relationship to her parents. Mei is a year younger than Nakai. And according to Nakai, she was “born a lesbian. She always loved women and has dated several women in the past.” When asked if she had deliberately suppressed her true sexual orientation in the past, Nakai replied that she only realized that she also loved women after she met Mei. However, it was not Mei who transformed Nakai from a heterosexual to homosexual. Nakai told me that

When I was in high school and university, I admired two female fellow classmates. But I was not sure whether this feeling was friendship or romantic love. Furthermore, at that time, I was not convinced that it is possible for two females to be together. I thought this only happened in TV drama. Unrealistic. So I did not do anything. After I started to work, I began to contemplate the idea of dating a women. I knew a lesbian, who confided to me that she liked to be with me, but I had no feelings towards her. So I refused… Previously, I was not clear whether or not I really like women, because I had not tried. So I was uncertain about my true feelings.

After being in relationship with Mei, Nakai realized that a homosexual relationship suited her better than a relationship with the opposite sex. “I love her very much, much more than any of my ex-lovers. I want to be with her regardless of family’s disapproval.” Most of her friends knew that she was dating a woman and they were mostly supportive. The main challenge she encounters, like so many other homosexuals in China, is to ask for her family’s acceptance. Her initial doubt on the feasibility of same-sex relationships is understandable in a society that exercises compulsory heterosexuality.[[40]](#footnote-40) Although she previously did not act upon her homoerotic impulse, her interest in same-sex love remained and it later facilitated the acceptance of her own sexuality. When asked if she felt confused and struggled to come to terms with her own sexuality, Nakai replied, “No struggle at all. I felt as natural as loving a man.” When talking about the role of the Internet in her self-identification with a marginal sexual identity, she replied that

I have been researching online to learn more about lesbianism, especially since I met Mei. It enhanced my understanding of the community, clarified my doubts, knowing that it is possible for females to develop romantic relationships and live together gave me lots of courage.

The exposure to a homosexual community online convinced Nakai that there was nothing wrong or abnormal about same-sex love. Interacting with other female same-sex couples gave her assurance and encouraged her to live the life she desired. Narrative is one of the resources we turn to for self-understanding and construction of the self.[[41]](#footnote-41) Through narrative, individuals reconfigure the present and reinterpret the past in order to present a coherent and integrated sense of self. When Nakai narrates her current relationship with Mei, she relates it with her past experience of sexual curiosities with women. By so doing, the same-sex relationship does not constitute a break in her sexual identity. Her continuous sense of self could have led to the smooth transition from cross-sex love to same-sex love.

Talking about her first online romance, Nakai said it was her first love, the most memorable experience of all, but also the most hurtful. They met in an online forum in 2006 when she was 20, and had just started at university. They met in person once. Despite living far apart she looked forward to visiting him during holidays and was prepared to relocate to the south of China to be with him after graduation. He was also a student, but soon to graduate from university. Sadly, Nakai later found out that he already had a girlfriend offline and was not serious in their relationship. After the relationship was over she continued to develop several other cross-sex online romances. The longest relationship lasted for a year, while the shortest was only a month. She came to know almost all of her lovers at online forums. When I asked if she was serious in these relationships, she replied,

Hard to say. I was once serious in all these relationships, but how long my seriousness lasted varied. I was serious throughout some of the relationships, but there were also others in which I was serious to begin with but after I became aware that the relationships had no prospects, I treated them as play.

This flexibly adjustable level of seriousness indicates Nakai’s pragmatic approach towards online romance. When the relationship is not likely to deliver the ideal outcome, she turns it into play. By doing so, she can enjoy the distractions brought by the relationships while minimizing the risk of getting hurt.

Nakai enjoys developing relationships with others online because as an introvert, face-to-face communication with people she does not know is not easy. The Internet not only increases her opportunity to meet new friends and engage in communication on a deeper emotional level, but also allows greater control of her self-presentation. Her second motivation for developing online relationships is they are good “when feeling bored. They can be used for recreation.”These relationships although not profound love, can still temporarily “satisfy the need of being loved and cared for.” What is most important is not to be too serious and let oneself delve too deep into the relationship, otherwise, one risks breaking one’s own heart.” Not surprisingly, she did not seem to be disappointed by short-lived online love affairs. She also argued that over reliance on the Internet for solace can be debilitating. “Long-term indulgence in cyberspace will result in loss of confidence in real life, having difficulties to communicate with others face-to-face.” Nakai’s attitude reflects the quintessential element of the pragmatic fantasist who prioritizes the quotidian existence in the offline world, and the sceptic’s playful approach to relationships online.

Nakai admitted that she once dated two or three different men online at once. But these relationships were short-lived and she was exhausted from trying to maintain all these relationships. When asked if she considered herself cheating, she replied that these relationships were just play, so faithfulness was not relevant. Nakai contended that only online romance that stood the test of offline reality can be called genuine love and deserves commitment. Online romance in itself is just atemporary outlet for emotional stimulation and for one to indulge in casual love affairs. This statement demonstrates that she is not rejecting the romantic realist’s aspiration. Her own experience with Mei is, in fact, a vivid example of online romance going offline and becoming a social reality.

Nakai’s overall experiences of the Internet, and online romance in particular, were beneficial to her self-experimentation and acceptance. She was not only able to explore and affirm the other side of her sexuality, but also improved her social skills online. Nakai’s self-confidence may not be particularly high, but she has a strong sense of self-efficacy in overcoming challenges and life adversities. Her determination to live with Mei, to pursue her own choice of life is perhaps the most vivid example of the exercise of agency. The way she describes her transitions and identification with the marginalized sexual identity is surprisingly smooth, unlike many reported accounts of internal struggle and self-rejection. Familial traditions and social norms might be a constraining force for Nakai, but she is not afraid of the obstacles. As a self-determining person, she is adept at looking for resources and support online, therefore has the means to empower herself in living her choice of same-sex love.

**Conclusion**

*‘Platonic* emotional love’ and ‘play’ are two key conceptual terms in Chinese discourse of online romance. Both are made possible by a deliberate and careful demarcation of the online and offline world into two separate terrains. Instead of simply dismissing Chinese Internet users’ online and offline dichotomy as regressive or naive, I focused instead on what it can achieve for them. Chinese are acutely aware that the online and offline worlds are inextricably linked but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, they choose to reinstate the online and offline boundary because it serves their purposes of looking for distraction and emotional solace. What they aim for is not a replacement for their often less satisfied everyday life in the offline world, but to use online relationships as a means to help them to improve the quality of their daily existence.

The ‘pragmatic fantasist’ is the key character in exclusively Internet-based *Platonic* emotional love. They approach online relationships instrumentally, aiming to find sustenance in these relationships of distant intimacy, making them the source of emotional stimulation and solace. Some of these relationships grow in intensity over time and become meaningful to the couples. Others remain shallow but are nevertheless appreciated for the good fantasies and reinvigoration provided that ease participants’ tense and mundane everyday lives, while being weightless and risk free. I argue that the desire for pure affection, anything ‘emotional’ as opposed to embodied, materialist or mercenary by pragmatic fantasists is a reaction to the highly commodified and stressful quotidian existence in contemporary Chinese society.

The word ‘play’ is frequently used by the ‘sceptic’ to describe online romance. Their sceptical attitude towards online romance often also turns into cynicism when they call for a playful approach to online romance and argue that it is unwise to take online romance too seriously as it is just an inconsequential game.Treating online relationships as social gaming has the dual functions of warning online daters not to commit too easily to the relationship, or expect too much from it, and providing a license for experimentation in carefree online intimacies. A playful approach also helps some to cope with the inherent conflicts between reality and virtuality. Through play, the real is rendered virtual and players have the opportunity to work out their problems and test out options available.[[42]](#footnote-42)

I use the term ‘romantic realists’ to label those who consider online romance as not essentially different from romantic relationships initiated face-to-face. They follow the Western trajectory of online romance in defining successful online romance as cumulating in marriage and long long-term relationships in the offline world. Once the relationship goes offline, the couple is subjected to the same cultural practices, traditions, social norms and conventions governing familial life and love affairs. Keeping a relationship online and calling it a play is a way to shield it from the influence of prevailing normative forces.

In therapeutic culture, online relationships could be empowering as they help couples to deal with their emotional emptiness and pain, preparing them to cope with the tensions and uncertainties resulting from the volatile and chaotic nature of selfhood and social relationships in late modernity.[[43]](#footnote-43) The therapeutic model of relationship also helps individuals to discover their true-selves and become autonomous persons leading an authentic life.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Finally, the experience of online romance and its social implications depend on the participants’ attitudes towards online romance, whether they are being pragmatic, sceptical or realistic in their pursuit of the relationships online. As pointed out by Hine, the Internet’s functions and meanings do indeed vary from individual to individual because its risks and opportunities are perceived differently in relation to each individual’s concerns and needs.[[45]](#footnote-45)

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