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A Review of the Evolution and Shifts in Research on Chinese Online Fan Fiction Culture

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Abstract

With the development of online media, fan fiction has gradually evolved from a niche creation by fans into a network cultural practice with a stable community base, and related research has continued to expand. This paper focuses on the period from 2000 to 2026, using a combination of platforms such as CNKI, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. It also employs a snowballing tracing method to select representative results and divides the research into stages based on changes in research subjects, problem awareness, and media environment. A review reveals that related research has generally gone through three stages: research on concepts and online communities, research on media and cultural practices, and research on creators and platform governance. The research objects have gradually expanded from texts and groups to the relationship between creators, communities, and platforms. However, existing research still has shortcomings in terms of research types, cross-platform comparisons, and the boundaries of related concepts.

Keywords

fan fiction, BL (Boys' Love) culture, gender studies, fan culture, online literature, platform governance

1. Introduction

The development of the Internet has changed the way literary works are produced, disseminated, and received, and has also provided new media space for fans to recreate based on existing texts, characters, and worldviews. Fan fiction has thus gradually become an important subject in the study of online literature and fan culture. Foreign studies broke through the perception of fans as passive cultural consumers earlier and began to focus on fans' active rewriting of existing cultural texts, meaning production, identity construction and interaction practices in online communities [1-3]. The online fan fiction culture in mainland China has gradually developed along with the popularization of the Internet from the late 1990s to the early 21st century. Related research has also expanded from online subcultural phenomena such as "fangirls," "BL (Boys' Love)," and "fan novels" to issues such as text production, community interaction, female subjectivity, platform mechanisms and cultural governance. It is important to note that although fan fiction and BL overlap significantly in Chinese online culture, they are not the same: the former is mainly defined based on the derivative relationship between the work and existing texts or characters, while the latter involves more specific gender and emotional narratives.

This paper uses a literature review method, with the period from 2000 to 2026 as the main search period. Considering that Chinese fan fiction research is influenced by Western fan studies, a small number of classic

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foreign works that have laid the theoretical foundation have also been traced back. Chinese literature is primarily searched through CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), using keywords such as "fan fiction," "fan literature," "fan culture," "fan novels," "fan fiction," "BL (Boys' Love)," and "fangirls" in combination with terms like "network," "internet," "platform," "community," and "new media." English literature is mainly searched through Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of "fan fiction," "fanfiction," "danmei," "slash fanfiction," "boys' love," etc., with "China" and "Chinese." The search was supplemented by keywords such as "gender," "identity," "community," "platform," and "censorship" from existing research, and professional journals such as Transformative Works and Cultures were used as supplementary sources. Based on this, a snowballing tracing method is used to supplement early and subsequent research from the references of core papers and subsequent cited results. The literature review primarily focuses on academic achievements directly related to the creation, dissemination, community, and related cultural practices of Chinese online fan fiction. General fan circle studies are only used as supplementary materials when they can explain fan fiction creation or platform mechanisms. This article focuses on three main questions: how the focus of research on Chinese online fan fiction has changed, how online media and platform environments have entered into related research, and what research characteristics have emerged at different stages regarding social issues such as gender, identity, and cultural governance.

This article also uses a timeline framework to organize relevant research. The periodization is not a mechanical division based on years, but rather a comprehensive examination of the phased changes in the research object, core issues, and media environment based on the classification of documents. Between 2000 and 2014, domestic research on this topic still focused on the introduction, definition, and preliminary community observation of the research subjects [4-10]. Around 2015, a more obvious shift in topics emerged, with research moving from describing cultural phenomena to media mechanisms and cultural production processes. Therefore, the period from 2015 to 2019 is classified as the expansion and deepening phase [11-18]. Research on fan community migration since 2019 has shown a shift towards platforms. Since 2020, issues such as commercial digital platforms, creators' group identity and writing experience, content governance, and cross-platform migration have become more concentrated [19-25]. The research objects have gradually expanded from text and single communities to the relationship between creators and platforms. Therefore, the period from 2020 to the present can be summarized as a stage of diversity and reflection. The above-mentioned periodization is mainly used to present the clustering of literature topics and the relative shift of research focus. There is continuity and overlap between the various stages, and they are not completely separate.

2. Introduction and Emergence Stage (2000-2014): Concept Introduction and Online Communities

Based on the time distribution of existing literature, research from 2000 to around 2014 focused on three aspects: conceptual explanation, women's participation, and online communities. In the literature included in this paper, platform mechanisms and governance had not yet become a central topic during this period. Therefore, this period can be regarded as the stage in which the subject of fan fiction research was gradually established.

2.1 Introduction and Local Definition of the Concept of Fan Fiction

In the 2000s, the first challenge facing Chinese online fan fiction research was defining the research subject. Early research focused on popular online subcultures such as "fangirls" and "*Danmei* (boys' love)," describing the gender, reading preferences, and cultural psychology of participants, and gradually noting the prominent participation of women in related cultural production and consumption [4-5]. As research has accumulated, "fan fiction" in the Chinese context has begun to connect with European and American fan fiction research. Fan fiction creation has gradually been understood as a practice of fans using existing cultural texts for reproduction, rather than just being regarded as a niche online entertainment [6].

Women's participation has also become a recurring research question during this period. Relevant results have noted that the character relationships in *Danmei* and some fan texts provide a cultural space for women to express emotions, imagine intimate relationships, and gender experiences that are different from traditional male and female love narratives [7]. Further research on women's online literature spaces has found that female participants often have multiple identities such as creators, readers and commentators, and creation, reading

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and feedback together constitute a continuous cultural production process [8]. However, since the concepts of "fan fiction," "*Danmei*," "BL," and "fangirls" were often used interchangeably during this period, and some studies actually discussed original *Danmei* literature, their conclusions were used to explain fan fiction culture, there is still room for further clarification of the boundaries of related research.

2.2 Online Communities and Early Cultural Practices

As research moves from conceptual definition to concrete practice, how the internet organizes fan culture has gradually become a new focus of attention. Online fan fiction communities are not simply spaces for storing works. Writers and readers form interactive interest communities through comments, mutual evaluations and continuous communication. Participants also demonstrate their identities and build group relationships in this process [2-3].

Further research on specific female fan communities has found that fan fiction can be combined with daily emotional exchanges among members, and works, discussions and friendships jointly contribute to the formation of group identity and intimate relationships [9]. At the same time, research on interest culture also points out that common interests gradually replaced geographical and professional ties, becoming an important basis for establishing connections among online subculture groups, and "circle-based" became a more obvious organizational feature of online communities during this period [10].

Overall, research from 2000 to 2014 progressed from "what is fan fiction" to "how fan fiction communities form and interact online." However, the research samples were still mainly based on single forums, online communities, or specific female communities, with relatively few comparisons between different platforms and different types of fan fiction communities.

3. Expansion and Deepening Stage (2015-2019): Media Mechanisms and Cultural Practices

Around 2015, the research questions in the relevant literature showed a significant clustering change: network technology, community governance, text production and gender practices became the research objects in succession [11-18], indicating that academic attention has shifted from early object identification to the explanation of the internal operating mechanism of fan culture.

3.1 Online Media and Fan Fiction Production

During this period, the focus of research gradually shifted from the basic characteristics of fan culture to its production and operation methods. Network technology has begun to be regarded as an important condition affecting the form of fan culture: the low threshold of information release and connection mechanism has expanded the scope of production, dissemination and interaction of works, while creation is also affected by specific environments such as website rules, copyright relations and network content management [11]. As a result, online media is no longer just the background for fan culture, but has begun to become the subject of study itself.

This change is particularly evident in studies of literary production. Research on fan forums has found that online communities can form their own screening and evaluation mechanisms through the release of works, reader replies, continuous discussions and long-term accumulation, indicating that fan fiction is not completely lacking in literary criticism standards, but has developed an evaluation order that is different from the traditional publishing system [17]. Further textual studies have shown that the subject matter of fan fiction is not limited to emotional and entertainment narratives. Creators can also use the character relationships and narrative gaps in the original work to re-process themes such as history, revolution and social experience [18]. At the same time, some cyberspaces have formed public discussion boundaries with specific gender cultural characteristics [15], while some communities have formed certain self-governance mechanisms through member norms and consultation [16]. As a result, fan fiction research has gradually expanded from a single text to multiple levels, including technical conditions, production processes, reader evaluations, and community rules.

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3.2 Gender, Identity, and Cultural Boundaries

Gender studies also deepened during this period. Early research largely explained why women read and create BL fiction, but since 2015, studies have begun to focus more on the gender settings within fictional texts and their cultural significance. Special settings such as ABO allow creators to experiment with character patterns in fictional worlds that differ from real-world male-female relationships by rearranging physical characteristics, reproductive relationships, and social gender identities [12]. Studies on BL and female-oriented online literature have also noted that the reconfiguration of intimate relationships for male characters can provide new imaginative space for equal relationships, expression of desires and identity positions [13-14].

At the same time, research conclusions have gradually become more cautious. The appearance of new gender arrangements within a text does not necessarily mean that the creator or reader shares the same stance on real-world social issues. Therefore, the gender significance of fan culture has begun to be understood as a cultural practice with specific context and boundaries, rather than being simply categorized into a single judgment of "liberation" or "conservatism." Differences between different studies also suggest that textual analysis is more likely to present the reimagining of gender relations, while community and participant studies are able to observe the distance between this imagination and real cultural norms.

4. Diversity and Reflection Stage (2020–Present): Creator Research and Platform Governance

Around 2019, some studies began to pay attention to the survival and migration of Chinese online fan communities. After 2020, issues such as commercial platforms, creator experience, group identity, and content governance have increased significantly, indicating that the research focus has further expanded from text and the internal community to the relationship between creators and the platform environment.

4.1 Creative Subjectivity, Community Identity, and Gender Issues

Since 2020, a notable change has been that research has shifted further from works and communities to the people actually involved in the creation process. The increase in empirical methods such as questionnaires, interviews, and digital ethnography has led to more direct discussions on questions such as "why create fan fiction," "how to sustain creation," and "what does community participation mean."

Related quantitative studies have shown that fan fiction is not a completely isolated personal interest. Participants' emotional connection to characters or artists, group affiliation, and community interaction are all related to their creative intentions [21]. This means that behind the creative logic within communities like "creating out of love" lies multiple social relationships, including role identification, feedback mechanisms, and interactions among like-minded individuals. Interviews with female Slash creators also show that fan fiction can be a way for some participants to deal with emotions, sexual fantasies and real-world gender experiences, and the meaning of creation is gradually formed in writing, feedback and community communication [22]. Subsequent studies have further revealed the complexity of this cultural practice: participants may actively expand their expression of male intimacy, while at the same time they may continue existing gender and sexual orientation norms in some real-world practices [23]. Therefore, in recent years, gender studies have gradually shifted from judging whether fan fiction has a fixed feminist significance to examining the actual experiences of different participants in specific scenarios.

4.2 Platform Governance and Community Migration

Since 2020, the platform has gradually shifted from being a background for the dissemination of fan culture to a direct research subject. Commercial digital platforms have expanded the reach of works and also influence creation and interaction through platform functions, community rules and business logic [20]. Therefore, fan fiction increasingly needs to balance the creator's own wishes with the platform's rules.

At the same time, the issue of community migration has received more attention. Long-term studies have found that factors such as website closures, data loss, copyright management, and content governance can lead to the migration of online fan communities and works resources [19]. The changes in the platform environment around 2020 further highlighted this phenomenon. Based on interviews with fan fiction authors, it was found that content restrictions not only affect whether the text can be published, but may also reduce the opportunities

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for feedback and interaction, thereby changing the original author-reader communication network. As a result, some participants have reduced the scope of dissemination, moved to other platforms, or adjusted their creative methods [24].

In the long run, migration not only means changing the publishing website, but also involves changes in cultural practices. From the “boards” of BBS forums and the “bars” of Baidu Tieba to the “tags” of LOFTER, different modes of information organization shape how works are classified, searched, aggregated, and connected to fan communities [25]. Therefore, the more accurate phenomenon revealed by relevant research in recent years is that fan fiction communities are constantly developing migration and adaptation strategies in the face of platform changes and rule changes. This migration may be driven by content governance and business rules, or it may be related to platform technology updates, community decline, and members' active choices. Thus, platform research extends the discussion of fan culture from within the works and communities to the digital media environment on which it depends.

5. Conclusions

A review of relevant research since 2000 shows that the evolution of Chinese online fan fiction research is mainly characterized by the continuous expansion of research objects and analytical levels. Early research primarily focused on identifying the concept of fan fiction, participating groups, and online communities. After 2015, research gradually expanded to include content production, community rules, media conditions, and gender cultural practices. Since 2020, creator experiences and platform environments have become increasingly important research subjects. This has led to a research path that gradually expands from textual and group observation to the relationship among text, creator, reader, community and platform. Gender issues have continued to receive attention in this process, but related research has gradually shifted from an early general explanation of women’s needs and subjectivity to a discussion of the relationship between textual imagination, specific creative experience, and real-world gender norms. The inclusion of platform research further illustrates that the production and dissemination of fan culture does not depend solely on creators and internal community rules, but is also continuously affected by changes in digital infrastructure and platform environments.

Existing research still has several shortcomings. Firstly, the research subjects are clearly concentrated on BL, Slash, and female fans, while genres such as BG, GL, no-CP fan fiction, anime/game fan fiction, and literary classic fan fiction have received relatively limited systematic attention. Secondly, there are many case studies on single platforms and single communities, but comparative studies across platforms and over long periods are still insufficient. Thirdly, the adjacent concepts such as “fan fiction,” BL,” and “fandom” are used interchangeably in some studies, making the scope of application of the conclusions sometimes unclear. Fourthly, existing research rarely further distinguishes the internal differences among creators in terms of age, occupation, years of participation, etc. This paper uses a timeline framework to integrate the above studies, but due to space and literature limitations, the methodological differences between different disciplines have not been fully explored. Further research could strengthen comparisons between different types, platforms, and participating groups, and focus on how new factors such as algorithmic recommendations and platform commercialization affect fan fiction creation, dissemination, and community norms.

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Conflicts of Interest

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