

Negotiated Fiction and Affective Politics in Chinese Dreamcore: Comparing Bilibili and Wikidot Communities

Shushi Mao*

Communication University of China, Nanjing, China

**Corresponding author: Shushi Mao.*

Abstract

In the contemporary context of decentralized information production and the deep integration of social media into daily life, the mechanisms governing the creation of online subcultural spaces have taken on new characteristics. This paper examines Backrooms and Dreamcore as its subjects, employing a method of online ethnography. Through textual analysis and participant observation, it conducts a comparative study of the rule-oriented Wikidot community and the emotion-oriented Bilibili community. The study reveals that these two virtual spaces, as typical products of participatory culture, embody a mechanism of negotiated fiction in their collective construction—users generate a sense of authenticity rooted in shared experiences within these fictional spaces through emotional resonance and rule-based negotiation. Based on this, this paper proposes an analytical framework of rational rules vs. emotional resonance, aiming to reveal how, in the digital age, contemporary youth leverage the diverse practices of participatory culture to continuously reshape their self-identity and explore new systems of meaning and modes of belonging in the intersection of the virtual and the real.

Keywords

the backroom, Chinese dreamcore, negotiated fiction, participatory culture, affective politics

1. Introduction

In 219, a blurry image (as shown in Figure 1) circulated on the 4chan forum: dim fluorescent lights, damp old carpet, and an endlessly monotonous corridor stretching into infinity. The caption read: If you accidentally noclip into the wrong area of reality, you'll fall into the Backrooms—a place where nothing exists except the musty smell of old dampness, the monotonous hum of yellow wallpaper, and infinitely expanding space. This simple urban legend rapidly evolved into a global collective creation movement. On platforms like Wikidot and Fandom, thousands of anonymous users collaboratively built a vast fictional universe—the Backrooms—complete with intricate hierarchies, entities, and survival guides (Backrooms Wiki, n.d.; Jin, 2023).

Around the same time, the Chinese Dreamcore aesthetic emerged on the Chinese internet. (See Figures 2 and 3) Low-resolution vintage photos, faded classroom corridors, street scenes filtered through blue glass,

the grainy texture of VHS tapes. These images, paired with soothing or eerie music, create a threshold sensation that is both familiar and unfamiliar (Xia, 2023). On platforms like Bilibili and Xiaohongshu, related videos routinely garner millions of views, with comments flooded with emotional resonance like memories etched into my DNA and my lost memories are starting to haunt me.

Figure 1: Images circulating on the 4chan forum (Jin, 2023)



Figure 2: Images of Chinese-style dreamcore scenes on the internet (Jin, 2023)



Figure 3: Images of Chinese-style dreamcore scenes on the internet (Jin, 2023)



These two seemingly distinct cultural phenomena share a similar logic of emergence: both are fictional spaces constructed through collective negotiation by ordinary netizens, each carrying specific collective emotions and unconscious aspirations. They are not products of official or elite narratives, but rather quintessential examples of participatory culture. In a digital environment characterized by fragmented information and emotions prioritized over logic, why are people so eager to build these spaces where physical logic collapses? How do communities from different cultural backgrounds produce distinct emotional connotations through negotiated fictions? This is precisely the question this paper seeks to address. Negotiated Fiction refers to a collaborative fictional creation model where multiple participants reach consensus through ongoing interaction. Unlike traditional author-centric approaches, it emphasizes

community members negotiating fictional content through discussion, revision, and voting to ultimately form a collectively recognized truth. The hierarchical settings of the Backroom and the symbolic systems of Chinese Dreamcore are both products of Negotiated Fiction. Participatory Culture, a concept proposed by Henry Jenkins, describes audiences transitioning from passive consumers to active prosumers who engage in constructing textual meaning through derivative works, commentary, and dissemination (Jenkins, 1992, 2006, Jenkins et al., 2015). This paper applies this theory to analyze how users intervene in the creation of The Backroom and Dreamcore through editing, bullet comments, and derivative works. Affective Politics describes how collective emotions are organized, mobilized, and embedded within processes of political unconsciousness. The fear and anxiety in The Back Room, alongside the nostalgia and loss in Dream Core, are not purely private sentiments. They crystallize as emotions shaped by specific socio-historical conditions, reflecting young people's perceptions and responses to the existing social order.

This paper selects two representative communities as research sites. Based on Table 1, the two research sites are defined as follows:

Table 1: Research Field (Jin, 2023)

Research Field	Definition
Wikidot (Backroom Chinese/English Official Website)	Primarily focused on textual creation, emphasizing the logical consistency of settings and documentation style, representing a rational negotiation construction model
Bilibili (video platform)	Primarily centered on audiovisual content, users engage in emotional interaction through bullet comments, reviews, and derivative works, representing a translation model of emotional resonance

Research questions include:

- 1) What distinct logics do the two communities follow when collectively constructing fictional spaces? How do their creative mechanisms, power structures, and emotional tones differ?
- 2) How did the aesthetic of the backroom evolve into the Chinese Dream Core after undergoing localized adaptation in China? What emotional politics does this transformation reflect?
- 3) How do these fictional spaces transform from aesthetic phenomena into survival strategies for youth groups? What insights do they offer for understanding contemporary digital culture?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Unnatural Narratives and Ontological Transgression

The core settings of The Back Room—such as card-based reality, infinite non-Euclidean geometry, and impossible hierarchical structures—flagrantly violate the physical and logical rules of the real world. Such narratives can be analyzed through the lens of Unnatural Narratology. Scholars like Richardson and Alber note that unnatural narratives challenge traditional mimetic conventions by presenting impossible events and scenarios, compelling readers to reexamine the boundaries between reality and fiction (Alber, 2016; Nielsen, 2013; Richardson, 2015, 2006). The Back Room constructs an ontologically transgressive alternate dimension precisely through the metaphor of mimetic transgression. Through specific textual strategies, The Back Room narrative blurs the line between reality and fiction, inducing readers to feel a sense of immersion—as if they too might be part of the story. Specifically, the creators employ the second-person pronoun you as the narrative perspective, merging the reader's identity with that of the story's characters. Simultaneously, they mimic official genres like scientific reports and survival guides, using the detached language meant for describing the real world to depict entirely fictional spaces. This combination of perspective transgression and genre transgression constitutes ontological trespass (Jin, 2023) and shatters the traditional distinctions between reader, narrator, and character, lending the fictional experience a certain illusion of reality.

2.2 Liminal Spaces and Ruin Aesthetics

The concept of liminality originates from anthropologist Victor Turner, originally describing the transitional state of in-between within rituals (Turner, 1969). Walter Benjamin's metaphor of ruins

emphasizes the ghostly persistence of relics from the past within modernity's trajectory (Benjamin, 1999). Their convergence provides a crucial lens for interpreting Chinese dream cores. The spaces depicted in Chinese dream cores—abandoned classrooms, deserted residential buildings, faded playgrounds—embody quintessential liminal spaces. Once vessels of collective life, they now retain traces of their past while losing their original function, creating a sense of familiar yet alien rupture. This spatialized experience of time echoes Benjamin's observation: Ruins are the parable of history's continuous decay (Benjamin, 2012).

2.3 Dark Ecology and Heterogeneous Coexistence

Timothy Morton's Dark Ecology advocates dismantling anthropocentrism, emphasizing the entangled coexistence of human and non-human entities (Morton, 2016). Within the backroom, alongside human explorers, numerous non-human entities—whether faceless humanoids or unnameable presences—collectively constitute this heterogeneous space. By articulating these fears of the other, users affirm their own identities and existential boundaries.

2.4 Participatory Culture and Collective Intelligence

Jenkins' theory of participatory culture posits that fan communities generate new modes of meaning production through poaching and remixing of texts. Lévy's concept of Collective Intelligence emphasizes how online communities accumulate knowledge through collaboration (Lévy, 1997). The hierarchical entries and survival guides within the Backroom are products of this collective intelligence, while Bilibili's bullet-screen interactions and collaborative fan creations exemplify participatory culture's new forms within audiovisual media.

3. The Wikidot Community: Rule-Based Rational Collective Construction

3.1 Archival Writing: Crafting Authenticity Through Scientific Style

The core writing styles within Wikidot's backroom wiki are Survival Difficulty Guides and Tier Archives. Each tier objectively describes its environment, entities, bases, and exits in a detached tone reminiscent of government disaster assessments or scientific expedition records. This archival writing deliberately mimics official discourse, lending fictional content a pseudo-empirical quality. Users are not creating fiction but documenting discoveries—a posture itself part of negotiated fiction: by mimicking real-world knowledge production mechanisms, fiction gains a form of substitute reality. For example, the entry for Level (the starting point of the backroom) states: Level is a non-linear space resembling the backroom of a retail store, featuring monotonous yellow wallpaper, damp carpet, and humming fluorescent lights. The writing is concise and devoid of emotional embellishment, yet its everyday details render it compellingly credible.

3.2 Rigorous Collaborative Rules: Power Dynamics in Negotiation

Wikidot is not a free-for-all. The community maintains a robust review system: new entries require voting, commentary, and revisions to be retained. Low-rated entries are deleted, compelling creators to adjust their settings based on feedback. This negotiation process is fundamentally a power struggle among community members over what constitutes acceptable fiction. This rule-driven community emphasizes logical consistency, stylistic unity, and originality, rejecting Mary Sue-style settings (excessively idealized, illogical). This mechanism fosters an elitist tendency: senior members hold discourse power, while newcomers must emulate existing styles to gain acceptance. Yet this elitism isn't entirely closed—anyone can register and participate in discussions, with consensus achieved through repeated negotiation.

3.3 Survival Dynamics: A Pathological Thirst for Order

Interestingly, while the fictional world of The Back Room is inherently chaotic and perilous (infinite space, starvation, tangible threats), its construction process obsessively pursues order. Wikidot users enthusiastically map hierarchical structures, draft survival guides, and categorize threats by severity. This impulse to counter disorder with order reflects the post-truth era's (here omitted, but still understood as an age of information overload) individual craving for anchors of certainty. In an environment where facts are

easily questioned and grand narratives fail, personally constructing a fictional yet internally consistent order system becomes a psychological compensation.

4. Bilibili Community: Emotionally Driven Secondary Translation

4.1 Visualization and Meme Propagation: From Archives to Atmosphere

On Bilibili, backroom content has evolved beyond lengthy text archives into audiovisual experiences. Users create MMD animations, audio-visual MADs, and real-location exploration shorts, blending layered visual elements (yellow corridors, fluorescent lights, damp walls) with low-frequency noise and ambient sounds to craft immersive dread. This adaptation drastically simplifies the original's complexity while amplifying its emotional impact. Simultaneously, Chinese Dreamcore—a locally adapted form—grafts Backroom aesthetics onto collective memories of 1990s China. Video scenes often feature dilapidated residential buildings, school corridors, and hospital waiting rooms, accompanied by nostalgic hits like Happy Planet soundtracks or Cyndi Wang's Love You. These symbols instantly resonate with Gen Z viewers: This is exactly what I saw growing up.

4.2 Localization of Emotional Politics: From Cosmic Horror to Nostalgic Melancholy

The emotional foundation of Wikidot's Backroom lies in Cosmic Horror—the primal dread of infinity and the unknown. In contrast, Bilibili's Chinese Dreamcore blends heavy nostalgia: longing for lost childhoods, mourning spaces erased by urbanization, and complex reflections on collective memories. This emotion transcends mere dread, becoming a Nostalgic Horror—or, as Benjamin described it, a melancholic gaze. This transformation reveals the local logic of affective politics: against China's backdrop of rapid modernization, Generation Z has experienced severe temporal and spatial ruptures. The demolition of old buildings, the dissolution of neighborhood bonds, the pressures of exam-oriented education—these collective experiences are encoded into dreamcore imagery, becoming an unconscious catharsis and healing. When viewers exclaim My defenses are shattered! Or my DNA is stirred! In the bullet comments, they are essentially sharing a generational trauma and solace.

4.3 Immersive Negotiation: Ritualistic Interaction Through Danmaku and Comments

Within Bilibili's community, fictional negotiation occurs not only between creators but also unfolds in real-time through danmaku and comments. When videos reach specific scenes, danmaku floods with You're awake! And welcome to the backroom, simulating the moment characters awaken and collectively achieve an ontological leap. The comment section extends this secondary creation: users share dreams of similar spaces, post old photos proving real-life backrooms, or debate whether certain settings align with the original work. This interaction cultivates a distinct sense of ritual: viewers don't watch videos in isolation but collectively enter a fictional space, confirming each other's presence through engagement. This collective immersion amplifies the emotional authenticity of fictional content.

5. Comparative Study: Differences in Community Construction Logic Between China and the West

5.1 Rational Rules vs. Emotional Resonance

Wikidot's construction logic can be summarized as archivalization—pursuing logical completeness in fictional worlds through strict rules and negotiation. Users resemble scholars or archivists, dedicated to refining a credible alternate universe. Bilibili's logic, however, is meme-based—transforming source material into consumable atmospheric products through visual symbols and emotional resonance. Users function more like poets or ritual masters, striving to cultivate a shared emotional experience. These approaches are not entirely mutually exclusive. Wikidot also involves emotional investment (passion for the fictional world), and Bilibili exhibits rule awareness (respect for source material settings), but their dominant logics are distinctly different.

5.2 Differences in Power Structures: Elite Curation vs. Traffic-Driven

Wikidot's review mechanism grants significant authority to veteran users, establishing a knowledge elite-led model. New entries require voting approval, with low-scoring content swiftly eliminated—ensuring overall quality but potentially stifling innovation. Bilibili, however, is entirely traffic-driven: view counts, likes, and bullet-screen density determine content visibility. Popular videos often resonate more with mainstream sentiment but are prone to homogenization and superficiality.

5.3 Commonality: Negotiated Fiction as Emotional Compensation

Despite their differences, both communities reflect contemporary youth's tendency to confront real-world anxieties through collective fictions. Whether through Wikidot's rational order-building or Bilibili's shared emotional rituals, both fundamentally seek a manageable alternate dimension in an era of information fragmentation and identity uncertainty. Fiction transcends mere entertainment, becoming a survival strategy—reweaving the web of meaning through collective narratives.

6. Conclusion

By comparing the backroom construction practices on Wikidot and Bilibili, this paper draws the following conclusions: The backroom and Chinese Dreamcore represent new forms of participatory culture in the digital age. Through negotiated fictions, they produce alternative emotional orders. This order does not constitute an escape from reality but rather a metaphorical reconstruction of it—transforming collective emotions like anxiety, nostalgia, and fear, which are difficult to articulate, into spatial symbols that are tangible, describable, and shareable. As a localized derivative of the backroom, Chinese Dreamcore is deeply embedded in the historical experiences of China's Generation Z. The liminal spaces it presents—abandoned classrooms, empty residential buildings—serve both as relics of collective memory and totems of generational identity. Within these images, the younger generation aesthetically processes their sense of rupture while subtly expressing complex attitudes toward developmentalism and collectivized existence. An affective politics perspective reveals the deeper significance of these fictional spaces, where they function not merely as aesthetic phenomena but as mirrors of social psyches. The cosmic horror of the backroom reflects modernity's universal anxieties, while the nostalgic melancholy of Chinese Dreamcore refracts the unique predicaments of its local context. By comparing the construction logics of Chinese and Western communities, we gain clearer insight into how cultural contexts shape the expression of collective emotions. Future research could expand its field scope to include platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin, or incorporate in-depth interviews to explore creators' personal motivations. Simultaneously, with the proliferation of AI-generated content (AIGC), negotiated fiction may evolve into new variants—how will human-machine collaboration reshape the landscape of collective creation? This, too, warrants further investigation.

References

- Alber, J. (2016). *Unnatural narrative: Impossible worlds in fiction and drama*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Backrooms Wiki. (n.d.). *Backrooms*. Fandom. https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Backrooms_Wiki
- Benjamin, W. (1999). *The Arcades project* (H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2012). *The lyrical poet in the age of advanced capitalism* (Chinese ed.). SDX Joint Publishing Company.
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & boyd, d. (2015). *Participatory culture in a networked era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics*. Polity Press.
- Jin, Y. (2023). *The unnatural narratives and implications of new media horror literature and art: A case study of Backrooms*. Literary Theory Research.

- Lévy, P. (1997). *Collective intelligence: Mankind's emerging world in cyberspace*. Basic Books.
- Morton, T. (2016). *Dark ecology: For a logic of future coexistence*. Columbia University Press.
- Nielsen, H. S. (2013). Naturalizing and unnaturalizing reading strategies. In J. Alber & B. Richardson (Eds.), *A poetics of unnatural narrative* (pp. 67–93). Ohio State University Press.
- Richardson, B. (2006). *Unnatural voices: Extreme narration in modern and contemporary fiction*. Ohio State University Press.
- Richardson, B. (2015). *Unnatural narrative: Theory, history, and practice*. Ohio State University Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Aldine de Gruyter.
- Xia, Y. (2023). Millennium, ruins, and Generation Z's disconnected perception: An aesthetic allegory of Chinese dreamcore. *Journal of North University of China (Social Science Edition)*.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

Open Access

This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

