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Praxis

Queerly imagining *Super Girl* in an alternate world: The fannish worlding in FSCN femslash romance

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[0.1] Abstract—A globally formatted, *Idol*-style, reality singing contest produced by a Chinese provincial TV station, *Super Girl* (SG; Hunan Satellite TV, 2004–2006) received staggeringly huge commercial success nationwide. It only allowed female participants and featured a large number of gender-defying finalists. This article explores femslash fan fiction published and circulated on *feise chaonü* (FSCN), one of the most popular Mainland Chinese femslash fandoms of 2006 SG participants. The lesbian romance depicted in FSCN fan fiction is inspired by and further articulates the intentionally "queered" content of SG. However, these lesbian stories are often narrated within culturally distant, fictional settings, such as Western, futuristic, or historical backdrops. My reading of FSCN femslash fan fiction explores how and why this prevailing, yet self-contradictory, femslash writing strategy helps the fans to queerly construct an "alternate world" that enacts, facilitates, or legitimizes Chinese lesbianism. I reveal the underlying ways in which this FSCN worlding practice ambiguously appropriates and ridicules contemporary Chinese female gender- and sexuality-related norms and ideals. Ultimately, I argue that the "worlded" contexts and plotlines of queer fantasy in FSCN femslash can be construed as active fannish responses to and negotiations with the realities and histories of Chinese lesbian-related public cultures.

[0.2] Keywords—Chinese femslash; Fan fiction; Lesbianism

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1. Introduction

[1.1] A queer fan subculture that focuses on homosocial/homoerotic relationships between female characters and/or celebrities, femslash has been prevalent in Chinese cyberspace for over a decade ([note 1](#)). Existing scholarship attributes the rise of online Chinese femslash fandom to its potential to utter queer voices and generate alternative affective belongings (Yang and Bao 2012). Yet despite its growing popularity, there has been little effort given to unveil the internal complexity and contradiction of Chinese femslash culture, especially Chinese femslash fans' sophisticated reimaginings of lesbianism, which are often conditioned by mainstream understandings of female gender and sexuality in the nonfictional world.

[1.2] To fill this gap, this article presents a case study of the femslash writings of gender-defying female participants of a prominent Chinese reality TV show, *Super Girl* (SG; Hunan Satellite TV, 2004–2006). This globally formatted, *Idol*-style singing contest once highly profiled a large number of female participants who looked either "boyish" or "androgynous" (Yardley 2005). These female contestants had never explicitly revealed their sexual orientations in public. However, the ambiguous intimate relationships between them had been articulated and celebrated in SG's online femslash fandoms. My analysis looks at the femslash fan fictions created and circulated on *feise chaonü* (FSCN), one of the most popular and large-scale femslash fan forums for 2006 SG ([note 2](#)). FSCN was built in May 2006 and is fraught with queer gossip and femslash vidding and writing. By the end of 2015, FSCN contained more than 460,000 entries and over 3,000 threads. According to earlier scholarly observations on FSCN, to this day hundreds of original femslash fan fiction works have been circulated on the site, a few of which are more than 200,000 words in length (Yang 2010; Yang and Bao 2012, 851).

[1.3] My study pays particular attention to FSCN femslash fan fiction with culturally distant settings, such as Western, futuristic, or historical backdrops. Methodologically, drawing from John Fiske's (1996) and Michel Foucault's (1990) explications of discourse in modern societies and public cultures, in concert with scholarly understandings of gender and sexuality as discursive formations in Western scholarship (Rich 1986; Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1993), I mainly employ textual and discourse analyses of some representative FSCN narratives featuring this kind of writing strategy. During my online ethnographic observation of FSCN between 2006 and 2013, I have read hundreds of FSCN femslash stories and tens of thousands of fan entries responding to the stories. In fan studies, both online narratives and communication are deemed as "representations of experiences, constructed first by the [fan] participants themselves and then by the researcher in the analysis of the data and the presentation of the findings as a coherent text" (Bury 2005, 29). Echoing this view, my interpretation of the data obtained during my long-term observation unpacks "the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices" (Hine 2000, 50) on FSCN. In doing so, I detail the contradictory yet critical ways in which Chinese lesbian identities, desires, characters, and relationships are posited and narrated in these queer fantasy contexts as a subjective fannish cultural discourse.

[1.4] It is worth noting that this textual maneuver of repositioning nonheterosexual characters into certain "already queered" sociocultural contexts is not FSCN-specific; it widely exists in both Western and East Asian popular cultures, especially fannish cultural productions (see Doty 1993, 15; Benshoff 1998, 215; Jones 2002; Jung 2004; Woledge 2005; Lothian, Busse, and Reid 2007; Martin 2008; Martin 2012; Ng 2008, 104; Wei 2008; Li 2009; Suter 2012; Feng 2013). In earlier fan scholarship, a comparable genre of Western slash/femslash fan fiction, which typically narrates queer romance against futuristic, historical, or fantasy backdrops that remove the sociocultural pressures faced by both LGBTQ communities and queer fan writers in reality, has been termed as "alternate world" (AW), "alternate reality" (AR), or "alternate universe" (AU) literature (Penley 1991; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006; Woledge 2005) ([note 3](#)). However, existing studies tend to understand this writing strategy as a liberatory, escapist tactic for homosexual-themed cultural productions or an intentional disinterest, demonization, and/or othering of same-sex relationships.

[1.5] For example, in his study of male homoerotic romance in Japanese boys' love (BL) works, James Welker notes that the Western cultural elements commonly borrowed in BL "help to liberate [Japanese] writers and readers to work within and against the local heteronormative paradigm in the exploration of [gender and sexual] alternatives" (2006, 841; also see Suter 2012, 230). Some other scholars also remark on the "anti-realist" or "homoindifferent" tendency rooted in this kind of queer fan productions because it "is simply not about modern homosexual identities, and thus, although it often depicts homosexual acts, it retains a distance from homosexual politics" (Woledge 2006, 103; also see Allison 1996; Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins 1998; Kinsella 1998; McLelland 2000; Wei 2008; Li 2009). Similarly, in her groundbreaking study of FSCN fan productions, Ling Yang reads some of the relocated narrative settings that are not closely associated with the real lives of the SG participants as a means for the fans to express their own lived experiences, emotion, and desires (2010). She attributes this prevailing style of FSCN writing in part to the growing estrangement between the show's contestants in real life after the show had ended.

[1.6] Dissimilar to these previous findings, Fran Martin observes a subjective, powerful "worlding" practice in the Taiwanese fandom of Japanese BL that is shaped by both local realities and cross-cultural fantasization (2008; 2012). As she elaborates, worlding is

[1.7] the way in which Taiwanese readers use the BL texts to imagine a geo-cultural world and reflect on their relation to it—that is, to create an imaginative geography of a "Japan" that is characterized by sex-gender ambiguity/fluidity/non-conformity, where beautiful boys enact romance narratives and enjoy passionate sex with each other. (Martin 2012, 378) ([note 4](#))

[1.8] In so doing, as Martin incisively argues, the Taiwanese BL fans imaginatively create a "BL Japan" that "is notably distinct from readers' own everyday life-worlds in Taiwan [but] facilitates the formation of a reflexive zone of articulation where the fans work through a range of responses to *local* regimes of gender and sexual regulation" (2012, 366). In this article, I go beyond Martin's viewpoint to look at the alternate worlds as reconfigured in FSCN femslash fan fiction. I see the worlding practice embodied by the culturally distant settings in FSCN femslash as a discursive strategy to address the depressing queer reality in contemporary Chinese society. Through this tactic, FSCN fans show an intense unease and insecurity, as well as deep concern about the existence and survival of lesbianism in the heterocentric Chinese world. This

femslash genre can thus be seen as a sophisticated, self-reflexive means for the fans to voice their queer fantasies and legitimize lesbian romance. It offers an indirect critique of mainstream Chinese society's erasure, denigration, and ostracization of real-world lesbian practices (Sang 2003; Martin 2010; Kam 2013). Meanwhile, I also unveil the ambivalent aspect of this fannish worlding strategy on FSCN fandom in revising, appropriating, and sometimes even conforming to mainstream media's queer connotations, unpleasant queer realities, and sociocultural stereotyping of lesbianism in local regimes.

2. SG as a queer female spectacle and FSCN as its femslash fandom

[2.1] The femslash mania surrounding SG was certainly not accidental. As a new media platform opened to a grassroots public, it lent voice to underrepresented Chinese females in various ways. As noted by Nick Couldry, it is "the fantasy of being included in some way in major cultural forums" that propels the audience to participate in the auditions and/or voting of reality TV shows (2000, 55). Indeed, SG's preliminary annual audition had no restrictions on the participants' age, outward appearance, singing style, or any other backgrounds. A wide range of Chinese-speaking females from all over the world were motivated to participate (Yardley 2005; Warn 2006). In its second season, in 2005, SG attracted about 120,000 participants to audition (Meng 2009, 260) and 400,000,000 viewers during the broadcasting of its final national competition (Yue and Yu 2008, 118). Although its selection criteria and processes were updated frequently and became more and more complicated, the general rule was for the participants to be judged by the following three groups of people before the finalists could proceed to the next round: several professional judges, a small team of randomly selected public judges, and the nationwide audience. While the professional and public judges were invited to vote for the participants in the live studio after the contestants' performances, the audience were allowed to vote for their favorite singers through SMS messages. The ranking of the three finalists in the national competition was solely decided by the audience's SMS votes (Meng 2009, 260).

[2.2] The unrestricted preliminary audition and the audience's voting rights on SG further encouraged the participation of those with nonnormative gender personas. A large number of females who were conspicuously gender-defying participated in the 2005 and 2006 national-wide auditions. Later, a great many regional and national finalists presented varied forms of queer performance in the show that "obviously challenged traditional [Chinese female] gender norms" (Warn 2006, 2). As argued by Frances Bonner, reality TV typically looks for people who can "project a personality on television" and who "are more usefully ordinary than others" (2003, 53). SG participants' nonconformist gender (and perhaps potentially sexual) deviance became, in this sense, a marketable draw for TV producers to explore. By dramatizing and sometimes even homerotizing the friendships between female contestants (Zhao 2016), SG carefully manufactured some of its gender-defying participants as "on-screen" queer hybrids that imply "the way that gender bending and non-normative sexualities can denaturalize and transgress" normative gender and sexuality divisions (Friedman 1998, 77). Meanwhile, it has been noted that fans tend to employ slash to expand and explore the underlying world hinted at by mainstream media (Bacon-Smith 1992, 45; Jenkins 1992, 176). This intriguing feature of SG eventually rendered itself a queer female spectacle, which not only helped to promote, dramatize, and sensationalize the show but also emboldened the reinterpretations of these queer female images by the show's staggeringly large numbers of online fan communities' (Yue and Yu 2008; Yang 2010; Xiao 2012; Yang and Bao 2012; Huang 2013; Kam 2014; Zhao 2014; Zhao 2016).

[2.3] Numerous femslash communities and spaces devoted to SG have been built since 2005 (Yang 2010; Yang and Bao 2012, 846–47). In 2006, femslash writings about SG flooded Chinese cyberspace. Because of its wide-ranging focus on multiple queer pairings in the 2006 season of SG, FSCN became one of the most prominent SG femslash forums. The majority of the fans actively participating in the forum were young, educated, Mandarin-speaking, Mainland China-based female fans with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Yue and Yu 2008; Yang 2010; Yang and Bao 2012; Zhao 2014) ([note 5](#)). FSCN femslash activities were extremely active from 2006 to 2010. After 2010, partially due to the state-forced transitioning of the entertainment contents and production formats of SG and similar kinds of reality TV shows (Yang 2014, 521–22), as well as some disruptions and inner struggles within FSCN community caused by several SG participants' lesbian scandals (Zhao 2014), FSCN's vitality as a femslash fandom gradually faded.

[2.4] Most stories in FSCN femslash transform the 2006 SG queer hybrids into characters with more explicit lesbian romances; however, they typically do so without situating such lesbianism within the contexts of SG. This repositioning helps to distinguish the characters from SG, a media world very close to reality, and

reassigns these reality TV stars to fictional occupations and identities. It allows FSCN writers to draw heavily on a variety of genre elements, such as crime, fantasy, historical, or science fiction. In this way, the writers break the constraints of the canon and reclaim the homoerotic connotations of the pairings in distinctive settings. Nevertheless, a more meticulous examination of the underlying reasons for this deliberate disentanglement of lesbian romance from contemporary Chinese sociocultural contexts reveals the cultural implications of this femslash genre. In the following sections of this article I offer a close reading of several commonly used, culturally distant settings of FSCN fan fiction—Western, futuristic, and historical backdrops. My analysis illustrates how the prevalence of this femslash genre in FSCN showcases its fans' awareness of and anxiety over mainstream Chinese society's patriarchal manipulations of female gender and sexuality, as well as their implicit and sometimes subjective challenge of this (hetero)normative regime.

3. The Western worlds

[3.1] Western contexts are commonly narrated in FSCN fan fiction to complete the development of lesbian romance, especially in the stories devoted to a popular pairing of two 2006 SG national finalists, Liu Liyang and Shang Wenjie. Interestingly, the appearance of Western storylines in FSCN femslash is often paralleled with some turning points for their lesbian identities, desires, and romantic/sexual relationships. Such is the case in the sensational FSCN fan fiction titled *fei se shi* (FSS; fatiaocheng521 2006), which pairs up Liu and Shang, and is known for its explicit portrayals of their highly eroticized, incestuous, and sadomasochistic lesbian relationship. FSS was originally published on FSCN by the author in November 2006 and had gained more than 10,000 fan responses by 2011. Even now, nearly ten years later, the fiction still draws recognizable fan discussions online.

[3.2] In FSS, Liu and Shang are depicted as paternal half-sisters who, unaware of this fact for most of the story, are brought up together as stepsisters and have strong but convoluted feelings for each other beginning at 12 years old. After Liu's tomboy lesbian identity dramatically surfaces in her final year in high school, her lesbianism immediately lines up with her other socially questionable behaviors and qualities, such as being a troublemaker and school dropout. All her "misdeeds" greatly disappoint and eventually enrage her father. He felt that it is impossible for Liu to stay in school and at his home anymore, and therefore decide to exile her to England with the excuse of "continuing her education." Yet, as the plot quickly unfolds, this decision of Liu's father to send her away actually aims to cast off the shadow caused by Liu's lesbian scandal in high school and let the rest of the family start over with a normal life. Ironically, during the course of her lesbian encounters in England, Liu becomes an independent, sensitive, responsible, and hardworking person and also learns how to deal with her anger, despair, and complicated feelings toward her stepsister Shang. In this part of the plotline, England interestingly is staged as both an exotic wasteland for heteropatriarchal families to expatriate their "misbehaved" children and a queer nurturing place for young lesbians to explore and make sense of those same-sex desires constantly rejected and stigmatized in the mainstream Chinese environment. Moreover, soon after Liu's exile in England, she accidentally comes across Shang in France, where they had their first kiss in a dreamy, surreal scene of nighttime escape together. France, often imagined as a romantic, sexually open place in mainstream Chinese culture, here serves as the fictional locus where the two are allowed to bond emotionally and develop intense lesbian romance.

[3.3] Sometimes, the location of the West is also used in FSCN fan fiction for Chinese lesbian characters to run away as queer diaspora from the social pressures resulting from their same-sex desires. In the plots of many FSCN stories, the romantic relationship of Liu and Shang starts in China but is doomed to fail eventually because of external pressures. Then, one or both of them goes to a Western country, such as England, France, Greece, Italy, Canada, or Australia, to recover from the psychological trauma. The plot then finds them either reuniting overseas and resuming their love affair after they return to China, or meeting by chance in the West, where they settle as a happy lesbian couple. Even in the stories without a happy ending between the two characters, Western settings still function in a therapeutic way. Take, for example, the fan fiction *Plane Tree* (chouchangliaowuyi 2009). In this story, realizing there is no future for her secret lesbian love for Liu, Shang runs away and eventually settles down in Australia, a place with a scenery similar to the one where she meets Liu for the first time. This Australian plot offers Shang a space that not only separates her from the current, disappointing reality in China but also allows her to reminisce about her lesbian past. Even in some stories where the development of the lesbian romance is not relocated abroad, it is often the case that at least one of the partners is imagined as having lived in a Western country earlier in her life. In

these stories, the experience of living in the West often serves as a prelude to their lesbian romances in China.

[3.4] These storylines with a western setting may have been inspired by the cosmopolitan personal backgrounds of Liu and Shang as promoted in the reality show (Zhao 2016, 165). They both studied in European countries and can speak multiple Western languages fluently. Shang studied as a French major in college, while Liu finished her undergraduate study in England. Western locations with predominant French- and English-speaking populations are frequently employed as the settings of FSCN fan fiction. However, the fact that the alternate Western world positively perpetuates the development of Chinese lesbianism, nourishes lesbian sentiments, and serves as the destinations of choice for nonheterosexual people in queer diaspora, is hardly a direct borrowing from the real-life narrative. Notably, a great number of FSCN femslash stories position other SG participants in Western settings, such as Zhang Liangying in *Love Wrong, Wrong Love!* (nabi forever 2007), Li Na in *Shadow Gloom* (fenglaifengquyuwuhun 2007), and Wei Jiaqing in *Every Lonely Flower* (feiyangyixia 2007). Most of these participants have never been abroad and/or cannot speak foreign languages at all in real life. In the following entries of one FSCN story devoted to queerly coupling Liu and Shang, *Love Likes the Tides* (malilian.xiongyong 2009a), some fan readers questioned why the story is set in Quebec, a place relatively unfamiliar to most Chinese people, to which the author responded:

[3.5] Quebec is the largest, French-speaking province in Canada. It is chosen [to be used in the story] because same-sex couples can legally get married there. As a YSER (femslash fan of Liu and Shang), we believe it represents hope. (malilian.xiongyong 2009b)

[3.6] As can be seen from the author's reply, the queer-supportive, promising West in these FSCN writings, as reimagined and aspired to by some fans, is an ideal fantasy universe, which, by nature of the frequently mass-mediated celebratory queer images, is utilized for the imaginary creation of Chinese lesbian romance. The use of these Western backdrops helps the fans validate in concrete, sociocultural terms the existence and future possibility of Chinese lesbianism, which in real-world China is less legitimate and recognizable. In this sense, these alternate Western worlds in the fans' fantasy scenarios are culturally, politically, and socially valorized as the opposite of mainstream Chinese society in order to express, develop, and reminisce about same-sex desires.

[3.7] This essentialization and romanticization of the West as a queer wonderland in FSCN femslash can be seen as a result of complex negotiations between the fans' queer fantasy desires and the stereotyping of Western practices of lesbianism (or nonheterosexuality and other kinds of gender and sexual deviances) in China. It implies a Chinese fantasy trope that same-sex desires are more prevalent and easily developed in Western countries and are more acceptable to people with Western cultural upbringings and lived experiences. This deployment might be explained by an Occidental perspective in current Chinese society that "the plentiful and prosperous Western materials civilization and its culture are considered superior to Oriental culture [by some Chinese people]; ...the Western world is a heaven [to them]" (Ning 1997, 64). The erasure of queer, especially lesbian, history, existence, and representations in local Chinese media and the influx of Western queer-related information into Mainland China have helped the Chinese consumers form this positive conceptual linkage between nonheterosexuality and the West. For instance, a valorization of a Western queer world, "which is perceived as non-homophobic, care-free, and liberating" has been found to be prevalent in China (Chou 2001, 31). Especially in recent years, the blooming of media piracy in Mainland China has familiarized Chinese people with a diversity of Western media, including queer-themed American TV shows such as *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–2005) and *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004–2009) (Tan 2011; Yang and Bao 2012). These shows in Western media further promote among Chinese audiences the fantacization of queer images that may be removed from off-screen, Western physical worlds.

[3.8] Moreover, this queer exploration of the West as an alternate world suggests a tendency to use Western locations to "naturalize" lesbian romances between Chinese characters. The contextual naturalization of lesbianism discloses some FSCN fans' compliance with one Chinese heterocentric assumption of lesbianism as derived from and shaped by cultural influences from the West (Engebretsen 2008). In a recent study of Chinese fans' interpretation of the American TV show *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), See Kam Tan (2011, 221) recognizes that a "'we-us-Chinese-self' versus 'they-them-Westerners-other'" dichotomy is created in Chinese audiences' cross-cultural interpretations of sex- and homosexuality-related themes. Tan's (2011, 222) study demonstrates that some Chinese fans possess distorted, homophobic views of homosexuality as a "contagious disease," a "'learned' behavior," and a prevalent occurrence in the West. According to Tan (2011,

219), the mixed influences of Chinese people's self-consciousness as a unique "cultural group that had particular traditions, norms, and values...the recourse to cultural difference based on ignorance and denial," and the unfamiliar life portrayed on American TV lead to "gross generalizations of the culture of the other" among the Chinese audience (2011, 221). These views of nonheterosexuality in mainstream Chinese society as derivative and deviant are possibly also internalized and incorporated into FSCN femslash writings and reflected by the fans' queer use of the West in femslash narratives.

[3.9] Nonetheless, underlying this promotion of the valorized queer atmosphere of the West in FSCN fan fictions is also the "backward" intolerance of mainstream Chinese society toward nonheterosexuality (Engebretsen 2008, 99). The fans' utopian, queer imagining of the West, though problematic, ultimately reflects their acute awareness of mainstream Chinese society as an exclusionary, heterocentric place. Thus, in their fictional narratives, the fans tend to emancipate lesbian characters by creating what might be called the space of queer utopia freed from the constraints of heterosexual hegemony in contemporary China. This point can be better demonstrated by FSCN fans' crafting of futuristic and historical Chinese contexts in the fan fiction.

4. Futuristic and historical settings

[4.1] Futuristic and historical China are two other common settings in FSCN femslash. Since "the temporal settings have a strong influence on plotlines and the type of fantasy that is found in [romance stories]" (Linz 1992, 11), these backdrops, to a certain degree, help the writers to complete utopian, bolder lesbian romances. They are frequently appropriated by the fan writers to create greater homoerotic possibilities and promises between the characters. Yet, similar to the Western worlds deployed in FSCN femslash, such narrative settings often reflect both a subversion of normative female gender and sexual ideals in the fictional world and the fan writers' frustration with the harsh real-life conditions of survival for lesbianism in contemporary China.

[4.2] One case in point is the futuristic fan fiction, *One Thousand Years Later* (niaoshanmingdeYS 2007). In this story, the lesbian romance between Liu and Shang takes place in the year 3032, in which there are ongoing intergalactic wars between humans, robots, and aliens. The author starts the story by stating that "Now is AD 3032 on the earth... Human civilization is on the verge of being destroyed by the rapid development of technology... Human obtains unprecedented freedom... The so-called ethics has long been stamped out" (niaoshanmingdeYS 2007). In such a chaotic future, love and sexual intimacy not only transcends traditional boundaries of gender, sexuality, and species but also is no longer sacred. Within this futuristic, permissive environment, the plot continues to describe a lesbian love tragedy that failed 1,000 years ago because of social pressure. This strategy of using combined futuristic and fantasy generic tropes to reimagine Chinese lesbianism makes wobbly the centrality of heterosexuality in today's Chinese society. However, the story simultaneously places lesbianism in opposition to contemporary social order and morality. The continuation of a lesbian romance in a chaotic, alien world suggests that lesbian relationships are only achievable when released from the constraints of the present heterocentric social and ethical systems.

[4.3] Similarly, the stories set in ancient China are usually set in a time when feudalism was the social and cosmological norm. The construction of lesbian romances in the relatively more closed-in and conservative sociocultural environment of the past can be read as an ironic commentary on the marginalization of and discrimination against lesbianism in the still-homophobic, highly civilized, postmodern human society of today. However, these historical plotlines are always infused with elements of social and political turbulence, a strategy that also possibly divulges a contradictory, pessimistic undertone of this fan fiction subgenre to parallel the existence and continuation of lesbian relationships with the ongoing social malaise and disorder.

[4.4] For instance, in one FSCN fan fiction work, *Shanghai 1943* (bulaimeidefuqiao 2007), the lesbian love between Liu and Shang is set in the context of the Chinese civil war period during which Chinese women were severely subordinated and had no control of their own destiny ([note 6](#)). The romance occurs between two characters working in a Moulin Rouge-style Chinese brothel where most of the girls are escorts. In another instance of historical FSCN fan fiction, *Peking Opera Blues* (sanshaonainaideshanzi 2007), the lesbian story is set in a female-only traditional Chinese opera troupe during China's anti-Japan war era ([note 7](#)). Intriguingly, almost all the females in this troupe are portrayed to be nonheterosexual. Of course, this plot design is largely based on the cross-dressing tradition and transgenderism in this type of Chinese female

troupe. Yet these intentional cultural positionings of lesbianism in the historical genre can also be viewed as clear manifestations of the fans' intertwined queer derision of contemporary Chinese heteropatriarchal society and their conformity to mainstream societal definitions of lesbianism.

[4.5] These historical repositionings of lesbianism serve as an interesting detour to imagining homorelationships between females that are unsettling to current, heteropatriarchal hegemony. It has been argued that, in romance fiction, historical settings are more often employed to "depict poverty, violence, and rape than are romances set in the present... [Because they] mak[e] the dramatization of such perils more remote and therefore less threatening" (Seidel 1992, 166). Indeed, most of these FSCN historical romances are accompanied with plots of rape, jealousy, revenge, sexual licentiousness, suicide, and sexual violence and abuse toward and between female characters. These dramatic, intense storylines and the permissive, chaotic, distant settings often generate homosocial and homoerotic bonding between the subordinated females in the stories. As Maureen Quilligan (2005, 12–13) has pointed out, lesbianism is a way for women to retain their agency, actively express their desires, and refuse to be traded out in a patriarchal society. While a direct subversion of heterocentrism in mainstream Chinese culture seems unrealistic and less possible, these historical lesbian fantasies function as a distant and relatively safe strategy of queer resistance against real-world cultural forces that deny and silence same-sex desires of women.

[4.6] Furthermore, although historical settings "have an advantage in creating fantasy worlds because our view of the past is selective" (Putney 1992, 99), selective historical Chinese contexts in these stories are certainly not utopian queer fantasy worlds. The imaginary lesbianism in these stories is also not exempt from being defined and even ostracized by the present Chinese heteronormative society. Similar to the Western plotlines, the historical settings often present relatively "naturalized" lesbian romances developed through women's cross-gender identifications, cross-dressing careers, or emotional bonds in an authoritarian, misogynistic surrounding. In such cases, the fan writers attribute Chinese lesbianism to the attachment of female friends within unconventional, difficult, or unsettled sociocultural and political environments. This way of "explaining" lesbianism, to some extent, reproduces the heteropatriarchal understandings of nonheterosexual female desires and identities as "derivative" and "situational" (see Sang 2003; Martin 2010) that the fans strive to challenge through femslash writings.

5. Conclusion: A self-contradictory worlding practice

[5.1] Some scholarship believes that slash fans have a tendency to ignore real-world, queer-related, social and political issues and that they tend to focus only on the pleasure generated through their play with same-sex desires. As Rhiannon Bury claims, "the function of romance fiction, even if it is queer, is to provide an escape from unpleasant realities; simply put, issues detract from the fantastical pleasures of such texts" (2005, 93–94). Nevertheless, some scholars (McLelland 2005; Wood 2006; McLelland and Yoo 2007) also argue that certain queer fan communities dedicated to Japanese media can be understood as a "counterpublic" (Warner 2002) because they actively and critically challenge "hegemonic (that is, patriarchal, masculinist, heterosexist) codes governing the public expression of gender and sexuality" (McLelland and Yoo 2007, 100).

[5.2] Neither view in itself can fully explicate the intricacy of FSCN femslash writings. Indeed, as previous research illustrates, many SG fans, including the FSCN femslash writers who had situated their stories within contemporary, SG-related contexts ([note 8](#)), fully realized the specific "capitalist mode" of the show's deliberate exploitation of female homosociality, yet were still able to enjoy the subjectivity and "pleasure of fan practices" during this discourse (Yang 2009; Yang and Bao 2012, 850; Yang 2014). Nevertheless, due to the increasingly tightening and evolving online media censorship and communication control in Mainland China, cyber public spheres, especially the ones explicitly advocating equality and democracy, hardly exist in such an environment (Zhou 2006). For instance, most FSCN femslash fans constantly made efforts to differentiate the fantasy of lesbianism in the fan fiction works from the real-world lesbian-related topics; in some cases, the administrators of the fan sites would silence explicit fan discussions on LGBTQ cultures to avoid potential backlash against both the SG celebrities and the fandom itself (Zhao 2014).

[5.3] Furthermore, online Chinese queer fan literature might "articulate [fan writers'] desire for democratic changes in both the intimate sphere and the public sphere" (Xu and Yang 2013, 39), but it has also been found fraught with "repression of female sexuality...uncertainties about [females'] gender identities and frustrations with heterosexual relationships as constituted in contemporary [Chinese] society" (Feng 2013,

81). As I reveal in this article, the worlding strategy allows fans to elaborate their complex queer fantasies and their struggle with mainstream, heteronormative cultures, as well as to negotiate with prevalent sociocultural regulations on female genders and sexualities. The creation of alternate worlds in fan fiction allows FSCN fans to voice their awareness of the undesirable real-world situations faced by Chinese lesbians. Meanwhile, the alternate settings and plotlines of FSCN femslash fan fiction imply that contemporary, mainstream Chinese society offers very limited supportive space for queer females. Seen in this light, this writing technique suggests that those who want to have a lesbian relationship need to run away from the judgment of their peers, cut off their social ties with family members and friends, and live in a culturally distant place or time in order to relieve themselves from the pressures that could hinder the development of their lesbian love. With this narrative strategy, FSCN fans simultaneously exercised their queer play with mainstream media, posed discursive challenge to Chinese lesbian reality, and expressed deep concern and discomfort with the heteropatriarchal and heteronormative paradigms ingrained in contemporary Chinese society.

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7. Notes

1. The terms "girl slash" and "girls' love" (GL) have also been used in certain studies of Chinese queer girl culture (Yang 2010; Yang and Bao 2012). GL is often closely linked to Japanese media and popular cultures. A large portion of GL culture also exclusively centers on the platonic, homoromantic relationships between underage, feminine girls. Furthermore, the definition of GL varies in different cultural contexts. Thus, I use the term "femslash" in this article to denote all kinds of FSCN fans' female same-sex fantasies.

2. This site is available at <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E7%B3%C9%AB%B3%AC%C5%AE>.

3. Certain genres, such as gothic and horror, have also been frequently appropriated in Western AW (or AR/AU) fan narratives.

4. In her research, Martin also uses the term "worlding" to describe how Taiwanese BL fans socially connect with each other in a local affective community. Because of the limited scope of this article, my analysis focuses on the imaginative level of worlding in FSCN femslash.

5. Some fan scholarship has showed that it is very difficult to unveil the real, off-line identities and backgrounds of online fans because virtual identities themselves are often performative, fluid, and fictional (Busse 2006; Hanmer 2010). Based on my long-term observation, this point is also applicable to FSCN fandom. In the previous study focusing on FSCN, the researchers believe that its fans, especially fan writers, were well-educated, and romantically (or even sexually) experienced and knowledgeable (Yang and Bao 2012, 851). Their findings were largely based on the sexually revealing content and well-designed, sophisticated plotlines of FSCN femslash. Yet I also found a few active FSCN fans who claimed to be romantically innocent, underage girls. Take, for example, xinxinxiaoxue, who claimed during online FSCN conversation with other fans, to be only 12 years old in 2007 and to never have had a romantic relationship (see <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/166973394?pn=74>). Thus, my research does not attempt to specify any precise data of the demographics of the participants of FSCN femslash.

6. The backdrop of the story is a time period before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, during which Mainland Chinese society was still at war.

7. This time period is from 1931 to 1937. This kind of female troupe is frequently referred to as *kunban*.

8. The FSCN femslash fan fiction works that set lesbian romance within a SG context, though they existed and were popular among the fan readers, often divulged the fan writers' cynical or gloomy view of the show's manipulation of queer female images and the real-life lesbianism in mainstream Chinese society. Such an

example is one of the most sensational fan fiction works in FSCN, *A Play for the World to See* (axiuluozhishuhai 2006).

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