Haomin Gong & Xin Yang, Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture. New York: Routledge, 2017.

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Haomin Gong and Xin Yang's book seeks to examine the Internet as a means of understanding online and offline public discourse on class, gender, ethnicity, and ethics in China. The authors explore Chinese Internet discourse based on a collection of viral narratives and engage with a range of literary, media, and social theory, as well as scholarship on Chinese Internet, to understand them.

The book is divided into five co-authored chapters (oddly, each with its own footnotes and bibliography) addressing themes of parody, smallness, gender, ethnicity, and ethics. In the introduction, authors review terms and commentary relevant to theorizations of the Internet in other countries as well as scholarship on the Chinese Internet, specifically. Extant scholarship on the Chinese Internet tends to either laud it as an engine of socio-political change and democratization, or critique it as indistinguishable from Internet postings elsewhere as a frequently shallow source of entertainment and misinformation. For Gong and Yang, the Internet expands public discourse, while also being vulnerable to commercial manipulation.

In the first chapter, the authors examine *egao:* digitalized comic satire in the form of language, pictures, and animation that critiques established media. The authors specifically focus on Ge Hu's viral satirization of Fifth Generation director, Kaige Chen's film *The Promise*—a lavish period drama with a Faustian plot that was a 2005 blockbuster that received mixed reviews. In *The Promise*, a slave girl turned queen is granted her wish of beauty, wealth, and power but is cursed with the denial of true love. Her loveless destiny is somehow bound up with revenge wreaked by a childhood acquaintance whom she tricked in order to eat his steamed bun. Hu's parody of *The Promise*, called "*A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun,*" took the form of a criminal trial in which scenes from *The Promise* were paired with music for comic effect, such as implying homosexual undertones to the friendship bonds between male characters. Chen sued Hu for copyright infringement. The authors assert the parody created controversy among "people, social groups and institutions" but unfortunately failed to identify the constituents specifically or the views they expressed.

Gong and Yang claim Hu's parody represents a new form of digital cultural critique of the establishment, commercialism, and "social stratification in contemporary China." The authors support the claim of social critique by referencing other *egao* scholars: Zhou, who sees *egao* as challenging established norms and values, though as individual action; the late Nobel laureate Liu, who likened *egao spirit* to musical parodies of Red Classics, dating back to the 80's and 90's; Huang, for whom *egao* "deconstructs serious themes to entertain…in defiance of authority"; and Berg, who dubbed *egao* as Bakhtinean canivalesque parody with an optimistically democratizing role. Gong and Yang praise these views but claim *egao* is a form of collective intervention, as evidenced by the "digital bun groups," young netizens who circulated clips from Hu's parody and resist established culture represented by Chen. Yet it would be helpful to learn how Chen, originally a rebellious Fifth Generation filmmaker, has become eponymous with the Chinese cultural establishment or how Hu may be construed as a critic of the establishment and commercialism when he subsequently produced state propaganda and worked for large companies making video advertisements. While there is little question that parody may be a form of critique or denunciation, it is less clear that *egao* represents resistance rather than the media producers of one generation lampooning the values of an older one. The authors reasonably identify *egao* participants (a largely youthful generation of tech-savvy

Internet users) as a new stratum of society, but more information and analysis is needed to substantiate their claim that such participants are a politically deliberate or coherent group leveling critiques at social stratification.

The second chapter focuses on micro-narratives and mirco-films elicited by online contests. Due to their scale as "micro," the authors view these forms as standing in opposition to "macro" media narratives produced by the state such as propaganda for the Olympic games. Micro-narrative provides "pictures of social reality in transformation," illustrating the compartmentalization and materialism that characterize the lives of netizens. This media itself is somewhat mundane, consisting of love stories, fantasies of time travel, Confucian-themed narratives about family relationships, movie-star scandals, domestic violence, and business schemes. Internet postings also provide glimpses of ambivalent views of modernity, such as one story in which an indigent migrant masquerades on the Internet as a rich socialite, only to have the ruse discovered by her friends and her parents, who are saddled with paying off her debts. The authors describe vignettes about the fascination with techno-gadgets and extravagant consumption, but they miss the opportunity to link this phenomenon to neoliberalism.

Chapter Three argues Internet narratives, many written by women, create a *heterotopia* or "different place" in Foucauldian usage where voices occupy a new digital space. Yet, this digital fiction recites conventional cultural restraints and morality such as Cinderella fantasies, polygamous courtesan romances, and time travel. In the most interesting example, *Go Princess Go*, a male character arrives in the historical past transformed into a woman who then falls in love with a male character, only to awake from the fantasy in the present, restored to being a man, still attracted to his male love interest from the past, who has also been transported to the present. This narrative of same-sex desire inspired critical Internet viewers to created their own endings, converting the couple back to a heterosexual pair, and the director, at the behest of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television repeatedly revised the show's endings until it was taken off the air. *Go Princess Go* provides the strongest evidence of the Internet as a space of alternative culture resisted by the state and could have benefitted from more attention by the authors.

In the fourth chapter, the authors examine ethnicity, in one case examining the viral popularity among Han Chinese Internet viewers of the wedding photos of a Tibetan couple, one of whom works for an advertising company, and the other runs an online store. The wedding photos feature the couple engaging in "modern life"—including flying in a helicopter, driving a Lamborghini, and drinking Starbucks or wine while wearing fashionable clothing—paired with photos of the same couple dressed in traditional Tibetan attire conducting devotional rituals at the Potala and performing daily activities common in rural Tibet such as herding yak or spinning wool. Summarizing a range of literature on ethnicity and citing a *New Yorker* article about the same Tibetan couple's viral photos, Gong and Xin concur that the couple is engaged in benign performances of ethnicity palatable to the state and motivated by postsocialist consumerism.

In the final chapter, the authors return to Internet fiction and cyber ethics, specifically to the genre of fiction featuring "human flesh searches," in which fictional Internet users dig up and post online compromising personal information about celebrities or private individuals whom they seek to ruin. In a confusing final discussion based on their examination of this human flesh search fiction, the authors ponder whether the Internet causes ethical deficiencies in the online and offline activities of netitzens; if mediality (dialogue between forms of media) leads to the manipulation of public opinion for profit, and how hyper-connectivity and the lack of (self-)

reflexivity are related to the creation of netizens who perceive their flesh searches as ethical identity construction in the postsocialist era.

Gong and Yang's book is preoccupied by many of the questions raised by Internet scholars globally: What does Internet media tell us about societal views? Is Internet media used for public manipulation? To what extent is new hyper-connectivity related to asocial and problematic behavior such as bullying and vigilantism? Gong and Yang face the difficult obstacle of trying to answer these broad social and historical questions through the prism of Internet fiction in China. Their project raises the question of whether fictional depictions of Internet users can be representative of a non-fictional Chinese public. Clearly, these viral accounts resonated with Chinese Internet users; however the authors are not examining public responses to Internet fiction as much as the fictional texts themselves, and, as the authors point out, the creators of Internet fiction follow formulaic guidelines that encourage exaggeration and suspense designed by website creators, TV, and other media for commercial gain. The authors astutely contextualize Chinese Internet as shaped by the postsocialist era and neoliberal economics but do not effectively demonstrate how these conclusions are related to the material they examine.

Overall, Gong and Yang are working with a fascinating subject, but too much of the book is devoted to the praise and summary of other scholars, leaving the authors of this work with insufficient space to develop their own analytic conclusions. Nonetheless, the book provides provocative samples of Chinese Internet fiction and an energetic introduction to this important topic. *Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity, and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture* may be of interest to scholars of Chinese literature, the Chinese Internet, and media studies in China.

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