

‘Farming Writing’: An Innovative Subgenre of Internet Literature

Aiqing Wang

University of Liverpool

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Correspondence email: aiqing.wang@liverpool.ac.uk

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Corresponding Author:

Aiqing Wang

Email:

aiqing.wang@liverpool.ac.uk

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Abstract

As an innovative subgenre of Internet literature, ‘farming writing’ has attained popularity in contemporary China’s cyberspace, which, in a narrow sense, denotes narratives pertaining to agronomic theories and agrarian practices. Disparate from cliché-ridden web romances that deploy authorial ‘golden finger’ to equip protagonists with impeccable demeanour and prowess, ‘farming’ fiction is characterised by reality-oriented, detail-enriched depictions, notwithstanding its essence as ‘feel-good writing’. Furthermore, ‘farming’ works are marked by a slow pace, peaceful setting and plain theme, enabling readers to identify with characters and escape from reality. In this article, I scrutinise a ‘farming’ novel under the genre of danmei (aka Boys Love), and further posit that the popularity of ‘farming writing’ is also attributed to the Chinese ethnicity’s devotion to agriculture since time immemorial.

INTRODUCTION

1990s China witnessed the proliferated production and consumption of Internet literature in cyberspace while marginalisation of serious literature, and it was due to the permeation of networked and programmable media (Cayley 2002, Zhang 2003: 230-255, Ouyang 2011, Tian and Adorjan 2016) that enabled web-based popular literature works as supplements to official, mainstream cultural offerings (Li 2007, Ren and Montgomery 2012). The advent of the digital age has inspired a cornucopia of non-professional creation composed by legions of obscure amateur authors as well as their prodigious readership (Rifkin 1998: 177, Zhang 2011, Bai 2013). Latest data released by

the China Internet Network Information Centre shows that by December 2020, there have been approximately 460 million Internet literature readers, accounting for 46.5% of the 989 million netizen cohort (China Internet Network Information Centre 2021).

Chinese virtual literature can be categorised into male-oriented writing and its female-oriented equivalent, viz. ‘male fantasy’ and ‘female fantasy’ (Hockx 2011, Guan 2017). Both subcategories are hosted by literary websites of various user sizes as well as profitable and non-profitable virtual communities (Hockx 2005, Yin 2005, Chen et al 2008, Tse and Gong 2012). Following the world’s first Chinese electronic magazine 华夏文摘 [Huaxia

Wenzhai] ‘China News Digest’ hosting early Chinese web literature attempts in 1991 (Hockx 2015: 30), there was an epoch-making publication on a local Bulletin Board System by an amateur writer pseudonymed 痞子蔡 Pizicai in 1998 (Liu 2004: 154, Chao 2012: 14). There also emerged a list of leading literary websites, exemplified by the first dedicated literary website 榕树下 [Rongshu Xia] ‘Under the Banyan Tree’ founded in 1997 (Hockx 2004, Kong 2005: 178-180, Ouyang 2018). In stark contrast to ‘Under the Banyan Tree’ that accommodates a mixed-gender readership, another pioneering and famed literary website 晋江文学城 [Jinjiang wenxue cheng] ‘Jinjiang Literature City’ (henceforward Jinjiang) is female-oriented (Feng 2013a, Guan 2017). According to latest statistics released in April 2021, among more than 46,370,000 Jinjiang’s registered users, 91% of them are female (Jinjiang Literature City 2021), and this percentage used to reach 93% (Feng 2009, Xu and Yang 2013, Wei 2014). Since its launch in 2003, Jinjiang has attained an iconic status and impressive commercial success (Linder 2005, Feng 2009, 2013, Wang 2019). It has hosted over 4.09 million narratives with approximately 100.8 billion Chinese characters (Jinjiang Literature City 2021), and there is an upsurge in its contracted writers: the number was 300,000 in 2012 (Xu and Yang 2013), yet it has exceeded 1.76 million by 2021 (Jinjiang Literature City 2021).

Among leading subgenres of Chinese web literature, the most well-established and fully-fledged ones are 玄幻 [xuanhuan] ‘Eastern fantasy’, 都市 [dushi] ‘urban’, 仙侠 [xianxia] ‘Chinese immortal swordsman’ and 网游 [wangyou] ‘online game’ (Chao 2012: 114-149).

There is a subgenre of relatively marginal interest, dubbed as 种田文 [zhongtian wen] that literally means ‘farming writing’. The terminology ‘farming writing’ was initially coined to define narratives depicting protagonists’ gradual construction of political, economic, military and technological systems. In line with the maturity of virtual literature, this terminology currently refers to texts concerning agricultural practices exclusively, or it is employed metaphorically to denote those recounting and expatiating trivialities, and hence its alias 家长里短文 [jiachangliduan wen] ‘household trifle writing’ (Tran. Mine) given by fan readers (Zhang 2013, Wei 2017, Sun 2019). ‘Farming writing’ has been attaining ever-growing popularity and visibility. Among 200 most-read novels on Jinjiang, 79 of them are ‘farming writing’ (Wu and Zhang 2018), instantiated by novels 天启悠闲生活 [Tianqi Youxian Shenghuo] ‘Leisurely Life in the Tianqi Period’¹ (Li 2013), 古代农家日常 [Gudai Nongjia Richang] ‘Daily Life of an Ancient Rural Family’ (Liu et al 2018), and 知否知否应是绿肥红瘦 [Zhifou Zhifou Yingshi Lüfeihongshou] that has been adapted into a television serial entitled ‘The Story of Minglan’ (Ifeng 2017, Zhou 2019). According to my observation on Jinjiang, there are currently 37,689 narratives under the subcategory of ‘farming writing’.

In this article, I investigate ‘farming writing’ in a narrow sense, namely, fiction appertaining to agricultural practices and agrarian ideologies, and I unravel the rationale behind its popularity as a web literary genre.

LITERATURE REVIEW

¹ Unless specified otherwise, all titles and citations in this article are translated by myself.

‘Farming’ fiction can be categorised into four subtypes: 穿越 [chuanyue] ‘time travel’, 架空 [jiakong] ‘alternative reality’, 古代 [gudai] ‘ancient’ and 现代 [xiandai] ‘modern’, with the last one being trivial in quantity (Li 2013). From a feminist perspective, the evolution of female-oriented ‘farming writing’ has undergone three stages. At the first stage starting from the 2007 prototypical work 明朝五好家庭 [Mingchao Wuhao Jiating] ‘A Model Family in the Ming Dynasty’ (Trans. Mine), ‘farming writing’ adopted a time travel storyline featuring complaisant women who complied with traditional gender norms and zeitgeist. At the second stage starting from the phenomenal work 庶女攻略 [Shunü Gonglüe] ‘Striving of a Concubine’s Daughter’ (Trans. Mine), ‘farming’ novels highlighted non-compliant women with a degree of feminist awareness against patriarchy. In the current, third phrase, ‘farming writing’ bears similitude to 女尊文 [nüzun wen] ‘matriarchal writing’ that recounts women’s ascent to power in the public arena or describes female supremacy in heterosexual relationships in patriarchal societies (Feng 2013a: 93-94, 2013b). However, such ostensible, bewildered feminist thinking fundamentally fails to address or annihilate gender inequality and stigmatisation (Liu et al 2018, Wu and Zhang 2018).

In terms of the widespread consumption of ‘farming writing’, it is inextricably intertwined with its properties.

First, ‘farming writing’ is marked by a slow pace and peaceful setting, enabling readers to mentally retreat into a fantasy world of self-indulgent pleasure-seeking, which is in stark contrast to the fast-paced, fiercely-

competitive reality (Zhang 2013, Liu et al 2018, Zhou 2019).

Second, ‘farming’ texts allow readers to easily identify with characters, in that the narratives are characterised by a plain theme regarding monotonous daily life (Wei 2017, Zhang 2017) as well as logical plots and detailed depictions (Zhang 2013, Wu and Zhang 2018).

Third, ‘farming writing’ is in essence 爽文 [shuangwen] ‘feel-good writing’ that enables readers to form reverie triggered by their incompetence in enhancing the status quo, and to temporarily adopt an escapist mindset from stringent social ethos and precepts (Zhang 2017, Liu et al 2018). Notwithstanding this prominent attribute, ‘farming writing’ tends to abnegate clichéd 金手指 [jin shouzhi] ‘golden finger’ (Feng 2013a: 39, Zhou 2019). This conception originates in the field of online gaming, while in literature it is deployed to denote an irrational authorial design that equips protagonists with unremitting auspiciousness, invincible artistry, supreme intelligence, extraordinary demeanor, etc (Zhou 2018). For instance, in a male-authored and male-oriented subgenre of virtual literature, ‘golden finger’ enables male protagonists to display stud-like virility to attain numerous beautiful women easily and simultaneously, so there is an uncomplimentary name for fiction under this subcategory, viz. 种马文 zhongma wen ‘stud fiction’ (Feng 2013a: 10, 38). By virtue of such a surrealistic trait, fiction featured by ‘golden finger’ is satirised as YY 小说 [YY xiaoshuo] ‘YY fiction’: YY represents 意淫 [yiyin] ‘lust of the mind’, i.e. explicit exploration of mental lascivious fulfilment (Chao 2012: 225, Hockx 2015: 112). ‘Farming’ works, on the contrary, predominantly refrain from over-emphasising reading enjoyment by means of ‘golden finger’

plot lines, so they are more realistic and accommodate readers' emotional requirements in a more leisurely, non-dramatic fashion (Zhang 2013, Feng 2013a: 38-39).

Fourth, being both a pivotal subcategory of 'farming writing' as well as an independent genre, 'time travel writing' is inextricably intertwined with while disparate from 'farming writing'. In a vast majority of female-oriented time travel novels, modern heroines of humble birth and mediocre ability become imperial aristocracy with a cornucopia of aptitudes and encyclopaedic knowledge as well as effortless charm and hence an army of suitors (Li 2013, Liu et al 2018). Analogously, in their cliché-ridden male-oriented counterparts, male protagonists manifest prowess to conquer the past with modern technologies and thus reverse history thoroughly (Feng 2013a: 38, 93). Although a substantial amount of 'farming' works entail protagonists' time travel to the past, their life and sense of satisfaction in ancient times are not facilitated by 'golden finger'. The reason lies in that these protagonists are still the grassroots, who are featured by diligence and low profile and endeavour to suit the new environment and obtain self-realisation via domesticity (Feng 2013a: 173, Zhang 2013, Sun 2019).

KING OF TURBULENT TIMES: AN EXAMPLE

In this section, I deploy a full-length, 626828-character novel entitled 乱世为王 [Luanshi Weiwang] 'King of Turbulent Times' (Trans. Mine) as an example to illustrate 'farming' fiction.

Chinese Internet literature contains a renowned transgressive genre, viz. danmei (Zheng 2014, Hockx 2015: 114) that features male-male romance and eroticism between beautiful pubescent boys and youthful men (Yang and Xu

2016, 2017a, 2017b, Zhang 2016). Derived from a Japanese cultural export dubbed as 'Boys Love' (aka BL) targeting specifically at female audiences (McLelland 2000, Fujimoto 2015, McLelland and Welker 2015, Nagaike and Aoyama 2015), Chinese danmei literature has been evolving from a marginalised niche market since 1990s (Liu 2009, Yang and Bao 2012, Zhu and Zhang 2015) into a thriving and increasingly visible subculture with legions of fan producers/consumers of audio-visual and textual works (Chao 2016, 2017, Zhang 2016). Since the underlying essence of danmei is female-oriented, gender-inflected fantasy, its fanbase is predominantly constituted of adolescent girls and adult women, who account for 91% to 93% of the fandom and are generally conjectured to be heterosexual (Louie 2012, Xu and Yang 2014, Zhou and Li 2016, Zeng 2017). In the current danmei subculture, fiction, rather than ACG (Anime, Comic and Games), is the most-consumed subcategory (Wei 2014).

'King of Turbulent Times' (henceforward King) is a danmei novel published on Jinjiang in 2016 under a feminine pen name 顾雪柔 Gu Xuerou, whereas it is almost unanimously surmised to be a nom de plume of an illustrious male danmei writer pseudonymed 非天夜翔 Feitianyexiang (henceforward Feitian) (NetEase 2018, 2020). Feitian's literary accomplishments can be epitomised by: 1) a wide range of innovative themes and ideologies (Shao 2020); 2) a fecundity of imagination and richness of imagery-evoking representation (Shao 2019, Xiao 2019); 3) profound historical and literary allusions; and 4) elaborateness and meticulousness (see Wang (2021) for detailed discussion). Feitian, therefore, is acclaimed as 'the well-established "nanshen" of female-oriented Internet

writing’ (女频网文界公认的男神 [nǚpín wangwenjie gongrende nanshen]), in which ‘nanshen’ (Lit. ‘male divinity’) is a readership-based neologism metaphorically lauding top-ranked online writers (Shao 2019, 2020, Xiao 2019). Nonetheless, in contemporary China, danmei producers have to write and publish pseudonymously for self-protection (Xu and Yang 2013, Zeng 2017), owing to danmei’s homosexual nature and interconnection with obscenity (McLelland 2005, 2016, 2017, Zhang 2017) and hence stringent official censorship and crackdown imposed by the party-state (Yi 2013, Ng 2015, Zhang 2017, Wang 2019).

King is a period romance with an intentionally unspecified dynasty and a variety of settings ranging from royal palaces to nomadic battlefields. Although *King* is not tagged under the category of ‘farming writing’, the entire second fascicle is preponderantly comprised of various agrarian customs and deeds. For instance, there are depictions concerning husbandry and sericulture, cookery and refinement, irrigation and drainage, sowing and harvesting, refurbishment and carpentry, etc. Apart from the groundbreaking agronomic treatise 齐民要术 [Qimin Yaoshu] ‘Essential Techniques for the People; Important Arts for the People’s Welfare’ (see below for more detailed discussion), the narrative also alludes to works such as a monograph 梦溪笔谈 [Meng Xi Bi Tan] on natural and social sciences composed by 沈括 Shen Kuo (1031-1095), a 1637 encyclopedia 天工开物 [Tiangong Kaiwu] ‘Exploitation of the Works of Nature’, as well as a Warring States (circa 475-221 BC) classic 墨经 [Mo Jing] ‘Mohist Canons’ encompassing engineering, mechanics, physics, optics, geometry, etc (Chapters 11-12).

In *King*, depictions pertaining to agricultural acts are detail-enriched and punctilious. As can be seen from Example (1), the author explicitly and elaborately portrays the entire process of one of the numerous farming tasks, i.e. waterwheel construction, in a meticulous manner. The author not only illuminates the complication and cost of the mission, but also the protagonist’s agitation when striving to resolve those insurmountable difficulties, which enables readers to identify with the character.

- (1) 征徭役是得找官府的，游淼人生地不熟，又临近年关，说不得只有到了年底，才好去县府走动，黄老匠人便住在扬州，这时间里去了，带着图纸，答应帮游淼先将水车的零件陆陆续续做点出来，游淼知道有这老头儿帮忙，水车多半能成了。但要雇五十个挖渠工更麻烦，游淼只觉这事简直扯来扯去扯不清，跟一团乱麻似的，开始只是想找点事儿打发时间，没想到一件连一件，种田要水车，水车要伐木，又要挖渠，得请徭役...扯出林林总总无数麻烦，还得花不少钱。游淼算了一会儿，水车需要木料，搭江边悬崖上的脚手架，运输，匠人...寻常的工匠还无法胜任这活儿，要在悬崖上开凿固定点，还要木筒、炸药。水车的水斗更是要好木，否则无法保证几十年如一日地装水，要隔水的稠漆，要沥青。开渠后要堆砖，砌土防漏，如此这般，到处都要钱。

The yamen was in charge of recruiting corvées, yet You Miao had not made acquaintance with any local official, and the lunar new year was approaching, so he had to wait for a better timing. Master Huang returned to where he resided in Yangzhou with the blueprint, and he

had promised to make some components of the waterwheel. With this carpenter's help, You Miao had some peace of mind. However, hiring fifty labourers to dig ditches was more troublesome, driving You Miao agitated. Initially he was only for something to kill time, but he never expected the endless series of tasks: farming needed a waterwheel, and the waterwheel needed logging, ditches and labourers...Every single mission generated troubles and huge cost. You Miao did the calculation: he needed to buy timber for the waterwheel and have a scaffold built against a cliff by the river, so he needed to hire carriers and carpenters too. And not just any carpenters, because they must be able to pull up supporting columns on the rock cliff, which meant he also had to prepare tubes and gunpowder. In order to last for a few decades, the waterwheel must be made of high-quality wood and protected by a thick layer of paint and asphalt. After the ditches were dug, they must be strengthened by bricks and made waterproof. All quotes would be costly.

(*King of Turbulent Times*. Vol 2. Chapter 13. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, as a danmei romance enriched by 'farming' elements, *King* is featured by reality-oriented storylines and depictions. Example (2) indicates agrarian and mercantile economy, feudal employment relations, implements and means of production, as well as an array of agricultural produce and byproducts. All depictions entail details and instantiate social reality. Although chapters concerning warfare and political confrontation between the central empire and ethnic tribes are embedded with magnificent

ideologies of heroism, patriotism and humanism, in the fascicle featuring farming, the author also manifests literary prowess to chronicle and embroider trivialities and kaleidoscopic daily life. It is noteworthy that in Example (2), the author signposts the characters' potential deficient harvest at their first attempt, instead of harnessing authorial 'golden finger' to create a bumper harvest in an unrealistic manner.

(2) “头一年,我抽七分的租儿。过完这年给你们降到六分。”游淼坐在厅堂中央,朝十二名户主说,“本少爷养活你们这些人,大家也得知趣点。种什么下地去,我说了算,咱们江南的水稻不比你们北方,头一年先种两季看看,缓一缓你们的吃食,再考虑来年三季的事,怎么样?”游淼说出这话时心里有点忐忑,毕竟种粮食不比种茶,五分已是抽得重了,抽七分,若选种不好,又遭了旱涝,寻常人家须过不下去。但这三个月里他要负担上千人的吃饭问题,水车是他建的,田也是他的,这些流民若不愿意种也只有收拾铺盖滚蛋的份...游淼哭笑不得,整个沈园才建好这点时日,又变得乱七八糟,六头牛挤在前院里,犁具堆在后院,简直就没地方下脚...乔珏说:“养蜂人我给你找了,一进二月就过来,油菜籽都在仓库里了,我见你买了谷种,过个十天就让人犁地,把地种了罢,就怕第一季这地太生,又没起够肥,种不出多少粮食来。”

'In the first year, I ask for 70% of your harvest as the rent, but the next year it'll be 60%.' You Miao sat in the middle of the hall and told twelve householders, 'As your landlord, I expect everybody to grow what I want. Here in the South is different from your hometown, so let's grow

rice twice a year for the time being, and you can make it three times in the future when the food is enough. Does that sound good?’ When You Miao was saying this, he was a bit worried: requiring 70% or even 50% was rather high, and if seeds were bad or there were droughts, farmers might not survive. However, in the following three months he had to feed over one thousand people, and besides, he owned the waterwheel and the land, so if these refugees did not agree, they would have to go... You Miao was speechless—his Shen Garden had only just been refurbished, but now it became messy again, with six oxen cramped in the front garden and ploughs piled in the back yard... Qiao Jue said: ‘I found some beekeepers for you, and they’ll come in early February. Rapeseed seeds are in the granary. I saw the grains you bought, and I’ll tell farmers to start ploughing in ten days. But this is the first year and the land is not fertilised well, so don’t have too much hope.’

(*King of Turbulent Times*. Vol 2. Chapter 18. Trans. Mine)

The reality-oriented feature of *King* can be further epitomised by the protagonist’s attitude towards money. Apart from the protagonist’s financial prudence with waterwheel construction and land rent (Examples (1-2)), as can be seen from Examples (3-4), his living expenses and ways of saving and negotiating have been punctiliously calculated as well.

- (3) 银子现在不能乱花了，一两金兑三十两银，一两银兑一吊钱。一吊钱可以做许多事，一斤米只要八文钱，一只鸡也只要二十五文。游淼从

前是不当家不知柴米贵，现在合计起来，父亲给他的一百两银，足够他在沈园吃上五年十年。...游淼挨个敲了敲，确认家主卧房中的家具都是花梨木做的。花梨木值不少钱，沉甸甸的，而且不朽，桦木制的柜子等则烂得透了，堆在院子角落里，正好当柴火烧。门则是梨花木的，这玩意也好，结实，至少门窗不用换了，把铆钉重新敲上，刨一次，重新上漆就成。

Splurging would no longer happen. One liang of gold equalled thirty liang of silver, and one liang of silver equalled one diao of coins. One diao of coins could buy a lot of stuff, as a jin of rice only cost eight coins and a chicken only cost twenty-five. You Miao had no idea of living expenses before, but now if he spent money carefully, the one hundred liang of silver from his father could support his life in the Shen Garden for five to ten years... You Miao knocked on every piece of furniture and found out all items in the main bedroom were made of heavy, expensive rosewood, so they were still strong. Those birch cabinets around the corner went rotten, but they could be used as firewood. The doors were made of solid rosewood as well, which was good—at least he could save the money for new ones and simply have them fastened, sanded and painted.

(*King of Turbulent Times*. Vol 2. Chapter 11. Trans. Mine)

- (4) 转了一刻钟，堂屋，东厢，西厢，客房，二门，大门，游淼把全部地方看过一次，说：“这里算修房子的钱，全做完给你们统共一吊钱，多的没了，也别给我讲价，我知道外头雇你们，

一天也才十文钱。这是十天的份。”那小点的工匠忙扯同伴的衣服，游淼知道雇这么俩人，花市价的话，雇个十天也就是两百文钱，这么一来，确实是十个人的工钱，不愁他们不点头。那年纪大点的工匠说：“东家，你管饭不？”这句东家一叫，游淼便知道行了，爽快道：“管饭，我吃啥你俩吃啥。”“俺弟兄俩可吃得多吃得多。”那小工匠说。游淼说：“每人每天一斤米，晚上再给二两酒，多的没了。”

You Miao spent a quarter of an hour to check the living room, eastern and western chambers, guest rooms as well as internal and main gates. He told the builders: ‘I’ll pay you a diao of money for the job. It’s a good deal. I know you’re paid ten coins a day, and this is ten days’ job.’ The younger builder gave his mate a nudge. You Miao knew the market price for two builders was two hundred coins for ten days, so his offer was fair. The older builder asked: ‘Boss, do you cover meals?’ Hearing the word ‘boss’, You Miao knew he had a deal, so he agreed straight away: ‘Sure. You’ll have the same meals as us.’ ‘But we eat a lot.’ The younger builder said. You Miao replied: ‘You two have a kilogram of rice per day, plus two liang of wine every evening. That’s it.’

(King of Turbulent Times. Vol 2. Chapter 12. Trans. Mine)

In terms of the protagonist, he is realistically depicted as an ordinary person without any blessing from ‘golden finger’. The protagonist is void of prior knowledge of agronomy, so he resorts to previously-mentioned agricultural and scientific treatises, as well as the expertise of paid professionals,

as in Example (1). Additionally, instead of being an exemplary and invincible hero, he occasionally exhibits negative moods (Example (1)) and lack of self-esteem (Example (2)). His same-sex partner, the deuteragonist, is not portrayed to be impeccable either, exemplified by his mediocre cooking skills (Example (5)). Nonetheless, the weaknesses of characters render them multi-faceted, so that readers can identify with them and attain a sense of satisfaction along with their maturation.

- (5) “饭好像是要蒸的。”游淼好奇地四处看，见李治烽在用木杯舀米，提醒他，“得兑水的吧，不能直接上屉蒸。”李治烽愣了一下，继而点头道：“对。”...桌上放着米饭，饭倒是蒸熟了，还是好米，颗颗晶莹通透的，散发着饭香味。一盆草菇汤也有模有样，撒了点葱花，奈何炒肉却糊得像炭一般，还有碟青菜被炒得剩下一点点，放在盘子中间。...游淼莞尔尝了口，说：“有点咸。”李治烽嗯了声，自己吃了口，那表情简直惨不忍睹。‘I think rice is steamed.’ You Miao was curious about everything in the kitchen. When seeing Li Zhifeng scooping rice, he reminded him: ‘I guess you need to add some water before putting it in a cooker.’ Li Zhifeng appeared dazed for a second and nodded: ‘Right.’...The rice was cooked—the grains were high-quality and smelled good. The mushroom soup looked nice too, with chopped green onions sprinkled on it. Yet the stir-fried meat looked like a chunk of coal, and the overcooked vegetables shrank into a small pile...With a smile on his face, You Miao tasted it and said: ‘It’s a bit salty.’ Li Zhifeng tasted it too and had an anguished look on his face.

(*King of Turbulent Times*. Vol 2. Chapter 11. Trans. Mine)

ETHNIC OBSESSION WITH FARMING

In this section, I expound a preponderant national trait that contributes to the popularity of ‘farming writing’.

Chinese people, even city dwellers, are internationally famed for devotion to horticulture (People’s Daily 2019). The masses cultivate edible plants in yards and balconies both at home and during work and family visiting abroad (Yang 2010). Scientists and soldiers do so in deserts, islands, the Antarctic and the outer space (Li 2016, Wen 2016, Zhang et al 2020). Being both indispensable as well as convenient and easy to grow, vegetables act as the quintessential plants, as opposed to grain or fruit (People’s Daily 2018).

In terms of the motive behind the Chinese ethnicity’s fondness for horticulture, it lies in natural, historical and cultural factors.

First, being an enormous country, China is endowed with climatic and geographical diversity and complexity (Forster 2000). Therefore, there is a veritable cornucopia of indigenous and imported flora and fauna (Huang et al 2017), which functions as the prerequisite for Chinese nation’s strong attachment to agricultural practice (People’s Daily 2018, 2020).

Second, agriculture has been flourishing in Chinese civilisation for millennia (Cohen 2002, 2003, 2011), equipping the Chinese nation with a wealth of agronomic theories and comprehension regarding agro-ecological systems and techniques as well as commendable agricultural achievements and breakthroughs (Li 2001: 3). Ancient

China has witnessed the composition of approximately 600 agronomic treatises (Du 1982: 323, Zhang 2008). The earliest extant and most well-preserved treatise is unanimously acknowledged to be 齐民要术 [Qimin Yaoshu] ‘Essential Techniques for the People; Important Arts for the People’s Welfare’ that was composed by a court official 贾思勰 Jia Sixie towards the end of the Northern Wei (386-534 AD) dynasty (Wang 2019). This encyclopedic, pioneering masterpiece cumulates a whole plethora of agricultural practices along middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River in North China circa 1,500 years ago (Li 1969, Bray 2019), and it encompasses a profusion of fields such as agronomy, horticulture, sericulture, afforestation, husbandry, breeding, brewing, veterinary medicine and barren land improvement (Gong 2013, Gao 2014, Xiong 2017). This masterpiece has profoundly inspired and impinged upon agricultural research in the following periods (Shi 1958, Li 2017) and cultural exchanges of imperial China (Yang 2020). For vegetable planting only, it records 32 pieces of related techniques and 123 types of indigenous vegetables and those of extra-Chinese provenances (Li and Sun 2018).

Notwithstanding leading agronomic theories and practices, China is in a predicament of feeding 20% of the global population with only proximately 7% of the planet’s arable land (Zhang 2011). Pre-modern history was fraught with a quagmire of travails in the form of widespread famine caused by wars and natural disasters, rendering the Chinese nationality prudent and punctilious in terms of maintaining an abundant supply of food (Edgerton-Tarpley 2013, Gerritsen 2016, Platt 2016, Bickers 2016). Even in 1942-1943 prior to the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, a central province of Henan was plagued

by a severe famine that caused the decease of two to three million citizens (Mitter 2016, Edgerton-Tarpley 2017). Therefore, even in the contemporary context, such a complex about food has not been completely eliminated.

Third, China's immemorial agricultural tradition nurtures a culture venerating farming and horticulture. Throughout history, the cultivation, cooking and consumption of foodstuffs were extolled as the fundamental transition away from barbarism. Therefore, the Han ethnic group regarded themselves as being superior to surrounding ethnicities with rudimentary knowledge of agronomy and gastronomy (Forster 2000). The preponderant status of food and culinary prowess was elaborated in 周礼 [Zhou Li] 'Zhou Ritual' that was a compendium recounting the idealised administration of the Zhou (circa 1066-771 BC) dynasty during the 5th century BC (Knechtges 1986: 49, Boileau 1998). Therefore, farming served to encapsulate Chinese people's spiritual aspirations, exemplified by the educated elite and aristocracy in the imperial society, who deployed gardening as a leisurely way of self-cultivation (Xiang 2010, Li 2016, Ma 2017). Moreover, sovereigns and court officials were fully aware of the significance of agriculture, so they promulgated agrarian economy and ideology and enacted pro-agricultural policies, thereby consolidating governance and centralisation of authority (Zhao 2015, Wu et al 2019, Zhang and Guo 2019). As recorded in 礼记 [Li Ji] 'The Book of Rites' (5th-3rdc BC), emperors and feudal lords of the Zhou dynasty engaged in ploughing as a symbolic gesture and annual ritual, and this tradition had been carried forward until the demise of the imperial Qing (1644-1912) era (Wu 2014, Zhang 2019).

It is worth mentioning that the national passion for plant growing is not limited to more elderly generations. I propound that it can be embodied by a phenomenal game 开心农场 [Kaixin Nongchang] 'Happy Farm'. This web-based game permits players to virtually cultivate land, plant and harvest crops and flowers, breed poultry and livestock, as well as build houses (Feng 2013a: 40). 'Happy Farm' went viral among young netizens, with 23 million daily active users at the height of popularity in 2009 (Chen 2009, Willward 2012). Young online farmers have also transferred their zealotry in the cyberspace into real life (Yu and Ren 2010). Moreover, there is a prodigious amount of related discourses on Chinese social media, which is predominantly used by netizens aged under 35 (Lai 2020b). Take Weibo as an example, which is a micro-blogging platform with approximately 530 million monthly active users in March 2021 (Weibo 2021). With 78% of users aged below 39 (Lai 2021), Weibo abounds in posts and comments exchanging gardening experience and displaying harvests, and there is a list of dedicated 'super topic' virtual communities that accommodate topics and discussions appertaining to vegetable growing in cramped metropolitan flats. This postulation accords with the popularity of 'farming writing' on Weibo, where the 'super topic' tagged as 'farming writing' has attracted over 2.5 million visits. Although among China's netizens, approximately 54.8% of the entire cohort are below the age of 39 (China Internet Network Information Centre 2021), farming serves as a popular theme for online fiction.

Additionally, I posit that the rationale behind the popularity of 'farming writing' is also ascribed to its exoticism. By December 2020, Chinese netizens residing in cities have accounted

for 68.7% of the entire cohort (China Internet Network Information Centre 2021), so the ‘farming’ texts enhance their reading enjoyment by means of elaborating agricultural practices they are void of.

CONCLUSION

As a danmei romance enriched by ‘farming’ traits, *King* is featured by detail-enriched and punctilious depictions pertaining to agronomic knowledge and agricultural practices. Furthermore, discrepant from clichéd ‘feel-good writing’ with surrealistic storylines and a ‘golden finger’ device, *King* is reality-oriented, embodied by the protagonist’s predicaments and financial prudence, as well as his shortcomings that render him multi-faceted. In terms of the popularity of ‘farming writing’, it lies in a preponderant national trait, viz. the Chinese nation’s adoration of agriculture, by virtue of natural, historical and cultural reasons. To be more specific, China’s immemorial agricultural tradition has nurtured a culture promulgating farming, which can be encapsulated by young Chinese people’s fondness for virtual and real-life horticulture and its representation on social media. Additionally, the popularity of ‘farming’ works is also ascribed to its exoticism that enhances the reading enjoyment of web literature consumers residing in cities.

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