

**Active Fans Vs Passive Readers:
Remapping the Relationship between Authors,
Readers and Texts among Chinese ACG Fan Communities in the Cyber Age
To be Presented at Media in Transition 6, MIT (April 24-26, 2009)
Petra T.C. KWONG (loverain@gmail.com)
Hong Kong Baptist University**

In 1976, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber raised the study of girls' subculture in cultural studies. In their pioneer article ¹, they pointed out that girls were absent in the study of youth culture. Whenever girls do appear, they are either "uncritically reinforce[ed]" with the "stereotypical image of woman" or presented "fleetingly and marginally" ². By criticizing the "classic" subculture studies were indeed boys' culture that carried "masculine overtones" ³, McRobbie and Garber called for a new research area of girls' culture.

McRobbie and Garber's paper is a milestone for both cultural and feminist studies. In social science, it was Carl Gilligan's *In a different Voice* (1982) led to a new wave of cross disciplinary studies and experiments on the development of girls and women. As Mary Piper states in *Reviving Ophelia* (1995), Gillian's work was an "exception" as "almost all [psychological] theory about teenage had been authored by men such as Lawrence Kohlberg and E.H. Erikson, who had mainly studied boys" ⁴.

Yet, it is inadequate to depend on past experiences and theories to study female of today because they "were [are] living in a whole new world" ⁵. As Manuel Castells suggests: "we have now entered a new world of communication: the Internet Galaxy [...]. Core economic, social, political, and cultural activities throughout the planet are structured by and around the Internet..." ⁶.

According to Castells, in 1995, the first year of the widespread of the Internet, there were 16 million users within the network. By 2001, the number had already risen to over 400 million while reliable forecasts point to 2 billion by 2010 ⁷. Although computer and Internet culture seem to be male-dominated in the past, more and more female are going online. In the opening of an article entitled "Gurl Power", Rayman-Read declares: "On the Internet, the year 2000 is the year of female [...]. The number of women usage of Web surpassed men the first time" ⁸. In the first decade of

the 21st Century, teenage females and young women are actually the fastest growing group of Internet users⁹.

As Mary Celeste Kearney states in *Girls Make Media* (2006), “female youth became active participant in the digital revolution in the 1990s”¹⁰. They are no longer passive cultural consumers but cultural producers who engage in cultural production. Over the Internet, female fans and fan communities are active groups of Internet users who participate in the production of digital media.

Since the 2000, more studies have been conducted on the topic of female media production and online fandom. For instance, Sharon Mazzarella initiated a study on girls’ fan sites of an American pop idol Chad Michael Murray¹¹. In *Cyberspaces of their Own* (2005), Rhiannon Bury investigates how female fans of television series *The X-Files* and *Due South* negotiated their identity, sexuality, and gender through the writing of fan fictions and the creation of online communities¹². In the conclusion of a research on manga and anime fan sites created by college-age females who live in the United States, Kimberly Gregson shares similar observation that “girls are active participants in the online anime [and manga] fan culture”; girls fans of manga and anime “have moved their bedroom discussion to the Web”¹³.

While scholarly works have addressed topic of online female fandom and media production, existing studies mostly focus on the female in the west. To a large extent, female fandom and its related online media production are not unique to western culture. Asian females, especially teenage females and young women, participate actively in ACG (Animation [Anime], Comic [Manga] and Video Game) fan communities through the production of media artifacts such as fan sites, dōjin fictions and dōjin manga.

As a response to the lack of study on ACG fan cultures and media production of Asian teenage female, this paper will give an account on the ways that participatory forms of media such as blog, web site and forum serve as a platform for the publication, reception and interaction of fan artifacts within ACG fan communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. By studying the relationship between readership, authorship and texts within female ACG fandom in the cyber age, I will argue that the virtual and digital form of media artifacts cannot replace the substantial existence or the

printed form of fan artifacts. Instead of leading to a diminishing of substantial fan artifacts, virtual fan communities and digital tools actually have boomed the production and circulation of substantial fan artifacts especially fan fiction, fan gallery and fanzine.

In Asia, ACG fandom and its fan artifacts are closely related to *dōjin*. The term “*dōjin*” or “*doujin*” (どうじん)¹⁴, literally “same people”, originates from Japan, means group of people who shares an interest or a hobby. In English, *dōjin* could be translated into clique, coterie or circle. Derived from *dōjin*, “*dōjinshi*” (どうじんし)¹⁵ means collaborations, magazines or books that are published and funded by amateurs. In the past, *dōjin* usually refers to literary groups which create and publish non-commercial literary magazines. With the rise of anime and manga culture in Japan, *dōjin* is widely used within ACG fandom to refer derivative materials and media that are produced by fans.

Although *dōjin* and *dōjinshi* are Japanese terms, their kanji, i.e. Chinese characters that used in the modern Japanese logographic writing system, 同人 and 同人誌 are adapted into Chinese ACG fan culture in referring different kind of fan artifacts such as *dōjin* fiction and *dōjin* drawing. Since teenage female and young women are the main participants of *dōjin* culture, Chinese ACG fans also borrow the kanji 同人女 (どうじんおんな, *dōjinonna*)¹⁶ from Japanese in referring female who participates in the creation and consumption of *dōjin*.

Actually, *dōjin* creation may have original content and not necessarily be a derivative work created by fans. As *dōjin* is now an important in-group concept that sharing among Japanese and Chinese ACG fans communities, however, I will keep using the term *dōjin* in this paper in referring fan artifacts especially reading material such as fanzine, fan fiction and fan gallery.

The emergence of *dōjin* and *dōjinshi* in Chinese community can be traced back to the 1980’s when the *dōjin* manga of *Saint Seiya* (聖闘士星矢) was first published and translated in Taiwan by Da Ran Culture Enterprise as fillers¹⁷. Apart from *Saint Seiya*, *Captain Tsubasa* (キャプテン翼) is another ACG series that receives great popularity among Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1980’s. Apart from male audience, the young and good-looking male characters of these *shōnen* manga¹⁸ attracted large pool of female

fans as well. Though the earliest Chinese dōjin of these ACG works were not published by fans but commercial publisher, they inspired many ACG fans to start their own dōjin creation. On top of that, the population of these classic shōnen manga among teenage female also leads to rise of BL (Boy's Love) or Yaoi (やおい) dōjin¹⁹, which portrays homoromantic and homoerotic relationships between male characters, in female ACG fan communities. Today, BL dōjin fiction is indeed the most prevalent type of dōjin among female ACG fan communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China.

During the 1980's, magazines were the chief sources of ACG news and information for fans in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Besides, magazines were also the main ground for ACG fans to share their creation and interaction with one another. By sending letters, commentaries and their own dōjin works to magazines, ACG fans gradually established a community network that is linked by postal services in the pre-internet era. Yet, as homosexual relationship was still a social taboo at that time and majority of people in the society still had no understanding on Japanese ACG culture, let alone dōjin and BL, the creation and circulation of BL dōjin among female ACG fans were kept underground.

To a large extent, it was until the widespread dissemination of inexpensive and accessible digital tools in the 1990's, ACG fan communities and BL dōjin creation have developed quickly in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. During the early development of online ACG fandom, majority of fans were anonymous surfers who did not participate actively in cyber communities. Yet, more and more young female started to construct web site for popular ACG works of that time such as *Slam Dunk*, *YuYu Hakusho* (幽☆遊☆白書), *Rurouni Kenshin* (るろうに剣心 -明治剣客浪漫譚-), *Hoshin Engi* (封神演義), *Descendants of Darkness* (闇の末裔) and *The King Of Fighters* series. Though most of the ACG fan sites at the early to mid 90's were informative rather than interactive, the emergence of Internet was an important stepping stone to the popularization of BL dōjin within female ACG communities.

In contrast to fan site in which most of the fans play a passive role of anonymous surfers, discussion boards and online forums adopt a member system to encourage participation and interaction of visitors. Divided into various sections and managed by a

group of voluntary staffs, who are also ACG fans and member of that online community, forums based fan communities encourage members to launch discussion and give feedback by ranking and rewarding members according to their rate of activeness. In order to stir up a sense of peers and belonging, online ACG fan and dōjin communities would arrange activities and members gathering. As most of the fan site and online communities are hyperlinked and have registered in web ring and search engine, ACG fan can easily join a fan community by simple search and account registration procedure.

Since the 2000's more and more female ACG fans and BL dōjin creators have used blog as a platform to publish their own writings and drawing of ACG related works. As teenage females without web sit and forum management skills can also set up blogs to publish their articles and drawing on the Internet, blog is now a popular tool for female ACG fans to shares information and dōjin creation. When compare with other platform such as fan site and discussion forum, blog is relatively personal and this personal nature of blog makes it a secret garden of female ACG fans to express their passion and fantasy towards the ACG characters they love. As teenage females usually hyperlink their blogs with peers and close friends, blog is now a common place for dōjin creators to experiment BL creation and have peer-review on their works.

In my view, the Internet did play an important role in the development of ACG fan communities and the spreading of dōjin culture among teenage female and young women in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan. Yet, I believe that online communities and digital media creations are support rather than substitution to the real life interaction between ACG fans, so as to the substantial publication of dōjin materials.

Although one may arguer that the virtuality of Internet may hinder the building of substantial relationship between members of online communities, the Internet is an important stepping stone for the establishment of connection between ACG fans. As ACG fans and dōjin creators are drawn together by their attachment and love towards the same ACG work or character, their relationship actually bases on a substantial foundation of mutual understanding and shared belief.

To the young women of ACG fan communities, the value of Internet is the convenience that it brings to in-group communication, information exchange and peer support. Apart from providing ACG fans a space for information exchange, Internet serves as a powerful network that links up hundreds and hundreds passionate soul that are separated in real life by allowing them to give immediate feedback, support and encouragement to their peers in the communities, To a large extent, the connections between fans are essential in encouraging young female to participate in dōjin creation. This is because while online communities provide dōjin creators a place of receiving, publishing and archiving their work, they also offers their members a sense of secure that their works would be received and accepted with people who have mutual understanding and respect.

To an extent, ACG fans not necessarily have to participate in fan communities and involve in dōjin creation. Yet, fan sits, forums and discussion board are common places that individual fans would surf for information and news of their favorite ACG works. And, the fact that official released materials can never satisfy the great demand of fans gradually turns more and more ACG fans to dōjin materials. Instead of waiting for the officially released materials, ACG fans uses dōjin to compensate what the official channel unable to provide.

As a result, most of the Chinese ACG fans who began as a passive surfer would eventually become an active participants in an online community. And, this interactive basis of cyber communities gradually blurs the boundaries between readers, writers/creators and fans within the ACG fan communities. In an online fan community, a fan is not merely a passive media consumer, but also a media producer through their participation in dōjin creation.

Since the 1990's, most of the ACG fans sites and forums possess their own dōjin archive. In order to encourage member submission and participation, some ACG forums would arrange writing competition and activities during festival and special day such as the birthday of an ACG characters. Apart from that, ACG forums and online communities would also collect members' creation and publish dōjinshi for non-profit selling over the Internet.

As mentioned, the key elements that united ACG fans and dōjin creators are their passion and love towards an ACG character or work. Apart from playing an important role as the base for the reception and creation of dōjin material, cyber communities are indeed bridges that join ACG fans from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China.

Despite the political dilemma that hinders the contact and cultural exchange between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese, online communities enable teenage person to overcome the confinement of geographical and social separation that are imposed by historical and political factors. In the past, ACG fan communities and dōjin activities from Mainland China are mostly isolated from that of Taiwan and Hong Kong. With the available of various digital translation and converting tools between traditional and simplified Chinese characters, Chinese ACG fans from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China are now able to overcome the language barrier that caused by the difference in the usage of characters system. Though users of the two characters systems may still have difficulty in inputting one another's systems, more and more of ACG fans are capable in reading and understanding both systems. Today, most of the fan sites and fan communities contain members from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China. This increase in interaction between Chinese ACG members from different countries and geographical locations has no doubt enhances the exchange of Chinese dōjin materials and dōjin culture.

To female ACG fans, cyber communities are an important site for the selling and promotion of printed form of dōjin material especially BL fiction and manga. After a dōjinshi is published, its creators would release news and call for peer ordering within the online community that they belong to. As mentioned, blog is now a popular place for teenage women to release their BL dōjin, many established dōjin creators and dōjin groups have started using blog to promote and sell their latest works. Apart from news on dōjinshi, ACG fans would exchange information of dōjin fairs and conventions in online communities as well. While dōjin creators with publication would exhibit and sell their work in dōjin fair, individual ACG fans would also join with their peers in online communities to visit dōjin fair in the city near by. Sometimes, members of online communities would also join as a group to exhibit their dōjin anthology in dōjin fair.

With the increase in popularity of reading and writing of BL dōjin, the publication of BL dōjinshi is common among Chinese teenage female. Apart from dōjin archives in fan sites, forums and discussion boards, web rings and search engines for BL dōjin materials of specific ACG series have also been set up. Despite Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China do have different culture in publishing dōjinshi and arranging dōjin fair, the enormous network behind online fan communities makes possible the cooperation between ACG fans and dōjin creators who live in different places.

In 2007, Tian Chuang Lian Meng (天窗聯盟)²⁰, the first Chinese dōjinshi promotion alliance that is joined by dōjin groups from Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan, was launched. Although residents from Mainland China may not be able to travel to Taiwan to participate and visit dōjin fair there or vice versa, through the registration and classification system of Tian Chuang, Chinese ACG fans and dōjin lovers from the different part of the world now get a shared platform to interact and exchange news on dōjinshi and dōjin events. With the use of blog, discussion forum and e-commerce system such as PayPal and Taobao (淘寶網), cross border ordering and consignment of dōjinshi between the Taiwan Strait are now possible.

In my view, the blooming of Chinese dōjinshi is undeniably contributed by the flourishing of ACG fan communities in the 1990's and the 2000's. It is true that the publication of dōjinshi is a traditional fan culture that exists before the arrival of cyber era, the rise of Internet community and digital writing, however, do not replace the real life interaction of ACG fans. Though hypertexts and digital fictions have served as a chief media for the releasing and circulating of dōjin over the Internet, status and role of “printed text” in Chinese ACG fandom do not diminish.

Virtual community and digital media are important vehicles for ACG fans to facilitate the process of communication and dōjin creation, the production of digital form of dōjin, however, is just a means but not an ends. Despite the Internet provides us with much convenient, the virtual world is just a temporarily place for ACG fans to build up connection and information network. No matter how large the scale an ACG fandom was, it could not escape the final destiny of down falling. One of the examples is the Slam Dunk fandom and dōjin heat that swept Hong Kong, Mainland China and

Taiwan in the 1990's.

The key factor that leads to the downfall of an ACG fandom is simply the passage of time. The popularity of an ACG work diminishes within one or two years after the series come to an end. Yet, an ACG fan community could sustain several years by solely maintaining the dōjin archive after the end of the series. As the web masters or administrators of ACG communities are mainly high school or undergraduate students while the creators of dōjin are usually young people from teenage to early adulthood, most of the online ACG fan communities and dōjin archive eventually stop running and disappear after last few die-hard fans move into the busy adult life and leave the world of ACG.

More importantly, the seems to be unlimited and timeless digital world is not really infinite and eternal. Internet and all the related services from web site hosting, “space” provision to servers’ maintenance are indeed business run by businessmen. As female ACG fans and dōjin creators are mostly teenage person who does not have stable income sources, the operation of their online communities largely relies on free hosting services. Although there are many free space e.g. Nesth, Geocities and Yam and freeware such as Discuz! for hosting website, discussion forums and blog over the Internet, theses online hosting services do not provide any guarantee to their users. As a result, there are often situation that domains of online ACG communities being shut down without a notice or entire database of an online community being removed without a warning. So, in order to sustain the in-group kinship among the community as well as to preserve the memory of their collective devotion, ACG fans and dōjin creators are devoted to the production of printed dōjin materials.

Although the world of ACG and their characters would only exist in imagination and dream, with love, enthusiasm and belief, dōjin creators bring the non-existed world into reality. To the creators of dōjin, “printed text” not only represents the actualization of substantial existence of a world that only exists in dream and fantasy, but also represents a mark of passion and devotion of youth. As the chief editor of *The Age of Innocence*, an anthology of Chinese fan fictions on *Slam Dunk*, wrote: “even if my love to SD [Slam Dunk] doomed to vanish, I still want to leave a mark of this glorious

memory of youth”²¹, the production of substantial fan artifacts is indeed an evidence of love and devotion of fans towards the ACG work they love. It is the will of ACG fans to do something for the works and characters they love that drive them to create dōjin and publish their dōjin in printed form.

When dōjinshi of newly popularized ACG works is published and open for sell in dōjin fair, numerous online dōjin and their digital domains disappear at the same time. One may forget the hours that she spent in front of the computer writing, reading, searching and discussing dōjin. Links of hypertext may disappear. Servers and hard discs may break down. Internet may be disconnected. A dōjinshi may mean nothing to outsiders who never come across with specific ACG works. However, to those who understand the meaning and afford behind that timeless memory of youth, what a dōjinshi represents is an epoch in life.

Notes

1. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Barber, “Girls and Subcultures,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005).
2. Ibid., 12.
3. Ibid., 14.
4. Mary Bray Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 35.
5. Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.
6. Ibid.,3.
7. Ibid.,3.
8. Alyssa Rayman-Read, “Gurl Power,” *The American Prospect*, January 29, 2001, 8.
9. Sharon R Mazzarella, introduction to *Girl wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 2.
10. Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media*,(New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
11. See, Sharon R Mazzarella, “Claiming a Space: The Cultural Economy of Teen Girl Fandom on the Web,” in *Girl wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of*

- Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 141-160.
12. See, Rhiannon Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
 13. Kimberly S. Gregson, "What if the Lead Character Looks Like Me?: Girls Fans of Shoujo Anime and their Web Sites," in *Girl wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity*, ed Sharon R. Mazzarella (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 137.
 14. See, Sha Hu Lu Tong Meng [傻呼嚕同盟], *Cosplay · Tong Ren Zhi Zhi Bi Mi Hua Yuan* [Cosplay · 同人誌之秘密花園] (The Secret Garden of Dōjinshi & Cosplay) (Taipei: Da Kuai Wen Hua, 2003), 130.
 15. See, *Ibid.*, 132.
 16. See, *Ibid.*, 133.
 17. See, *Ibid.*, 132-133.
 18. Comics which target teenage male readership in marketing strategies, yet, they are often popular among teenage female as well. See, Sha Hu Lu Tong Meng [傻呼嚕同盟], *Shao Nu Mo Jing Di Shi Jie* [少女魔鏡中的世界] (The World in the Magical Mirror of Teenage Girls) (Taipei: Da Kuai Wen Hua, 2003), 19 -20.
 19. See, Paul Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Laurence King, 2004), 81.
 20. See, *Tian Chuang Lian Meng: Zhong Wen Tong Ren Zhi Tui Guang Lian Meng* [天窗聯盟: 中文同人誌推廣聯盟] (Tian Chuang Alliance: Chinese Dōjinshi Promotion Alliance), <http://doujinring.warmsoil.com/> (accessed 15 April, 2009).
 21. Xiao Shi [小室], preface to *Chun Zhen Nian Dai: Jing Xuan Guan Gao Dan Mei Xiao Shui Tong Ren Zhi* [純真年代：精選灌高耽美小說同人志] (*Age of Innocence: Selected Slam Dunk's BL Dōjin Fictions Dōjinshi*), ed. Xiao Shi et al. (Beijing: n.p., 2002), N. pag.