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New Horror as Feeling:

Space, Subjectivity, and the Social in Chinese Digital Fiction

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in East Asian Studies

by

Chu Chu

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

New Horror as Feeling:
Space, Subjectivity, and the Social in Chinese Digital Fiction

by

Chu Chu

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Michael Sanford Berry, Chair

This thesis examines “new horror” as an emergent affective formation in contemporary Chinese digital fiction and online popular narratives. Rather than treating it as a continuation of traditional horror narratives taken up by ghosts, supernatural beings, or graphic violence, this thesis argues that new horror legitimizes a suppressed genre long stigmatized by discourses of sensory excess and superstition through its entanglement with fantasies of space. By examining adjacent popular genres, including Backrooms fiction, rule-based weird fiction, and Infinite

Flow novels, this thesis attempts to answer how these writing forms and fantasies of space refract social realities that official discourse cannot accommodate. New horror inaugurates what this thesis calls a mixture of feelings, a diffuse feeling without a fixed object, folding together anxiety, nostalgia, longing, and dread into a shared emotional grammar shaped by spatial experience and rules, entangled with discussions of gender and subjectivity. In so doing, this thesis suggests that capturing horror as a negative, unspecified affect offers visibility into transformations in social consciousness within contemporary Chinese youth culture that remain incomprehensible, opening alternative ways of imagining the present and futurities.

The thesis of Chu Chu is approved.

Andrea S Goldman

Yinghui Wu

Michael Sanford Berry, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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It feels almost surreal to be writing this thesis as a farewell to my academic path, when I crossed my own Rubicon to come to UCLA only two years ago, still full of fascinations with theory. Susan Sontag once wrote in her diary that “words have their own firmness, and that they may conceal the flabbiness of the mind that conceived.” I was once obsessed with pursuing that “firmness” through the writing. But I gradually realized why she also said: “all writing is, in some sense, a potential fraud.” A compelling argument does not translate directly into rightness. What has happened around me and in the world these years made me realize that there are things—feelings or stances—far more important than the arguments assembled in the writing. I start feeling compelled to discern what is flimsy, or even blank in the mind: not what people want others to know they laugh or cry for, but simply what they laugh or cry for. The study of feeling, in one sense, marks the beginning of this new direction of thought, and alongside it, the ending of my academic writing.

My deepest gratitude goes first to my committee. I thank my chair, Prof. Michael Berry, whose wide expertise turned my eyes toward popular culture and online literature. This project would not have been possible without his openness to the idea, and I also benefited from our conversations during office hours. Prof. Yinghui Wu, despite a demanding schedule, discussed premodern Chinese horror with me and offered a wealth of related scholarship. And Prof. Andrea S. Goldman, the kindest and most dedicated professor ever known, offered encouragement for my early and often naive ideas at every turn, along with exquisite proofreading and thorough, timely comments.

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Finally, I thank my parents, to whom this thesis is dedicated, who, even without understanding what I study or what I pursue, have supported and endured me through all my days with unconditional love. This thesis grew from a discovery about feeling. Love for a thing or an *-ism* does not last forever; that is, what one once loved can become unrecognizable, even exploitative, thus sometimes transforming into horror. But horror does not necessarily refer to weakness or negativity but rather to a deeper understanding. I then began turning toward the study of horror, though in hindsight it may have drifted from my original inquiry into feeling and become more like a cultural survey. All the same, I appreciate what and all who shaped this thesis, with all of my heart.

Introduction

On May 12, 2019, a disquieting image first appeared on *4chan*, an anonymous English-language imageboard forum, showing a monotonous yellow-hued empty expanse where walls clad in tacky wallpaper fractured space into a labyrinth of disjointed pieces, all shrouded under the dim glow from overhead fluorescents (Figure 1). This image depicting an unidentifiable location soon sparked a wave of resonance, conceptualized by an anonymous user as the “*Backrooms*,” adding on some narrative associations with sensory details such as “maddening hues,” “the endless buzz of fluorescent lights,” and “the stale stench of moist carpets,” all of which amplify an unspecified unease.¹ Drawing on the gaming term *noclip*, it describes an unsettling occurrence where one slips out of reality and into a liminal space. Imagine Harry Potter dashing through the wall to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, but eerily trapped within the brick walls rather than entering an expected magical world; or a video game avatar trapped between scenarios due to a bug, where rebooting fails and movement becomes impossible, stranded in an infinite, unknown space. Any encounter becomes possible in such a place. They are the feelings of *Backrooms*.

¹ A. Lloyd, “The Backrooms: How a Creepy Office Photo Became an Internet Bogeyman,” *Vice*, 29 March 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dga98/is-the-backrooms-real>.



Figure 1. A Yellow Room, the origin of The Backrooms

Not limited to a single image and its accompanying imaginary, the *Backrooms* phenomenon soon expanded across multiple media forms on the internet, ranging from derivative horror-related online urban legends and a series of pseudo-documentaries on YouTube to the 2023 video game *The Exit 8*, as well as subsequent horror film adaptations including *Backrooms* (2026) directed by Kane Parsons, and literary productions on platforms such as *The Backrooms Wikidot* and *The Backrooms Wiki Fandom*. These developments mark the global phenomenon of a liminal space aesthetic. The concept of liminality originated as an anthropological term. Arnold van Gennep defined liminality as the transitional stage within ritual processes: an actual middle passage through a threshold during which the initiate undergoes a transformation of state.² Victor Turner later expanded the concept to emphasize ambiguity in self-perception and the instability of social boundaries, describing liminality as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action.³ Although liminality has

² Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, intro. Solon T. Kimball (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 21.

³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), pp. 95, 167.

since been reinterpreted and retheorized across different disciplines, contemporary Backrooms culture tends to literalize the concept as a physical and transitional space closely associated with psychological horror. Definitions of the Backrooms, therefore, remain deliberately loose: alternate dimensions, dreamscapes, enclosed interiors, subways, underground passageways, corridors, elevators, offices, and other exceptions to ordinary reality and everyday life may all fall within its scope. Their shared characteristics are abandoned sites, full of suspension, disorientation, and an openness toward contingency.

Despite the apparent universality of liminal aesthetics, the appeal of the Backrooms is also shaped by regional and cultural specificity. Chinese Backrooms, for instance, often emerge from historically recognizable spaces such as urban-rural transitional zones, residences decorated in older Chinese domestic styles, rural *siheyuan* (courtyard houses) marked by traces of collective living, residential compounds from the turn of the millennium, and underground shopping malls. These spaces are deeply entangled with historical memory and social reality. Based on imaginative engagements with such environments, Chinese Backrooms culture has generated various forms of contemporary *guaitan* 怪谈 (weird) literature. These ghostly texts themselves function as reflections on spatial transformation, collective memory, and the affective uncertainties embedded within everyday life.

This thesis goes beyond introducing the aesthetic style of Backrooms culture. By

placing the horror aesthetics of the Backrooms at the beginning of this discussion, I seek to introduce a broad outline for understanding the horror genre alongside and the conceptual framework of this project. I argue that horror has increasingly departed from predetermined forms traditionally associated with ghosts, monsters, and supernatural entities, evolving instead into a more diffuse affective and spatial condition. When I refer to this emerging form of horror culture, I focus specifically on its literary manifestations and narrative forms. Before engaging with these textual readings, it is necessary to first examine horror and fear and why they matter as objects of this study.

I. Why Horror Matters

When horror descends, fear, in a generic mode of emotional processing, seizes us in an aggressive way: when specific words and images are received and processed by consciousness into intelligible threats or loathing, the body responds. Goosebumps may rise; minute tremors crawl along the nerve endings, accompanied by physiological aberrations of racing heartbeats, sweat, perhaps tears. The multifarious sensations make the subject aware of their own existence and the connection between the self and the external. Fear brings an unusual moment in which anachronic feelings capture repressed emotions and perceptions of the external.

How does this negative emotional experience of fear explain the paradoxical attraction of horror? For Susan Feagin, while fear is a painful negative emotion, it can function as an

enjoyable emotional experience.⁴ Noel Carroll, however, objects to this positive view of fear, arguing that the feeling remains inherently uncomfortable (disgust, for example). Carroll defines horror as a cognitive state triggered by beings that are “outside our standing conceptual schemes,” suggesting our attraction lies in our curiosity toward these threatening beings.⁵ Building on these discussions, Katerina Bantinaki offers a hedonic integrationist account proposing that horror is experienced through a positive attitudinal account of enjoyment, regardless of whether the emotion itself is pleasant or unpleasant. In this sense, the discussion moves beyond the futile questioning of fear as a subjective feeling.⁶ Whether fear itself is pleasurable becomes secondary; what matters is the return to the object of horror itself. Therefore, my core argument does not stay at the level of fear as a private emotion, instead focusing on the “sense of horror” as a localized aesthetic and cultural phenomenon.

A sense of horror implies a collective feeling and sociality. Drawing on Raymond Williams’s concept of structures of feeling, horror can be seen as a lived social experience *in solution*—a collective emotion that is still in the process of generating and has not yet precipitated into a fixed form, thereby creating a specific sense of a social period.⁷ The sense of horror is not just the human emotion of fear; it loosely encompasses emotions, opinions, and ideologies, enabling an exploration of human ontological boundaries and social power

⁴ Susan L. Feagin, “Monsters, Disgust and Fascination,” *Philosophical Studies* 65.1/2 (1992): 81.

⁵ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 184.

⁶ Katerina Bantinaki, “The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a Positive Emotion,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70.4 (2012): 383–92.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 129–35. He argues that the social cannot be reduced to fixed forms, given the complexities, uncertainties, experienced tension shifts, and all forms of unevenness and confusion. His term, “the structure of feeling,” distinct from world-view or ideology, captures social experiences that are still “in process/in solution” and have not been recognized into the institutions or structure in the social present. He specifically mentions that social consciousness should be examined in the full sense, “preventing that extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced.” The linkages to the deep starting point might be helpful.

struggles. Texts circulated and consumed on digital platforms reflect the emotional demands of contemporary readers as a popular sub-literary genre. An analysis of these structures of feeling in horror helps capture collective emotions that official narratives often miss, providing a glimpse into the cultural sensibilities and continuous social experiences of this generation. In other words, through the interaction of internet platforms and sub-literature, horror works both map and shape the collective anxiety of an era. Next, I will review the development of Chinese horror, illustrating the specific practice of the structure of feeling in the unique social context of China.

II. A Brief Overview: Chinese Horror

Defining horror is daunting. Considering the rootlessness of horror, this section does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of the origins and development of Chinese horror, but rather to outline its shifting manifestations across different historical periods. In doing so, it suggests that contemporary Chinese horror discourse is marked by cultural hybridity. Taking a straightforward view of horror literature as the depiction of fear toward unknowable things, which breaks the boundaries of human cognition, Chinese horror can be traced back to *zhiguai* 志怪 (stories of the strange) fiction. In *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (*Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe*) 中国小说史略, Lu Xun offers a chronological and systematic overview of the *zhiguai* tradition:

Shamanism was widespread in ancient China and during the Chin and Han dynasties there was much talk of spirits and saints, while the end of the Han dynasty saw a great

increase in shaman worship so that superstition was rife. Then Hinayana Buddhism came to China to spread by degrees. Since these various religions had much to say about spirits and miracles, the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries produced many works dealing with the supernatural. Some were written by scholars, others by religious devotees. Though the scholars differed from the professed Buddhists and [D]aoists whose aim was to spread their religion, they were not writing fiction either. The men of that age believed that although the ways of mortals were not those of spirits, none the less spirits existed. So they recorded these tales of the supernatural in the same way as anecdotes about men and women, not viewing the former as fiction and the latter as fact.

中国本信巫，秦汉以来，神仙之说盛行，汉末又大畅巫风，而鬼道愈炽；会小乘佛教亦入中土，渐见流传。凡此，皆张皇鬼神，称道灵异，故自晋迄隋，特多鬼神志怪之书。其书有出于文人者，有出于教徒者。文人之作，虽非如释道二家，意在自神其教，然亦非有意为小说，盖当时以为幽明虽殊途，而人鬼乃皆实有，故其叙述异事，与记载人间常事，自视固无诚妄之别矣。⁸

Consequently, the cultural foundation of indigenous Chinese *zhiguai* fiction was built upon a belief in deities, sorcery, immortals, and the supernatural, which was further strengthened by social religious superstitions and the prevalence of foreign Buddhism and Daoism during periods of social upheaval. Notably, the supernatural phenomena in *zhiguai* narratives were not necessarily regarded as fictional inventions; instead, ghosts and strange occurrences were often

⁸ Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中国小说史略 (Beijing: Zhongguo shuji chubanshe, 2016), p. 32; Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 42.

recorded as reality. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, themes of divination, dreams, spirits, ghosts, and karmic retribution were not intended to conjure up horror. As Robert Ford Campany argues, anomalies serve to reveal a presupposed ordered world.⁹ Citing the Tang Dynasty *biji* 笔记 (casual jottings) collection of anecdotes, *Youyang zazu* 酉阳杂俎, Zhang suggests that ghost narratives merely reflected the poetic Tang philosophy on life and death.¹⁰ These *zhiguai* traditions occupy an ambiguous zone of horror literature because emotion does not seem to occupy a central position.

In the late imperial period, *zhiguai* fiction, such as *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异, *Zi buyu* 子不语, and *Yuewei caotang biji* 阅微草堂笔记, took a step further into the realm of individual emotion. These stories include unsettling elements of body horror, such as Chinese zombies and decapitation, alongside depictions of non-human creatures like spirits and fox-fairies. Regarding the latter, the prevailing narrative was often one of romance rather than intimidation. Chiang explains this deviation from horror by arguing that these works were collected, edited, and deliberately presented to reveal the author's construction of self-identity, rather than serving as mere records of collective culture.¹¹ Meanwhile, the emotions within these *zhiguai* narratives must be viewed through two key conflicts: the tension between Confucian ritual and late imperial discourse, and the clash between Manchu autocracy and the heightened self-awareness of Qing literati.¹² In other words, the sense of the macabre or creepy in parts of

⁹ Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 238.

¹⁰ Zhang Qianru 张倩茹, "Youyang zazu zhong gui de xingxiang tanjiu: jian lun Tangdai gui xinyang" 《酉阳杂俎》中鬼的形象探究——兼论唐代鬼信仰, *Hebei keji shifan xueyuan xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 河北科技师范学院学报(社会科学版) 18.3 (2019): 54–58.

¹¹ Sing-Chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China*, vol. 67 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 1–2.

¹² Chiang, *Collecting the Self*, p. 246.

zhiguai may stem from social instability.¹³ For instance, in “The Rakshas and the Sea Market” (Luosha haishi) 罗刹海市, the total inversion of beauty and ugliness, along with the complete reversal of values, reflects a profound disillusionment with unstable social structures and the imperial examination system.¹⁴ In short, these horror narratives exist as a form of inner projection.

The encyclopedic *zhiguai* narratives mentioned above provided a rich reservoir of traditional horror for 20th-century Hong Kong horror cinema and, later, online horror literature. A common sense of horror stems from the conflict between modern moral values and the socio-cultural ethics of historical periods. For example, Cantonese films from the 1950s demonstrate the combination of horror conventions with the image of female ghosts to discuss the liberation of social values regarding arranged marriages.¹⁵ In short, both *zhiguai* narratives and the horror tropes of Hong Kong cinema provided a template for horror in the new millennium, specifically the horror and trauma arising from the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar within traditional culture and old moralities. In contrast, early Mainland Chinese horror films seemed less dependent on the *zhiguai* tradition. Ma-Xu Weibang’s *Song at Midnight* 夜半歌声 (1937) confirms this; its portrayal of ghosts and monsters, combined with the geometric construction of desolate and detached spatial environments, suggests a stronger overlap with Western Gothic horror. In Gothic literature, horror is a byproduct of capitalism, often exposing social violence and moral decay through monsters and degenerate characters.¹⁶ As Judith Halberstam argues,

¹³ By specifying “parts of *zhiguai*,” I intend this as a qualified claim. For instance, Ji Xiaolan lived during a stable Qing period yet still produced *zhiguai* works.

¹⁴ Pu Songling 蒲松龄, *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异, trans. Sun Tonghai 孙通海 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), pp. 907–8.

¹⁵ *Hong Kong Horror Cinema*, ed. Gary Bettinson and Daniel Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 9–10.

¹⁶ Erin Yu-Tien Huang, “Capital’s Subjects: Chinese Cinemas, Urban Horror, and the Limits of Visibility” (PhD

the monster in Gothic literature “condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie in one body.”¹⁷ While *Song at Midnight* appears to appropriate this culture, it actually reflects the revolutionary leftist politics of China at the time. As Erin Huang suggests, the spatial setting of countryside and city points toward the history of peasant uprisings in the communist revolution.¹⁸ This example inspires my research on contemporary internet horror narratives: even though they inherit a mixture of Chinese traditions and Western horror influences, they remain worthy of study as a subject due to their close connection with contemporary social realities.

Following these brief remarks on old horror conventions, I will now turn to the discontinuous development of horror fiction within the digital spaces of Mainland China in the new millennium. On April 3, 2001, the Lotus Ghost Stories (*Lianpeng guihua* 莲蓬鬼话) forum on Tianya 天涯 Community, one of China’s earliest thrill and mystery literature hubs, was launched. It became one of the most active sections of the site, driving the maturity of the tomb-robbing and horror-mystery genres.¹⁹ However, horror themes reside in an ambiguous marginal zone. While censorship of internet literature in Mainland China primarily targets explicit pornography, horror is easily caught in crackdowns on “harmful information” such as gore, violence, and vulgarity. Folk horror, involving spells and sorcery, is often accused of promoting feudal superstition, which contradicts the spirit of modern rational science. Furthermore, excessive depictions of visceral physical detail, criminal processes, and

diss., University of California, Irvine, 2012), pp. 27–28.

¹⁷ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁸ Huang, “Capital’s Abjects,” p. 32.

¹⁹ Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Li Qiang 李强, eds., *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue biannian jianzhi* 中国网络文学编年简史 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2023), p. 38.

physiological pain are seen as triggers for negative sensory stimulation. For instance, censorship prohibits negative portrayals of suicide.²⁰

Increasingly tightened censorship policies have resulted in horror literature being unable to exist as an independent genre in the public eye. Nevertheless, horror has not entirely vanished from contemporary web literature; instead, horror elements survive in a fragmented form, parasitically embedded within adjacent genres such as Creepypastas/weird (*guaitan*) literature, short and innovative horror stories that circulate rapidly across digital platforms, and Infinite Flow (*wuxianliu*) 无限流 narratives, a more expansive, episodic, and gamified form of web fiction in which protagonists are repeatedly transported into discrete worlds, completing missions and avoiding death in each before moving on to the next.. In this thesis, I define these as “a new horror,” which did not exist in the pre-given forms mentioned earlier, yet they do not entirely abandon those traditions. Notably, this “new horror” emerges in a new, commercialized, and formulaic format that aligns with the emotional demands of contemporary web literature consumers. Whether it is Backrooms creepypasta, Rule-based horror (*guize guaitan*) 规则怪谈, or infinite flow novels, these forms exist as seemingly independent yet interrelated reflections of contemporary social reality. Here, horror is not a thrill or a sensory jolt, but rather a mundane, out-of-place, and pervasive feeling integrated into daily life. In this sense, what I call “new horror” is not horror in any single sense. It is better understood as a mixture of feelings, where fear is entangled with nostalgia, anxiety and even longing. The horror is inseparable from these other feelings, giving these texts their particular affective force and their

²⁰ Shandi 珊迪, “Wangwen zhengai you chu xinzhaio, ‘xian zisha ling’ beihou luoji hezai?” 网文整改又出新招, “限自杀令” 背后逻辑何在?, Maoying wenyu 猫影文娱, Zhihu 知乎, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/158796622>.

capacity to reflect contemporary Chinese social experience.

III. Chapter Layout

As previously noted, the study of “new horror” would not be possible without examining the affective structures and narrative mechanisms of popular horror discourse within contemporary Chinese digital platforms. This thesis thus examines precisely how these horror texts are produced and perceived, and how they reflect contemporary Chinese social reality and cultural conditions. In Chapter One, I focus on *Backrooms* creepypasta, often regarded as a marginal or subcultural form of horror literature, as well as the *Zoo Rule Horror* 动物园规则怪谈, a phenomenal rule-based horror that emerged from Chinese internet culture. These participatory horror narratives, I argue, fundamentally transform the traditionally unidirectional power relations embedded within the affective structure of horror fiction, thereby making possible more collective and shared forms of fear that reflect the social unconscious. The authority to produce horror is no longer monopolized by the author alone, but is distributed across collective processes of interpretation and participation. Distinct from conventional body-centered supernatural horror, these narratives generate fear through sensitivity to spatial environments, and through questioning forms of rationality and social rules that are usually taken for granted.

Chapter Two turns to Infinite Flow Novels (IF Novels), a popular subgenre that has developed in relation to rule-based horror narratives. I see this genre as a textual field that is constantly negotiating with, and at times resisting, the regulatory censorship shaped by scientific rationalist discourse in contemporary China. This chapter addresses the issues of

gender and affect in infinite flow fiction through comparisons between Zhhtty's *The Infinite Terror* (*Wuxian kongbu*) 无限恐怖 and the *danmei* 耽美 IF horror novel *Huabu* (*Painting Terror*) 画怖, alongside brief references to other related *danmei* texts. These two works are respectively regarded as foundational texts of *nanpin* (or male-oriented) 男频 infinite-flow horror and as one of the most representative works within the *danmei* horror subgenre, which is primarily read by female audiences. By comparing masculine survival-oriented narratives with the emphasis on intimacy and emotional dependency in *danmei* (female-oriented) horror, I examine the gendering of horror within Chinese online literature. Also, through analyzing reader reception and responses, I question the seeming solidity of the binary between male-category (*nanpin*) 男频 / female-category (*nüpin*) 女频 in Chinese internet literature. Taking *Huabu* as a case study, I further examine how horror is constructed from the perspectives of time and space, while also engaging with broader political concerns such as sexuality, environmental ethics, and animal protection. I argue that these narratives not only reveal a gendered understanding of horror and intimacy by female authors, but also expose their ambitions to engage in negotiations over discursive authority and cultural participation within patriarchal structures.

More broadly, the “new horror” literature emerging in the digital age challenges conventional understandings of horror. Contemporary horror is no longer produced solely through ghosts, monsters, or supernatural entities, although these figures have not faded away. Instead, horror increasingly becomes a sense generated through spatial configurations and cues embedded in everyday life. This individual sense of unease is further dispersed across digital platforms, becoming a collective sense that is out of sync with mainstream social discourse,

thereby opening an alternative way of understanding engaging with the instability of modern subjectivity under ideological and institutional pressure, and the erosion of social trust amid rapid modernization in contemporary Chinese digital culture. Through explaining those visible or invisible senses, I hope to provide a beginning to the dialogue between horror aesthetics, spatial theory, and gender theory in contemporary Chinese online literature.

Chapter 1: Chinese Creepypasta Fantasy on Digital Platforms

In this chapter, I move freely between the terms “creepypasta,” “weird literature,” and “guaitan.”

In the age of networked culture, new vocabularies emerge faster than their definitions can stabilize, and the boundaries between these terms remain loose and overlapping at times. Given this, my aim is not to settle on a single definition that excludes the rest, but to work across them.

That said, some clarification is useful. Creepypasta, deriving from the digital practice of “copypasta,” whose content is copied and pasted across platforms, signals an inseparable connection to digital circulation. As an apt metaphor, the “pasta” itself describes spread and multiplication. In general, creepypasta refers to short horror-related texts, especially in the form of pieces of text, sometimes accompanied by images or video, that deal in the supernatural and urban legends. These texts disguise themselves as real accounts of things that could actually happen, thereby amplifying the sense of horror through fictionalizing something plausible.¹

By contrast, using “weird literature” or “New Weird” more readily calls to mind a specific genre trajectory in Western literary history: the “old” weird, usually speculative fiction with its romanticized place, and the New Weird, which VanderMeer defines as a more transgressive horror that is conscious of the modern world by choosing realistic world models.² By invoking “weird literature,” I want to emphasize the possibility of bringing these texts into the domain of literary studies, rather than treating them solely as objects of internet communication research. “Guaitan,” a borrowing from the Japanese “kaidan,” literally means “strange tale” and carries connotations of folklore horror involving ghosts, spirits, and monsters with tangible

¹ Line Henriksen, “‘Spread the Word’: Creepypasta, Hauntology, and an Ethics of the Curse,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87.1 (2018): 267.

² *The New Weird*, ed. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008), p. xvi.

forms. Yet in contemporary Chinese usage, as in “*guize guaitan*” (rule-based strange tales), the term is used to evoke horror and strangeness without necessarily invoking supernatural entities. Given all of these reasons, no single term captures exactly what I mean. Each carries association that partially fit and partially deviate.

There are many subgenres within the online creepypasta category, such as the SCP Foundation, the Backrooms, and rule-based horror, etc., though they are not identical in their concerns. The SCP Foundation is a collaborative shared-world fiction predating the Backrooms, beginning on Wikidot in 2008.³ It centers on a clandestine organization that records, contains, and protects against supernatural phenomena and anomalous entities. Rather than cataloging threatening physical beings, the Backrooms, although it shares a similar collaborative structure, emphasizes a different spatial perspective, conjuring environments conspicuously devoid of human presence and activity.⁴ Therefore, this thesis selectively focuses on two subgenres whose narratives are bound, directly or indirectly, to questions of space: the Backrooms, which originated in Western internet culture and was subsequently taken up and transformed by Chinese creators; and rule-based horror, which was invented within Chinese online culture and later spread to platforms such as Reddit, which can be seen as a generative prototype for longer narrative forms, most notably the infinite flow novel, which is the subject of Chapter Two.

Existing scholarship has tended to focus on the liminal space aesthetics of the Backrooms phenomenon, though from several angles. Wiggins offers a communication studies analysis of Kane Parsons’s Backrooms videos, reading the phenomenon as a digital chronotope through

³ *SCP Foundation* accessed 20 May 2026, <https://scp-wiki.wikidot.com/>.

⁴ Bradley E. Wiggins, “The Backrooms and Liminal Spaces: Explorations of a Digital Urban Legend,” *New Media & Society* 27.8 (2025): 4730.

narratological and semiotic frameworks.⁵ Cho and Underberg-Goode situate the Backrooms within a longer literature tradition of haunted space narratives, tracing the evolution of spatial obsession from oral folklore to Gothic fiction and gaming, and read the genre's popularity as an outlet for collective grief during the Covid era.⁶ Stephen, drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks, analyzes how play and dream operate within the liminal space of the Backrooms and how the genre manifests collective unconscious processes through shared meaning-making.⁷ Tanni's book-length study devotes a chapter to the Backrooms, examining its liminal space aesthetics and describing its lore as the core of a mushrooming subcultural narrative.⁸ Overall, for the Backrooms specifically, two notable gaps exist. First, the fictional writing produced within these communities has received little attention compared to other visual and media forms such as images or video content. In addition, the creation of Chinese-language Backrooms remains almost entirely outside the scope of existing research. For rule-based horror, scholarship is similarly limited; only one Chinese-language study by Wang Xin has effectively approached the genre through the lens of rules and social cybernetics.⁹

This chapter addresses these gaps through two sections. Section One focuses on the Backrooms, centering on the Chinese Backrooms writing community on Wikidot and Fandom. Rather than treating it as a media phenomenon, I read its fictional writing as a literary form with a specific collective mechanism. Taking a well-known work called *Nangang City* 南港

⁵ Wiggins, "The Backrooms and Liminal Spaces," pp. 4729-47.

⁶ Day Cho and Natalie Underberg-Goode, "Lost in Liminal Space: The Internet Legend of the Backrooms," *Contemporary Legend* 4.03 (2025): 16.

⁷ Samantha J. Stephen, "'The Backrooms': Exploring the Unconscious Together through Collective Meaning Making," *Journal of Psychosocial Studies* 15.3 (2022): 201-8.

⁸ Valentina Tanni, *Exit Reality: Vaporwave, Backrooms, Weirdcore and Other Landscapes beyond the Threshold*, trans. Anna Carruthers (Rome: Nero Editions, 2025).

⁹ Wang Xin 王鑫, "Dongwuyuan li de Kafuka: guanyu guize yu kongzhi shehui de guandan xiaoshuo" 动物园里的卡夫卡：关于规则与控制社会的怪诞小说, *Wenxue yu yishu lilun piping* 文学与艺术理论批评 2 (2024): 144-54.

市 as a case study, I analyze how horror becomes entangled with nostalgia and spatial imagination in the Chinese context. Section Two turns to rule-based horror storytelling, taking the popular text *The Rules of the Zoo* as an example. I first examine the internal contradictions of its rules and their horror effects, then the spatial logic of the zoo as a Foucauldian heterotopia, and the process by which readers are drawn into and assimilated by the text, connecting this to the social conditions of contemporary China, including the breakdown of social trust and the affective structure of cruel optimism under Chinese socialism.¹⁰ By juxtaposing these two texts, this chapter suggests that participatory horror in contemporary China is a shared affective structure, shaped by and in turn shaping the social conditions of contemporary China.¹¹

Section 1: The Backroom Culture: Backroom Wikidot & Backroom Fandom

No examination of fictional writing within Backrooms culture would be complete without its two most prominent fan writing hubs: the Backrooms Fandom wiki was established first with the Backrooms Wikidot following in April 2020.¹² Both are global, multilingual projects that host branches in various languages, including Japanese, French, Italian, Korean, Spanish, and others alongside their English main sites. As of now, the English main site on Fandom contains approximately 1,700 pages, while the Chinese branch has generated 3,789 pages of content, including some excellent translated works and a substantial body of Chinese original writing. That number of pages alone speaks to the scale of Chinese Backrooms fiction and the energy

¹⁰ The concept of “cruel optimism” is developed by Lauren Berlant in the context of late capitalism; see *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). I adapt this framework to the Chinese socialist context here.

¹¹ On participatory culture, see Henry Jenkins, *Participatory Culture: Interviews* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

¹² Sariastuff et al., “FAQ,” *The Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), trans. BrightWalking, Silver Willow, and Ambersight, accessed 20 May 2026, <https://backrooms-wiki-cn.wikidot.com/faq>.

of its community. Both platforms operate as wiki farms, servers that host collaborative, wiki-style websites, and all published content is released under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license.¹³ This means that, provided attribution and share-alike conditions are met, the work can be freely adapted, shared, redistributed, and even used for commercial purposes. This licensing structure points to a defining quality of Backrooms writing, one that is, at its core, a practice of co-creation and collective creation.

A foundational way to understand the worldbuilding of the Backrooms is to read its fictional works as expedition guides or survival manuals. Authors and readers are both “Wanderers,” stumbling in one after another, all stranded in the same unknown place. The philosophy of the Backrooms lies in nothingness, and the question of how to resist it. Ordinary people have slipped away from the familiar world and arrived somewhere hollow.¹⁴ What they leave behind for those who come after is a guide to possible exits, or at least a way to survive. Then the published works are treated as archival documents, written to improve the survival odds of all other Wanderers. Every work, accordingly, follows a specific writing structure.

Before walking through that structure, I want to offer a brief overview of the Backrooms’ basic lore and multifarious jargons. Returning to the image described at the opening of this thesis, the yellow room, that space is Level 0, the origin point of Backrooms culture. The Backrooms world is built from these distinct levels, rendered as “楼层” on Fandom and “层级” on Wikidot. Entries labeled Level C (Wikidot) or Level-ZH (Wiki Fandom) are original

¹³ Creative Commons, “Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0),” accessed 5 June 2026, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>.

¹⁴ DebianInstall, “Yuxian: wei bei shuo chu de qinggan” 阈限：未被说出的情感, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 27 May 2026, <https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/%E6%9C%AA%E8%A2%AB%E8%AF%B4%E5%87%BA%E7%9A%84%E6%83%85%E6%84%9F>.

works from the Chinese branch, distinguished by this numbering system. The spatial scale of the Backrooms is vast and debated as “ranging from 600 million square miles to an infinite range.”¹⁵ Each level is a distinct environment with its own conditions, its own dangers, and sometimes its own physics operating beyond ordinary understanding. Meanwhile, the imaginative range of these spaces is equally boundless. For example, Level C-182 is an enclosed space resembling a female womb.¹⁶ Level ZH-227, “The Heyday of the Kaiyuan Era 开元盛世,” imagines a historical space described as filled with ancient Chinese architecture, technologically primitive but safe, with bland but plentiful food.¹⁷ Others could be a plain, a station, a factory, or even a pool, no further elaboration needed. These spaces range widely in aesthetic and atmosphere, and each carries its own sense of time. In short, the Backrooms are a place severed from reality, but the specific form they take is limitless. The only requirement, as introduced earlier, is liminality.



Figure 2. What A Backroom’s work looks like
(For the full English translation, see Appendix.)

¹⁵ Stephen, “The Backrooms,” p. 201.

¹⁶ Yoghurt Jinchouge, “Zigong” 子宫, *The Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 20 May 2026, <https://backrooms-wiki-cn.wikidot.com/uteru>.

¹⁷ ColdrainNirvana9420, “Level ZH 227: ‘Kaiyuan shengshi’” Level ZH 227: “开元盛世”, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 1 June 2026, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Level_ZH_227.

In the shared writing settings of The Backrooms world, the “Frontrooms 前室/前厅” refers to the ordinary world, the reality from which wanderers have slipped. Levels, sometimes also called Timeless Spaces, models itself loosely on the Frontrooms but is unable to maintain that stability. Within these levels, wanderers may encounter entities 实体, beings with life and agency, as well as objects 物品, inanimate things that can be used or collected. Each work follows a standardized format of eight required modules: a level number, a rating module, a survival difficulty rating (Threat Index/ Survival Difficulty), a description, information on bases and outposts, entry and exit conditions (may include anecdotes or unverified accounts), author information, and tags. The survival difficulty of each level is assessed through three indices: an escape index, an environmental index, and an entity index, together producing a pseudo-scientific profile of any given space (Figure 2). Survival difficulty ratings range from categories such as “Sustained Communities” and “(Un)Secure” to “Uninhabitable,” giving each level a kind of statistical legibility that sits in a productive tension with the illegibility of the spaces themselves.

In terms of writing style, the clinical tone is a suggested convention across Backrooms fiction, one it shares with the SCP Foundation, another niche horror writing community whose entries adopt the tone of a pseudo-scientific style, precise, objective, and emotionally detached, as if writing were being wielded like a scalpel.¹⁸ For instance, a Chinese community’s writing guideline provides suggested phrasings that reflect a uniformly clinical and standardized language: objective opening descriptions such as ‘Level ZH xxx appears as...’, formulaic constructions like ‘[Object] + usually... + [quality/characteristic]’, and phrases such as ‘Current

¹⁸ “Clinical Tone: Declassified,” *SCP Foundation*, last modified 28 November 2021, accessed 5 June 2026, <https://scp-wiki.wikidot.com/clinical-tone-declassified>.

scale...' and 'Wanderers should be aware of...' (Figure 3). Also, in the Backrooms, writing is typically in the second person. Jin reads this as a form of "unnatural narrative" with a dialogic quality: the second-person address implicates the reader directly, turning reading into a form of participation and extending an invitation to co-construct the Backrooms world.¹⁹

适用部分	表述参考
描述开头	"从外观上看, Level ZH xxx由.....组成" "Level ZH xxx呈现为....." "流浪者眼中的Level ZH xxx是....."
描述环境	"放眼望去....." "[方位]+[景物]" "[事物]+通常会.....+[性质、特征]"
实体	"xxx是Level ZH xxx中常见的实体" "此类实体通常出现在....." "流浪者应注意....."
据点与前哨站	"xxx是流浪者可以信任/不可信任的....." "当前规模....." "现今状态....."
入口与出口	"从.....卡入可以来到Level ZH xxx" "若流浪者发现.....可以卡入来到Level ZH xxx" "更多入口/出口有待商榷....."

Figure 3. A Writing Sample of the Backrooms²⁰
(For the full English translation, see Appendix.)

Beyond tone, the visual and material dimensions of these works are integral to how horror is produced. A level's entry and exit points can connect freely to those of other levels, and authors realize this through hyperlinks embedded in the text. Given its inclusion of hyperlinks as part of the fiction, Jin further characterizes Backrooms writing as a form of hypertext narrative.²¹ I would argue this is not entirely accurate. These hyperlinks do not lead to different

¹⁹ Jin Yichen 金义晨, "Xin meijie 'guaikong' wenyi de feiziran xushi ji qi yiyun: yi 'houshi' (Backrooms) wei kaocha Zhongxin" 新媒介"怪恐"文艺的非自然叙事及其意蕴——以“后室” (Backrooms) 为考察中心, *Jingu wenchuang* 今古文创 4 (2026): 95.

²⁰ O.Phiexley, "Louceng xiezuo zhinan" 楼层写作指南, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 5 June 2026, <https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/楼层写作指南>.

²¹ Jin Yichen, "Xin meijie 'guaikong' wenyi de feiziran xushi," pp. 94-95.

story paths in the manner Aarseth describes in his theory of Cybertext, where the reader's navigation between traversing narratives constitutes a form of ergodic efforts.²² In the Backrooms, clicking a hyperlink does not open an alternative route through the story; it just deepens the reader's immersion in a single shared world through its forms, functioning more as decryption than navigation. Nor does the Backrooms fit neatly into Landow's hypertext theory, which, in its opposition to structuralism, frames linking as a post-structuralist gesture that destabilizes authorial authority and resists linear narrative.²³ The Backrooms does break authorial authority and achieves a collectively constructed text but not through hypertext narrative, instead, their community's review mechanisms, which will be discussed following. What better describes the materiality of Backrooms writing is Hayles's concept of the "technotext," which she defines as a work that "connects the technology that produces texts to the texts' verbal constructions."²⁴ In Backrooms writing, the platform's affordances, including its CSS templates, image embedding, and layout conventions, are narrative techniques that contributors are expected to deploy as part of the craft, deepening the horror and atmosphere of each specific space rather than serving as supplementary decoration. Mastering these technical requirements is a prerequisite for participation, and this technical difficulty is itself a barrier to entry, which explains why Backrooms fiction remains a niche form.

Collaborative Writing

From the very beginning, Backrooms culture has been a collective endeavor. Different

²² Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2, 62–66.

²³ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 124–26.

²⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 25–26.

contributors spontaneously add level settings and narrative details, building out a shared world without any central authority or official canon. There are no correct answers, no definitive interpretations. There are only administrators, who are responsible for checking the sources of images used in works (such as whether they comply with licensing requirements and flagging them for revision), refining community guidelines, and mediating disputes between members. This distinguishes the Backrooms from more conventional forms of horror writing, where a single author controls the text and the reader receives it. On Wikidot, a levels' rating rises and falls according to reader evaluations, with higher-rated works receiving greater visibility and readership, and any work whose score falls below negative two is flagged for deletion and removed within seventy-two hours (Figure 4). The survival of any given piece of writing is therefore subject to ongoing collective judgment.

最高评分的页面				
名称	分数	字数	评论数	创建者
Level C-100	+ 1095 (+1131, -36)	1620	132	(user deleted)
重生之勇闯后室成为M.E.G.大哥	+ 846 (+892, -46)	845	204	(user deleted)
Level C-324	+ 840 (+889, -49)	6218	132	Uluolos
《字符大陆》- 导演剪辑版	+ 777 (+787, -10)	193256	75	(user deleted)
Level C-2	+ 663 (+672, -9)	25864	52	Meauzeek Zampona
Level C-490	+ 593 (+603, -10)	250	62	(user deleted)
Level C-1001 - "打破天穹"	+ 553 (+581, -28)	58926	65	CaroyalKkaia
Entity C-99 - "生神"	+ 544 (+551, -7)	5560	42	(user deleted)

Figure 4. The top-rated entries on the Backrooms Chinese Wikidot

Yet this openness is structured by its own barriers. Engaging with Backrooms fiction means already knowing its history, its jargon, and terms of reference. Participating in the community feels like querying a computer's system log since you need to know the language before you can read the output. As established in the previous section, mastering the technical

requirements of CSS formatting, image embedding, and layout conventions is a further prerequisite for participation. Although these demands function as a barrier to entry, limiting the size of the community and contributing to its marginalization, they also produce a form of community identity. The difficulty of entry, paradoxically, strengthens a sense of collective belonging and internal cohesion. To write for the Backrooms is, therefore, to demonstrate commitment to a shared world.

The Chinese Backrooms Fandom operates a formal work review and voting system called the yellow and red ticket system (*hong huang piao zhidu* 红黄票制度) to maintain quality standards. Works that fail to meet requirements receive red or yellow tickets. A red ticket may be issued for serious reasons including confrontational tone, overtly political or sexually explicit content, plagiarism, or violation of the Backrooms world-building rules (using level numbers at or above ZH 2000 are not permitted, for instance.) Yellow tickets address weaker issues such as unconvincing world-building, clichéd core concepts, or other markers of lower quality. Authors whose work receives a ticket are given time to revise; if they do not, the work is deleted after the deadline. In the second stage of review, authors lose the right to cancel the ticket themselves; it can only be withdrawn by an administrator. Any reader/member who identifies a problem may issue a ticket and provide a justification. This mechanism even extends beyond review to rewriting. Any member may rewrite another author's work, provided they obtain the original author's permission first. If the original author cannot be contacted, or fails to respond within fourteen days, the rewrite may proceed without authorization.²⁵ In this

²⁵ “Wenzhang shenhe & shangpiao zhidu yu guifan” 文章审核&上票制度与规范, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 5 June 2026, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Backrooms_Wiki:文章审核%26_上票制度与规范.

sense, the author, in other words, is not the final guardian of their own work.

Consequently, these mechanisms reveal an unusual power relation, one that is rare even within commercial and non-commercial fan writing communities. In commercial web literature platforms, readers function as consumers whose preferences shape what gets written, yet authors still retain significant authority over their own work. Even in fan fiction communities, where authors are emotionally committed to maintaining the integrity of shared characters and collaboratively built worlds, individual authors generally preserve the right to protect the coherence and independence of their own work; their writing is rarely subject to arbitrary alteration by others. I would argue that what makes the Backrooms different is precisely the absence of this emotional connection between reader and text. Those traditional works are driven by emotional stimulation, whether the satisfaction of wish fulfillment or the pull of romantic feeling, sustained by fully realized characters and narrative arcs in which readers can invest in. In the Backrooms, by contrast, the writing often features no characters at all, or only a single unnamed wanderer designed as a surrogate for the reader. Without a deep emotional bond between reader and text, readers can evaluate entries with a cooler, more critical eye. The result is that it is the shared world, not the individual author, that holds authority. Authors must contribute to the world without deviating from it and, in this sense, they lose a degree of creative freedom that authors in other forms retain.

What counts as good writing within this community further illuminates these dynamics. The community favors works that depict the everyday life of ordinary wanderers over grander, more sweeping narratives. The Chinese Backrooms Fandom, Level ZH 1220, titled “绿水青山” (Lucid waters and lush mountain), for instance, illustrates what happens when this

preference is violated. The title borrows from a political slogan “Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets 绿水青山就是金山银山,” associated with President Xi Jinping’s ecological development theory, first articulated in 2005, which has since become a fixture of state media, government reports, and official discourse.²⁶ The work imagines an isolated, impoverished village whose inhabitants take in a group of wanderers, who in turn decide to repay them through a project that closely resembles the Chinese government’s real-world poverty alleviation programs, complete with literacy campaigns, road construction, and improved crop yields. Appearing to be a deliberate celebration of the government’s poverty alleviation efforts, this work renders its effect through the sacrifice of wanderers and the language of bureaucratic success. The death of a wanderer is arranged during his construction of the level, with no emotional buildup whatsoever. This forced attempt to generate pathos is further amplified by the melodramatic responses of those around him — ‘What a good comrade he was! Why did fate have to take him away?’ an elderly woman sobbed. The use of the term ‘comrade’ (*tongzhi* 同志) subtly evokes a Communist political atmosphere. Later, when the road construction is completed, the body of the fallen comrade is dramatically discovered. ‘He was buried on the land where he had worked, and a gravestone was erected in his memory. Everyone came to mourn him. Buried beneath the earth was a man who had died for his passion, a heart that had repaid kindness. An old man touched the gravestone and said softly, “You once held my hand and told me thanks, that you would help us become prosperous. Now, I have received your repayment.”’ (Figure 5). These feelings are bound up with political commitment.

²⁶ Wang Xiangwei, “Xi Faces One of His Greatest Tests Yet: The Environment,” *South China Morning Post*, 27 August 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2108336/xi-faces-one-his-greatest-tests-yet-chinas-environment>.

The work then culminates in an annual summary meeting, where a young wanderer announces from the stage:

“Today, through targeted poverty alleviation, the last dozen or so impoverished households in the village have officially escaped poverty. Through fruit revenues, from 2020 to 2024, the village’s total income has exceeded 600,000 yuan. We have achieved our poverty alleviation goals step by step, fulfilling the wish he left behind. I now officially announce: Level ZH 1220 has officially escaped poverty!” The hall erupts in warm applause.

“今天，我们通过精准扶贫，全村最后十几位贫困户正式脱贫。通过水果收益，2020 年-2024 年，全村总收益额突破 60 万元。我们一步一步脚踏实地地实现了脱贫目标，实现了他所留下的遗愿。现在，我正式向大家宣布：Level ZH 1220，正式脱贫!” 全场响起热烈的掌声。²⁷

This ending, however, attracted criticism for its rigid emotional expression and overt flattery of real government initiatives. By saying “words like ‘GDP’ and ‘poverty alleviation’ feel really out of place,” one commenter articulated the community’s aesthetic preference directly: rather than depicting grand narratives of political transformation, good Backrooms writing should show how wanderers actually live, moving from master narratives toward individual ones (Figure 6). The Backrooms, as a space severed from the Frontrooms, cannot sustain the logic of state-sponsored development due to its dispersed and marginal nature. The rejection of this

²⁷ Gikihi, “Level ZH 1220: ‘Lüshui qingshan’” Level ZH 1220: “绿水青山”, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 20 May 2026, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Level_ZH_1220.

work is not only an aesthetic judgment but a worldbuilding one.

It is against this backdrop that *Nangang City* 南港市 stands out. Like *Lüshui qingshan*, it engages directly with Chinese social reality. Differing from the latter, which flattens social reality into political sloganeering, *Nangang City* instead evokes the reader's everyday emotions through a mixture of horror and nostalgia. It is to this work that I now turn.

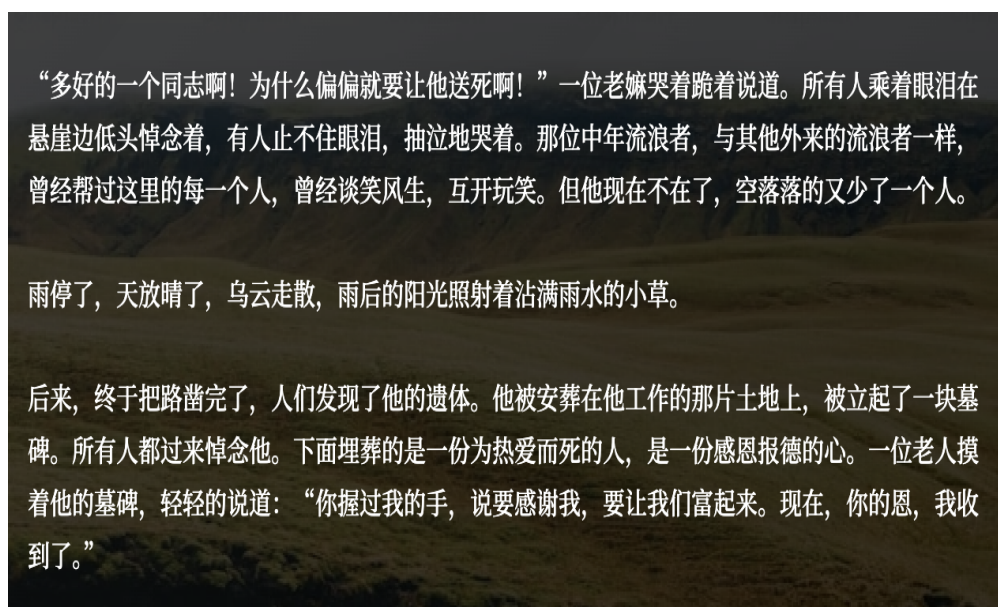


Figure 5. An excerpt from work ZH-1220 “绿水青山”²⁸

²⁸ Gikihi, “Level ZH 1220.”

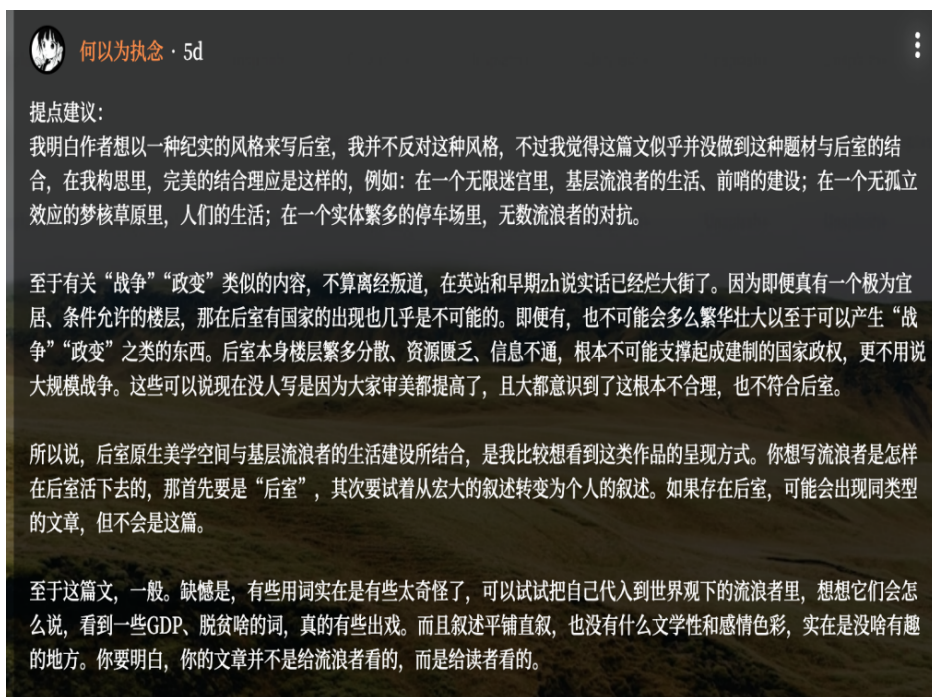


Figure 6. A comment on work ZH-1220
(For the full English translation, see Appendix)²⁹

Nangang City

Nangang City, as the winning work in the sixth Chinese Backrooms-themed competition, whose theme was “nostalgia,” was collaboratively authored by three users Hezi 盒子, Mangguo 芒果, and Sensen 森森. It is designated Level ZH 1000 and consists of thirteen iterated pages combining a series of fictional government New Year addresses, work reports, newspaper articles, and first-person fictional narratives resembling diary entries. Together, these documents construct a fictional super-city modeled on the Pearl River Delta urban agglomeration, particularly Shenzhen, transposed into the Backrooms. Opening with a government New Year’s address dated December 31, 1998, this work reviews the past year’s achievements in agricultural and industrial development, spiritual civilization, and economic growth, drawing the reader unsuspectingly back into the final years of the twentieth century.

²⁹ He yi wei zhi nian 何以为执念, comment on Gikihi, “Level ZH 1220: ‘Lüshui qingshan’” Level ZH 1220: “绿水青山,” *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 5 June 2026, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Level_ZH_1220.

What follows is a series of newspaper articles reporting on the extraordinary successes of Nangang City under Reform and Opening Up policies. However, certain details begin to unsettle the reader, revealing a profound rupture between the text and historical reality. For instance, there is a fully completed Pearl River Delta metro system by 1998, the finalized construction of the Nangang Tower, and a completed “Xiangshan-Zhuguang-Macao” cross-sea bridge, with a projected daily traffic flow of 10 million commuters. Most jarringly, the permanent population of the Shekou district is said to have reached six million, which inflated to thirty times its actual size in 1999. In contrast to this alternative timeline, the real-world Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge was not completed until 2018, while its metro systems and the Shenzhen Tower remain stalled in planning stages to this day. In short, the city’s depicted level of productivity and socio-economic development far exceeds anything achieved in real history by 2018, or even to this day.

Undoubtedly, the unreasonable details produce a sense of the uncanny. Nangang city is not a familiar space we know, but rather a “Backrooms” one, into which we have inadvertently “noclipped.”³⁰ Freud’s concept of the uncanny illuminates this strangeness, describing the alien familiarity of things old-established in the mind and revealing how the everyday world can deviate from itself.³¹ The work’s aesthetic tension, however, lies in its obsessive pursuit of verisimilitude at every turn. The layout of the *Nangang Daily* 《南港日报》 faithfully mimics the typesetting conventions of real Chinese newspapers; the official documents

³⁰ The phrase “noclip” or “no clipping” is a gaming term, referring to an action that allows a player to walk or fly freely through some solid objects like floors or walls. In the Backrooms, it is the main method of entering and exiting the levels. “No-clipping,” *Backrooms Freewriting Wiki*, accessed 7 June 2026, <https://backrooms-freewriting.fandom.com/wiki/No-clipping>.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” trans. Alix Strachey, first published in *Imago* 5 (1919), reprinted in *Sammlung, Fünfte Folge*, p. 13, <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

replicate the red-header formatting of actual government paperwork; and even the television broadcast scripts capture the cadences of state media announcements with precision. The city looks entirely Chinese, speaks the institutional language of the state, and follows the logic of Chinese infrastructure, yet it exists within a dimension that real-world Chinese history has never trodden. This, I would argue, is Hayles's technotext at work: the material form of the documents, their visual design, and institutional formatting actively participate in the construction of unease.³² The work shows the reader a world that looks exactly right, then lets the wrongness accumulate through the details. This accumulation is reflected in the work's navigational structure across its thirteen pages. Clicking a hyperlink on an archival page returns to a news article about the completion of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge; clicking further leads to a first-person diary narrative. As Ciccoricco suggests, "the process of linking itself implies a rhetoric of repeated disorientation and reorientation"; each click through an iterated page is another reminder of what does not add up, deepening the sense of wrongness with each reading.³³

Not confined to unreal details, the work further deepens the unsettling feeling by presenting a series of police notices and news reports documenting overtly paranormal events, such as buildings vanishing without a trace, a passenger plane disappearing mid-takeoff, and hundreds of people dissolving after public gatherings. Where did they go? Did the missing find a way back to reality, or did people from reality fall into the Backrooms? In most Backrooms fiction, no explanation is given, since the unknown is itself a mode of horror. *Nangang City* is unusual in that its fictional government documents offer an explanation, giving the work a

³² Hayles, *Writing Machines*, pp. 25–26.

³³ David Ciccoricco, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 80.

dimension of science fiction. Drawing on the metaphor of “stack overflow” from computer science, the documents argue that reality operates like a program with finite memory. When the pace and scale of human development exceed the world’s carrying capacity, the system crashes. It is precisely this crash that opens what Žižek, as Greenshields notes, describes as “an excess of a third space which gets lost in the division into outside and inside.”³⁴ The Backrooms is thus not so much an exterior or ultimate reality as it is a glitch in reality that opens onto an unbounded surplus.³⁵

Outside the text, the horror has already taken root in the reader. Inside it, however, the narrator’s response is strikingly different. In his/her opinion: “Weird stuff like this happens all the time in *Nangang*. Everyone is numb to it, and nobody buys the official news anymore; most folks just write it off as rumors. The only thing we give a damn about is the New Century in three days. 这样的怪事在南港已经太常见了…大家习以为常，也不再相信官方的新闻，大多数人都当作谣言。而我们关心的，只是三天后的新世纪。”³⁶ This indifference is itself unsettling. To understand it, one must look more closely at the narrator’s inner world, describing 1999 as a year in which time seemed to accelerate beyond her grasp:

So much happened that year. It was as if time had been fast-forwarded, everything blurring past in Nangang’s massive crowds, leaving us feeling pushed to the very fringes of the era. I wanted to feel the warmth of life, to sense its continuity, but everything seemed condensed into this single city, this entire country. Yet, there was a

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 259.

³⁵ Will Greenshields, “Another Alternate Reality? Exploring the Backrooms with Žižek,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 17.1 (2023): 3.

³⁶ “Level ZH 1000: ‘Nangang shi renmin zhengfu’” Level ZH 1000: “南港市人民政府,” iteration 11, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), accessed 10 April 2026, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Level_ZH_1000/11.

strange comfort in it, knowing that millions of people shared the exact same wish: to make it past the year 2000, to survive into the New Century, and to carry our bustling metropolis with us into the future.

那年发生了太多事，像是时光被按下了快进键，一切在南港庞大的人流中飞速流逝，像是被时代挤到了边缘。我想去体会生活的温度，感受生命的延续，可一切都好像被浓缩到了这座城市、这个国家。反倒让人觉得欣慰，因为有几百万人抱着一个共同的愿望：活过 2000 年，活过新世纪，带着我们的繁华都市，一起走进未来。³⁷

Meanwhile, the radio broadcasts a manic, jubilatory voice of collective optimism entirely at odds with her experience:

Every single one of us was giving it everything we had, disregarding life and death as we raced toward that goal. Everyone threw themselves into the collective, merging into the roaring current of production and construction without feeling tired. Moving as one, we injected endless vitality into reality. With millions of people striving like this, it felt as though reality itself had truly hit the fast-forward button.

我们每个人都在全力以赴，舍生忘死地奔向那个目标。每个人把自己融入集体，融入到生产建设的洪流之中，却从未感到疲惫。大家齐心协力，为现实注入无尽的活力。百万人这样努力着，现实仿佛真的按下了加速键。³⁸

The gap between the broadcast's exhilaration and the narrator's numbness is where another

³⁷ "Level ZH 1000," iteration 11, *Backrooms Wiki*.

³⁸ "Level ZH 1000," iteration 11, *Backrooms Wiki*.

layer of horror resides. The estrangement of the individual from the collective is, in a social acceleration, a structural consequence when the pace of social change exceeds the individual's capacity to process it, lived experience becomes impoverished, and the feeling of presentness is lost. As the narrator cannot feel time passing or any social progress, only the news of completed infrastructure projects gives any of it meaning: "I feel no sense of time passing, nor any real sense of society truly progressing. It seems only the news of a grand infrastructure project reaching completion lends any of this meaning. In these hazy times, my life is slowly being compressed. I barely feel present. As if only in that fleeting moment when the lights of a great metropolis blaze to life, do I truly exist at all. 我却感受不到时间的流逝，也感觉不到社会真正的进步。似乎只有那些大型工程竣工的新闻，才让这一切显得有那么一点意义。虚无缥缈的时光里，我的生命一点点被压缩，我却没有丝毫自我感知。仿佛只有在国际都市灯火通明的那一刻，我才真正存在过。”³⁹ People have lost all touch with the present. This dulled perception leaves everything blurred, not just the present but the future as well. The millennium, for the narrator, is not a clear vision of the future but something vague and screen-like, the image of "Win98 SE's desktop, that fresh and beautiful picture of the future."⁴⁰

Nostalgia, then, is born in a small, throwaway moment. Standing in a crowded convenience store on the eve of the millennium, the narrator buys a bottle of lemon soda and notices its production date: December 20, 1999, 18:28:21. No real production label could be marked to the second. This precision is itself a trace of the accelerated world she/he inhabits, time managed and measured to its smallest unit, perhaps the very condition that makes such

³⁹ "Level ZH 1000," iteration 11, *Backrooms Wiki*.

⁴⁰ "Level ZH 1000," iteration 11, *Backrooms Wiki*.

exaggerated economic development possible. But what the narrator feels is something else entirely: “I usually don’t care at all about ‘expiration dates,’ but when I think about how we’ll rarely come across anything produced before the year 2000 from now on, I find myself feeling a little reluctant to let it go. 平时我根本不在乎这些 ‘保质期’ ，但想到以后几乎见不到 2000 年前生产的东西，心里竟有些不舍。” An ordinary, unremarkable object is about to become unreachable. This is where nostalgia begins in the recognition that the texture of a particular moment will soon be impossible to return to.

Beyond this temporal dislocation, there is spatial dislocation. The narrator walks through the streets of 1999 Macao, a threshold between the real world and the Backrooms, observing the Portuguese mosaic pavement, the yellow Igreja de Santo Rosário, and the glowing neon signs in 1999 colors. But there is no one: no tourists, no pigeons, no taxi sounds. “This is a Macau forgotten by someone, somewhere... a pocket of space stranded outside of time, a city dangling on the very brink of the century. 这是被谁遗忘的澳门，是一段孤立的时间之外的空间，是一座悬挂在世纪边缘的城市。”⁴¹ As Svetlana Boym writes, the nostalgic feels “stifled within the conventional confines of time and space.”⁴² In this sense, the narrator is stifled in exactly this way, trapped in a 1999 that will not end, in a city whose future she can expect but cannot reach.

The narrator’s individual nostalgia is nevertheless not simply personal. By choosing the narrative form of government documents and newspaper articles, this work points toward a larger intention, since these are not the carriers of individual memory but of collective memory, implying that the implied reader is not “you” but “citizens,” “the people,” “the broad

⁴¹ “Level ZH 1000,” iteration 12, *Backrooms Wiki*.

⁴² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiv.

readership.” The nostalgia Nangang City evokes is therefore not one person’s longing for their own past, but a collective mourning for a future that was once shared and is now lost.

By placing real or imminent achievements before the millennium, the work retrospectively imagines an alternate version in which everything accelerated faster than we could have expected. Boym observes that “nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways.⁴³” This sideways nostalgia binds the fictional space of Nangang City to the liminal nature of the Backrooms. As Boym further argues, “creative nostalgia reveals the fantasies of the age, and it is in those fantasies and potentialities that the future is born. One is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future.⁴⁴” A 1999 government work report in the story includes a section on clean governance, presented as an accomplished fact (In reality, the anti-corruption campaign only began in earnest under Xi Jinping in 2012.)⁴⁵ A reader’s comment captures the displacement with striking directness: “So ahead of its time, if the anti-corruption campaign had really started that early, how could the government system have rotted to its current state?”⁴⁶ Unlike *Lüshui qingshan*, which simply flatters government work, Nangang City expresses something closer to grief for a success that arrived too late, and/or not at all. This imagination, in my opinion, however, remains bounded: it does not invite the reader to reimagine history beyond what actually occurred, but simply runs along the same track faster

⁴³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiv.

⁴⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 351.

⁴⁵ He Qinglian 何清涟, “2012 Zhongguo ‘fanfu fengbao’ de xin kandian” 2012 中国 “反腐风暴” 的新看点, *China Digital Times* 中国数字时代, 7 December 2012, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/267213.html>.

⁴⁶ Kento Momota, comment on “Level ZH 1000,” iteration 3, *Backrooms Wiki* (Chinese edition), 28 July 2025, https://backrooms.fandom.com/zh/wiki/Level_ZH_1000/3.

and further. This revisionism reflects both nostalgia for past glory and anxiety about a present in which those promises have gone unfulfilled. It goes beyond what one might call psychological nostalgia, the longing for a specific historical moment, and instead becomes a mourning for the failure of a structural promise.

This is where Mark Fisher's concepts of hauntology and lost futures become essential. Fisher argues that what should haunt us is "not the 'no longer' of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialized. These specters — the specters of lost futures — reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world."⁴⁷ Fisher develops this argument in the specific context of postwar British social democracy and the interruption of popular modernism's cultural trajectory. For Fisher, the "lost futures" points toward the possibilities once promised by a diffuse cultural ecology where there is a coexistence of cultural democratization, experimentation, and mass accessibility. In my analysis, the subject shifts from a cultural ecology toward a political discourse. The Reform and Opening Up narrative once guaranteed a trajectory of modernization and prosperity. The collective imagination of "Shenzhen speed," economic takeoff, and comprehensive development was deeply internalized by everyone who grew up in 1990s China. In the current period of economic stagnation, that promise seems no longer to hold. What *Nangang City* mourns is the sense of direction that era once carried and the possibilities it opened.

Because the defunct promise cannot, precisely, be questioned in a real world, it manifests as a symptom of nostalgia. The government's New Year address, with its fixed formula of

⁴⁷ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), p. 22.

“another year of glorious achievements” and exhilarating enumeration of agricultural output, industrial production, and spirit civilization, fills the narrative space so completely that any question about where that future went cannot be posed. This is also a reflection of the Backrooms space itself, where no “real” future exists. The relentless, euphoric repetition of these announcements is itself a symptom, exposing an anxiety about what is being celebrated: that it might not last, that it might not be real. Indeed, the exaggerated achievements are fictional, severed from reality, and it is precisely this mixture of estrangement, uncanniness, and nostalgia that can only be projected in a fictional Backrooms space.

Section 2: Chinese Rule-Based Horror Storytelling: The Rules of the Zoo

While rules in the Backrooms fiction manifest primarily as complexity in the writing and reading process, those in the Chinese rule-based horror storytelling discussed here are integrated directly into the narrative text *per se*. In 2021, a post titled *The Rules of the Zoo* 动物园规则怪谈, published by the author *phKeaLx* on the Weird Tale board of the Chinese ACG forum “A-Island,” marked the beginning of a new storytelling form combining rules and regulations with weird tales.⁴⁸ Subsequently, this new narrative form rapidly spread and gained popularity across Chinese social media and literary platforms, serving as a source text that inspired the creation of “rule-based” and “infinite flow” subgenres in Chinese online fiction.

Featuring specific rules, manuals, or instructions as its main forms, rule-based storytelling guides readers to reconstruct a fragmented truth through deductive reasoning. Unlike traditional weird fiction, which relies on a complete plot to show what happens, rule-based

⁴⁸ *phKeaLx*, “Dongwuyuan guize guaitan” 动物园规则怪谈, A-Island Anonymous Board A 岛匿名版, 30 November 2021, originally available at <https://adnmb3.com/t/44880434?page=1> (site discontinued).

storytelling, instead, confronts the reader with a non-linear collage of information that is descriptive rather than narrative, in a rational and pseudo-scientific tone, showing a deeply unsettling and terrifying world. Put simply, these works often mimic official formats of modern institutional management systems, such as visitor guidelines, employee handbooks and all sorts of notices or safety precautions. Rhetorically, the text relies heavily on forceful imperative sentences, written list by list in a tone of demands, commands, or seemingly objective counsel (Figure 7).

■ ■ City Zoo Park Visitor Guidelines

Dear visitors, welcome to the city's largest zoo. We hope you and your children will enjoy your visit as we have included most of the world's animals and made sure to create a suitable environment for each of them! When visiting the zoo, we ask that you observe the following rules to ensure your safety, otherwise you will be responsible for the consequences.

1. There is absolutely no problem with the security measures of the park, and there is no possibility of animals escaping, especially small herbivores who are mostly kept in a closed environment that cannot be touched. Therefore, if you see an escaped rabbit on the roadside, please take your children away immediately and report to the staff, do not approach and do not touch, especially if the rabbit finds and starts to approach you at high speed.
2. The park for apes has only one street and only shows apes. If you find two streets and the animals on display include rabbits, choose the one on the left and end your visit to the park as quickly as possible.
3. An elephant is a huge creature with fan-like ears, a long trunk and legs as thick as pillars, and it is not white. Please make sure that you see one and only one elephant in the elephant park.
4. The zoo's drink store does not offer "rabbit blood", so if you see it on the shelf, do not buy it.
5. Do not stay alone in the shade of the rabbit park.
6. The Zoo does not have an oceanarium. If a staff member sells you a ticket for the Oceanarium, refuse them.
7. If you have seen the oceanarium, leave immediately and call the number marked on the map to inform them.
8. Do not feed the rabbits. The rest of the animals are fine.
9. Rabbits do not make laughing noises. If you hear laughter while visiting the rabbit park that is clearly not coming from the direction of the visitors, tear off the dotted line on the map and hold it before leaving the park, and do not let the dotted line leave your hand until you have completely left the zoo.
10. If you fall foul of any of the above and find yourself lost and separated from other people you know, immediately find the nearest drink store within a quarter of an hour and tell the salesman in blue clothe there (note that if you see a salesman in black clothe, pretend that you could not hear whatever he says to you) and he will take you immediately to the working lane in the lion park. Don't be afraid, the lions here will not attack you, hide behind the rockery, wait for all the white lions to start roaring, the staff will take you out of the park (please make sure he is in blue), then your family and friends will be waiting for you at the entrance of the lion park. After all this, leave the zoo immediately.

Figure 7. City Zoo Park Visitor Guidelines, the first part of *The Rules of the Zoo*⁴⁹

Taking the well-known and original text *The Rules of the Zoo* as an exemplar, the text comprises nine distinct sections: the Visitor Guidelines, the Employee Code of Conduct, the Notices posted at the Aquarium Entrance, the Internal Aquarium Signage, the Aquarium Employee Handbook, a Warning Note found by a visitor, a Note left in an aquarium guestroom,

⁴⁹ watcoulditbe, "The Rules of the Zoo," r/Ruleshorror, Reddit, accessed 5 June 2026, https://www.reddit.com/r/Ruleshorror/comments/r9yit8/the_rule_of_zoo/.

an Official Document from the Zoo Director's Office, and a Sticky Note written three years prior by a security guard at the Elephant Enclosure. As Wang metaphorically puts it, this text functions as a set of highly interconnected puzzles, inviting readers to reconstruct their understanding of this fictional universe through fragmented clues.⁵⁰ In my view, this metaphor of "puzzles" similarly calls to mind the figure of a "map." Jeff VanderMeer describes maps as "the first form of misdirection," precisely because they make certain things visible only by rendering others invisible.⁵¹ This insight cuts to the core of the horror in rule-based storytelling: what matters most is what lies beyond the puzzle and the map. In this sense, merely following these rules blindly, as one is meant to, will mislead readers into overlooking the disturbing truths buried beneath the textual surface, thus making it all the more necessary to read between the lines and piece together a complete picture of this unsettling world. In short, this section examines *The Rules of the Zoo* across three dimensions: the internal logic of its rules, the spatial structure of the zoo, and the position of the reader within the narrative, tracing how each layer contributes to a form of horror that implicates its audience in the context it describes, and how together they reflect the social and cultural anxieties of contemporary China.

Contradiction and Irrationality as Horror

By analyzing the rules themselves in rule-based narratives, this section examines how they create a sense of horror by being self-contradictory and logically irrational. As mentioned earlier, the horror does not come from bluntly telling readers what terrifying things will happen;

⁵⁰ Wang Xin 王鑫, "Dongwuyuan li de Kafuka," p. 145.

⁵¹ Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), p. 66.

it comes from letting them discover the absurdity on their own. In general, these rules either defy common sense or contradict one another. An example of the former is a rabbit letting out an eerie laugh, or rabbit blood being sold as a drink in a store. For the latter, take the very first rule of the *City Zoo Park Visitor Guidelines*:

The zoo's safety measures are infallible. No animals can escape, especially the small herbivores kept in closed, inaccessible environments. Therefore, if you spot an escaped rabbit outside of a designated enclosure, move away with your child immediately and report it to the staff. Be extra vigilant if the rabbit notices you and starts running toward you at high speed.

本园安全措施保障绝对没有问题，动物没有出逃的可能性，尤其是小型草食动物大多被关押在不可触摸的封闭性环境里。因此，如果您看见路边有逃跑的兔子，请立刻带着您的孩子远离并报告工作人员，不要靠近，不要触摸，尤其是兔子发现并且开始高速接近你的时候。⁵²

In this scenario, first, the common-sense idea that small herbivores are gentle and quiet is completely flipped. Second, the passage starts by guaranteeing the park's safety with absolute confidence, yet the very next sentence describes a bizarre scenario of a rabbit rushing at you, immediately taking back what it just promised. The formal tone and administrative phrasing are supposed to bring a sense of order and reliability, but the internal contradiction in the content undermines their authoritative rules.

Furthermore, the sense of horror extends beyond contradictory rules to the coherence of

⁵² phKeaLx, “动物园规则怪谈”.

the worldview they construct. First, the text turns established cognitive categories upside down. For instance, the white lion is trustworthy; while the rabbit, a creature that across cultures symbolizes weakness and harmlessness, is dangerous and predatory. The horror, therefore, lies in the disruption of our understanding of the world's order; it presents an erosion of human rationality. Second, by introducing a thing known only as "It," never identified as human or non-human, tangible or intangible, the text keeps reminding us of the fundamental irrationality of the world we are in. In some popular readings, "It" is interpreted either as a light-seeking creature with an aversion to enclosed spaces, or as a kind of infectious force spreading through the zoo. Readers are told not to ask what "It" is, not to speak of "It" to others, and not to let "It" sense their hesitation or fear, or they too will be "infected." Wang offers a Lacanian reading of "It," arguing that "It" is something that resists cognition, a failure of linguistic signification, a non-meaning and a non-signifier.⁵³ "It" is the Real that has failed to be absorbed into the Symbolic Order. "It" thus revealing the limit of what the Symbolic Order can contain, shows that what used to be stable is not as stable as it seems. This instability spreads to identity itself. The rules return repeatedly to the boundary between human and animal: "Remember, you are human, not an animal." Rule 15 instructs that animals must be killed when necessary, adding the caveat that "you don't know whether they are animals." The fact that this boundary needs to be stated and restated through rules suggests its instability. As the text hints, symptoms including tinnitus, red eye, and migraines have been read as signs of identity slipping from human to infected rabbit. Because the Symbolic Order is failing, the line between human and animal cannot hold on its own; thus, it must be enforced rule by rule.

⁵³ Wang Xin, "Dongwuyuan li de Kafuka," p. 151.

There is another source of horror worth addressing, that is the ambiguous consequences of following or breaking the rules. Rule-based narratives rarely offer clear cause and effect, so whether a rule is obeyed or violated, the outcome remains uncertain and the punishment is undefined. The text refuses to provide any stable logical basis for interpretation. Therefore, readers cannot calculate risk or predict outcomes relying on rational decision-making. The fear this produces is not simply a fear of the unknown, but the specific panic of being inside a system that demands compliance while refusing to explain itself. In a study on rule-based storytelling, Mei notes that, in the industrial era, instructional rules belong to a tradition of technological rationality, abstracted from lived experience and presented as summarized steps or inexplicable theory, which gives them an implicit kinship with scientific law.⁵⁴ But in rule-based narratives, this kinship does not seem to exist because the rules carry the form of scientific authority without delivering an inexplicable logic. People are still required to follow them, but the rules themselves have lost their credibility.

This is where the horror connects to something beyond the text. Graeber argues that bureaucracies maintain the appearance of fairness and equal treatment through a set of seemingly fair rules. However, rules that apply equally to everyone operate as a fiction; in practice, they function as a tool for the arbitrary exercise of individual power.⁵⁵ Inside the zoo, the spatial logic erases distinctions of identity and class, offering everyone the same fiction of equality. But this is precisely what makes it a fantasy space, where the absurdity of rules here conceals the inherent unfairness of the rules in the real world.

⁵⁴ Mei Ningyuan 梅宁远, “Jishu shijie de benzhen wenben: lun kongbu ‘Dongwuyuan guize guaitan’ de yu jiudu meixue” 技术世界的本真文本——论恐怖《动物园规则怪谈》的与救渡美学 1 (2026): 67–68.

⁵⁵ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York: Melville House, 2016), p. 14.

The Zoo and its Space

In terms of the scenario setting in rule-based storytelling, the choice of location often follows a recognizable pattern. Those closed, familiar spaces such as middle schools, libraries, hospitals, sanatoriums, and theme parks... are among the most common choices. These spaces share several key characteristics: each carries a specific institutional purpose, whether healing, learning, or leisure, implied or explicit, in relation to its corresponding social functions. The point is, each operates according to its own enclosed system of rules, designed to ensure that its designated purpose is upheld and that those within it are protected. They are highly institutionalized public spaces that involve the regulation of the body and the restriction of behavior through meticulous rules. As Michel Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, “discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony”.⁵⁶ He argues that institutions such as factories and schools involve the operations of power and the regulation of bodies. Within these spaces, discipline and control are implemented to serve a useful end in production or administration.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is no coincidence, then, that rule-based narratives intentionally choose spaces such as these, reminding readers that discipline is already in operation and to legitimize it, reinforcing the awareness that rules exist and must be followed. This also activates the reader’s own bodily memory and experience of these

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 141.

⁵⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 142-43.

spaces. In this sense, the choice of space itself contributes to, and even constructs the rule-based narrative.

Although the zoo is not a traditionally Foucauldian disciplined space, it nonetheless involves the management of bodies and the operation of micro-power. Within the physical layout of the zoo, visitors move along designated pathways, segregated from the animals, a constant reminder of their distinction from other species and their identity as human spectators. In *The Rules of the Zoo*, however, this default power relation is disrupted. Animals appear unpredictably and in the most unexpected locations. There might be an evil rabbit that chases visitors, or a white lion that switches unpredictably between two states, one dangerous and one protective. Humans no longer occupy a permanently secure position as onlookers; instead, animals become ubiquitous predators. They can hurt you at any moment, and you cannot fight back with modern technology. Unlike a real-world animal escape, no one is coming with a tranquilizer gun. Even a fragile rabbit can harm you. The chaos that comes from subverting the one-directional gaze, the watcher becoming the watched, is where the horror fundamentally lives.

Zoo-break narratives, in socio-cultural analysis, are in fact a common cultural form. Elisha Cohn, for instance, conceptualizes it as a political intervention, an allegory reflecting the crises of the human subject within state institutions. He notes that from the perspectives of animal and postcolonial studies, narratives of animals reclaiming freedom ultimately serve neoliberal ideals.⁵⁸ Yet, this kind of reading still centers the human, rather than the relationship between humans and animals itself. In contrast, I move beyond reading the

⁵⁸ Elisha Cohn, "Paperback Tigers: Breaking the Zoo," *Contemporary Literature* 56.4 (2015): 569.

animal escape in rule-based narratives as simply a symbol for human activity, instead considering how these animals interact with humans as a threat, and how this interaction dissolves spatial boundaries.

To understand the mechanics of this space, it is necessary to bring in Foucault's concept of heterotopia, to explain how the spatial logic of the zoo operates and how it connects to the broader social space. In his 1967 lecture *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault posits that people "live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another."⁵⁹ In other words, space is not merely location but a structure of relations, which provides the basis for understanding what makes heterotopias distinctive. Unlike utopias, which are unreal, perfected versions of social space, heterotopias are real, existing sites that function outside everyday social norms. I would argue that the zoo fits his description of a "heterotopia of deviation," a space that houses things whose logic deviates from that of the outside world.⁶⁰ As mentioned in the previous section, the rules inside cannot be explained by rational cognition. Entering such a space implies a separation from ordinary social life. Foucault further notes that heterotopias "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable."⁶¹ Entry is regulated and conditional, never fully free. In *The Rules of the Zoo*, the conditions are made explicit: admission requires a ticket, but exit is far more exacting, requiring the visitor to "tear off the dotted line on the map and hand it to the right person."⁶² The text deliberately establishes this

⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984): 3. Originally presented as "Des Espaces Autres" (March 1967).

⁶⁰ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," p. 5.

⁶¹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," p. 7.

⁶² Lin Qi 林栖, "Dongwuyuan guize guaitan wanzheng ban quanwen ji Q&A/jiexi" 动物园规则怪谈完整版全文及 Q&A/解析, Zhihu 知乎, 29 November 2021, last modified 14 December 2021,

requirement, reminding the reader that they are inside a heterotopic space.

Foucault also notes that “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”⁶³ Like the different enclosures within a zoo, each zone in the text is governed by its own enclosed and mutually incompatible rules. The aquarium is a separate space where the people inside are infected, operating under a set of rules opposite to those of the safe zones elsewhere. Knowledge and strategies built up in one space become completely useless once you cross into another.

And yet, are these incompatibilities absolute? Are spatial boundaries truly stable? In *The Rules of the Zoo*, an elephant appears as a “projection” inside the Aquarium, an animal from one zone materializing in another, suggesting that the boundaries within the zoo are not fixed but permeable. One reading suggests that the text implies the possibility of spatial folding: jellyfish from the aquarium appear in the director’s office, and the goat enclosure, repeatedly mentioned, never appears on the visitor’s route. In this sense, echoing my earlier point, this is another form of animal escape, not through physical flight, but through the dissolving of spatial boundaries. There is no absolutely safe zone inside the zoo. The heterotopia fails to deliver on its promise of containment, and the sense of horror deepens accordingly.

Moving beyond looking at the zoo from inside, it is essential to examine its relationship with the external world. This can be approached by translating Jean Baudrillard’s critique of Disneyland into the context of the zoo. He argues that the Disneyland theme park exists as an idealized, imaginary space whose purpose is to convince us that “the rest of the world is real,”

<https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/439434254>.

⁶³ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p. 6.

thereby concealing the fact that the surrounding American society is already “of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation,” and “thus of saving the reality principle.”⁶⁴ The zoo, in contemporary capitalist and consumer society, operates on a similar logic. On the surface, it presents itself as a sanctuary for species conservation, a place where technology artificially replicates the conditions each animal needs, bringing them all into one shared space. As Foucault suggests, the zoological garden claims to represent the totality of the natural world within a small, enclosed area.⁶⁵ The co-existence of all these animals is counter-intuitive, producing an unmistakable sense of artifice. Like Disneyland, the zoo functions as a decoy: its visible unreality reassures visitors that the world outside is real and safe. Yet the animal images of that outside world are equally culturally constructed signs. The rabbit is timid and harmless, the lion a fierce aggressor, the elephant docile and wise, not because nature dictates this, but because culture does, through centuries of fables, wildlife documentaries, and visual media. These are simulacra: representations that are not relevant to any original reality, mistaken for natural fact through sheer repetition. In this sense, the zoo in the text occupies the position of Disneyland in Baudrillard’s framework. By assigning the rabbit as a threat and the lion as a protector, the narrative makes its own artifice visible. In doing so, however, its’ obvious distortion leads readers to treat the outside world’s animal signs as natural and real. Both, however, are simulations. The horror, then, arises not only from the absurdity the text deliberately conveys, but from the moment one recognizes that the symbolic order of the real world, never thought to be questioned, is in fact a simulation.

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 12–13.

⁶⁵ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” p. 6.

The Reader as Subject: Assimilation, Anxiety and the Social

A complete form of rule-based narratives goes beyond the text *per se*; it also incorporates the continuously emerging interpretations from readers that often reflect or even transcend the author's original intention. Currently, there are many versions of analysis on *The Rules of the Zoo*. Here, I refer to this continuously updated interpretation published by *Zhihu* user Lin Qi, in which nearly three thousand comments collectively construct this analysis, and then construct the narrative.⁶⁶ As Wolfgang Iser argues, reading is a constructive process in which the “blanks” within a text prompt readers to establish connections and interpret, resolving breaks in what should be the text's fundamental “connectability.”⁶⁷ This is especially relevant to rule-based narratives, where the blanks are not incidental since the rules themselves are incomplete and demand active interpretation. In this sense, the reader constantly participates in the narrative through the act of reading.

Not confined to the fictional world in the text, the horror in rule-based narratives reaches outward, reflecting the logic and reality of the external world by placing the reader into the position of an experienced subject. This narrative does not place the reader as a bystander—like a detached detective in traditional mystery novels—but rather thrusts them directly into the rules themselves. From the moment readers encounter the “Visitor's Guidelines” or the “Employee Manual,” they are automatically assigned to, and start experiencing, a specific social role: a visitor, an employee, a survivor or an infected person. They are required to

⁶⁶ Lin Qi, “Dongwuyuan guize guaitan wanzheng ban quanwen ji Q&A/jiexi.”

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 180–83.

remember the color of their clothes, which symbolizes “holding firm to self-cognition,” even though this seems ultimately impossible in the zoo.⁶⁸ Switching between different identities implies a splitting of subjective cognition. In the process of reading, readers must be confined to both identities and this forced splitting. It is precisely this act of reading for the purpose of obedience that generates the genre’s deep anxiety in the aspect of loss of subjectivity.

In this section, I intend to provide a symptomatic reading of how this reading mode operates. On one hand, readers must follow the rules to make sense of the text and reconstruct the fragmented world it presents. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, these rules contain self-contradictory and unexplainable logic. The reader is thus caught in a bind: obeying the rules is both necessary and insufficient. Following the rules does not guarantee safety, and the very attempt to obey actually drags the reader deeper into the incommensurate system the text describes. Interpreting the rules means one has already been assimilated by them. When readers begin to question which rules apply, which characters can be trusted, and what “It (the unknowable being in the text)” actually is, they have already accepted the premise that these questions make sense in this world, thereby ignoring the ultimate meaninglessness of the rules themselves. In this sense, interpretation marks the surrender of rationality and logic, and the beginning of assimilation.

This assimilation ensures that rule-based narratives do not just exist as entertaining horror texts, but also generate real impacts on the external world. Why are people so obsessed with narratives about rules breaking down? Why is there a preference for inhabiting the moment of collapse rather than imagining new possibilities, that is to say, abandoning the old rules while

⁶⁸ Lin Qi, “Dongwuyuan guize guaitan wanzheng ban quanwen ji Q&A/jiexi.”

reading *The Rules of the Zoo* and building something different? I find Lauren Berlant's affective structure of "cruel optimism" effective in explaining this. She describes an attachment that happens when what you desire is, in fact, an obstacle to your flourishing.⁶⁹ More specifically, she explains that there is a collective emotional response under late capitalism that remains attached to the fantasy of a good social life, despite evidence showing that its promises are fragile, precarious and highly costly.⁷⁰ Borrowing from her analysis of American society, I am not implying a globally homogenous system, but I do see the pattern as transferable to the specific social context of contemporary China.

Contemporary China is undoubtedly at a complex moment of transformation. The Reform and Opening Up and the broader wave of global modernization propelled China from a relatively closed agrarian economy to one of the world's largest economies.⁷¹ At the same time, this path towards prosperity faces many social contradictions, such as a widening wealth gap, a lack of political freedom, and a perceived overall decline in social moral standards.⁷² In other words, many contradictions are unresolved. The progressive nature of the Reform and Opening Up dismantled the previous avowed commitment to equal distribution and homogenous identity; however, it accelerated social stratification and inequality. Studies have shown this causality in which China's modernization process brought economic prosperity, but this prosperity intensified social anomie, leading to a crisis of social trust.⁷³

I clarify that my aim is not to find a comprehensive explanation for these issues, but to

⁶⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Zhiqun Zhu, "Introduction: The People's Republic of China Today," in *The People's Republic of China Today*, ed. Zhiqun Zhu (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), p. 5.

⁷² Zhu, "Introduction," pp. 9, 11–12.

⁷³ Zhenhua Su, Yanyu Ye, and Pu Wang, "Social Change and Generalized Anomie: Why Economic Development Has Reduced Social Trust in China," *International Sociology* 34.1 (2019): 58–82.

bring these phenomena forward and use them as anchors to analyze how popular cultural aesthetics become a response to social experience and a mapping of current social reality. The anomie of a society means the breakdown of its rules. Durkheim argued that the suddenness of change and the resulting imbalance leads to anomie.⁷⁴ During periods of social transition, existing rules lose their efficacy while new ones have not yet been established; individual behavior thus loses its direction. The public needs time to adjust their desires and demands to cope with such changes in social resources.⁷⁵ I argue that the narrative of rules breaking down is precisely a cultural manifestation within this social background. For example, the popularity of the internet buzzword “Kong Yiji’s Long Gown” (Kong Yiji *de changshan* 孔乙己的长衫) on online platforms highlights that academic credentials can no longer directly translate into employment opportunities or social status.⁷⁶ This allusion originates from a short story by Lu Xun, in which he satirically describes a literati left behind by the old era who stubbornly holds onto his past identity. Today, it is used to describe the employment dilemma faced by newly graduated college students. It demonstrates at least one reality: over the past thirty years, people firmly believed that academic credentials provided opportunities for upward mobility and changing one’s social class; however, it no longer offers the same guarantee today due to credential inflation driven by demographic growth and social stratification. The rules and survival strategies that contemporary youth grew accustomed to during the period of economic

⁷⁴ Iraj Faizi and Hooshang Nayebi, “Anomie Theories of Durkheim and Merton: A Comparative Review,” *Comparative Sociology* 22.2 (2023): 282.

⁷⁵ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 213. Taylor & Francis e-Library edition.

⁷⁶ Chang Siying 常思穎, “Tuo xia ‘Kong Yiji de chang shan’: Zhongguo jiuye xingshi yu fa yanjun, nianqing ren cong ‘lanling’ gongzuo xun chulu” 脱下「孔乙己的长衫」：中国就业形势愈发严峻，年轻人从「蓝领」工作寻出路, BBC Chinese BBC 中文, 27 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-65995537>.

ascent are failing. Yet, the rules still exist and still need to be followed, even though their inherent protective logic has completely vanished. People continue to live in ways that were effective in the past, but they can no longer achieve the accomplishments of the Reform and Opening Up or its resulting economic acceleration. In this sense, I suggest this narrative captures the confusion and anxiety of contemporary youth.

This brings us back to the earlier question: why is escape from these collapsing rules so difficult? In part, a one-party political system increases people's dependence on the government, making them less guarded against these sweeping changes. But more fundamentally, cruel optimism explains why escape is not really the point. Berlant does not define cruel optimism as a form of masochism (since there is no pleasure involved), but rather as a mode of survival.⁷⁷ She argues that the fantasy of a normative lifeworld provides a pre-experience, a "desire to have a cluster of affects and feelings in lieu of having a world."⁷⁸ What matters is not the good life itself, but the feeling of orienting toward it. The reader is not looking to escape from collapsing rules, but to coexist with them because of these feelings. In this sense, the horror of rule-based narrative, and its popularity as entertainment reflects exactly this affective structure. In short, the horror lives in the tension where people depend on the rules while simultaneously being subjected to them. Therefore, people repeatedly create such rule-based narratives and are keen on interpreting them, even though they know that ineffective rules cannot provide valid answers. And the entertainment value of this narrative accurately mirrors the cruel optimism used to deal with an everyday impasse shaped by crisis.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Mary Ryan, "Finding a Better Society: The Work of Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*," *Spectra* 5.1 (2016).

⁷⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 185.

⁷⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.

Conclusion

In general, then, Chinese creepypasta offers a new mode of storytelling that functions as a diagnosis beyond entertainment. Including all forms of creepypasta in this discussion would be impossible. My aim has not been to produce an exhaustive or comprehensive definition of the genre, but rather to use the two representative types discussed here to illustrate the kaleidoscopic possibilities of online *guaitan* narratives as a body of work not yet brought into mainstream critical view, and to show how, through space and affect, they contribute to literary narratives as a mode of analyzing social reality. Whether it is the spatial nostalgia of the Backrooms or the collapse of rules and rationality in rule-based horror, both point toward the diffuse social anxiety of contemporary Chinese youth confronting a fractured social reality and a set of promises that are narrowing. The horror elements, in this sense, constitute a series of affective responses to the same historical moment. Both these literary forms are participatory, with horror constructed jointly by readers and authors alike. It is with this in mind that I now turn to the infinite flow novel, which can in some sense be understood as a genre developed out of rule-based horror, one that has since been absorbed into the commercial mechanisms of Chinese web literature and reached a far wider audience, and in which the negotiations between horror, gender, and censorship take on new dimensions.

Chapter 2: Chinese Infinite Flow Novels (Wuxianliu xiaoshuo)

If Chapter One examined horror as a collectively produced and collectively received phenomenon, Chapter Two turns to a subgenre that has absorbed horror into a fully commercialized literary form. The infinite flow novel, or *wuxianliu xiaoshuo* 无限流小说, a popular and emerging fantasy subgenre that has emerged in contemporary Chinese web novels, draws on elements of horror, mystery, and supernatural fiction and sometimes incorporates worldbuilding elements of science fiction. Where the Backrooms and rule-based horror cater to a niche readership and manifest as a relatively small and compact form, the infinite flow novel is more expansive, with a million-word novel taking on a commercially serialized form.

The typical pattern of this genre centers on the protagonist being drawn into an “infinite space,” where they are forced to traverse different worlds repeatedly in which they must complete tasks to avoid death, with the story often wrapping up when the protagonist solves the puzzle and escapes the space or loop entirely. The scope of the infinite flow genre is so broad that it is difficult to identify a clear origin or define precise criteria. Nevertheless, the general consensus is that the forerunner of infinite flow fiction on Chinese web platforms can be traced back to *The Infinite Terror* (*wuxian kongbu* 无限恐怖) written by Zhttty, and first published on the Qidian Chinese website in 2007.¹ The novel follows a protagonist who, adrift and searching for the meaning of his life, accidentally enters a mysterious space where he is forced to traverse a series of danger-laden horror films such as *Ju-on: The Grudge* or *Alien*, struggling to survive through constant combat, power upgrades, and teamwork, establishing

¹ Liu Xin 刘欣 and Chen Ziyao 陈子瑶, “Wuxian liu xushi ji qi xiandu: jiyu ‘Jingsong leyuan’ de kaocha” 无限流叙事及其限度——基于《惊悚乐园》的考察, in *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yanjiu (di er ji)* 中国网络文学研究 (第二辑), ed. He Hong 何弘 and Zhou Bing 周冰 (Chengdu: Chengdu shidai chubanshe, 2023), p. 139. Epub edition.

the foundational template for the genre that followed. Although the earliest conception of the infinite flow novel drew upon worldviews already existing in other film and literary works, the genre subsequently developed far beyond anyone's expectations, becoming increasingly original, expansive in its worldbuilding, and diverse in its forms. As Xiwen Hao has noted, the most defining characteristic of infinite flow is its "all-encompassing" nature, referring to its capacity to accommodate virtually every imaginable element, including science, psychology, philosophy, religion, mythology, history, geography, contemporary society, film, and games, etc., into a perpetually evolving world system.²

Beyond the character of genre-blending, the infinite flow novel is defined by a second feature, a gamified narrative mechanism, which has dominated existing scholarship. The core plot elements of the genre follow the grammar of video games, such as scenario traversal, task completion, skill upgrades, team cooperation, and world-building logic. For example, in *The Earth is Online* (地球上线, 2018), a mysterious black tower suddenly appears on Earth, forcing all of humanity to act as players who attack the tower and complete dangerous "game instances" by finding and exploiting the rules of each scenario. Wang Yusu identifies this "reversal structure," in which players find cognitive traps and logical gaps within fixed rules and then turn those rules against the system, as the defining feature of the genre's gamified logic.³ Similarly, Shanshan Yang argues that the creation of spaces of "another world" in the novel mirrors gaming's spatial construction.⁴ Wang further situates infinite flow as the origin

² Xiwen Hao, "The Research on the Writing Mechanism of Infinite Flow Novels in China's E-Book Market," in *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, vol. 559 (Amsterdam: Atlantis Press International BV, 2023), https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6463-098-5_63.

³ Wang Yusu 王玉王, *Bianma xin shijie: youxihua xiangdu de wangluo wenxue* 编码新世界：游戏化向度的网络文学 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2021), p. 56.

⁴ Yang Shanshan 杨姗姗, "Zhongguo wangluo kongbu xiaoshuo yanjiu" 中国网络恐怖小说研究 (MA thesis, Southwest University 西南大学, 2024), p. 47.

example of the online suspense genre, arguing that its gamified multidimensional world-setting unsettles the absolute authority of truth in traditional detective fiction and exposes the latent violence of rational power.⁵ The genre's endless "reversal structure" means that no reliable total truth can be delivered.⁶

Overall, existing scholarship has treated the horror as incidental to this genre, rather than as the primary mechanism through which infinite flow produces meaning. Building on these studies, my focus shifts from the gamified narrative to how specific horror oriented IF works produce, manipulate, and circulate fear. Acknowledging the peculiar status of horror in the Chinese literary market, as Ni observes, a brief flourishing of horror fiction in the late 1990s and early 2000s provoked a moral backlash, with accusations of inciting imitative violence and gratuitous gore attached to the genre, leading authors to avoid classifying their work as horror, preferring the more neutral term "suspense."⁷ To me, the IF genre brings stigmatized horror back into the public view, using the protective cover of the gaming form to strip away any moral taint.

My analysis, therefore, focuses on this specific intersection of infinite flow and horror, while also introducing a gendered dimension through a reading of the *danmei* infinite flow novel *Huabu* 画怖 (Paintings of Terror) by Xingyue 琤玥. Existing scholarship on Chinese web literature has tended to discuss *nanpin* 男频 and *nüpin* 女频 works separately, treating the binary as self-evident. I explain and question this assumption through a comparative

⁵ Zijian Wang, "When Sherlock Holmes Becomes a Computer: Suspense, Truth and Media Change in 21st Century Cyber Thriller Novels," *Chinese Journal of Art Studies* 4 (2025): 86.

⁶ Zijian Wang, "When Sherlock Holmes Becomes a Computer," p. 89.

⁷ Xueting C. Ni, "On Chinese Horror Storytelling," *British Fantasy Society*, accessed 6 April 2026, <https://britishfantasysociety.org/on-chinese-horror-storytelling/>.

analysis of *Huabu* and *The Infinite Terror*. I then address the impact of censorship on the production of infinite flow fiction. Section Two returns to the question of horror, examining through a close reading of *Huabu* how spatial horror and temporal horror function as allegories of the condition of the modern subject.

Section 1: Infinite-Flow Novels and their Context

Danmei wuxianliu

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to introduce *danmei* fiction. The term “*danmei*” (耽美, literally “indulgence in beauty”) was initially imported from Japanese culture, where it originated in an early twentieth-century aesthetic literary movement that championed sensory and artistic representation over naturalist concerns, and subsequently gained extraordinary popularity in China.⁸ Generally, *danmei* depicts romantic love between two (usually beautiful) men, and is distinguished from queer fiction by its primary authorship and readership: it is written mainly by women for women, and so accordingly classified within the *nüpin* category. *Danmei* fiction first spread in China through the internet, reaching an audience of educated young women.⁹ From its origins, it has carried a distinctly feminist dimension. As Jin Feng argues, by setting stories in fantastical and fictional worlds and depicting utopian love largely untethered from realism, *danmei* literature provides a space for female readers to imaginatively inhabit an idealized masculinity through gazing at the male protagonist, a process that

⁸ Pi Junjun 皮俊珺, “Guqi wenxue de ‘mei yishi’ mengya zhi chutan” 谷崎文学的“美意识”萌芽之初探 [First Exploration on the Budding of Aesthetic Consciousness in Literature by Tanizaki Jun’ichirō], *Tianjin waiguoyu xueyuan xuebao* 天津外国语学院学报 3 (2002): 64–67.

⁹ Jin Feng, “‘Addicted to Beauty’: Consuming and Producing Web-based Chinese ‘Danmei’ Fiction at Jinjiang,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21.2 (2009): 3.

encourages a sense of empowerment.¹⁰

Despite being initially developed by male authors, infinite flow fiction did not become a dominant form in the *nanpin* market. As Jiang Wenbin summarizes, after *The Infinite Terror* and the brief wave of enthusiasm it generated, reader fatigue set in. The pursuit of narrative excitement made it increasingly difficult to produce anything genuinely new. Female-oriented fiction, by contrast, embraced infinite flow rapidly, and from around 2017 onward, it became one of the most popular forms within the *nüpin* market. This period coincided with a broader explosion of *danmei* fiction, and female authors began combining *danmei* conventions with the infinite flow structure to produce works of considerable ambition. For example, Mu Su Li 木苏里's *Global University Entrance Examination* (*Quanguo gaokao* 全球高考) and Xi Zixu 西子绪's *Death Kaleidoscope* (*Siwang wanhuatong* 死亡万花筒) both topped platform rankings during their serialization.¹¹

In *danmei* infinite flow, love is no longer a dispensable byproduct of the survival plot but occupies an increasingly central position. It intimates that emotional resonance between protagonists, mutual rescue, and even forms of telepathic connection become the primary narrative. The impulse behind this hybrid form arises from a dual dissatisfaction. Female authors are neither content with purely romantic fantasy in *danmei* nor satisfied with the male-oriented structures of competition, leveling-up, and grand narrative arcs in IF that leave little room for female emotional projection. The author of *Huabu*, for instance, brought to the genre an ambition to incorporate hard science fiction on its own terms. *Breaking the Wall* 破壁书

¹⁰ Feng, “Addicted to Beauty,” p. 24.

¹¹ Jiang Wenbin 姜文彬, “Wangluo wuxian liu xiaoshuo yanjiu” 网络无限流小说研究 (MA thesis, Yangtze University 长江大学, 2024), pp. 9–11.

defines female-oriented writing as a creative tendency in which Chinese women, having gained, through the internet, an independent space free from the male gaze, write primarily for themselves.¹² Xiao Yingxuan builds on this, arguing that compared with the commercialized *nüpin* market aimed explicitly at female readers, female-oriented writing, due to its self-contained subcultural ecology, is smaller in scale yet more open to embracing equally niche genres such as science fiction and horror.¹³ *Danmei* infinite flow, centered on same-sex affect, thus opens up the possibility of exploring social history, identity structures, and emotional experience.

Chinese Web Literature: Male category/nanpin and Female category/nüpin

As noted above, Chinese web literature and related scholarship operate within a pervasive binary classification system that divides fiction into *nanpin* and *nüpin*. The logic is straightforward. *Nanpin* fiction is written by men for male readers and characterized by competition, power fantasy, and individual achievement; *nüpin* fiction is written by women for female readers and characterized by romantic relationships and emotional investment. Functioning as a crude but effective market tool, this classification shapes how platforms organize content, how readers navigate their choices, and how authors position their work. On another level, it reflects and reinforces an entrenched gender essentialism in Chinese cultural production, quietly naturalizing assumptions about what male and female readers want. Under

¹² Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 and Wang Yusu 王玉王, *Breaking the Wall: Keywords in Online Literature and Culture* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2018), pp. 166–71.

¹³ Xiao Yingxuan 肖映萱, “Huanxiang de kaituo: ‘Nvxing xiang’ wangluo xiaoshuo dui kehuan ziyuan de jicheng yu gaizao” 幻想的开拓：“女性向”网络小说对科幻资源的继承与改造, *zhongguo tushu pinglun* 中国图书评论 (China Book Review) 1 (2023): 73–74.

Chinese conservative gender politics, many readers accept this assumption without being offended, even following it in practice.

Within this classificatory framework, readers have internalized certain expectations so thoroughly that they have hardened into prejudice. A persistent assumption is that *nanpin* fiction is saturated with misogynistic logic. Zhhtty's *The Infinite Terror*, as the founding myth of the infinite flow genre, offers a clear illustration. He publicly claimed on social media that all infinite flow fiction is an act of homage to him: "as long as anyone writes infinite flow, they are worshipping me, the originator." This declaration attracted significant criticism, with readers identifying it as an expression of extreme male chauvinism, a self-mythologization that reproduces the logic of patriarchal authority. The genre's name echoes the context. "Flow" (流) implies a genealogy streaming outward from a single source, manifesting a founding patriarch whose descendants can only ever be derivative.¹⁴

This patriarchal logic runs through the text itself. Female characters in *The Infinite Terror* are consistently rendered through the male gaze, described primarily in terms of the physical responses they provoke in male characters. The fetishistic descriptions of women's bodies, particularly their breasts, are pervasive and explicit. Too many passages describe a female character whose chest "bounced" as she struck it, causing the two male protagonists to look twice; another describes a young woman "full of a strange allure," her oversized chest "attractive" and "tempting" to male onlookers.¹⁵ Even at the most tense moments of the plot,

¹⁴ Yun Zhijun 云之君, "Taolun/tiqing: 'Wuxian liu' zhe ge ci yingdang bei nüpin zuozhe duzhe yiqi pailei" 讨论/提问 | "无限流" 这个词应该被女频作者读者一起排雷, Douban 豆瓣, 21 September 2024, <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/311585787/>.

¹⁵ Zhhtty, *Wuxian kongbu* 无限恐怖, WeChat Reading 微信读书 edition (n.p.: Yuewen 阅文, n.d.), chs. 5, 20, 32, 54, 55, 59, 70, 71, 72, 75, and *passim*.

these descriptions are not treated as distractions but as a form of comic relief for the male protagonists amid the horror of survival. These details reveal that women in the novel exist primarily as bodies to be observed, their interiority far less important than their capacity to generate male desire. In this sense, female readers are left outside the implied audience somewhat since they are often discomfited by such narrative.

Notably, Zhhtty has never substantially revised this aspect of his work in response to criticism. In addition, his social media persona is classically anti-feminist.¹⁶ He even claimed that “most women cannot understand the true meaning of brotherhood between men, let alone the meanings of dreams, courage, sacrifice, struggle; they tend to focus on more practical, petty-bourgeois concerns.”¹⁷ This dismissal echoes his treatment of female characters in the text, in which women are reduced to a lesser order of experience, incapable of accessing the moral and emotional world the novel reserves for its male protagonists.

Female-oriented fiction, however, does not automatically escape this logic. *Huabu*, written by a female author and serialized on Jinjiang Literature City, a mainstream platform for *nüpin* fiction, attracted criticism precisely for failing to meet the expectations its category implied. Readers complained that its romantic subplot was underdeveloped and awkward. Some went further, suggesting that the novel read as if written by a man, pointing to stereotyped female characters in the early sections as evidence: women who were foolish, a liability to the team, or alternatively cunning and cruel, serving as foils to the moral virtue of the male protagonists, and frequently sacrificed as plot devices (Figure 8,9,10).¹⁸ In this sense, *danmei*, as a narrative

¹⁶ zhhttyzhhtty, Weibo post, 3 August 2024, <https://weibo.com/1553184325/5063612555594648>.

¹⁷ zhhttyzhhtty, Weibo post, 10 May 2024, <https://weibo.com/1553184325/5032530249517878>.

¹⁸ Xiaoshuo fen ni yiban 鸭硕分你一半, Weibo post, 15 May 2026, <https://weibo.com/7271543268/5299093100299723>.

form that idealizes masculinity while sidelining women, does not straightforwardly constitute feminist expression, even when written by women for women. By contrast, female readers praised works like *Apocalypse Paradise* 末日乐园, in which the key to saving the world is held by a female character who is not even a supporting role. This is a narrative choice that, in readers' eyes, affirmed the value of women precisely by refusing to marginalize them.

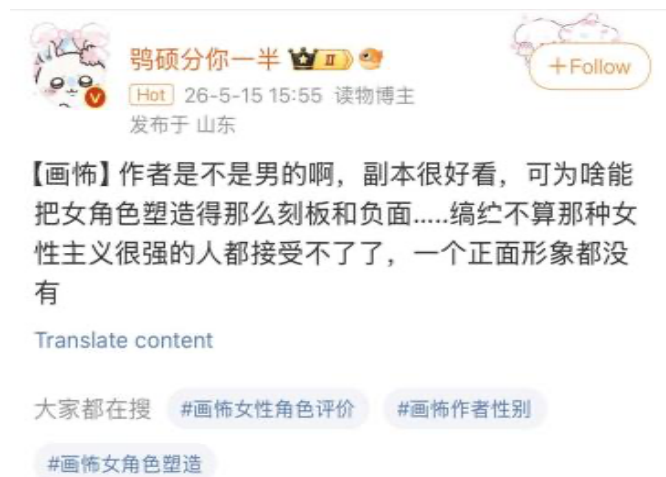


Figure 8. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 1¹⁹

(Note: The full English translations for this and subsequent Chinese screenshots are provided in Appendix.)

¹⁹ Xiaoshuo fen ni yiban 鸢硕分你一半, Weibo post, 15 May 2026, <https://weibo.com/7271543268/5299093100299723>.

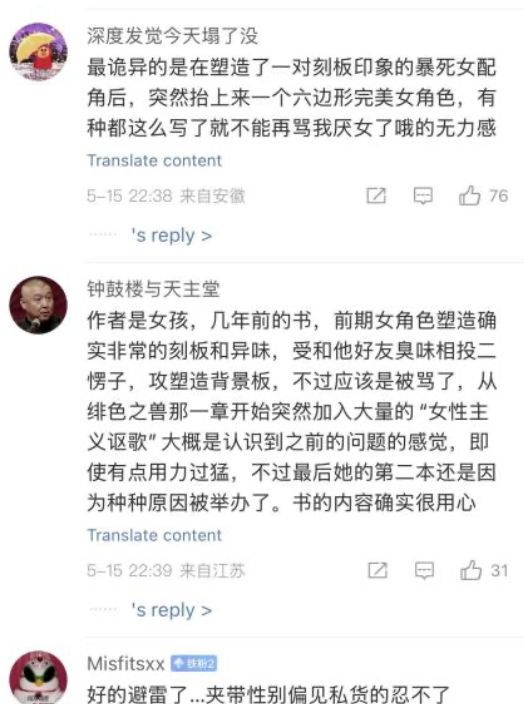


Figure 9. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 2²⁰

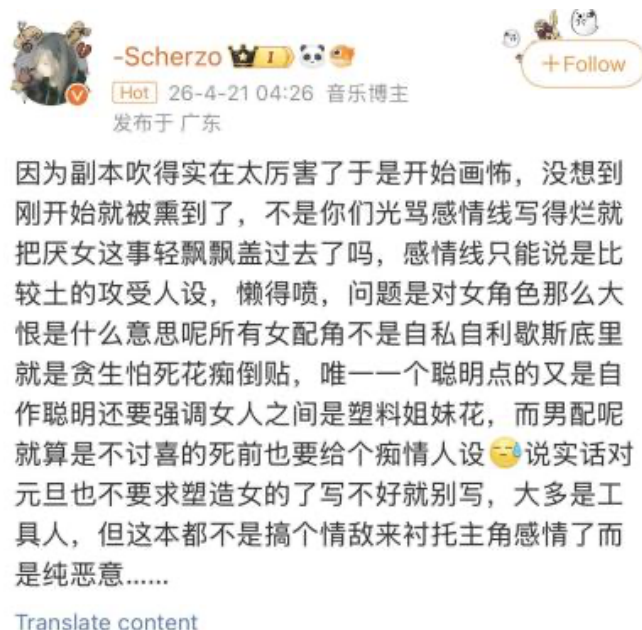


Figure 10. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 3²¹

However, in contrast to Zhhtty, who refused to adjust his writing, the author of *Huabu* engaged with her critics during serialization. In the later chapter titled “The Scarlet Beast (Feise

²⁰ Shendu fajue jintian ta le mei 深度发觉今天塌了没 and Zhonggu lou yu tianzhutang 钟鼓楼与天主堂, comments on Xiaoshuo fen ni yiban 骛硕分你一半, Weibo post, 15 May 2026, <https://weibo.com/7271543268/5299093100299723>.

²¹ -Scherzo, Weibo post, 21 April 2026, <https://weibo.com/1798230283/5290222439112089>.

zhi shou) 绯色之兽,” she offered a sustained feminist reflection on the novel’s treatment of gender. Two passages illustrate this shift. The first reflects on the structural exclusion of women from social discourse:

In an unjust world, women have little voice. They comment on your ‘long hair, short vision,’ or ‘when a woman thinks, God laughs,’ seemingly without malice, even with a subtle indulgence. Yet women are being systematically excluded from social strata.

女性在不公平的世界里，是没有多少话语权的，说你‘头发长见识短’，说‘女人一思考上帝就笑了’，对他们来讲都是再平常不过的话，并无恶意，甚至还有一丝宠溺意味似的……实则明里暗里都在对女性进行着社会阶层的排除。²²

The second passage depicts the dissection of a beast from a deceased woman’s heart. Mouthless, naked, and bound by ropes, the creature serves as a metaphor for the prolonged exploitation the woman endured within her family during her lifetime:

Look at you, with delicate features but no mouth. Is it because you cannot speak? Look at you, a perfectly whole person standing bare. Is this a naked exposure and denunciation of those who leer at you? Look at you, with strong limbs, yet no hands or feet. Hands could grasp everything; feet could walk the world. You stand rigid like this, guarding against the dangers around you, or is it because of that rope binding

²² Xingyue 琨玥, *Huabu* 画怖, ch.167, originally published on Jinjiang Literature City 晋江文学城

you? That damned rope has snapped! You could recover now, recover.

你看你，眉眼秀丽，却没有嘴巴，是不是因为有口难言？你看你，好好的一个人，非要赤裸着身体，是否是对垂涎于此的人做出个痛快的赤裸裸的揭露与鞭笞？你看你，明明有健壮的四肢，却偏偏没生手和脚，双手可以抓牢一切，双脚可以走遍天下的啊！你就这么僵硬着，立得直直的，是在警惕着四周的危险，还是因为那根捆着你的绳子？那该死的绳子都断了，你也好起来吧，好起来吧。²³

By revealing the mechanism of women's social exclusion directly and rendering the bound female figure an allegory of structural constraint as embodied horror, this chapter attempts to engage in a feminist discussion in response to the criticism. Some readers did not buy it, reading the revision as a concession to market pressure rather than authentic authorial intention. However, at least the willingness to reflect publicly and revise substantively distinguishes the author of *Huabu* from Zhttty.

Meanwhile, another voice is worth noting. The critical pressure directed at the author of *Huabu* was itself not free of misogynistic logic. As Ge Liang argues, a dynamic becomes misogynistic in its effects when it deploys patriarchal mechanisms of discipline and exclusion regardless of its ostensibly feminist framing.²⁴ To what extent does the critique narrow the range of women's conduct, desires, and creative writing? Deployed by female readers against a female author, the accusation that *Huabu* reads "as if a man wrote it" functions precisely as this kind of discipline. It ignores the author's efforts to occupy IF territory that the *nanpin/nüpin*

²³ Xingyue, *Huabu*, ch. 167.

²⁴ Liang Ge, "'In the Name of Pro-Women': Intra-Women Surveillance and Internalized Misogyny in Digital East Asia," *Media and Communication* 14 (2026): 2.

binary implicitly reserves for men the characteristics of rigorous world-building, hard science fiction, and philosophical ambition. That *Huabu* pursues these goals and does so in ways that most *nüpin* IF novels do not can itself be read as a feminist intervention and a strategic occupation of a domain long considered male.

Juxtaposing the writings and critiques that *The Infinite Terror* and *Huabu* faced reveals a key problem with the *nanpin/nüpin* classification. It assumes stable correspondences among the author's gender, the implied reader's gender, and the gendered values embedded in the text. As both cases demonstrate, none of these correspondences hold reliably. *Huabu*, at least, attempts to challenge the boundary between *nanpin* and *nüpin*, and is constrained by the very classificatory logic it seeks to unsettle. The binary is not a neutral description of the literary field; it is a regulatory mechanism that shapes what can be written, by whom, and for whom, thus disciplining those who do not stay within its bounds.

Horror, Danmei, and Censorship

Any discussion of Chinese web literature, and particularly of horror and *danmei*, would be incomplete without addressing censorship. The boom of web literature marked a new degree of autonomy, shifting from a print publishing industry entirely under state ownership to literary websites that, operating as de facto publishers, were not state-owned. For a long time, the Chinese internet, as a space of cultural production, has been read by Western observers as a symbol of freedom perpetually suppressed by government control.²⁵ Michel Hockx argues that ever since Xi Jinping took power, the censorship regime has intensified considerably, working

²⁵ Michel Hockx, "The Literary Field and the Field of Power: The Case of Modern China," *Paragraph* 35.1 (2012): 61–62.

to disguise prohibition as benevolent guidance and to transform popular culture into something “morally conservative, highly patriarchal, and extremely patriotic,” demanding literature that upholds patriotic values and avoids any recognizable political reality.²⁶ One crucial point is that the official guidelines for censorship have never been fully made public, generating a vagueness that enforces pervasive self-censorship and leaves no traces, a method that has proven more effective than explicit prohibition.²⁷

Within this framework, horror fiction occupies an ambiguous position. Explicit restrictions on supernatural and horror content in China have focused on the genres of film and television areas. A 2008 directive from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television specified that horror, ghost, and supernatural content was subject to heightened scrutiny, and it has since become a consensus that thriller productions must not contain superstitious content that violates socialist core values and the discourse of scientific rationality and progress.²⁸ Online fiction, by contrast, has faced censorship focused primarily on sexually explicit and obscene content. The 2021 “Qinglang 清朗” campaign further tightened controls on web literature, emphasizing the removal of “vulgar” and “pornographic” material, with *danmei* fiction, due to its depictions of same-sex romance and sexual content, becoming a primary target.²⁹

As for horror content in online fiction, although it has not been explicitly regulated, authors have inevitably developed self-censorship mechanisms. In IF fiction, this includes, for example,

²⁶ Michel Hockx, *Literature and Censorship in Modern China* (London: Routledge, 2026), p. 67.

²⁷ Lynda Ng, “China’s Elusive Truths: Censorship, Value and Literature in the Internet Age,” in *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary: A Global View*, ed. Nicole Moore (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 242.

²⁸ Zheng Houzhe 郑厚哲, “Yingye de falü sikao: dianying neirong shencha de chidu” 影业的法律思考：电影内容审查的尺度, 1 December 2016, <https://victory.itslaw.com/victory/api/v1/articles/article/9f2b3667-81e5-40df-ae37-816b97df57ee?downloadLink=2>.

²⁹ Boston Review of Books 波士顿书评, “Shupinduanping: Women keyi shaohui Sade ma?” 书评短评 | 我们可以烧毁萨德吗?, *Boston Review of Books*, 21 July 2025, <https://bostonreviewofbooks.substack.com/p/a38>.

explaining ostensibly supernatural phenomena through scientific rationales (referring to sci-fi settings), thereby reframing “feudal superstition” or “ghosts” as scientifically explicable; deploying cold, absolute “game rules” to reduce the risk that readers will map the fictional world onto social reality, which might destabilize the social order; and restraining graphic depictions of sensory and bodily violence, turning instead to spatial atmosphere as the primary vehicle for horror. In his study of online ghost stories with political allegories, Mengxing Fu treats them as an art of resistance, in a way both imitating and distancing themselves from old *zhiguai* conventions of horror to bypass censorship and to reference things that cannot be named directly.³⁰ The IF horror works examined in this thesis operate somewhat differently, as they are not primarily engaged in conscious political allegory. Rather, the development of IF horror can be understood as a form of discourse invented in the process of working against and through the pressures of a mainstream state discourse that tends to suppress or dismiss the terrifying.

Danmei wuxianliu, however, faces dual pressures. *Huabu*, one of the most well-known IF works in *nüpin*, was removed from Jinjiang Literature City through a combination of reader reports and platform self-censorship. The novel now survives only in private archives and fragmented reader circulation. The reason is, first, in one episode, the novel depicts a government institution conducting electroshock therapy and prefrontal lobotomy experiments on homosexuals, a scenario read as an allegory for state suppression of homosexuality. Second, this depiction triggered accusations of “historical nihilism” and of implicitly targeting the nation, charges that reflect the broader political sensitivity around any fictional treatment of

³⁰ Mengxing Fu, “New Wine in Old Bottles: Contemporary Chinese Online Allegorical Ghost Stories as Political Commentary,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 5.1 (2019): 51.

state violence against queer subjects.³¹

At this level, horror manifests a dimension beyond the fictional world. The content censorship and reporting mechanism constitutes a form of institutional horror, capable not only of erasing a text's online existence but of dissolving the affective community built through serialization, comments, and reader interaction. Horror, in other words, extends beyond ghosts and death within the narrative to the power network constituted by the relations among text, platform, and users. As Tingting Hu, Liang Ge, and Cathy Yue Wang observe, China's censorship regime has shifted from a simple top-down model to a more complex system involving government agencies, state media, commercial platforms, and netizens who report one another through platform tools linked to state censorship.³² In this sense, readers themselves become accomplices in the production of horror. The censorship recruits readers into its own enforcement, functioning as an external horror that echoes the fictional horror logic within the text. The boundary between institutional horror and narrative horror, it turns out, is as permeable as the boundaries between the painted worlds that *Huabu*'s protagonists' traverse. With this doubling in mind, I now turn to a close reading of the novel's internal horror of space and time.

Section 2: A Reading of Huabu

Despite ongoing controversies around its treatment of gender, *Huabu* has never been in doubt as a work spanning an extraordinary range of subjects, widely regarded as among the most

³¹ Yue Gu 月顾, answer to "Wei shenme zai Jinjiang APP sou bu dao 'Huabu'?" 为什么在晋江 APP 搜不到《画怖》?, Zhihu 知乎, 19 July 2021, accessed 12 December 2025, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/473421257>.

³² Tingting Hu, Liang Ge, and Cathy Yue Wang, "A State against Boys' Love? Reviewing the Trajectory of Censorship over Danmei," *Continuum* (2024): 235.

accomplished in female-oriented infinite-flow fiction. Following the protagonist Ke Xun 柯寻, his lover Mu Yiran 牧怵然, and their companions, the novel begins with an accidental entry into an art museum and a subsequent pull into the world of painting. Structured around deciphering puzzles and locating the signatures of each painting as the condition of escape, their adventure takes them through fourteen paintings in turn, each forming a relatively autonomous yet interconnected world that collectively points toward allegories of multi-spatiality, parallel worlds, and temporal dislocation.

This story recalls the 2012 Japanese pixel-horror game *Ib*, in which a girl visiting an exhibition falls into a fantastical painted world and must solve puzzles to escape, but the two share little else. Where *Ib* follows a philosophy of “less is more,” generating unease through imagery and sound aesthetics, *Huabu* takes the opposite approach with dense content and engaging with social issues.³³ Drawing on elements of Chinese traditional horror, the novel incorporates folk funeral rituals in Episode One “Funeral Affairs (Baishi) 白事,” mythological and religious violence in Episode Two “Faith (Xinyang) 信仰,” and folklore and classical literary sources in Episodes Nine, Thirteen, and Fourteen. Other episodes turn toward pressing contemporary concerns. Reconstructing the traumatic forced demolition of longtime residents of “Spring Bamboo Apartments,” “Breaking Ground (Potu) 破土” engages with the contradictions of urban redevelopment and capital exploitation in China’s modernization. “Animal World (Dongwu shijie) 动物世界” depicts a horrific reversal of the human-animal food chain, reducing humans to industrially slaughtered feed while cattle wield whips as

³³ Des Miller, “Ib (Remake) Review,” *RPGFan*, 25 May 2023, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20230807172540/https://www.rpgfan.com/review/ib-remake/>, accessed 20 September 2025.

overseers, opening onto questions of animal abuse and protection. In the episode “Restart,” the author uses the spread of the Ebola virus as an allegory for ecological breakdown in the Anthropocene, imagining an apocalyptic collapse. The episode “Schrödinger’s Cat (Xueding de mao) 薛定谔的猫” discusses structural problems in China’s exam-driven education system. It also connects the novel’s overarching worldview to the science-fictional logic of quantum mechanics, providing the theoretical worldbuilding that holds it all together.

The novel’s most unsettling argument lands at its conclusion. All human consciousness turns out to be nothing more than dust on a membrane in a seven-dimensional space, regarded by higher-dimensional beings with complete indifference to human effort, feeling, and sacrifice. This recalls the Singer 歌者 civilization in Liu Cixin 刘慈欣’s *Three-Body (Santi)* 三体 trilogy, where an inhuman alien intelligence of superior advancement patrols the universe and regards human civilization condescendingly. There is, however, an interesting difference: I argue that *Huabu* draws on the idea from *Three-Body* but goes beyond it. In the *Three-Body* world, more advanced and less advanced civilizations coexist within the same competitive universe, where lower civilizations face the threat of being cleansed, a threat that, however lethal, at least implies a kind of recognition by situating all in a relentless struggle for survival. As Mingwei Song argues, “[Singer] enjoys the beauty of the primitive membrane the humans broadcast into space... the human experiences are nothing but a sort of ‘language’ or ‘poetry’ written on the primitive membrane. This is what appeals to Singer.”³⁴ That is to say, Singer civilization at least finds aesthetic value in human experiences. In *Huabu*, however, the human world is an incomplete membrane “made” by seven-dimensional beings, and the protagonists’

³⁴ Mingwei Song, *Fear of Seeing: A Poetics of Chinese Science Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 117.

attempts to explore the higher-dimensional world are regarded as a “deficient membrane.” This setting fundamentally annihilates the significance of human civilization’s existence by canceling the meaning of human effort. *Huabu*, in one sense, pushes beyond the cosmological framework of *Three-Body* entirely: where Liu’s trilogy still operates within the universe’s internal logic of civilizational competition, *Huabu* gestures toward something that exceeds even the category of dimension itself. As the protagonist approaches the novel’s final revelation, “the vast and magnificent super-universe collapsed before his eyes into a singularity, infinitely small and infinitely large at once... he felt as though he had left yet another... perhaps ‘dimension’ is no longer the right word here. 那磅礴恢宏的超级宇宙，在他的眼前变成了一颗无穷小，又无穷大的奇点……他感觉自己好像又离开了一个……也许在这里已经不能用‘维度’来定义了……” The novel ends with “the most terrifying thing in the world is not gods or ghosts, but science. 世界上最恐怖的不是神鬼，是科学。”³⁵

Colliding scientific rationalism with humanist narrative, this revelation renders horror not as an external threat but as a cognitive collapse. I do not intend to survey all this content comprehensively. My aim is to show that the horror in *Huabu* consistently takes the form of something bound up with actual conditions of existence, with questions about what kind of subjects inhabit the modern world and what happens to them when the structures they depend on stop working. The horror, in other words, is bound up with the instability and unknowability of humanity’s past, future, and the very structure of the world, what might be called the finiteness of the human in an infinite narrative.

Entering the painting is, in this sense, a form of psychological work. Identifying four

³⁵ Xingyue, *Huabu*, ch.380.

ultimate concerns that human beings must confront, namely death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, Irvin D. Yalom offers a framework that infinite-flow narratives seem almost designed to enact.³⁶ Protagonists typically begin with loss or solitude, orphaned sometimes, and find within the painting worlds a sustained romantic bond that addresses the problem of isolation. Meaning emerges through a heroic, salvific sense of mission. Freedom manifests as a state of existing beyond the rule structures of the human world. And death, rather than being evaded in ordinary life, is confronted directly and repeatedly in painting worlds. The painting worlds, in other words, do not offer escape from these concerns. They force protagonists to live inside them. It is precisely because of this that the therapeutic and the terrifying turn out to be the same experience approached from different angles. The confrontation that IF narrative make possible is also what makes them unbearable.

Treating horror as a concept operating simultaneously at psychological and social levels, this section examines it as the affective core of infinite-flow fiction. The analysis proceeds across two dimensions. First, I turn to spatial horror, examining how space in IF texts, through its enclosure, rule-orientation, and artificiality, becomes a disciplinary structure that produces fear. Second, moving to temporal horror, from suspended time and temporal loops to temporal taboos and ethical dilemmas, I investigate how time generates horror, which does not stem solely from the imminence of death. Dissolving and reorganizing time, space, and behavioral rules, it strips away the world's intelligibility, emerging from the subject's experience of existential is-ness.

³⁶ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). The “four ultimate concerns of life” — death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness — are discussed throughout Parts I–IV.

Space and Horror

Space in *Huabu* is not merely a neutral geographical setting or narrative backdrop, but what makes things happen, actively constructing fear, regulating behavior, and shaping how characters perceive the world around them.

A recurring traversing mechanism in infinite-flow fiction is the mediating object, something drawn from everyday life that appears innocuous precisely because of its familiarity. In *Huabu*, it is a specific painting in an art museum; in another well-known infinite-flow novel, *Death Kaleidoscope*, it is a series of doors. What these mediators share is their accessibility and the abruptness with which they transport characters from reality into fictional space. In *Death Kaleidoscope*, protagonists may be chatting casually one moment and find themselves inside a door the next. Freud's concept of *Das Unheimliche*, rendered in English as the *uncanny*, describes this psychological phenomenon in which something familiar harbors an unsettling strangeness.³⁷ Mark Fisher extends this into spatial terms, characterizing the uncanny as the feeling of "the domestic world not coinciding with itself."³⁸ Once inside these worlds, previously familiar frameworks and concepts become obsolete. In their place, protagonists must figure out the rules governing how the world operates, or more precisely, how death operates within it, since mastering these rules is also the only path to escape. What makes this terrifying is that there is no safe way to learn them. Rules can only be inferred, indirectly, through the deaths of companions. They are invisible, opaque, and inexplicable, rendering systems of knowledge, embodied experience, and natural law entirely useless. Sometimes the

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 124–25.

³⁸ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 5. Epub edition.

world is outright anti-rational. In the episode “Restart,” protagonists discover that tropical and cold-climate plants grow side by side in the same region, a phenomenon that might be explained if the forest were artificially cultivated, but the text presents it as natural wilderness. Such counter-intuitive spatial arrangements generate cognitive horror. When the world no longer follows real world logic, this is not merely a metaphor for Anthropocene chaos; it signals the collapse of human empiricism itself.

As Eugene Thacker argues in his *Horror of Philosophy* series, “[...] is there no distinction between the natural and supernatural, but what we sloppily call ‘supernatural’ is simply another kind of nature, but one that lies beyond human comprehension — not in a relative but in an absolute sense.” This, he writes, is the basis of Lovecraft’s “cosmic horror”: “the paradoxical realization of the world’s hiddenness as an absolute hiddenness.”³⁹ In infinite-flow fiction, this hiddenness manifests through rules. The worlds are governed by logics that operate mechanically, non-negotiably, and without explanation, exercising absolute authority over life and death. Rules become the medium through which the world’s fundamental illegibility is felt. The fear they generate is not the fear of a visible threat, but the fear of inhabiting a structure one cannot understand.

Spaces in IF novels also tend to be intensely closed. Protagonists are forced into environments that appear realistic but are severed from the real world. With all routes of escape cut off, they are confined within a liminal space saturated with the unknown and latent possibilities, which in turn produces a corresponding psychological liminality marked by panic and destabilization. When characters attempt to leave, they encounter a deeply unsettling fact:

³⁹ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), p. 77.

[...] We walked along the road toward the distance, only to find that it gradually disappeared. Ahead was nothing but chaos, much like the first painting we entered, whose edges were deliberately blurred. It was clearly another restricted painting, confining us to the area between the residential zone and the forest.

[...]我们试着沿公路向远处走了走，发现走着走着就没了路，前方是一片混沌，就像是《白事》那幅画一样，边缘区域都进行了模糊处理，显然这也是一幅限定型的画，把我们限定在了这边住宅区和森林之内的范围里。⁴⁰

These outward-extending zones of chaos are filled with unpredictable dangers. Those who attempt to escape vanish into them. Horror arises not only from the psychological pressure of confinement, but also from the visual violence implied by the deliberate blurring of spatial boundaries. This strategy reveals the world as something drawn and artificially constructed, exposing its unreality. Such scenes recall the film *Coraline*, in which the girl discovers an empty void beyond the garden of the Other Mother's world. That world is partial, seductive, and familiar, while everything beyond it is blank, exposing the illusion as false⁴¹. *Huabu* goes further. Protagonists are not merely forbidden from crossing boundaries. It is the curiosity itself that is prohibited. Exploration beyond prescribed limits is considered a rule violation and is punished by disappearance into the void. The space disciplines not just behavior but even the impulse to question.

If unreality is foregrounded to its extreme in the early stages of the novel, the later

⁴⁰ Xingyue, *Huabu*, ch. 279.

⁴¹ *Coraline*, directed by Henry Selick (Burbank, CA: Laika, 2009), film.

episodes work in the opposite direction by constructing an overwhelming sense of realism that erodes the subject's ability to distinguish the real from the false. In the episode "The Scarlet Beast," those who enter the city gradually forget limited time, identity, and eventually begin to enjoy the life in the painting and wish to remain forever. Upon entering the city, characters are immediately assigned social roles and tasks, such as police officers, forensic examiners, clerks, or "outsiders." Outsiders exist in a transparent, blurred, ghost-like state. They remain conscious and have not lost their awareness, yet their warnings cannot be perceived by companions who have already become "insiders." In another episode, horrific scenes of monsters overtly devouring humans unfold. The protagonists are informed of a disturbing phenomenon: although deities are supposed to oversee and regulate the crimes, when they pass through this place, they become assimilated into its prevailing ethos and come to regard everything as natural and justified⁴². Both episodes point to a logic of assimilation. Horror no longer stems from recognizing the world as unreal, but from realizing that one is being gradually absorbed and reshaped by a false space, with one's perceptual and ethical frameworks rewritten from within. In this sense, space acquires agency, quietly reshaping how characters think and feel, spreading its logic like a contagion across human and nonhuman bodies alike. This spatial logic mirrors a structural anxiety in contemporary society: individuals' sense that something is wrong, yet they are being ideologically reconfigured into subjects who can no longer question or resist it.

Time and Horror

⁴² Xingyue, *Huabu*, ch. 341.

Beyond space, time becomes a source of horror in *Huabu*. The manipulation of time challenges linear temporal progression. When protagonists enter an episode, narrative time activates while real-world time is suspended entirely. However long they spend inside, the passage of time in the external world remains zero, resuming only upon their exit. Drawing on David Lewis's distinction between external time and personal time, in which the former refers to the objective time of the world and the latter to the time shown on the traveler's own wristwatch, the incommensurability between these two temporalities generates a persistent sense of sensory dislocation. Ordinary individuals maintain continuity within external time; time travelers preserve that continuity only within the domain of personal time.⁴³ For the protagonists of *Huabu*, this produces a troubling question: were their experiences genuinely real, or merely a nightmare? The museum ticket that appears in their pockets afterward serves as a material reminder of the intersection between the virtual and the external worlds, and of how personal time is cut apart by an external clock.

Renren Yang argues that both capitalist and socialist temporal regimes promote a "homogeneous time," one stripped of human value and lived experience, promising a teleological vision of human progress while foreclosing genuine reflection.⁴⁴ Infinite flow narratives intervene by disrupting this linear temporal line, creating a space in which such reflection becomes possible. The accelerated tempo of everyday life leaves little room to contemplate the very problems that modern progress generates but refuses to address. It is

⁴³David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13.2 (1976): 146–48.

⁴⁴Renren Yang, "Buried Alive in History: Poetics, Politics and Ethics of Time in *Startling by Each Step* (Bubu Jingxin) and Other Chinese Time-Travel Historical Romances," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 10.4 (2016): 699–742.

through the virtual spaces and suspended time of infinite flow that the novel finds room to engage with questions it could not otherwise raise, among them forced demolition, animal protection, and environmental destruction. Yet the thinking space that infinite flow opens up is not a comfortable one. Time in these worlds does not simply pause; it becomes a site of prohibition, ethical paradox, and ultimately, causal collapse.

Time, therefore, becomes taboo. In “A Life’s Journey in Reverse (Nilü) 逆旅,” whenever protagonists or other characters utter words that even allude to time, they are met with terrified reactions and sharp rebukes: “You just hit a taboo! You just hit a taboo!” Even more unsettling is what follows. The speaker returns to calm almost immediately and loses all memory of the outburst, as if nothing had happened. At that point, the protagonists have not yet realized that time itself is what is forbidden. Horror arises not only from the sudden outbursts and contorted expressions but from the sense of an unknown prohibition governing thought and events. As Fisher observes in *The Weird and the Eerie*, eerie horror typically derives from an unseen agency, an imperceptible order that orchestrates reality from behind the scenes and makes the subject aware of being governed by a transcendent structure.⁴⁵ The temporal taboo makes this structure felt while keeping its nature opaque. Characters inhabit a world that must be obeyed without being understood, where both language and time are under surveillance.

The same episode then reveals something stranger still. Every individual exists alongside another self on a different timeline. Time folds back on itself in a looping, circular structure. Death is not an endpoint but a “node” where two timelines briefly intersect. Sacrificing the

⁴⁵ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), pp. 41–42. Epub edition.

present self might leave more time for another version of the self. In other words, time becomes a resource that can be redistributed, and the horror of this ethical dilemma lies in the fracture it opens within the subject. Two versions of the self are placed in irreconcilable conflict, with no standpoint from which to adjudicate between them. Who is the real self? The one who lives now, or the one on another timeline? Who deserves to survive, and who should be sacrificed? The horror, then, does not stem from time itself but from the way time forces the subject to confront its own incompleteness. The splitting of timelines positions the subject perpetually on the brink of collapse, unable to make a fully coherent ethical choice. What is feared is no longer death alone, but the awareness of a missing part of the self, and the existential anxiety produced by a subject that can never be whole.

On the other hand, this temporal taboo suggests that, in the world of “A Life’s Journey in Reverse,” time has been entirely removed from everyday life. Gone are the clocks, the rooster calls, the barking dogs, any natural or social rhythms capable of marking the passage of time. By constructing a de-temporalized space, this setting strips characters of the temporal frameworks that once guided their actions, leaving them in uncertainty. Unable to rely on clock time, protagonists are forced to depend on their own biological rhythms to resist absorption by the space. I suggest that this configuration reflects the imagination and critique of everyday life in contemporary digital society. As Henri Lefebvre notes in *Rhythmanalysis*, “everyday life is modeled on abstract, quantitative time, the time of watches and clocks.”⁴⁶ Losing clock time and temporal markers, therefore, signifies the withdrawal of this homogeneous time from daily

⁴⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 73.

life. As E. P. Thompson argued, the rise of clock time replaced task-oriented rhythms with a new form of temporal discipline, making the synchronization of labor possible and marking the operation of mature industrial capitalism.⁴⁷ By fantastically abolishing time, the novel explores a mode of resistance, placing humans in a de-temporalized condition that expresses a longing for, and mourning of, natural time untainted by capitalism.

To contrast the operations of capitalist temporal discipline from a different angle, the episode “Shadow (ying) 影” depicts time as a highly institutionalized force governing action. Protagonists must complete a fixed quota of labor, three large jars of berries, within a strictly defined daily timeframe. Foreshadowing the timing of the next death, the clock on the wall not only regulates the rhythm of labor but also becomes a symbol of power that governs life and death itself. The coercive regulation of labor rhythms reenacts the industrial capitalist time discipline analyzed by Thompson, as subjects are forced to submit their labor to an externally imposed tempo. If the horror of “A Life’s Journey in Reverse” arises from the absence of time, the horror of “Shadow” emerges from its over-discipline. Taken together, these two episodes reveal the political dimension of time in infinite-flow horror narratives: protagonists must continually struggle against the temporal logic of the world, either resisting assimilation into de-temporalized spaces or confronting the possibility of being disciplined and punished by temporal regimes.

At the moment of revelation near the novel’s conclusion, the explanation of time explicitly incorporates science-fictional elements. Revealed to be disordered and unstable, the timelines

⁴⁷ E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967): 61–69.

give rise to a turbulent and chaotic temporal space. At the climax of the story, the protagonists glimpse fleeting fragments along the timeline, including images of their past and future selves, gesturing toward parallel worlds, superposition, multiple dimensions, and spacetime curvature produced by uneven material fields. When they attempt to figure out how to obtain sufficient blood to complete the task without requiring the death of all team members, the solution lies in returning to a world they had previously visited, where one of them had suffered severe injury and significant blood loss. Having planted a crucial clue earlier, the author now reveals its significance: when that character was injured and unconscious, he had seen figures from the future taking his blood, an experience he had dismissed as hallucination. This narrative intervenes at a micro level into linear causality. Already shaped by causes that were themselves influenced retroactively, the outcome turns out to be the result of the protagonists' own later intervention in the past. This classic temporal paradox, staged repeatedly throughout the narrative, intensifies the instability of time. The horror here does not arise merely from temporal disorder, but from the recognition that causality itself, one of the most fundamental structures of human existence, has collapsed, taking with it the epistemic and ontological foundations on which the subject depends.

Love, Animalization, and Subjectivity

If space disciplines the subject from without and time breaks it from within, what remains is the question of whether subjectivity can survive at all. Rather than death, the painting worlds of *Huabu* threaten the protagonists with the gradual erosion of the self at the levels of ideology,

the body, and language itself. Žižek's account of ideological fantasy offers a way into this:

When we awaken from a dream into reality, we usually tell ourselves that it was 'only a dream.' By doing so, we ignore the fact that in our daily, waking reality, we are nothing but the consciousness of this dream. Only in the dream do we approach the fantasy-frame which structures our activity and patterns of behavior in reality.⁴⁸

The dismissal of "it was only a dream" precisely conceals the dream's revelatory function.

The fictional experiences in IF narrative enact this dream-structure literally: the protagonist enters a separate world, undergoes what cannot be undergone in waking reality, and returns bearing the fantasy-frame that world brought into view, whether they acknowledge it or not.

The horrors the protagonists encounter in the painting worlds constitute the fantasy-frame that structures the reality they return to. It can be read through the episode "Animal World," where the protagonists witness a complete reversal of the human-animal food chain. Humans are reduced to dismembered parts in slaughterhouses, to slices of meat on plates, to bodies conscripted into reproductive labor, while cattle wield whips as elevated overseers. Subjected to naked and public mating, the protagonists experience an intense sense of shame, and then, gradually, find that shame beginning to fade. What initially appeared as an unbearable violation of human dignity becomes normalized through repeated exposure and enforced participation. More disturbingly, some members do not merely accommodate themselves to the new order but actively seek a position within it: those who become "seed-humans," voluntarily serving as breeders, have found in the inverted structure not only a bearable

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), ch.1, "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?" p. 52. Epub edition.

existence but a functional identity — and with it, a reorganization of desire itself around the terms the new order provides. The horror lies not only in the worldbuilding setting of reversal, but also in the normalization that follows. Ethical modernity dissolves from within, once the fantasy frame governing social relations has been restructured. Hence, the fiction of “Animal World” reveals how quickly the moral frameworks of human civilization can be undone when the conditions sustaining them are removed.

Where “Animal World” renders a collective animalization as a horror of moral dissolution, another episode, “Pure Land (Jingtu) 净土,” relocates it to the individual body. Each member is randomly assigned a character from an old animated series and must enter the corresponding fictional world to complete its plot and tasks within a set time. Those who enter the wrong world undergo a gradual corporeal transformation into their assigned character, a process that is distinctly bodily and sensory. The protagonist Ke Xun finds himself becoming a cat. His human language dissolves into meaningless, non-human sounds. His knowledge and reasoning become unintelligible to his companions because no one can understand cat language. Hence, he finds himself being isolated from his group in an alien and treacherous environment. The horror does not lie in death as an endpoint but in the gradual loss of human identity. When Ke Xun’s teammate transforms into a mouse, Ke finds himself unable to suppress a predatory instinct toward his companion. What is lost is not merely bodily integrity but the rational and moral self-mastery by which the human defines itself against the animal. Rather than a fear of external threat, it is a fear of becoming a stranger to oneself.

Beyond marking the regression of the human and the retreat of subjectivity, animalization in “Pure Land” opens onto an affective possibility. On the one hand, Ke Xun’s transformation into a cat follows a recognizable convention of female-oriented fantasy *danmei* fiction, generating emotional tension and a kind of “cuteness,” intensifying romantic logic and deepening intimacy between partners. This narrative, however, does not merely serve the purpose of romance. On the other hand, it enacts a breakdown of the symbolic order through which a different kind of intimacy becomes possible.

Borrowing from Kristeva’s account of horror and abjection, animalization can be understood as an analogous dissolution of subjective boundaries, a process that draws the subject into the pre-linguistic space where the usual conditions of symbolic subjectivity no longer hold.⁴⁹ When Ke Xun’s language regresses into feline sounds, symbolic communication temporarily fails. What replaces it is rhythm, emotion, and bodily presence. His companions cannot understand him; only his lover can. This seemingly irrational configuration suggests that affect does not depend on symbolic systems but emerges from more primal and immediate forms of perception.

⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 10–12. In her book, Kristeva conceptualizes abjection as a dynamic force situated between pre-linguistic drives and symbolic language, a semiotic energy that repeatedly tears at representational structures, pushing the subject into a liminal state where meaning collapses and signifiers disintegrate (10–12). Objects such as corpses and excrement provoke horror not merely physiologically but structurally since they threaten the boundaries that constitute the subject, collapsing the distinction between inside and outside, self and not-self. Therefore, the horror they provoke is pre-linguistic, with a visceral, bodily recoil that precedes and exceeds the symbolic order. Although animalization does not constitute a classic instance of abjection, it operates, in my opinion, through an analogous logic. The body begins to exceed conscious control, the sounds produced can no longer be processed by the symbolic order, and the boundary between human subject and “animalized body” starts to dissolve.

It is precisely within this dissolution that love appears. Wu Guanjun, revisiting Alain Badiou's ontology of love, argues that love, though enacted through subjective practice, is itself non-human, operating as a subjectless affect, an ontological force capable of disturbing the subject and triggering transformations of subjectivity.⁵⁰ In other words, love does not depend on the subject. Appearing in the rupture as a non-subjective force, it reorganizes the subject from within. This is why love can emerge from animal regression rather than being foreclosed by it: the very dissolution of the symbolic subject is the condition that makes love's non-subjective force visible. No longer being an experience of subjective collapse, animalization becomes the very condition through which subjectivity can be reconstituted — and through which a different mode of intimacy becomes possible, one that bypasses symbolic language entirely, grounded instead in body and direct affective perception.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter Two examines the IF novel as a commercialized literary form that absorbs and transforms horror. Beginning with a contextual account of the genre's origins and its gendered division into *nanpin* and *nüpin*, the chapter situates *danmei* infinite flow as a hybrid form that combines the survival logic of male-oriented infinite flow with the affective and romantic investments of female-oriented fiction. A comparative reading of Zhhtty's *The Infinite Terror* and Xingyue's *Huabu* exposes the limits of the *nanpin/nüpin* binary as a classificatory system, showing that it functions not as a neutral description but as a regulatory

⁵⁰ Wu Guanjun 吴冠军, "Ai de bentilun: yige Badiou zhuyi-hou renleizhuyi chonggou" 爱的本体论：一个巴迪欧主义 - 后人类主义重构 ["Ontology of Love: A Badiouist-Posthumanist Reconstruction"], *Wenhua yishu yanjiu* 文化艺术研究 14 (2021): 18, accessed 27 June 2025, via CNKI.

mechanism that disciplines authorial and readerly practice. The chapter then addresses censorship of horror and *danmei*, respectively, arguing that the institutional suppression of *danmei* horror constitutes a form of horror by absorbing the reader and author into the practice of censorship.

The next section turns to a close reading of *Huabu* across three perspectives: space, time, and love. By creating an enclosed space, horror operates through gradual assimilation of characters into false worlds, producing a fear not of visible threats but of inhabiting a structure one cannot understand or resist. Temporal horror works through suspended time, temporal taboos, looping timelines, and the collapse of causality itself, reflecting the discipline of time and eroding human subjectivity. Further, I discuss subjectivity in collective and individual animalization, and how this dissolves the ethical order, and how love operates as a non-subjective force capable of reorganizing the subject from within. In short, horror is the anxiety of inhabiting worlds where rules cannot be understood, time cannot be controlled, and space continuously threatens to absorb the human into something other than itself. More than an analytical category, horror becomes a mode of thinking that reveals the fractures of modern subjectivity and, in some sense, reflects the possibility of love.

Coda

A question has long run through my mind and eventually rooted itself in this thesis: in what ways does popular culture, constantly consumed especially in the digital age, reshape our affective lives and perception of society in ways fundamentally different from before? Manifesting foremost as an increasingly ubiquitous form of entertainment, it by no means stops there, precisely because this ubiquity enables it to provoke, feed, and further respond to our present emotional needs and desires.

Scholars of cultural and literature studies have noted this trend, attending to the ways in which internet popular culture carries the potential to transform social ideas and even social structures. Recent scholarship on Chinese web literature has grown considerably, yet it remains, almost inevitably, in a somewhat marginal position. Such studies often devote extra length to justifying the significance of their research and the legitimacy of their methodology, since a “consensus” must be established before analysis can even begin. Some studies adopt the narrative and aesthetic frameworks used for canon literature, as if to elevate web fiction to the same standing as more canonized cultural forms, thus acknowledging the necessity of web literature. Meanwhile, some voices claim that these frameworks are anachronistic to the new social structures and forms that have emerged. Taking both sides with a grain of salt, I neither think blindly copying past methodologies will work, nor do I claim they are completely useless. The former risks being methodologically lazy; the latter, however, runs into a similar trap—by simply saying “no,” it dodges the real question: what does work then? Criticizing what’s already out there is easy, while constructing something that surpasses the object of critique is another matter entirely. The result is that no fully developed theoretical framework for this field

has yet been widely adopted.

Against this backdrop, the methodological untidiness of this thesis parallels, in a sense, the current state of the field. This thesis adopts no single fixed methodology, nor does it resort to any “authority” to back its approach. By freely juxtaposing space with a series of affects such as horror, nostalgia, romance, and focusing on three specific web literary texts, this thesis has attempted to address several questions: how does space, operating simultaneously as topographical and aesthetic space, become entangled with particular emotions within these texts? How does space intervene in the construction of nostalgia or horror, and through this, acquire the capacity to intervene in reality? And what role does the technical form of the internet play in all of this?

In response to these questions, returning to the horror that connects these texts is essential. Horror, as I have argued, is a collective, haunting, and diffusing feeling inseparable from contemporary social reality. Where love, nostalgia, or other emotions require a defined object, a relationship, and sustained investment to be maintained, a sense of horror could be contagious, self-amplifying, and objectless, sticking to all manner of social signs as it circulates socially without requiring a fixed source. This objectless-ness is also what makes horror difficult to study. The horror of a specific object easily dissolves into a feeling without a traceable source. The Backrooms offers a good example: is the horror of liminal space a horror of the unknown? A horror of the uncanny where the familiar is rendered strange? A horror of death and danger? The answer lies in its very mixedness, and horror, I would suggest, is also a horror of that mixedness itself.

Given all of this, in Chapter One, I strategically selected two non-traditional horror texts,

The Backrooms and rule-based horror, neither of which relies on jump scares or monstrous entities. The reason horror films so often receive polarizing responses is that they cannot simultaneously produce something that satisfies everyone's fear. These two texts resolve this dilemma by generating a sense of horror rather than horror itself—an affective anchor capable of awakening fear in others through participatory and puzzle-like modes of production respectively.

Chapter Two turned to the infinite-flow novel, tracing how this diffuse horror is absorbed into a fully commercialized and expansive literary form, where it becomes entangled with questions of gender, space, and worldbuilding on an entirely different scale. Although I have selected texts that are relatively well-known and representative, and that are closely bound up with space and horror, they cannot stand in for entire genres, and my discussions are necessarily case-by-case. This is perhaps most acute in the case of the infinite flow novel, where my focus on a single *danmei* text, while opening up questions of gender and desire, inevitably limits what can be claimed about the subgenre as a whole. Yet these limitations also point toward directions that other research might productively take, including engagements with different narrative modes, the fan communities and readerships that constitute a rich archive of collective affective response surrounding these texts, and the reception and circulation of translated and adapted works both within mainland China and abroad. These remain open questions worth further pursuing.

It is worth noting, in closing, that the works examined in this thesis were all published during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, a fact that, coincidence or not, at least offers an additional angle from which to understand why enclosed spaces became so entangled with

horror and a more diffuse mixture of feelings during this period. The pandemic, including the lockdowns and quarantine measures in its wake, transformed people's social lives in unprecedented ways. Whether confined to the narrow domestic space or compelled to enter into the collective life of the *fangcang* 方舱 makeshift hospitals erected by the PRC government, people found that enclosed space was reshaping their perception of the world, marked by fear of infection, anxiety about food security, patriotic sentiments, and a broader unease about the future, under rules demanding compliance yet somehow unspecified. In this light, the emergence of Backrooms fiction, rule-based horror, and the infinite flow novels that absorbed the logic of enclosed, rule-governed space together reflects this mixture of feelings. If Fang Fang 方方's *Wuhan Diary (Wuhan riji)* 武汉日记 can be said to document, in an essentially realist mode, both the government's management of the pandemic and individuals' experiences and reflections within it, then these seemingly apolitical fantasy texts, distant as they are from reality, are no less engaged with the reality of everyday life and project equally the way people were thinking through what was happening around them, in so doing shielding themselves from government censorship and the threats posed by extreme nationalist sentiment. In this sense, the unspeakable quality I have attributed to the new horror could, at least in part, be a survival strategy.

To summarize, this thesis by no means claims to have resolved the opening question or arrived at an incontestable methodology. What I have argued instead is that existing frameworks can be carried forward, but only through continual revision. I have therefore neither abandoned the tools of close reading, narratology, and semiotics, nor relied upon them wholesale, but moved between them, finding a mode of analysis suited to the discreet textual

and cultural contexts at hand. Through the study of the Backrooms, rule-based horror, and the infinite-flow novel, I hope to have shown that horror is growing out of these new forms and connecting them to one another. This is the new horror I proposed at the outset, a spreading, atmospheric feeling pervaded by anxiety, entangled with nostalgia and longing, reflecting the feeling structure of contemporary Chinese youth life, and yet, somehow, unspeakable.

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Appendix: Translations of Chinese Screenshots

This appendix provides the full English translations for the substantial Chinese text appearing in the screenshots throughout the document. Minor or incidental Chinese text is not translated.

Translations of Texts in Figure 2. What A Backroom's work looks like

Level C-819 Rating + 69

SURVIVAL DIFFICULTY: Class 3

-Unsafe -Stable -Minimal Entities

Level C-819 is the 819th level of Backrooms Cluster C.

Description: Level C-819 is a non-linear continuous space, typically manifesting as several luxury hotel lobbies connected by wide corridors. The structural composition across the level's various zones remains identical, though minor details may be distorted or altered.

Translations of Texts in Figure 3. A Writing Sample of the Backrooms

1. Description Openings could be "From an external perspective, Level ZH xxx consists of..." or "Level ZH xxx presents as..." or "In the eyes of wanderers, Level ZH xxx is..."
2. Environment Description could be "Looking as far as the eye can see..." or "[Direction/Position] + [Object]" or "[Object] + usually meets/comes with + [Properties, Characteristics]."
3. Entities could be "xxx is a common entity found in Level ZH xxx" or "This type of entity usually appears in..." or "Wanderers should be aware of..."
4. Outposts and Communities could be "xxx is a trustworthy/ an untrustworthy... for wanderers" "Current scale..." "Current status..."
5. Entrances and Exits could be "One can enter Level ZH xxx by noclip from..." or "If

wanderers find..., they can noclip into Level ZH xxx” or “More entrances/exits remain to be explored...”

Translations of Texts in Figure 6. A comment on work ZH-1220

User: He yi wei zhinian

Translation: I understand that the author wants to write the Backrooms in a documentary/realistic style, and I do not oppose this approach. However, I feel this work doesn't quite successfully combine this subject matter and the Backrooms core concept. In my mind, a perfect combination should look like this: for example, the life of ordinary wanderers and the construction of outposts in an endless labyrinth; the life of people in a dreamcore grassland; or the confrontation among countless wanderers in a parking lot filled with entities. As for content regarding things like “war” or “coups,” it is not considered unconventional; to be honest, it has already become cliché on both the English wiki and the early Chinese wiki. Because even if there really is a highly habitable level with permissive conditions, the emergence of a nation in the Backrooms is almost impossible. Even if one did exist, it couldn't possibly become so prosperous and massive as to generate things like “war” or “coups.” The Backrooms levels themselves are incredibly vast, scattered, resource-scarce, and isolated from information. They simply cannot support the formation of structured national state power, let alone large-scale warfare. Nobody writes these themes anymore because everyone's aesthetic standards have improved, and most have realized that this is unreasonable and does not fit the Backrooms theme. Hence, a presentation method where the original aesthetic space of the Backrooms is integrated with the daily life and construction efforts of ordinary wanderers is what I prefer to see in this type of work. If you want to write about how wanderers survive in

the Backrooms, it must first and foremost be the “Backrooms,” and secondly, you should try shifting from a grand narrative to an individual narrative. If the Backrooms truly existed, stories of this type might indeed appear, but it wouldn’t be this one. As for this one, it’s just average. The flaw is that some of the word choices are too strange. You can try immersing yourself as a wanderer under this worldbuilding view and think about how they would actually speak. Seeing terms like “GDP” and “poverty alleviation” really ruins the immersion. Furthermore, the narrative structure is flat and heavy-handed, lacking literary merit and emotional depth; there really isn’t much to find interesting. You must understand that your work is not written for the wanderers to read, but for the readers.

Translations of Texts in Figure 8. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 1

User: Xiaoshuo fen ni yiban

Translation: For *Huabu*, is the author a man? The story arc is very good, but why on earth are the female characters shaped in such a stereotypical and negative way... Even someone like me, who is not considered a strong feminist, finds it unacceptable. There is not even a single positive female image.

Translations of Texts in Figure 9. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 2

User: Shendu fajue jintian ta le mei

Translation: The most bizarre thing is that after creating a pair of stereotypically annoying female supporting characters who died violent deaths, [the author] suddenly brought in a ‘flawless’ female character, as if to say, ‘I’ve written it this way, so you can’t call me misogynistic anymore,’ leaving me feeling utterly helpless.

User: Zhonggulou yu tianzhutang

Translation: The author is a girl. This novel was written a few years ago. The female characterization in the early stages was indeed very stereotypical and uncomfortable, while the male protagonist's bonds of friendship were portrayed with great depth. However, she was probably criticized for it. Starting from the chapter 'The Scarlet Beast,' she suddenly added a large amount of feminist content — she probably realized the issues in her previous writing, even though it felt a bit forced and overdone. Her second book was unfortunately banned for various reasons, yet the content is indeed written with care.

User: Misfitsxx

Translation: Good to know, I'll avoid reading it... I can't stand it when authors sneak their gender biases into writing.

Translations of Texts in Figure 10. Some Comments on *Huabu* from Weibo 3

User: -Scherzo

Translation: Because the praise for the story arc was so overwhelming, I started reading *Huabu*. I didn't expect to be disgusted right from the very beginning. Can the issue of misogyny really be lightly brushed aside just because everyone keeps blindly criticizing the poorly written romance line? The romance line was rather cliché in terms of character setting, which I don't even care to criticize. But the problem is, why is there such deep hatred toward female characters? Every single female supporting character is either selfish, hysterical, cowardly, or boy-crazy and clingy. The only one who is slightly smarter is depicted as a *know-it-all*, and the text even emphasizes that the relationship between women is a fake friendship. On the other hand, even the unlikable male supporting characters are given an affectionate trait before they die. To be honest, I don't even demand a well-rounded female character from *danmei*. Most of

them are just plot devices, but this book doesn't feel like it's just creating female rivals in love to set off the main characters' romance — it feels like pure malice [toward women] ...