

Platformized Seriality

Chinese Time-Travel Fantasy from Prime-Time Television to Online Streaming

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Abstract

While seriality has long been associated with broadcast and cable television, the global rise of online streaming has brought development of what I call *platformized seriality*: assemblages of online platform infrastructure design, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. The notion of platformized seriality points to a complex refiguration of specific media content and genre forms that are usually overlooked in platform studies. This essay analyzes time-travel serials—now immensely popular in the context of China’s growing video-streaming industry, convergence culture, and the financial boom of digital platforms. Analyzing the trope of the female time traveler in historical romance, this essay examines how *chuanyue*, or the Chinese time-travel genre, subtly unsettles contemporary gender-related anxiety and the dominant discourse on development and progress, something that partly explains the pleasure it generates. The genre of *chuanyue* benefited from the rise of platform infrastructure designs such as bullet screens and pay-on-demand-in-advance services that direct new forms of audience engagement and new practices of binge-watching. Focusing on the fantasy genre and the mutability of the time traveler’s gender, sexuality, and class, I explore how the trope of traveling backward marks a reconfiguration of conceptions of time, space, and history and thus opens a space to negotiate with the neoliberal narratives of linear and progressivist temporality.

Keywords: seriality, platform, streaming, time travel, gender, television, *chuanyue*, historical romance, fantasy television, China, censorship, global television

Seriality has long been associated with the predominant narrative mode of network television.¹ The global rise of online streaming platforms has brought new practices of seriality online. With the rise of subscription video-on-demand services such as Netflix, Amazon, Tencent, and other branded television content, originally produced content has been increasingly important.² These new services offering quality television via video-on-demand have facilitated new modes of watching such as binge-watching, which is a deliberate, self-scheduled alternative to the conventional television-watching experience.³ Intersecting existing literature on television studies and platform studies, in this essay, I examine the operations of what I call *platformized seriality*, which are assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. Specifically, I explore the exemplary short history of the *chuanyue*, or Chinese time-travel genre, to demonstrate the logic of platformized seriality, including the genre's short period of popularity on prime-time television, its ban by the Chinese government, and its later revitalization on online streaming platforms.

The revival of time-travel serials typifies the impact of complex Internet fandom and media convergence. Platformized seriality makes narrative experimentation or diversification more flexible, as evident in the trope of the female time traveler who, compared to the male traveler, better articulates contemporary gender politics and collective anxiety and appeals to the female audience. The theme of traveling backward manifests a reconfiguration of the conceptions of time, space, and history and thus opens a

1. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

2. Michael Wayne, "Netflix, Amazon, and Branded Television Content in Subscription Video On-Demand Portals," *Media, Culture and Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 725–41.

3. M. Jenner, "Binge-watching: Video-on-demand, Quality TV and Mainstreaming Fandom," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3(2015): 304–20.

space to negotiate with the neoliberal narratives of linear and progressivist temporality, which, I believe, is one of the reasons behind this genre's unpopularity with Chinese officials. Focusing on the fantastical genre and its rendering of the gender, sexuality, and (im)mutability of the time traveler, I explore the trope of traveling backward from the present in the framework of China's neoliberal acceleration and its century-long revolutionary conceit of "moving forward." While these TV shows are usually dismissed as "superficial, vulgar, and infantile" by critics and government officials in China, this subgenre of time traveling to the past can also be read as a fantasy of gender relations and historical imagination.

After outlining the significance of platformized seriality and its contribution to existing discussions on seriality and streaming in the Chinese context, I elaborate on platformized seriality in three aspects. First, platformized seriality revitalized time-travel serials, made possible by the rise of convergence culture and the financial boom of digital platforms seeking original content despite its higher risk of content regulation and censorship. Second, platformized seriality is evident in various forms of the time-travel narrative, especially the gendered genres such as historical romance. Third, platformized seriality highlights how platform infrastructure directs audience engagement in the serial form with functions such as bullet screen and pay-on-demand-in-advance that raise expectations for the script's seriality.

Platformized Seriality: Television Studies Meets Platform Studies

In television studies, seriality is usually understood as one of the defining characteristics of the medium and a major narrative mode of organizing content.⁴ Considering gender and audience receptions, scholars such as Ien Ang, Robert Allen, and Jane Feuer have pointed out the importance of

4. Fiske, *Television Culture*.

seriality in understanding melodrama on television, particularly in the form of soap operas.⁵ In the new millennium, as comics, literature, music, film, television, and other media are digitally reconfigured, new modes of seriality have also emerged, such as “digital seriality” in game storytelling.⁶ In the digital environment, there are overlapping elements as well as differences in game storytelling and television storytelling; playfulness is a common and important facet of narrative comprehension.⁷

Expanding on discussions of digital television and seriality, I turn to platform studies to conceptualize seriality in the age of big data, algorithms, cloud computing, and the rise of “platform capitalism.”⁸ Platform studies is a fast-growing field, covering diverse topics such as digitized economy,⁹ the convergence of media industries,¹⁰ platform governance,¹¹ and platform infrastructure.¹² In particular, beside the political economy approach in the study of digital content-based platforms, scholars have investigated

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5. Robert Clyde Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 1985); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 138–60.
 6. Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, “Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games,” *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 7, no. 1 (2013): 1–32.
 7. Jason Mittell, “Playing for Plot in the Lost and *Portal* Franchises,” *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 6, no.1 (2012): 5–13.
 8. Paul Langley and Andrew Leyshon, “Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalization of Digital Economic Circulation,” *Finance and Society* 3, no. 1 (2017): 11–31.
 9. Yu Hong, *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).
 10. Elaine Jing Zhao, “The Bumpy Road towards Network Convergence in China: The Case of Over-the-Top Streaming Services,” *Global Media and China* 2, no. 1 (2017): 28–42, <http://doi.org/10.1177/2059436416688698>.
 11. Robert Gorwa, “What Is Platform Governance?” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019): 854–71.
 12. Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, Paul N. Edwards, and Christian Sandvig, “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 293–310.

the algorithmic culture of Netflix¹³ or the technological structures of publishing platforms such as Wattpad.¹⁴ In these works, there is a tendency to emphasize the political economy perspective or the platform affordance and infrastructure. I call this a structural approach in platform studies since it emphasizes more structural shifts and the structure of the platform itself rather than the specific media content and genre forms on the platform.

In this essay, I develop the notion of platformized seriality to encourage more dialogue between television studies and platform studies considering the recent increase of serials produced by digital streaming platforms. I define platformized seriality as assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, generic convention, and experimentation. My use of assemblage follows Slack and Wise's framework¹⁵ of understanding technology as assemblage that interconnects with the context, instead of as an autonomous thing. The notion of platformized seriality provides a conceptual framework to explore how serial narratives are shaped by platform infrastructure, thus bridging the concern with narrative structure in television studies and the attention to technical affordances and algorithms in platform studies. Assemblage emphasizes specific media content and generic forms, including the cultural variations of generic conventions and the active incorporation of content regulation and censorship into streaming platform design and functioning.

In China, the traditional television industry is controlled by several state-owned television stations, and productions must strictly comply with the official policy.¹⁶ The boom of the online television market is largely due to the rapid development of digital technologies, the expansion of local

13. Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 117–37

14. Claire Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment Ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, Publishing and Adaptation," *Convergence* 27, no. 2 (2021): 524–38

15. Jennifer Daryl Slack and John Macgregor Wise, *Culture+ Technology: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

16. Michael Keane, *The Chinese Television Industry* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2015).

Internet conglomerates, and the state's policy of engaging in the global Internet economy. In China's contemporary video-streaming landscape, four platforms—Tencent, iQiyi, Youku, and Mango TV—are the front-runners. Each is owned by one of the major players in the industry: Tencent, Baidu, Alibaba, and an influential traditional television station called Hunan Satellite TV, respectively.¹⁷ The Chinese online television industry has boomed in the last decade. The entire online television market revenues increased from \$2.14 billion in 2013 to \$15 billion in 2017, and the annual rate of increase reached 50 percent.¹⁸ By 2019, the audience size of video-streaming users has reached 639 million, accounting for 74.7 percent of the total number of Internet users.¹⁹

Scholars have traced the formal and informal markets of the Chinese online video industry and how it has shifted the definition of television.²⁰ Elaine Zhao's study indicates how online video-streaming platforms such as iQiyi have negotiated state and copyright territories in platform-initiated overseas expansion, when diasporic Chinese communities are returning to the Chinese Internet using geo-blocking circumvention.²¹ Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Laboto suggest that online video platforms such as iQiyi "must heed the state's political imperative to maintain uniformity in services and content formats" to provide

17. Anthony Fung, "Fandomization of Online Video or Television in China," *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 7 (2015): 995–1010.

18. "The Report on China's Business Situation in Online Video," iResearch, May 25, 2018, <http://www.199it.com/archives/728128.html>.

19. China Netcom, "44th Statistical Report on the Development of Internet in China," CNNIC, August 30, 2019, http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201908/t20190830_70800.htm.

20. Elaine J. Zhao and Michael Keane, "Between Formal and Informal: The Shakeout in China's Online Video Industry," *Media, Culture and Society* 35, no. 6 (2013): 724–41; Michael Keane and Elaine J. Zhao, "TV or Not TV? Re-imagining Screen Content in China," *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 299–307.

21. Elaine J. Zhao, "Negotiating State and Copyright Territorialities in Overseas Expansion: The Case of China's Online Video Streaming Platforms," *Media Industries Journal* 5, no. 1 (2018): 106–21.

materials for the audience.²² In this context, “individualization, decentralization, user empowerment, and disruption, may have limited application.”²³ Anthony Fung points out that companies such as Tencent manage to create “fandomization of online video or television”²⁴ in that participation plays a stronger role in swaying online video content via the dual television- and fan-based platform. While these studies approach Chinese online streaming through various angles such as infrastructure, economy, mode of operation, and audience/fandom, much less attention is paid to the specific content and its narrative seriality, especially the relationship between platforms and the seriality. In the context of these exciting new works on digital platforms and online streaming, I provide a reading of a specific genre—the time-travel serial or *chuanyue* genre—its platformized seriality, and its innovations in the online environment that enabled it to circumvent censorship.

Time-Travel Serials from Prime-Time Television to Online Video Platforms

As Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai point out, scant research exists on Chinese serials, especially when compared to the extensive scholarship published about Chinese films.²⁵ Television drama in China first appeared as single-act plays in the late 1950s. The first serial drama (*lianxuju*) did not appear until the early 1980s.²⁶ Not long after, costume dramas became

22. Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Lobato, “Chinese Video Streaming Services in the Context of Global Platform Studies,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019): 356–71 and 367.

23. Wang and Laboto, “Chinese Video Streaming,” 367.

24. Anthony Fung, “Fandomization of Online Video or Television in China,” *Media, Culture and Society* 41, no. 7 (2019): 995–1010.

25. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, “Introduction” in *TV Drama in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press), 3.

26. Zhu, Keane, and Bai, “Introduction,” 4.

“undoubtedly” a dominant genre in prime-time television since the 1990s.²⁷ As more classical “chapter novels” were adapted for television, the long tradition of serial storytelling seen in *Dreams of the Red Chamber* or *Journey to the West* contributed to the themes and aesthetics of the television serials. More recently, online video seriality is also influenced by serialized literary forms—in particular online literature, as in the case of time-travel serials.

The Chinese genre of *chuanyue* has been popularized in numerous television serials, films, and electronic literature in the last two decades, which formed a time travel media phenomenon. In the 2000s, China Central Television’s *The Myth* (2010) and Hunan Television’s *Palace* (2011) had a boom in the number of viewers. Time-travel serials became extremely popular with TV serials *Palace* (2011) and *Startling by Every Step* (2011). Broadcasted by Hunan Satellite TV, both shows scored high ratings. Their popularity is also reflected in their high viewership on online video platforms. For example, on Youku alone, China’s leading Internet television platform, the total clicks on the thirty-three-episode *Palace* were more than three hundred million in 2011. Both television dramas feature a young, urban, middle-class woman from present-day China traveling back to three hundred years ago, during the peak of China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty. The female time traveler’s consciousness enters the body of a Manchurian noblewoman. Even though the Manchu ruled the Qing dynasty, the Manchu aristocrats in most Qing historical drama are usually played by actors of Han ethnicity, the largest ethnic group in China. With a modern woman’s consciousness, the female protagonist develops multiple romantic relationships with known historical figures, particularly two princes competing for the crown. *Palace* illustrates a modern woman’s intervention into a highly aestheticized and romanticized imperial setting.

The popularity of time travel in Chinese-language media has a relatively short history. Stephen Chow’s comedy *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995) is a myth-based costume drama with fantastical elements such as time traveling via a

27. Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 7.

magic device called a moonlight box. It contributes to the postmodern style of nonsenseness or *mo lei tau* originating in Hong Kong. Adapted from a science fiction novel by Wong Cho-keung (Huang Yi), *A Step into the Past* (2001), a forty-episode Hong Kong television serial, depicts a modern policeman using a time machine to travel back to China's first dynasty and help change history. The setup of an elaborate time-travel machine and time-travel technology in *A Step into the Past* is not unlike Hollywood time-travel science fiction blockbusters such as *Terminator* (1984). Similarly, one of the recurring time-travel motifs in Japan is based on Tsutsui Yasutaka's popular young adult novella *The Girl Who Leapt through Time* (1967), with eight adaptations to film and television between 1972 and 2010, in addition to two manga adaptations.²⁸ In these Japanese time-travel stories, like *A Step into the Past* or *Terminator*, teleportation across time and space has a loose scientific basis through science fiction conventions.

In contrast, in the development of the time-travel genre in Mainland China in the 2000s, the term *chuanyue* is used to describe a person entering another world by transferring their cognitive powers without using any scientific equipment. Unlike typical science fiction time-travel plots of traveling to the future with one's own body, *chuanyue* often involve the traveling of consciousness instead of the body. In *Startling by Each Step*, for example, the modern female time traveler finds herself waking up in a noblewoman's body in an ancient-style room (Figure 1). Usually in the television show, the same actor will play both the modern woman and the ancient woman whose body she enters to avoid audience confusion. Yet the ancient woman usually has her own social status and experience of growing up.

Most *chuanyue* tropes in China are *hunchuan*, or consciousness traveling, in which the time traveler is no longer in their own body but is transplanted to someone else's who already has a social position and social

28. Sung-Ae Lee, "Adaptations of Time Travel Narratives in Japanese Multimedia: Nurturing Eudaimonia across Time and Space," *International Research in Children's Literature* 7, no. 2 (2014): 136–51.



Figure 1: Screen capture of the modern female time traveler waking up in a noblewoman's body in an ancient-style room in *Startling by Each Step* (2011). Dressed in white pajamas and with an injured head, she asks her maid, "Where am I?"

identity in the alter-world. Interestingly, this development of time-travel media in China draws less on science fiction conventions and instead relies more on well-established genres such as period drama or martial arts. In other words, *chuanyue* is more related to Stephen Chow's myth-based costume drama with fantastical elements than to science fiction. This is also why I talk about *chuanyue* as fantasy rather than as science fiction, although there is, of course, much cross-influence between these genres.

The success of prime-time time-travel serials points to the importance of online fandom and convergence culture. It is common to associate the thriving of the online video industry with the convergence culture. Yet convergence culture already existed when time-travel stories were popular on prime-time television. The television show *Startling by Each Step* (2011) is adapted from an Internet novel that was produced by an Internet-based publisher, the Jinjiang Literary City. Established in 2003, the website of Jinjiang Literary City claims itself as the largest female literature website around the globe, specializing in publishing online novels written by ordinary female

users. These novels include popular genres such as *chuan yue*, romance, *wuxia* (the adventures of martial artists in ancient China), fantasy, boy love stories, etc. The online literature platform has millions of registered members, and a predominate portion of the users are female between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five. Many users publish their novels on the website, and the most popular ones are placed into the VIP category, which may subsequently go to print publishing. Thus far, tens of thousands of novels from the website are published in print. *Startling by Each Step*, written by Tong Hua, is one of these novels. Its later adaptation into a television drama highlights a new development for electronic literature. Notably, the predominant form of the online literature on Jinjiang is serialized. Analyzing creative writing and reading on the social media platform Wattpad, Claire Parnell finds that serialization is inscribed into the interface of Wattpad and shapes how works are created and engaged by its users.²⁹ Similar observations can be made about Jinjiang as a creative writing and reading platform in web-based as well as social media forms.

Time-travel serials show dynamic intertextuality among different cultural texts. *Startling by Each Step*, for example, is largely influenced by historical fiction and historical television drama. As mentioned earlier, the costume drama genre has grown rapidly since 1993 and has become one of the most popular genres on prime-time television.³⁰ Ying Zhu's influential works on historical drama point out that revisionist Qing dramas such as the popular serial *Yongzheng Dynasty* (1999) have responded to the political climate of contemporary times such as anticorruption campaigns.³¹ Making obvious reference to the political struggle popularized in these historical dramas, *Startling by Each Step* draws on the antagonism between the fourth and eighth princes who become the two male players in the love triangle with the female time traveler.

29. Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment," 530.

30. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai, *TV Drama in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 7.

31. Ying Zhu, "Yongzheng Dynasty and Chinese Primetime Television Drama," *Cinema Journal* (2005): 3–17.

Thus, the time-travel cultural phenomenon presents interactions between television, electronic literature, and print publishing in the context of convergence culture.³² It also aligned with the more recent trend of media adaptations based on work from online publishing platforms such as Wattpad.³³ The trend toward convergence culture is also evident in the crossover between television and games. For example, *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*, or *Chinese Paladin*, a role-playing game (RPG) developed by Taiwan's Softstar Entertainment Inc. in 1995, was made into three seasons of television serials. Moreover, these television shows are increasingly consumed on the Internet, which goes along with the emergence of electronic fandom. The time-travel cultural phenomenon is indebted to the rise of fandom in the digital age. Tong Hua, the author of the original novel *Startling by Each Step*, is one of thousands of online writers, most of whom are fans of historical drama and fiction. Here, fans become authors who openly reappropriate cultural texts. The fans become what Henry Jenkins describes as "textual poachers" in participatory culture.³⁴

In April 2011, the Chinese government banned time-travel television shows. The Chinese state regulation banned time-travel shows from prime-time television and restricted time-travel television productions in the future.³⁵ Despite the official ban on time-travel television production since 2011, the development of video-streaming series in China has given rise to another wave of time-travel serials online in recent years. One example is the web series *Go Princess Go*, which premiered via LeTV in 2015. It features a modern man who time-travels to the past and enters the body of a princess, the wife of the prince (Figure 2). The time traveler, a man living in a woman's body, tries to climb up the social ladder while spending time with other concubines of the prince. With its unique plot twist and gender play, this small budget online series became a hit. More recently,

32. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

33. Parnell, "Mapping the Entertainment," 530.

34. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

35. David Barbosa, "Making TV Safer: Chinese Censors Crack Down on Time Travel," *New York Times*, April 12, 2011.



Figure 2: Screen capture of a modern man who finds himself in the body of a princess in ancient times in *Go Princess Go*. Again, dressed in white pajamas, the man tries to find out what is going on by talking to the maid in green.

iQiyi produced *Joy of Life* (2019), a forty-six-episode serial adapted from a famous time-travel novel. Tencent also produced the twenty-four-episode serial *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* (2020) that was well received.

The reappearance of time-travel serials online illustrates the shift in Chinese television and the online video industry. In the early 2010s, strict limitations were set on time-traveling dramas: National Radio and Television Administration of the PRC stated that existing time-travel dramas disrespected history and culture and that these productions were not fit for recommendation. On December 31, 2015, the China Television Drama Production Industry Association set out the “Notice and Rules of Producing Television Drama Content,” which stated that television series had to be based on realistic subjects and forbade the “promotion of the attachment of souls, reincarnation, voodoo practices and some such feudal superstitious ideas.”³⁶

36. China Television Drama Production Industry Association, “General Regulation on TV Drama Production,” accessed August 1, 2021, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%94%B5%E8%A7%86%E5%89%A7%E5%86%85%E5%AE%B9%E5%88%B6%E4%BD%9C%E9%80%9A%E5%88%99/19428353>.

While it is no longer possible to air time-travel serials on traditional television, time-travel online novels remain popular. Thus, when online streaming platforms were trying to grab users in the mid-2000s, small budget investments in original content available exclusively via the platform were highly desirable. *Go Princess Go*, which premiered in 2015 as LeTV, was trying to attract subscribers to its online streaming service. In this way, the revitalization of time travel serials on subscription video platforms was enabled by competition among digital platforms to attract and maintain users through original content production. For big-budget productions, the time-travel plot is likely to be adjusted to minimize possible censorship risks. For example, in the original novel of *Joy of Life*, the main character suffers from myasthenia gravis and gradually loses control of his muscles. One night, he lies in the hospital, pondering over his fear of death. When he opens his eyes, his consciousness is in the body of an infant. The man time-travels back to the ancient past and is given a new life as Fan Xian, which explains the Chinese title of the show, *Thankful for the Remaining Years*. When the novel was adapted into an online serial, the time-travel element was removed, and the main character was changed to a university student writing a novel set in the ancient past. In this way, the time-travel plot was replaced by framing the story as fictional writing. The revised version passed the censor and the online serial eventually obtained airing rights on traditional satellite television.

In contrast, another smaller budget yet well-received online serial *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* (2020) emphasizes its time-travel plot. The main character Chen Xiaoqian is a young screenwriter who struggles to finish her script but is met with harsh critiques from producers and the leading actor. After completing the script, she closes her eyes and later wakes up in the body of the unpopular princess Chen Qianqian, surrounded by male courtesans in a matriarchal society (Figure 3). As a side character in Chen Xiaoqian's original script, Chen Qianqian is an arrogant princess who dies in the third episode. To survive, the main character uses her knowledge as a scriptwriter to stay alive as the plot starts to depart from what she originally



Figure 3: Screen capture of a modern script writer who wakes up and finds herself in the body of the unpopular princess Chen Qianqian, surrounded by male courtesans in *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*.

wrote. These new time travel serials and their plot design are related to the platform's need for and different strategies of original content production, forming one aspect of what I call platformized seriality. For smaller budget serials such as *Go Princess Go* and *The Romance of Tiger and Rose*, the time travel plot is an important plot device for narrative experimentation. I will explore the narrative experimentation in detail in the next section. Yet for big budget serials such as *Joy of Life* adapted from famous IP works, the plotline was revised to minimize risk.

The production of *Joy of Life* also reflects how adapting copyrighted popular Internet literary fiction, usually referred to as intellectual property (IP), has been an important strategy for video platforms to develop their original content. Both licensed and original content are important for subscription video platforms. Amazon builds its streaming service alongside network brand identities to lure more subscribers. In contrast, Netflix builds its own brand in competition with network television.³⁷

37. Wayne, "Netflix, Amazon."

Chinese streaming services, telecom operators, television stations, and Internet platforms gradually converge to provide diversified multimedia services. To obtain more online traffic and to cut down costs, online video platforms have also combined two modes of distribution—namely, exclusive distribution (*dubo*) and codistribution (*lianbo*). Exclusive distribution generally refers to how the content can only be viewed on its own platform, which aims at attracting more members via original content. In contrast, content via codistribution can be viewed on different platforms and other satellite television stations. *Go Princess Go* and *The Romance of Tiger and Rose* have exclusive distribution to attract and maintain platform users. *Joy of Life* also started with exclusive distribution before being codistributed. It was aired on traditional television not only because of its popularity but also because of its revised plot that did not explicitly mention time travel. In this way, the contexts of the different video platforms are important to understanding the serial format and its platformized seriality.

The Female Time Traveler: Seriality, Gender, and Fantastic History

How do the generic formations of time travel inform gender politics and historical imagination related to platformized seriality? Despite its huge popularity in terms of fan fiction and television ratings, Chinese writers, cultural critics, and Chinese media have described the *chuanyue* phenomenon as “superficial, vulgar and escapist.” Time-travel television dramas marry two “low” genres: the television form based on the quotidian and seriality and the popular genre of romance, melodrama, and fantastical works that feature excessive emotions and spectacle. In her study of romance, gothic novels, and soap operas, Tania Modleski argues that the enormously popular “mass-produced fantasies for women” touch on

“very real problems and tensions in women’s lives.”³⁸ In a similar vein, Peter Brooks points out that in the melodrama genre, larger social conflicts are expressed in excessive and intensive personal stories.³⁹ Thus, it is worth asking the following questions about time-travel stories: How does the enormous popularity of the time-travel genre reflect the collective societal anxiety of contemporary China? What cultural contradiction does it invoke or negate?

Although many online time-travel fictions feature female time travelers, sometimes with a homosexual or transgender twist like *Go Princess Go*, the popular cinematic and televisual imaginations were largely restricted to heterosexual male journeys until around the time of *Startling by Each Step*. The male time travelers’ journeys are full of actions and excitement; the travelers themselves emphasize their masculine bodies, sophisticated combat skills, or social position as modern, privileged individuals. In his 2005 movie *The Myth*, Jackie Chan’s character, a modern archeologist, is a reincarnation of General Meng Yi in the Qin dynasty, a heroic historical figure who saves the empire as well as the emperor’s beautiful concubine. Similarly, the 2009 television show *The Myth* also features a young male time traveler who fights for justice in ancient times.

Departing from male-centered time-travel narratives that emphasize masculinity and empire-building, stories about female time travelers focus excessively on the romantic experience of the female protagonist. The key narrative theme of prime-time serials such as *Startling by Each Step* and *Palace* is that the female time traveler rejects the Qing dynasty’s polygamous marriage system and continues to seek her true love. Thus, she refuses to become

38. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 14. The narrative strategies which have evolved for smoothing over these tensions can tell us much about how women have managed not only to live in oppressive circumstances but also thrive in their situations with dignity.

39. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

the imperial concubine of the prince or emperor and instead chooses to be a maid of honor working in the imperial palace. Although the female time traveler stays away from the center of politics and imperial power to defend her view on “true love,” she is the center of the diegetic universe where she easily forms strong romantic bonds or friendships with various male characters. In the television serial *Startling by Each Step*, right after time traveling, the female protagonist opens her eyes with a subjective, out-of-focus shot. She is a middle-class woman living in an urban environment, highlighted by her professional clothing and black-framed glasses. She gets in a fight with her boyfriend after catching him kissing another woman. After slapping her boyfriend in the face, she strongly asserts her belief in monogamy by stating that they are no longer living in imperial times when men could marry more than one wife. She is then disoriented by electronic sparks from a nearby construction site and hit by a car, then transported to the Yongzheng reign of the Qing dynasty, when men could marry multiple wives. Unlike many science fiction time-travel tropes in which one travels with his or her own body, our female protagonist wakes up in the body of the sister of the second wife of the eighth prince. After realizing that she has traveled back to the Qing dynasty, the female protagonist learns to negotiate her own social identity and her life as a woman in this era. As a woman from the future, she doesn’t benefit much from her modern wisdom and knowledge to rewrite history. Most of the time, she tries to figure out how to survive as an upper-class woman in the patriarchal society of the Qing dynasty, including reciting Mao Zedong’s poem to impress the emperor Kangxi.

Compared to prime-time television serials, online video-streaming platforms provided more room for narrative experimentation. In *Go Princess Go*, the man in a woman’s body creates many plotlines that challenge conventional femininity, such as a woman’s manner, or creates on-screen intimacies between women, including the time traveler and other concubines. The show also playfully suggests that gender performance is socially coded. Likewise, in *Romance of Tiger and Rose*, the female protagonist, a scriptwriter who travels back in time in the story she has written, knows the hidden

plots in the universe she is in. The new world is a matriarchal society where women rule and men are confined to domestic and supportive roles with no significant social status. The reversed gender hierarchy brings comedic effects but also points to the absurdity of gender hierarchy.

In contrast to the familiar time-travel trope in science fiction that brings the time traveler to spectacular and otherworldly spaces, the Chinese time-travel serials feature female protagonists traveling back to ancient times. Why traveling to the past? Hua Tong, the scriptwriter of *Startling by Each Step*, who is also the author of the original novel, acknowledges herself as a fan of a Qing dynasty time-travel fiction classic *Dreaming Back to the Qing Dynasty*. Tong finds her character's unconventional values and modern attitude the major reasons for her popularity among the princes. However, at the end of typical time-travel stories, those female time travelers either marry a man with wives and concubines or they return to modern times. The Internet fan/writer manifests a strong will to assert a woman's individual happiness, which may involve the subversion or revision of history:

To time travel is merely to live your life in another place. To live is to feel refreshed and is to live for oneself. It doesn't matter whether one is going with the flow of history or living against it. If one is not happy, why don't we subvert everything!⁴⁰

The playful rewriting of history with romantic conventions, or the appropriation of historical characters and events for generic pleasure in the time-travel genre, disturbs the official view on history and led to the discouragement of time-travel television productions by the administration for television production and censorship in China, the Bureau of Radio, Film and Television. In other words, the element of achieving the impossible in time travel provides an imaginary solution to the contradictions in gender politics and historical imagination.

40. Lan Shui, "Preface" in *If Xiangxi I*, Cece Literature, accessed August 29, 2021, www.cecewx.com/chapter/34995_8.html.

The departure from official histories in the time-travel trope is not unlike the “playful reenactment” (*xishuo*) subgenre in costume television serials. This subgenre is deliberately mocking official histories. The playful approach to history departs from influential serials such as *Yongzhen Dynasty*. *Yongzhen Dynasty*’s subtle critique of political corruption in contemporary times, its elaborate scriptwriting and character design, and the realistic representation of costumes, imperial settings, and outdoor activities all suggest its “quality drama” status. In contrast, the *xishuo* trope or the more recent time-travel trope is deemed much less valuable. Traveling back to a historical time, especially the heydays of the Qing imperial dynasty, may signal a nostalgia for the times when China was a strong imperial power. At first glance, traveling back in time may reassure the audience as modern, privileged, and well-informed individuals. Yet previous studies on seriality and television also remind us that we should attend to the pleasure that these popular forms provide and the collective anxieties they abruptly or symptomatically address.

When China’s embrace of neoliberalism accelerates and transfigures the century-long revolutionary conception of moving forward in its pursuit of modernization and development, what is at stake in traveling backward from the present? The predicament of women’s situations embodied by the Chinese female time traveler, both in ancient and contemporary times, lies not in the nostalgic mode of fantasizing about a golden age in history. The female time traveler in the serials—usually a single, educated, middle-class woman living in an urban area of contemporary China—tends to be experiencing problems in her personal or work life. In contemporary China, the socialist framing of gender equality is overturned by the commodification of the female body in the “market economy.” The development promised by the state increasingly relies on a monilinear understanding of economic growth. The gendered nature of developmental ideology is reflected by the hostility toward single women, such as the widespread stigmatization of single women as “left-over women.”⁴¹

41. Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

The time-travel trope differs from historical television drama in its constant reminder of the present, embodied in the figure and the mind of the female time traveler. Her self-awareness of the time-travel trope and her comments on the rigidity of social norms in the Qing dynasty constantly remind the audience of the coexistence of the present and the past. While the historical television drama tries to provide an immersive viewing experience by setting up a realistic mise-en-scene and story lines, the female time traveler completes her soul-seeking process in the world of fantastic history. In platformized online productions, stories tend to be set in ancient times without corresponding to a specific period or dynasty. It is a way to stay away from the accusation of not taking real history seriously. At the same time, platformized seriality gives more room to create a fantasy world with gender-crossing and reversed gender hierarchy, as seen in *Go Princess Go* and *Romance of Tiger and Rose*.

Time travel is a plot device that enables complex relationships among the past, the present, and the future, and these are intensified in platformized seriality. While many time-travel stories feature the transportation of the protagonist's mind and body back to the historical period, some of the female time travelers' stories feature the transportation of the "soul" or the consciousness into another body, with various renderings of gender, sexual, and ethnic mutability. In contrast to the formulaic television dramas, electronic literature presents a much more diverse rendering of mutability and a more intentional rewriting of history for the sake of a woman's agency and subjectivity. For example, in the popular Qing dynasty time-travel Internet fanfiction *Cherishing Each Other*,⁴² the female protagonist travels back to the Kangxi reign in the Qing dynasty and becomes General Nian Gengyao, another famous historical figure. As a woman in a man's body, s/he is involved in romantic relationships with several princes and chancellors. In her research on time-travel historical romances, Jin Feng has pointed out that

42. Lan Shui, *If Xiangxi I*, Cece Literature, accessed August 29, 2021, <http://www.cecewx.com/ebook/34995.html>.

these online novels do not necessarily reflect feminist consciousness even though readers have “moved from being passive receptacles of patriarchal ideologies to active pursuers of their own welfare.”⁴³ Nevertheless, what is significant is the pleasure these time-travel historical romances provide. As Mary Jo Puntey points out, all romances are fantasy since the genre centers on emotions and relationships rather than plots. A good romance offers a “spirit of optimism” as well as a belief that “life is improvable” in the face of the boredom and agony of everyday life.⁴⁴

Further, at first glance, the time-travel trope seems to reflect many traits of postmodernism in its parodic style, flat sense of history, and the infinite referral to other cultural texts. History becomes a database for game-like narrative structures and fantastical imagery. However, as I try to demonstrate in this paper, this postmodern sampling culture should be scrutinized in relation to contemporary politics of gender, sexuality, and the conception of history.

Platformized Audience Engagement: Bullet Screen and Pay-on-Demand-in-Advance

Every video-streaming platform provides multiple ways to engage the audience, and the ways of engagement may vary in different contexts. For China-based online streaming platforms, the serials may have hyperlinks on screen linking to social media platforms such as Super Topic (*chaohua*) for plot discussions. There are also numerous Chinese online forums or apps devoted to viewer discussions. Douban, for example, arranges its content by each cultural product: books, films, and serials. Beside these digital environments that facilitate audience engagement, the video-streaming platform

43. Jin Feng, *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 164.

44. Mary Jo Putney, “Welcome to the Dark Side” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 99–106.

infrastructure also provides user interactions within the forum. One of the prominent features is *danmu*, or the bullet-screen function in which viewers' comments fly over like a bullet on the screen. The comments are time coded so that the viewers may watch the video at a different time yet still respond to each other about the same content on-screen. You can "like" the comments. It also creates an immediate experience of watching collectively and interactively (Figure 4). Studies have shown that both users' instantaneous intention to comment and their intention to continue to comment are significantly affected by the perceived interactivity provided by bullet screen.⁴⁵ The large quantity of bullet-screen comments also creates the perception that watching the videos, including time-travel serials, is a shared experience.

Originated as danmuku video sites in Japan, the bullet-screen function has been adopted by many Chinese video sites since 2012. The bullet screen is a popular interactive tool in many video platforms in Asia. Increasingly, the platform designs have made efforts to generate audience interactions. For example, on Twitch, streamers can choose to overlay live chat texts on the side of the screen. Overlaying the texts on the sides of the screen works well when the streamer continues to be centered on the screen. What is distinct about the bullet screen on Chinese or Asian video platforms is that the comments are viewed when watching fictional films and serials, which is not yet common in Anglophone platforms.

To attract more users to register as members, a value-added service called pay-on-demand-in-advance (*shaoqian dianbo*) was launched by online video platforms, which can unlock the content of the episode in advance, in addition to membership subscriptions. For instance, members of Tencent who pay extra were able to view new episodes of *Joy of Life* or the *Romance of Tiger and Rose* prior to those Internet users who are already members. This value-added service has brought new revenues

45. Lili Liu, Ayoung Suh, and Christian Wagner, "Watching Online Videos Interactively: The Impact of Media Capabilities in Chinese Danmaku Video Sites," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 283–303.

implies “a deliberate choice of watching serialized ‘quality’ content.”⁴⁶ Binge-viewing is a kind of attentive viewing, not only in terms of an excessive number of episodes but also an “excessive” or “close” audience-text relationship.⁴⁷ Binge watching has been a practice for a long time. Yet streaming platforms such as Netflix put all episodes of selected serials online and further prompt binge-watching while other serials or shows are released on a weekly basis. In the Chinese online video platforms, most online serials today still follow a weekly schedule to maintain user subscription. For example, recent time-travel serials such as *Joy of Life* and the *Romance of Tiger and Rose* release six episodes per week. The first few episodes were free to all users, and the subsequent episodes were only available to subscribers. The pay-on-demand-in-advance service provides an opportunity for the subscribers to unlock one week’s content, which usually consists of six episodes. One new episode can only be unlocked once all the previous ones are unlocked. *Joy of Life*, for example, has made a million-dollar commercial profit via this value add-on service.⁴⁸ In the past, platforms tried to maximize the profit gained through this service and were met with consumer backlash.⁴⁹ Yet the pay-on-demand-in-advance service has now been used in most Chinese online video platforms.

Binge-watching is usually associated with “quality” serials, which all episodes are available online at once. But unlike binge-watching, what the pay-on-demand-in-advance service encourages is binge-watching over several weeks. Such a platformized function of pay-on-demand-in-advance is best suited for serialized content, especially long-format serials, instead of series

46. Jenner, “Binge-watching,” 314.

47. Jenner, 314.

48. For details, see Kankeji, “Tencent Video Earns 30 Million a Night from Preview of *Joy of Life*, Video Streaming Platforms Harvesting Users,” December 13, 2019, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/97214692>.

49. Users criticized platforms such as Tencent Video for this value add-on service and tried to protect users’ rights through legal means. For details, see Wen Shahua and Bi Yuanyuan, “Behind the Fiasco of *Joy of Life* Is a Trial by Video Sites,” *National Business Daily*, December 19, 2019, <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2019-12-19/1394657.html>.

or feature films. Unlike American or Japanese serials, most Chinese serials are long. For costume drama, it is common to see serials that consist of more than fifty episodes. Even for serials set in contemporary times, it is unusual for a serial to have less than twenty-four episodes. *Empresses in the Palace*, also known as *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, which features the life of an eighteenth-century royal concubine and her way to power, has seventy-six episodes. The serial was reedited into six episodes when it was made available on Netflix in North America. One of the reasons behind the long-serial format is that, historically, television serials have been sold by episode in China since they are evaluated by the running time they provide to television stations. Hence it is common for scriptwriters to “add water,” or add side plotlines to the story.

The new pay-on-demand-in-advance service on online video platforms poses new expectations for serial script writing. For example, more plot twists are expected in the second half of a serial to hook the audience across several weeks. In traditional network television, a television serial is usually forty-four minutes long per episode to fit all the commercial breaks in the one-hour time slots. The forty-four-minute time frame influences how stories are told, and usually each episode tries to end with a cliffhanger. For Chinese online serials, the length per episode for big-budget productions is still forty-four minutes so it is possible for online serials to be aired on television, such as the case of *Joy of Life*. In the case of *Romance of Tiger and Rose*, though the production value is lower, the length is still forty-four minutes per episode. The new pay-on-demand-in-advance business model certainly brings more financial opportunities for online serials. How it will influence storytelling remains to be seen. As I am writing this article, the pay-on-demand-in-advance service on the platform was criticized for its violation of subscribers’ user rights, and the platforms stopped this design in 2021.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, what we can expect is a higher demand on screenwriting and plot twists as the serials develop.

50. For more details, see People’s Daily Online, “‘Aiyouteng’ Cancels ‘Advance On-Demand’ Netizens: This Wasted Money Need Not Be Spent Any More,” October 4, 2021, <http://finance.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/1004/c1004-32245692.html>.

Conclusion: Transnational Seriality in East Asia

In 2020, South Korean TV station tvN acquired the rights to *Go Princess Go* and remade it into *Mr. Queen*, a twenty-episode serial in which a male chef from contemporary Seoul enters the body of the queen in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). It is not the first time that Chinese time-travel serials were remade in other East Asian countries. In 2016, SBS remade *Startling by Every Step* into *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, another time-travel romance set in the Goryeo dynasty (918–1270). These South Korean remakes reflect the popularity of Chinese time-travel serials across East Asia. This is noteworthy since cultural productions from Mainland China, when compared to Japanese television and anime and later the Korean wave, tend to be less flexible in crossing geographical boundaries.⁵¹ For transnational remakes, more than a dozen Korean serials were remade into Chinese versions, such as *The Loving Home* (2014) and *Because Love Is a Miracle* (2014). Additionally, Hunan Satellite Television and Zhejiang Satellite Television purchased the rights to Korean reality formats, and the Chinese versions of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (2013–2018)⁵² and *Keep Running* (2013–2016) are both long-lasting, popular shows. In contrast, the cultural flow in the past rarely went the other way from China to South Korea, except for cases such as the time-travel serial *Startling by Every Step*. However, more recently, with the adaptation of *Go Princess Go*, remakes of Chinese serials in the Korean market have started to gain momentum. This emerging transnational adaptation of Chinese shows are partly due to the industry context and serialization pattern as well as the audience engagement that I have characterized as platformized seriality in this essay.

51. Beng Huat Chua and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

52. Because of the official regulation to cut down the airtime of children on reality television, Hunan Satellite Television stopped airing the show on television. It was then moved to online streaming on Mango TV from 2016 to 2018. For more information, see Beijing Youth Daily, “Parent-Child Programs ‘Where Are We Going, Dad’ and ‘Dad Is Back’ Were Called Off,” March 6, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160307135229/http://www.bj.xinhuanet.com/bjyw/2016-03/06/c_1118246587.htm.

Throughout this paper, I have charted different aspects of platformized seriality through the time-travel subgenre. The convergence culture and the financial boom of digital platforms, which seek original content despite the risk of content regulation, allowed for the revitalization of time-travel serials. In the shift from prime-time television serials to platformized seriality, the historical romance centered around female time travelers stands out as a trope that subtly unsettles contemporary gender-related anxiety and the dominant discourse on development and progress—this explains its charm. Platform infrastructure designs, such as bullet screens and the pay-on-demand-in-advance service, direct new forms of audience engagement and new practices of binge-watching that are associated with higher expectations for seriality. Thus, the time-travel serial genre provides a good case study to examine platformized seriality as assemblages of online platform infrastructure, content regulation, and generic convention and experimentation in China. While online video-streaming platforms are a growing market and many of them are trying to reach transnational markets, how platformized seriality will develop is yet to be seen. What seems obvious is that the definition of seriality cannot be separated from the specificity of digital infrastructure designs and shifts within the industry. Though the paper engages in specific discussions of Chinese time-travel serials, the notion of platformized seriality can be applied to other cultural and industrial contexts to account for varied platform infrastructure, content regulation, and generic convention.

The notion of platformized seriality contributes to platform studies by engaging with generic conventions and experimentation, analyzing the cultural significance of specific cultural forms, and broadening the field beyond its heavily Western-focused biases. Examining the platformized seriality of Chinese time-travel fantasy serials, I hope to bridge the analysis of narrative structure in television studies and the attention on technical affordance in platform studies. Further, by engaging with the generic content of these serialized cultural products, we are more attuned to their underlying cultural politics, as in the case of “traveling backward.” In his study of science fiction, Fredric Jameson argues that science fiction and its emphasis on future

history “demonstrate” and “dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future.” Science fiction depicts a utopian form of “profound historicity”:

The historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.⁵³

As I have shown in this paper, the trope of the Chinese female historical time traveler not only demonstrates the “incapacity to imagine the future” but also to bear the present, which is always overshadowed by the drastic changes and gender inequality in China’s “moving forward.” I am not suggesting that the trope of the female time traveler necessarily resists such a developmental ideology of moving forward. However, reading these cultural texts in relation to the geopolitical context can expand feminist television studies and discover their potentiality as meditations of narratives of gender, progress, and development.

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53. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), xii.

