

Tielian in Mixed Realism

Real Person Fan Fiction and Collective Memory in Contemporary Chinese Fandom

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Abstract

This article investigates the question of authenticity in Chinese real-person fan fiction (RPF), a fan-fiction subgenre centered on real-world celebrities. Through the lens of *tielian* (“getting close to the face”) and mixed realism, the study examines how Chinese RPF authors craft recognizable representations of celebrity characters that resonate with fan readers. Focusing on the RPF work *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor* on the fostering idol, the case illustrates how real-world events are transformed into compelling depictions of the past that weave fragments of realities into a coherent narrative. In this context, *tielian* serves both as a measure of authenticity and as a means of expanding readers’ consumption of celebrities’ media-generated realities. Since collective memory plays a crucial role in the fostering-idol fandom, subjective interpretations often contest each other in the agreement of *tielian*. This tension highlights the dynamic negotiation of authenticity within RPF communities. By framing *tielian* as a form of processual and affective truth making, the article positions RPF as a site of literary innovation that reconfigures realism, authorship, and authenticity in participatory digital culture.

Keywords: real-person fan fiction, mixed realism, fandom, celebrity culture, collective memory

Introduction

Fan fiction—the imaginative reinterpretation of existing cultural texts by fans—has emerged as a literary phenomenon challenging boundaries between authorship, readership, and textual authority. Often associated with popular media, most notably the *Star Trek* fandom during the 1970s,¹ fan fiction has evolved into a major cultural force in the digital era, producing bestsellers like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *After*.² The Chinese fan-fiction community originated from fans of Japanese and Euro-American pop culture in the 1990s and 2000s, later expanding through social media platforms in the 2010s. Writers then, motivated primarily by community-building rather than commercial gain, began sharing their work online, gradually gaining cultural visibility.³ Scholarly interest in fan fiction has largely centered on its extratextual dynamics: industry relations, copyright tensions, and authorial politics. Since Henry Jenkins's foundational concept of the "textual poacher," fandom is often framed as a subversive force contesting media prototypes.⁴ While legal scholars like Aaron Schwabach interrogate

1. Jennifer McGee, "‘In the End, It's All Made Up’: The Ethic of Fanfiction and Real Person Fiction," in *Communication Ethics, Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Phyllis M. Japp, Mark Meister, and Debra K. Japp (Peter Lang, 2005), 162.
2. E. L. James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Vintage, 2011); originally an erotic romance fan fiction on the fantasy novel series *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer. Anna Todd, *After* (Gallery Books, 2014); originally, it was fan fiction based on British pop star Harry Styles.
3. Chinese fans of Japanese Boy's Love (BL) culture developed *danmei*, a localized adaptation of BL, during the late 1990s and early 2000s. They began writing original queer stories and publishing them on web novel platforms like Jinjiang Literature City (*Jinjiang Wenxuecheng*). Some danmei authors monetized their work by using Jinjiang's subscription feature. In contrast, fan-fiction writers typically shared their work for free, opting for nonprofit platforms instead of commercial web novel sites. See Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu, "Chinese Danmei Fandom and Cultural Globalization from Below," in *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan*, ed. Jing Jamie Zhao, Ling Yang, and Maud Lavin (Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 4–5.
4. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Methuen, 1979); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 2012), 17–19; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2002), 56; Fan Xiao, "‘We Are Snowflakes’: Minor Transnationalism and the Cultural Resilience of Slash Fanfiction

copyright implications of character appropriation, media scholars such as Judith Fatahallah identify a “legitimacy paradox” in which fandom’s growing cultural authority remains constrained by industry power structures. These works highlight the tensions between fan creativity and institutional frameworks but tend to treat fan fiction primarily as a site of cultural negotiation rather than literary production.⁵

The sociocultural focus on fan fiction underemphasizes its literary innovation and aesthetic achievement. The neglect of fan fiction’s literary values stems from the persistent exclusion of popular and amateur writing from literary studies. Fan productions are conventionally examined in the framework of power subversion and subcultural expression, which pays little attention to their formal literary qualities. This article intervenes by analyzing fan fiction as a literary text, centering on the characterization as the core literary technique in producing fantasized narratives and further exploring the potential literary values of fan fiction. What do fan readers expect from a “good” fan fiction? And most importantly, as a genre itself, what generic conventions does fan fiction offer to contemporary literary study?

This article shifts focus to real-person fan fiction (RPF)—a genre in which real-life public figures are reimagined in fictional narratives—to examine its literary construction, particularly its use of characterization and narrativization. RPF manifests fans’ desire for a parasocial dialogue with celebrities via speculation⁶ or their attempt to participate in the game of knowing, betting on who knows the celebrities more accurately and more extensively.⁷ The

Community in China,” *Global Media and China* 8, no. 4 (2023): 480–505, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364231188350>.

5. Aaron Schwabach, *Fan Fiction and Copyright: Outsider Works and Intellectual Property Protection* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 5, 143–44; Judith Fatahallah, *Fanfiction and the Author* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 199.

6. McGee, “In the End,” 164.

7. Bronwen Thomas, “Fans Behaving Badly? Real Person Fic and the Blurring of the Boundaries Between the Public and the Private,” in *Real Lives, Celebrity Stories: Narratives of Ordinary and Extraordinary People across Media*, ed. Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round (Bloomsbury, 2014), 182.

emphasis on “realness” constantly raises questions: How authentic are these celebrity characters? Does using the name of the celebrity automatically refer to the real person? The case of the Chinese RPF provides an intriguing case on how to achieve a realistic representation of the celebrity character that is recognizable to fan readers. The Chinese RPF community develops the concept of *tielian* (“getting close to the face”) to assess the degree of characterization authenticity. Tielian evaluates how successfully fictional portrayals capture changes in interpreting celebrity’s public images across media. Tielian challenges RPF authors to constantly adjust their characterizations to achieve provocative authenticity, which speaks to the reader’s affective connection. In theory, the ultimate achievement of tielian involves not merely matching the “fictional face” to reality but using fiction to supplement the comprehension of reality. Therefore, aesthetics of RPF dissolve the fiction/reality binary, positioning these modes as complementary rather than oppositional.

Using a case study of RPF on the fostering-idol system (*yangchengxi*) in China, this article aims to illustrate the process of accomplishing tielian via transferring real-world events into the fantasized account while harmonizing the division. The “fostering-idol system” represents an idol-making model that builds upon fans’ long-term emotional investment and affective witnessing of trainees’ developmental trajectories from adolescence to stardom. Through various behind-the-scenes content that renders training visible, this system constructs a participatory relationship wherein fans’ collective memories of shared experiences intensify the demand for “realness”—understood as faithful representation of actual events and personal growth. As such, factual accuracy in narrativization becomes a crucial mechanism through which fandom reaffirms its affective ties and companionship of an idol-trainees’ journey. In this context, compelling RPF can function as both affectively resonant and historically informative, positioning the fantasized account as a legitimate mode of narrating mediated memory. Meanwhile, this article also attends to the existence of individual fans’ subjective interpretations that challenge tielian as a consolidated standard in evaluating RPF. As the RPF authors reconfigure collective fandom memories,

competing fan interpretations over the past vie for authentic status. The emergence of tielian and debates surrounding it signify the dynamic literary discourse within the fan-fiction community, a critical conversation that has been largely neglected in academic scholarship.

Tielian and Mixed Realism

Chinese RPF provides a constructive case study for understanding authenticity as central to fan fiction's literary practice through its development of tielian. The selection of RPF as the entry point of analysis has three levels of rationale. First, most of the discussion around RPF is fixated on its transgressive practice of pairing and fantasizing about real-world celebrities. In academia, RPF generates more controversy than general fan fiction due to its perceived unethical manipulation of the real person.⁸ The prevalent speculation of homosexual romance between real-world celebrities raises concerns about conflating reality with fiction, stigmatizing marginal groups, and the unintended "outing."⁹ Other critiques have pointed out that the unethical speculation of celebrities' lives behind the scenes violates the privacy of its subjects, especially when involving sexual content, which would further risk jeopardizing celebrities' public careers. Aware of the transgression encoded in their performance, fans develop consent practices such as content warnings and ratings, publicly acknowledging that their fantasized accounts should be distant from the celebrity's real life.¹⁰

8. McGee, "In the End," 176; Melanie Piper, "Real Body, Fake Person: Recontextualizing Celebrity Bodies in Fandom and Film," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 20 (September 15, 2015): 1.1, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0664>.

9. Francesca Coppa, *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 102; Clare Southerton and Hannah McCann, "Queerbaiting and Real Person Slash: The Case of Larry Stylinson," in *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, ed. Joseph Brennan (University of Iowa Press, 2019), 161.

10. Thomas, "Fans Behaving Badly?" 175, 182; Ming Zhang, "'Keep the Fantasy Within a Circle': Kai Wang and the Paradoxical Practices of Chinese Real Person Slash Fans,"

Second, Chinese RPF work evolves from a marginal product to a major cultural phenomenon in the digital media ecology. Its circulation disperses across different platforms in multimedia forms. Besides dedicated fan-fiction platforms such as LOFTER¹¹ and Archive of our Own (AO3), and major social media platforms like Weibo and Douban, RPF also circulates in the column section of video streaming platform Bilibili or is adapted into RPG games and published on Orange Light Game (*chengguang youxi*). Moreover, the RPF community's language, such as "making/ addicted to CP" ("coupling"), has also been appropriated by the media to appeal to the younger generation,¹² which indicates a gradual acceptance of RPF practices and diminishing concerns over manipulating real persons in China. Hence, the assessment of RPF works should go beyond ethical criticism on sexual fantasy to examine their literary dimensions.

Third, and most importantly, the Chinese RPF community develops the concept of tielian to evaluate how closely the "fantasized face" approximates the "real face" perceived by the public. The central goal of tielian is to construct an authentic celebrity character in fiction—one that allows readers to enjoy the imaginary narrative while still sensing a realness in the embodied affect it evoked, as if the celebrity had truly experienced or enacted it.

Celebrity Studies 12, no. 2 (2021): 347–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1765074>.

11. LOFTER was originally advertised as a lifestyle blogging platform that did not explicitly address the fan community, but it was gradually appropriated by the proliferating posting of fan fiction, and today it is branded as a fan-fiction/amateur creation platform.
12. For instance, China Central Television (CCTV)'s various Weibo accounts have made different posts about using the term CP for different occasions. On May 4, 2018, the CCTV News account made a Weibo article on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to commemorate Marx's two-hundredth anniversary. In the text description, CCTV News explicitly called Marx-Engels "super CP" and romantically described their story. See @CCTVNews, "(Marx and Engels' Brotherhood: A Lifelong Friendship) Throughout Marx's life, Engels was his most loyal 'pinned' best friend. But their bond wasn't love at first sight—at first, Marx didn't think much of Engels. It wasn't until their second meeting that they hit it off and regretted not connecting sooner. Don't assume Engels was just Marx's 'sugar daddy'—this legendary CP was actually a case of 'heroes recognizing heroes,' elevating and completing each other," Weibo, May 4, 2018, 22:28, <https://weibo.com/2656274875/GfexZzZKW?pagetype=profilefeed>.

Yet, this “public face” significantly diverges from the actual person. Richard Dyer’s work on star images has already pointed out the constructive nature of the star’s public presentation, which folds various social norms and expectation with reality.¹³ When reproducing narratives based on celebrities’ known stories, fans selectively choose and reinterpret elements of stars’ images to serve their own narrative purposes.¹⁴ Moreover, the consumption of celebrities inherently involves voyeuristic desires to peer beyond the public persona. Therefore, while gossip and scandals can damage stars’ reputations, they also constitute celebrities’ authenticity.¹⁵

These layers of configuration separate an RPF’s “realness” from the singular physical body in material reality and emphasize a configured authentic body that draws various metatextual realities into one. Here authenticity becomes a conglomeration of the multiple mediated celebrity personas. Despite this distortion, fan fiction pursues ontological coherence that grounds imagination in tangible media images, making the measurement of distance between the fan fictional and the real quintessential to the genre.

Tielian emerged in the RPF discourse around 2016–2017, coinciding with the boom in celebrity culture in mainland China.¹⁶ Previously, Chinese fandom primarily used the term “out of character” (OOC)—imported from Japanese anime (*erciyuan*) and Euro-American media fandom (*oumeiquan*)—to signal character deviation. OOC functioned primarily as a disclaimer warning readers about deviations from the expected characterization while the discourse on tielian revolves around evaluating authenticity. The tension between OOC and tielian intensified in the controversial “227 Incident” of 2020. A small group of fans of Chinese celebrity Xiao Zhan,

13. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (British Film Institute, 1979), 34.

14. Piper, “Real Body,” 2.2.

15. Crystal Abidin, *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (Emerald Publishing, 2018), 4.

16. The 2016 Hallyu Restriction Order (*xianhanling*), resulted from the Chinese government’s antagonism toward the South Korean government’s installation of THAAD system, has led to a rapid growth of the Chinese entertainment industry.

enraged by the oversexualized portrayal of Xiao's character in an RPF titled *Falling* (*xiaozhui*), reported the work on Weibo. Since *Falling* was posted on the overseas platform AO3 but advertised within the fan community on Weibo, the reporting resulted in the state censorship of AO3, stirring widespread resentment among other fan communities.¹⁷ The author's OOC warning failed to prevent some fans from perceiving the narrative as a severe violation of Xiao's proper public image. The incident spurred broader discussion about offensive deviation of celebrity characters under the tag of OOC and the emerging need for tielian as a guiding principle in RPF writing. RPF fans generally acknowledge that all fan works involve some degree of OOC, since they are by nature fictionalized recreations—but they also call for shared standards and guidelines to shape both the production and reception of fan fiction within the community.

In celebrity culture, “reality” is mediated by various forms of virtuality, from screen productions, social media content, to entertainment gossip, and paparazzi news. The multilayered realities that facilitate the narratives of RPF resonate with Timothy J. Welsh's mixed realism. Welsh's framework, developed through his study of video-game and print fiction, elaborates on the complex relationships that media-generated virtualities forge between and within real-world contexts, pointing at the diminishing boundaries between the material reality and immaterial virtuality in user interactions.¹⁸ Welsh's reading of the nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1966) by Truman Capote presents an intriguingly similar case of reader engagement with RPF. *In Cold Blood* utilizes nonfiction elements that intersect with Capote's fictional narratives in unveiling the Clutter family murder.¹⁹ Similarly, RPF

17. Celia Lam and Zhen Troy Chen, “Performing the Creative and Irritating/Ed Fans: Discomfort, Flames, and Social Media Spectacle in Xiao Zhan's RPS Fandom,” in *Catching Chen Qing Ling: the Untamed and Adaptation, Production, and Reception in Transcultural Contexts*, ed. Cathy Yue Wang and Maria K. Alberto (Peter Lang, 2024), 237–38.

18. Timothy J. Welsh, *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 16–17.

19. Welsh, *Mixed Realism*, 37.

authors weave nonfictional elements of the celebrity they distilled from media portrayals, such as personality, hobbies, or background facts, with fictional storylines to narrate a new story of the celebrity. At the same time, unlike Capote's case where there is a relatively objective fact with the execution, the perceived objectivity for RPF authors and readers, such as a celebrity's real personality beyond the spotlight, is always mediated and never fixed. Thus, while RPF readers are also aware of the fantasized narratives they are reading, like Capote's readers, they are also required to constantly locate a "truth" of the celebrity themselves that provides factual ground amid fictional narration. Simultaneously, RPF readers engage in the process of defining reality in fan-fictional reality as the RPF authors do. Meanwhile, since both Capote and RPF writers have no physical encounter with the historical event or the actual celebrity, despite their efforts in maintaining objectivity and authenticity, there is the insurmountable gap that always exists in this mixed realism fueled by the media.²⁰ Tielian precisely measures such distance.

Similar to Capote's fictional account that approaches but never reaches the objective depiction of the historical scene, RPF approximates but never captures the celebrity characters' "real" appearance or "true" physical bodies. The question of authenticity in mixed realism, then, rests on the process of forging reality rather than the forged result.

Fostering the Past with Collective Memory

It is the urge to produce the "most authentic" RPF work that drives fan authors to develop different techniques of articulating celebrity's essential characteristics. Here, the "fostering idols" (*yangchengxi*) fandom introduces their unique emphasis on "essence." "Fostering idols" in China originated with the entertainment company Times Fengjun (*shidai fengjun*) in

20. Welsh, 40.

Chongqing that pioneered the “fostering model” (*yangcheng moshi*)” in idol training.²¹ Since 2010, Times Fengjun debuted two boy bands, TFBOYS and Teens in Times (TNT, *shidai shaonian tuan*), both achieving enormous popularity across Sinophone areas.²² Adapting Japanese idol-training systems, the fostering model highlights fans “witnessing” and “accompanying” inexperienced young trainees on their journey to stardom.²³ The focus on trainee-fan companionship creates a parasocial and even para-kin relationship in which fans identify themselves as trainees’ family members and cocultivate in their coming-of-age and debut on stage.²⁴ The construction of the idol-fan para-kin relationship relies on two factors: first, abundant media archives documenting daily activities and interactions of the trainees create quasi-omniscient fan knowledge; second, the companionship ideal elevates fans’ collective memory of idol trainees’ past as the ultimate communal treasures worthy of constant recounting. Therefore, reenacting of the past, either by the company’s official media or fans’ creative production, is crucial for fostering idol fandom’s communal bonding.²⁵

21. Times Fengjun’s profile on its official website explicitly shows it as the “first entertainment agency in China to use trainee fostering model in star training.” See also Beijing Times Fengjun Culture and Art Development Co., Ltd., “Home,” Wayback Machine, accessed September 4, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231209045219/https://www.tfent.cn/Index/contact>.
22. Times Fengjun’s influence first reached outside of mainland China in 2014 when TFBOYS went to Taiwan to film their reality show “TFBOYS Idols’ Journal” (TFBOYS *ouxiang shouji*) produced by iQiyi. In 2024, TF Fengjun debuted their third boys group, T.O.P (*denglu shaonian*), in a concert held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
23. Ning Jiang, “Fostered Idols and Chinese Identities,” in *Chinese National Identity in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. Lu Zhouxiang (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 115.
24. Qing Yan and Fan Yang, “From Parasocial to Parakin: Co-creating Idols on Social Media,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2021): 2608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820933313>.
25. TF Fengjun frequently asks the idol trainees to watch older video footage of them and give reactions. For instance, in the first episode of the *Typhoon Debut Project: Typhoon Summer Camp*, a reality show concurrent to the debut show of *Teens in Times*, all seven participants are asked to watch their “dark history” (*heilishi*, cringe moment) and try not to laugh. The editing of this scenario usually puts a small frame at the corner to show the video footage while simultaneously viewers can see idol trainees’ reactions. See: “(*Typhoon Debut Competition*) Typhoon Summer Camp 01: Pajama Party Begins, Classic Drama Re-enacted,” video, Bilibili, posted by TF Family, July 23, 2019, accessed

Written by the fan author named Woxiyangyang, *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor* (*qinggui budao shibalou*, hereafter *Light Rail*) exemplifies how RPF articulates fans' collective memory. Praised by fans as a "masterpiece of the community" (*zhenquan shenwen*)," *Light Rail* has gained further prominence by an fan-produced video adaptation that garnered 39.2 million views on Bilibili and 49.5 million views on Weibo after its release on April 23, 2020.²⁶ Despite different authorship, many fans consider the text and the video complementary, treating both as part of a unified legendary work in the fandom.

Written retrospectively in 2020, *Light Rail* builds on the reminiscence of Typhoon Project (2015–2019), which began with seventeen trainees but only culminated in seven debuts. Over its span of four-and-a-half years, the project experienced dramatic trainee turnover. To better recap the complicated history, the work uses the Chongqing light rail as the central metaphor for departure to provoke fan readers' affective connections. Moreover, *Light Rail* employs first-person narration to observe and reveal the intricate relationships among trainees. This narrative choice encourages readers to identify with the train driver "I," who is only later revealed to be Liu Zhihong—one of the earliest TF Fengjun trainees familiar to most fan readers. By using a first-person narrator, *Light Rail* aims to achieve authenticity through reader identification, creating collective witnessing through consumption. Despite surrealist depictions of the time-travel machine, its plots and settings are designed to correspond to the real-world scenario, even rendering a sense of historical writing. For instance, *Light Rail* specifies the time (2015–2020) and location (Chongqing) and chronicles events similar to those in real life. Hence, *Light Rail*, rather than creating an alternate universe, operates within actual timelines and identities. This approach

December 29, 2024, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1at41177wr/?vd_source=64fb-685c523fb522b13f8a557c8e151c.

26. This video is not made by the original author of *Light Rail* but an "authorized remake" by a fan reader.

demands encyclopedic knowledge of archived footage—the extensive video documentation of trainee development becomes the author’s primary resource for achieving tielian.

Unlike *In Cold Bold* where Capote conceals the fictional construction through immersive realism, *Light Rail* deliberately juxtaposes surrealist time travelling with real-world evidence dissolving fiction/reality boundaries. For instance, Yan Haoxiang, one of the final debut members both in *Light Rail* and reality, uses the candy as his symbolic departure token, a real object from a game in episode 4, season 5 of Time Fengjun’s reality show *Friday Trainees* (*xingqiwu lianxisheng*) that aired in 2016. In this game, Yan failed the mission of finding candies with his best friend, He Junlin, and runs away as part of the script. Coincidentally, Yan temporarily withdrew from the Typhoon Project from 2017 to 2019 and returned for the final debut program in reality. In both the media footage and the real-world scenario, Yan’s sudden leaving does not result in a break between the two but an intersecting moment of mixed realism. Fans discuss the 2016 episode as the unintended foretelling of Yan’s real departure. “Foretelling” effectively blends constructed narratives with real-world scenarios, making fiction intersect reality.

In *Light Rail*, to further fantasize about Yan’s close relationship with He, the candy is both the one they failed to find in the reality show as well as the symbolic friendship Yan has given up. When Yan first takes the train to leave in 2016, he gives a candy as his train ticket. In 2019, he tries to use a bag of candy in return for the candy he gives three years ago:

He says, “Going back to the 18th floor.”²⁷ I was stunned for a moment and told him that this train was one-way without returning. He bit his lips and stood still for a while, then he opened the violin case and said, “Let me play a song for you.”

27. The “Eighteenth Floor” (*shibalou*) is a fandom-derived name that refers to TF Fengjun, whose Chongqing office is on Changjiang International Tower’s eighteenth floor.

So, I took away his violin and stopped his horrible melody from hurting my ears, and I found the candy and gave it back to him.

...

"This is my first time driving the returning line."

"This is my last chance," Zhan Yiwen²⁸—or now we should call him Yan Haoxiang—did not shut up because we were both speaking at the same time and rather continue his monologue, "If I can't go back to the 18th floor, then I have to go to Canada to be with my dad."²⁹

Emphasizing that the metaphorical train is supposed to be one way without returning, the scene recontextualizes one of the most controversial events to the fandom: Yan Haoxiang was the only trainee who could participate in the 2019 debut show after his previous contract dispute with the company. In presenting this watershed moment, the author purportedly intersects real-world elements with fictional narratives. The mention of the violin playing refers to Yan's final performance in the 2016 Christmas concert, right before he left the company. From 2017 to 2019, Yan occasionally performed his violin on stage but discontinued after he returned to Times Fengjun in 2019. In this case, violin playing is repurposed as Yan's barter for returning in *Light Rail* but also supplements a fan interpretation of his discontinuity in real life. Moreover, the last conversation between Yan and the train driver is a literal adaptation from his interview footage in 2019, in which

28. "Zhan Yiwen" was a stage name Yan took on when he left TF Fengjun and joined another company at the beginning of 2017. After his return in 2019, he continued to use his real name (Yan Haoxiang) on stage.

29. This article uses the version posted by the author in a Douban member-only discussion group "*douban lengquan luangao*," which focused entirely on fostering idol trainees. Douban is one of the most vibrant social media platforms for celebrity fandom discussion, which stimulates dynamic mobilization of fan activities that impact the celebrities' stardom. Although the closed-group function of Douban that restricts external members from commenting in the post, *Light Rail* received 317 likes, 2,273 collects, and eighty-seven external reposts. See the original fanfiction post at @Woxiyangyang, "Fantasy Literature Posted During Team Bonding: *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor*," Douban, January 15, 2020, https://www.douban.com/group/topic/163265054/?_i=4934254n_HEgUt.

he deliberately called out that, if he loses in the debut competition, the worst case would be going to Canada.³⁰ Rather than simply recontextualizing a historical scene in the narratives, the intentional juxtaposition of the fictional (Yan conversing with train driver) and the real (Yan's interview) highlights the deterministic mind as Yan's essence that alleviates the ruptures in the interchange between fantasy and reality. In such a way, *Light Rail* achieves a high degree of tielian by making the fictional Yan closer, or even speaking the same speech, as the real Yan.

The symbolic candy culminates in Yan's reunion with He:

"I am sorry, mister Yan, I have dental braces, I can't eat the candy." Yan Haoxiang insisted on putting the candy in He Junlin's palm, Yan pulled apart his fingers and put the candy in his palm, then he pulled him into his arms, "I am back. I am sorry."³¹

In this case, the reason behind Yan's departure is painted by multiple meanings: as part of the game after they fail the mission, the real-life choice as well as a regrettable decision that separates him from his best mate. Here, Yan's true motivation is unknowable, but the layered mediation, from media archive to fantasized imagination, prompts the belief that these different interpretations coconstitute the "truth" of Yan's departure. The "realness" at stake is no longer the matter of an objective and consolidated fact, of the actual reason why Yan left and came back; the "realness" in tielian is about the continuous processing of truth formation that affectively engages the readers. In reconciling the disparity emerged in this dynamic, tielian evokes a higher emotional appeal that overarches all. The final apology of Yan thus speaks to not only He in the fictional account but also the readers who are processing

30. "Typhoon Debut Competition Preview: A Conversation with the Seven Members, and a Tribute to the Redeparting Journey," video, Bilibili, posted by TF Family, July 19, 2019, 20:10–18, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1ot411J7cq/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=64fb685c523fb522b13f8a557c8e151c.

31. @Woxiyangyang, "Light Rail."

the truth of his return. This shift to processual authenticity positions tiel-ian as a distinctly literary mechanism that privileges affective resonance and collaborative interpretation over factual fidelity. In doing so, it expands the formal possibilities of fan fiction, foregrounding emotional plausibility and intertextual memory as core strategies of narrative construction.

From Immersion to Intermediality

Welsh identifies Capote's important tactic for immersive reading: incorporating trial quotations that compel readers to problematize fact-based narrativization. Through sharing his textual evidence, Capote not only supports his version of the story but also enables his readers to construct alternative interpretations.³² Similarly, *Light Rail* constructs immersive reading, particularly in the short reunion between He and Yan, through intermedial references to the archival footage in the fan video. Intermediality—the fusion of entwined media forms and practices—manipulates material, technological, and semiotic facets of different media to transform and enrich narrative potentialities.³³ In the age of digital culture, new affordance of technologies brings new aesthetics in reading practices, which highlight readers' reactions and interactions in reading practices. The inclusion of hypertext, images, and moving pictures in digital and visual print poetry, for instance, have profound impact in disrupting linear and sequential reading of traditional poetry, which relies on a single medium, providing readers constant novelty.³⁴ In the case of *Light Rail*, where the video and the text are often consumed together, the use of audiovisual materials amplifies affected realism by conjoining facts with fiction. In the textual account of the reunion, *Light Rail* attains faithful transcription of the archival media by recontextualizing the

32. Welsh, *Mixed Realism*, 42–43.

33. Marina Grishakova, "Intermediality as a Material Practice and Artistic Event," in *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, ed. Astrid Ensslin, Julia Round, and Bronwen Thomas (Routledge, 2023), 35, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003119739-4>.

34. Grishakova, "Intermediality," 41–42.

actual event filmed in the 2019 debut program, in which He showed bewilderment and sarcasm at Yan's reappearance:

(Long shot with all seven members in the frame)

Ding Chengxin (to He Junlin): What kind of feeling do you have?

Zhang Zhenyuan (to He Junlin): Just tell us your feelings.

Ding Chengxin: (He Junlin) is too nervous.

(Camera zooms to a medium shot of He Junlin sitting with three other members)

He Junlin (looking at Yan Haoxiang): I (pause) I saw someone that I could not recognize.

(Camera shifts back to long shot)

He Junlin (chuckles): I don't know you (Yan sneers), who are you?

(Camera zooms to medium close-up of Yan Haoxiang)

Yan: Oh (looking away from He's direction) Should I make a self-introduction?

(Camera shifts to medium shot on He's side, including Yan on the edge of the right side)

Yan (looking to He's direction): Hi everyone.

He Junlin (cutting Yan's word off and looking to Yan): Who are you (chuckle)?

Yan Haoxiang (putting a palm on his chest and looking to He's side):

Let me make a self-introduction. (Concurrently overlapped by Song Yaxuan's voice: "Hi everyone, I am Yan Haoxiang again").

(Camera zooms to medium close-up of Yan)

Yan Haoxiang (smiling awkwardly): Hi everyone, I am Yan Haoxiang.

(Stops smiling immediately and puts his head down).

(Camera returns to long shot of all members)

He Junlin (hand covering his face, [speaking] in a sarcastic tone):

Wow, how excit[ing] this is.³⁵

35. "Typhoon Debut Competition Preview," 24:56–25:17.

Comparing He's overbearing questioning above with his line in *Light Rail* ("I am sorry, mister Yan, I have dental braces, I can't eat the candy") reveals how the fan-fictional line retains He as a sharp-tongued person showing more humiliation than joy at Yan's return. In this case, even though *Light Rail* fantasizes a romantic relationship between Yan and He, the text maintains fidelity to the archived scene. He's reaction in the show, the more authentic portrayal recorded by camera, is transferred to the fantasized narratives. This consistency allows readers to recognize the essence of He being the witty one through the fictional lines. Conversely, Yan's cautiousness in his awkward interaction with He becomes reinterpreted as his regret. Where the 2019 reality show depicts persisting with his self-introduction despite He's scorn, *Light Rail* transforms this persistence into the promised candy as an apology. Fan fiction may romanticize Yan's persistence as his emotional bonding with He; nonetheless, it preserves the discomfort in this reunion scene, achieving tielian through emotional fidelity.

In the fan video, intermediality heightens the narrative impact through combining media footage with the fan-fictional narrative, inviting the readers to recontextualize the scene collectively. The fan video attentively selects film clips that match the storyline in *Light Rail* and welds text with moving images.³⁶ Most parts of the video prioritize fan-fiction text over visual footage by transmitting textual lines thoroughly and removes the clips' original soundtrack. However, echoing Capote's tactic, the fan video retains the original clips in the reunion scene; specifically, Yan's interview footage remains unedited. The sequence starts with an establishing shot that represents the train-riding scene, then cuts to the media footage of Yan describing his determination to return, substituting the talk scene in the fan fiction with real speech. When the train driver asks about Yan's reason for returning, the

36. "(*Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor*) TF Second-Gen Ensemble: They Share a Story with You, and You Are Destined for an Unexpected Farewell with Them," video, Bilibili, posted by Youjianxinghe, April 23, 2020, accessed December 26, 2024, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Q5411x7dr/?vd_source=64fb685c523fb522b-13f8a557c8e151c.



Figure 2.1: Screenshot of the fan video *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor* by Yueliang Xiahuole, posted on Bilibili. The visual footage is taken from the 2019 debut program while the text is extracted from the original RPF.

Source: Bilibili https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Q5411x7dr/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=ddadf821399654fce17b57e9ab2338eb

video chooses to first incorporate a short clip of the awkward reunion where He mocks Yan, and then inserts the exact line from the text as the explanation of Yan's return only after He's disbelief (see figure 1). Through this technique, the original and supposedly "real" presentation in visual media replaces and supplements the fantasized recreation in forming an intermedial narrative where authenticity and imagination become inseparable.

Viewer engagement reveals the immersive reading through Bilibili's *danmu* feature. *Danmu* (bullet comment) is the user-generated text flowing across the screen to promote a participatory culture of consumption.³⁷ In the reunion scene of the *Light Rail* video, viewers simultaneously express their affection in the reunion ("Grateful for the return") and provide textual

37. Feifei Zhou, "Orality, Multimodality and Creativity in Digital Writing: Chinese Users' Experiences and Practices with Bullet Comments on Bilibili," *Social Semiotics* 34, no. 3 (2022): 370–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2022.2120387>.

information from the fan fiction (“Here [when he] tells about the reason for the returning trip in the original text, [it] is because someone pays for Yan’s ticket”). These affective danmu indicate diverse reading perspectives of the readers, whether they choose to prioritize the reality, the textual, or the audio-visual mediated truth. Once again, the fiction/reality binary dissolves as the real speech now becomes a segment of the fan fiction and the fantasized account participates in the real footage’s mediation of the event. This reciprocal relationship constitutes mixed realism’s authentic effect.

Why not entirely rewrite the emotional moment with love and tears? Why not recount the memory in a heartfelt way rather than a bitter one? Why not just make the video by replacing the original soundtrack with the fan-fiction lines? The case of Yan and He’s reunion scene demonstrates that RPF’s imagination operates within boundaries. Constructing an RPF’s “realness” requires careful calibration of personal essence against the documented truth. RPF readers expect a speculative narrative that exceeds the perceived reality, but speculation must remain grounded in communally acknowledged parameters. While celebrities can be characterized into different roles in different fantasized narratives, their traits must align with mediated reality. Moreover, the intermedial reference that weaves the fictional text into the real footage consolidates mixed realism in fan fiction. Rather than a simple remolding of the celebrities on-screen into the desirable characters in the fanfiction text, the realistic pursuit in a tielian RPF invites the readers to reconceptualize their perception of media presentations collectively. Whether watching reality shows or reading fan fictions, fans ultimately engage in expanded forms of celebrity consumption.

Illusive Essence, Subjective Faces

Although tielian is commonly used in fandom to evaluate characterization in RPF, this standard operates in a narrative vacuum where no official version exists to anchor the interpretations. The fostering-idol system’s fragmented

media archives create a documentary surplus that enables multiple, equally valid reconstructions of the memory. In fact, because of the absence of a master narrative imposing an “official” interpretation of the past in the community, various fan narratives will contest over the right to interpret.³⁸ Hence there can be dichotomous reviews of a single work among the reading community. Positive comments see *Light Rail* as a “realistic fiction” that is more tielian and emotionally affective than other works. In this case, the text and the video are jointly seen as contributing to the excellence of *Light Rail*’s realism:

Light Rail’s style is the most comfortable one I feel, [and I think] both the text and the video are pretty good. . . . Different (RPF) works have different settings, but the realistic one is always more *tielian* [and therefore] more likely to make the reader have authentic and heartfelt emotion [*zhenqing shigan*].³⁹

Another fan reader writes:

This work [*Light Rail*] is so meaningful and deep to me, the author’s writing technique is unique and beautiful. The literary style itself is already high quality, but the plot and theme even elevate RPS⁴⁰ to a new level. I would like to call it the most beautiful non-fictional literature [*jishi wenxue*] in the community of *wannian*.⁴¹

38. The discussion on master narratives and collective memory here follows Susan Weigelin-Schwiedrzik’s inquiry into the collective memory of the Cultural Revolution and the narratives of traumatic experience. Although celebrity fandom does not enact the same level of traumatic past equivalent to national history, the narration of the past and the constant reiteration of “blood and tear” aligns with the reflection over agony in the past. See: Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History,” *China Quarterly*, no. 188 (2006): 1071.

39. Niannianjinhuan, Weibo, July 8, 2020, 02:24, https://weibo.com/7456304374/Jagt-KyeK2?refer_flag=1001030103_.

40. Real-person slash (RPS) is an interchangeable title with RPF. Slash culture is a subgenre of fandom focusing on homosexual romance. See Jenkins, *Poacher*, 192.

41. DreamMin1006, Weibo, May 3, 2021, 10:13, https://weibo.com/2253957385/KdOR-ZoaVZ?refer_flag=1001030103; “Wannian” is the CP abbreviated name of Liu Yaowen and Ding Chengxin in TNT. *Light Rail*’s author publicly acknowledges themselves as

This comment constitutes an inherent paradox by calling the work “nonfictional literature,” which is against the nature of RPF. Nonetheless, elevating the work as nonfictional and pinpointing its ability to arouse authentic emotion, these comments argue that the reader’s affective reenactment is part of what constitutes the realistic aesthetic in tielian. Welsh uses Katherine Hayles’s conception of embodiment in examining the contextual articulation of the material for immersive readership in *In Cold Blood*.⁴² With *Light Rail*, the contextual factors have been restricted to a very small worldview, with a specific group of celebrities during a particular period, and embodiment is achieved through recontextualizing the fantasized face close enough to the real world. In this logic, tielian relates to the ultimate achievement of an embodied readership with an affective connection that welds the fictional with the real. This commentator also accentuates a climax sentence at the ending of *Light Rail* (“No one will forever love you, but forever there will be someone who loves you”) and admires these words’ “pureness and authentic and heartfelt emotion” (*chuncui he zhenqing shigan*). The recurring sentiment of authenticity and sincerity, alongside the emphasis on homogeneity, allocates the realization of tielian in readers’ processes of affective recognition.

Even more than the emotional return, a realistic and tielian RPF is seen as trustworthy as historical writing. An anonymous review identifies *Light Rail* as the “chronicle of blood and tears on the 18th floor” that “records every (CP),” and “each character in (the story) is fresh and vivid.”⁴³ This reviewer gives a full scale for *Light Rail*’s writing style, plot, narrative, characterization, and delivered value but a poor score for “instant gratification” (*shuanggan*), which the reviewer explains in subtext, “[This is] the chronicle of blood and tears, there is no gratified attitude but only tears” (see figure 2).

a shipper of *wannnian*, thus most of the fan readers attribute *Light Rail* to a wannian RPS/F work.

42. Welsh, *Mixed Realism*, 32–33.

43. Shibalouwenxue_Bot, “Eighteenth Floor Fanfic Panel: Fan Submission Part 4! (image 7),” Weibo image, August 18, 2022, 09:51, <https://weibo.com/7778274341/M1Fx-6gLdw?pagetype=detail>. See figure 1 in appendix for details.

The addressing of a fantasized account as historical writing through words like “chronicle” and “record” further complicates the boundary between speculative fiction and objective records. Even if the fantastical narrative of time travelling repurposes the actual events for its own use, claims like this one still utilize the common belief of history’s neutrality to justify the realness and factuality of *Light Rail*. Meanwhile, the praise of the characters as “fresh and vivid” (*xianhuo*) acknowledges the successful molding of celebrities’ figures into characters, which provokes and enhances the collective memory of fans’ experiences. All these examples of compliments show readers’ decisive roles in the scaling of tielian in an RPF’s characterization. This would also mean that there would always be readers falling short of the ambiance.

In a reaction video on reading *Light Rail*, the reactors contend that fans have overrated this work, which wrongly reflects the history that both the trainees and fans have experienced. Claiming themselves to be “veteran fans” who hold temporal proximity and experiential authority, the reactors fiercely criticize *Light Rail* for selective rewriting and omission, constituting a “brainwashing package” (*xinao bao*), which greatly diverges from their accounts yet receives wide support among fan groups. In the reactors’ reading of Yan’s return, they believe that describing Yan’s poor violin skills is propagating disinformation about the real person:

Then [it] talks about Yan Haoxiang going back [to the company, and he] needs to play the violin to Liu Zhihong [the protagonist/train driver] [for the returning train ticket], [and then the writer] says he plays poorly. Yan has improved his violin skill [over time] okay? Don’t play on this bad joke of his poor skill and keep talking about it! [I think the author] has enmity with Yan Haoxiang, [the author] jokes about his [crack] voice, and jokes about his violin. These are all the things these kids would never like to mention [but the author] is repeatedly mentioning. (See figure 3.)⁴⁴

44. ShibalouwenzueBot, “A Literary Feast like Rare Delicacies? Only Veteran Fans Know the Truth but Stay Quiet! Eighteenth Floor Fanfic Panel: *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor*,” video, Bilibili, August 27, 2022, 05:50.

十八楼文学交流表

作品名：《轻轨不到十八楼》
作者：我喜羊羊

●一句话故事梗概：

18楼血泪编年史

●直抒胸臆的夸夸/吐槽：

每个人在里面都是鲜活的，
唯一有返程票的严戏，
多次来车站送人的丁年，
去了影视部的薇姐和敖狗，
七折，航鑫，逸鑫，戏影，
每一对都被记录下来，
还有我们真诚的刘晚。

没有人永远爱你，
但是永远有人爱你。
完年疯狂上分

原谅我一个七折余孽，
看到薇说我们不相欠了
是真的忍不住

●仅代表个人的打分：

文笔：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→
剧情：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→
叙事节奏：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→
人物塑造：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→
价值观：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→
爽感：☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆→

血泪编年史 无爽感，，，只有泪

Figure 2.2: Anonymous reviewer's review on *Light Rail Does Not Reach the Eighteenth Floor*.

Source: Weibo @shibalouwenxue_bot “Eighteenth Floor Literature Bot.”

Rather than seeing violin-playing as a treasurable memory of a lively image of Yan, the reactors believe that this is perpetuating Yan as an untalented trainee, thus inverting their mnemonic accounts. The accusation of “spreading [a] brainwashing package” is, on the one hand, pinpointing false depictions and stereotypes; on the other hand, it also implicitly acknowledges the prevailing effect that impacts readers’ perceptions of celebrities. Readers’ blind acceptance of the false representation would delude them from seeing the true essence of the celebrities, thus falling for disinformation. Although such “true essence” is subject to change depending on the availability of media footage and even individual tastes, fans are vigilant on any potential “discredit” of their beloved idols, even if this is only a fictional account.

Moreover, in contrast with positive comments’ applause on *Light Rail* portraying characters as “fresh and vivid,” the reactors condemn *Light Rail* for making pale and stereotyped characterizations:

You [fans] brand [*Light Rail*] as [writing] the “history of blood and tear[s],” [but] what it shows is not the most “blood and tear[s]” moment of [the trainees]. . . . I think [it] not only does not reflect these kids’ efforts in keeping up, [and] the struggles and the friendship [this work] has no portrayal. I don’t know what you guys [author and readers] are so emotional about?⁴⁵

The recurring melancholic register of “blood and tear[s]” indicates that, despite the disagreement over interpretations, both its criticism and compliments concern the question of authenticity through the representations of suffering. The aesthetic of hardship authenticates an idol’s journey through pain and struggles, validates fans’ emotional investment, and thus creates the shared affective ground for recontextualization. The focus of adversity in

45. ShibalouwenxueBot, 02:34, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Tg411D7dB/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=ddad821399654fce17b57e9ab2338eb.



Figure 2.3: Screenshot of the reaction video contending the misrepresentation with a meme of young Yan.

Source: Bilibili https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Tg411D7dB/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=ddadf821399654fce17b57e9ab2338eb

encoding the past aligns with the long tradition of using individual experience confronting the conventional historiography. This links tielian to the broader artistic choice of portraying suffering, wherein pain is particularly associated with the configuration of literary humanity in realism.⁴⁶ The representation of the real, in this case, is attained when the repressed pain in collective memory is affectively evoked.

The competing legitimations over the characterization illustrate the post-truth condition of narrative construction in the digital era. When the objective fact matters less than individual opinion, truth can be manifold: the veteran fans' view of growth prioritizes the positive outcome of development and hence the repetition of inexperienced performance delegitimizes the idol's effort while the positive comments see imperfection as a crucial factor, making adolescence meaningful and reminiscent. The temporal disjunction persisting in the collective memory results in the productive instability in constantly shaping and reshaping fandom's knowledge of the celebrity. Though the "real face," which the fictional face should strive to approach in tielian narratives, is based on the same contextual factors in the collective memory enriched through media, and thus there would always be a base for the collectives to evolve. Whereas a holistic master narrative is missing in the community, for fostering idol fans, they share the struggle of youth development—that no matter how different individual narratives decode the memory, they nonetheless echo the sentiment of a memorable adolescence.

Conclusion

The case of *Light Rail* and the fostering system fandom it belongs to illustrate how authenticity is realized in fictional depiction through the affective

46. For a discussion on pain and realism in Chinese literary culture, see Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (Brill, 2009); and Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

evoking of collective memory. The fan discourse of tielian reveals how digital communities create new forms of literary authenticity when institutional arbiters of truth no longer exist. Fundamentally, celebrity fan culture is built on mixed realism, and tielian continuously measures how closely fictional characters' "faces" resemble the celebrities' multimedia personas. As the celebrity's authenticity is constituted by the interference of media, the search for the celebrity's essential traits is multilayered, in that realness in speculative narratives is not antagonistic to fictional rendering but cocontributing to readers' recognition of the celebrity. Tielian thus names an ongoing process that is both mediated by and remediates fan perception. It opens new possibilities of digital memories, documentary and archival practices, and collective authorship in the age of mediation. It shows that digital literature such as celebrity fan fiction has become a progressive site of production, involving continuous effort from the community to render the truth to reality. In particular, intermediality contributes significantly to the construction of affective authenticity in diminishing the boundaries among mediated reality, fan fiction, and fans' collective memories. In this process of representing reality, fan fiction engages the verisimilar tradition of Western literary tradition, which theorizes art's idealizing power in shaping life.⁴⁷ Rather than a mimetic representation of the celebrity, tielian in fan fiction stresses a heightened probability that both perfects readers' perception of the real star, as well as their negotiated memories linked up with the mediated past. Remembering idols' struggles is equally provocative as remembering one's own experience during the same time. Moreover, the nature of participatory culture has enabled a perpetual discourse of truth formation in a post-truth era, in that all contesting interpretations can find moral legitimacy in the void of master narrative. The verisimilar probability in fan fiction is thus infinite: It affirms existing representations through affective resonance,

47. Matthew Potolsky, "Verisimilitude: A Reintroduction," *MLN* 138, no. 5 (2023): 1423, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2023.a922032>.

verifies new meaning from clashes of interpretations, and continues to valorize different orders of information succeeding the current formula.

By treating fan fiction not merely as a subcultural response but as a literary form grounded in affective realism, this article positions tielian as a critical framework for understanding the literary evolution in digital culture. It draws attention to how literary realism is reimagined in participatory contexts, where emotional accuracy and communal remembrance serve as new standards of narrative legitimacy. As such, tielian goes beyond fan culture—it is a literary logic that remediates our understanding of realism, authorship, and authenticity in contemporary storytelling.