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ARTICLE

Romance as a Method, Enjoyment as Empiricism

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Abstract

The practice of anthropology is based on the ethnographer "being there" in time and space. And the act of writing is the reenactment of "presence" for the reader. "The field" is a romanticized space for empirical exploration. However, technological innovation and connectivity have enabled easy access to new "fieldsites" and vicarious participant-observation without being "present." The entertainment media ecosystem is now more heterogeneous than ever and is more relevant in everyday life. The depth with which we immerse ourselves in these imaginary worlds speaks volumes about our withdrawal from other forms of engagement with the people, communities, and social problems around us. Romance and fantasy are a means to escape vulnerability and hopelessness, as well as serving as an outlet for the frustrations of failed social mobility. This essay posits that romance is a method for living today, and enjoyment is empiricism for a public anthropology. Romance is more than a genre; it is a guide to understanding how society functions. There is something deeply human about living through our imaginations to escape our present. Enjoying romance as a method to engage with the world offers insight into political infrastructures, social hierarchies, and elite intrigue. Life is full of afflictions, and romance is more than a salve; it offers a strategy for navigating social relations.

Keywords: anthropology; China; empiricism; enjoyment; entertainment media; romance

The practice of anthropology is based on the ethnographer "being there" in time and space. And the act of writing is the reenactment of "presence" for the reader. "The field" is a romanticized space for empirical exploration. However, technological innovation and connectivity have enabled easy access to new "fieldsites" and vicarious participant-observation without being "present." I began intently watching Chinese serial dramas, reality shows, talk shows, and variety entertainment during the COVID-19 global pandemic when I was stuck in place. The ubiquity of streaming platforms offering endless entertainment enabled binge-watching of entire seasons in one sitting. Easy escapism is at our fingertips. The constant churn of new shows is designed to keep audiences hooked and engrossed in storylines that are more exciting than life in lockdown or life in normality. Immersion into the lives of enchanting characters entangled in captivating (and far-fetched) scenarios in different historical periods and geographic locations was (and is) utterly enjoyable, and I argue here, serious.

"Watching" fails to capture the interactive nature of how viewers comment on each and every episode, observing carefully the acting quality, character development, plot changes, chemistry between the lead actors, pace of the action, and so forth. The fandom around

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particular "idols" and celebrities adds to the cacophony of commentary that has been enfolded as streaming content for participating viewers.[1] The entertainment media ecosystem is now more heterogeneous than ever and is more relevant in everyday life. The depth with which we immerse ourselves in these imaginary worlds speaks volumes about our withdrawal from other forms of engagement with the people, communities, and social problems around us. The recent phenomenon of Chinese youth engaging in "*tan ping*" (lying flat) and "*fu lan*" (let it rot) in China is indicative of the loss of faith and trust in the Chinese socialist system that promised to "serve the people" and deliver "common prosperity," which are slogans from ideological campaigns by the Chinese Communist Party. Fierce competition in education, work, and intimate relationships within an environment of yawning wealth disparity has dispelled any lingering belief in hard work reaping just rewards. Thus, the social media sensation of Chinese youth publicizing their retreat from work, marriage, and consumption is a sign of disaffection with the ruling authorities and prevailing system. Withdrawal from the status quo and immersion into fantasy worlds online in the form of gaming, fan fiction, or non-generative leisure is a concern for the Chinese government. Romance and fantasy are a means to escape vulnerability and hopelessness, as well as serving as an outlet for the frustrations of failed social mobility. These romances are highly stylized to be entertaining, but they also provide a portrayal of the excesses of patriarchy, social stratification, and commodification of life in a market economy.

The many variations of Chinese romantic dramas provide insight into the cultural tropes that circulate in Chinese society. However, these tropes are not isolated to China; we see similar cultural iterations in other societies as well. These serial dramas are modern folktales that address a plethora of contemporary social issues in both fantastical and stark ways. They are the creative products of writers and producers contemporaneous with the audience. Thus, they express the collective sentiments of a society that is wrought with inequity, fear, and precarity, as well as the desire to escape into another world to alleviate us from these afflictions. To relate just a few popular examples—there is the business romance between domineering male boss and unflappable female underling; the contract marriage romance between the scion of a family conglomerate and a Cinderella character; the high school romance between the smartest boy in the class and the underachieving girl; the historical, martial arts romance between the powerful prince and the attentive but poor female servant; and so forth. These tropes are an extension of the archetype of the powerful male figure who falls desperately in love with the poor, plain Jane figure while spurning other rich, beautiful women who are trying to ensnare him to gain status. The male protagonist's devotion to this overlooked but worthy woman symbolizes his fidelity, sincerity, and intelligence to see through scheming and superficiality.

Despite the outrageous plotline and clear violations of professional ethics, the workplace business romance is relatable because it illustrates how work is a dominant force that structures the relationships and encounters in an individual's life. The fantasy of the boss falling desperately in love with an underling is an overture to the threat of sexual harassment and assault when there is an obvious power imbalance in hierarchical institutions. The devotion of the male lead to the female lead, despite the temptation of other cunning, beautiful women equally dedicated to enticing him away, is a projection of the threat of adultery and abandonment. The terms "*xiao san'er*" (the third person), "*er nai*" (second breast, aka mistress), and "*chu gui*" (derailed, aka cheating) in the Chinese vernacular indicate the prevalence of adultery and cheating within conventional monogamous relationships. The

[1] See Cui and Wu 2024.

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fidelity of a man who meets the ideals of "*gao, fu, shuai*" (tall, rich, and handsome) is the wishful thinking of the mostly female audience watching these romances.

These dramas resonate with audiences because the social truth circulating in Chinese society is that wealth and education determine life chances. Even the high school romances between the overachieving boy and the struggling girl—who is tutored by the boy, and he then proceeds to fall in love with her—are moral lessons in studying hard to achieve a high score on the "*gaokao*" (university entrance exam) in order to gain entrance to a good university, because that is one channel to success and social mobility. The familiar script of the man as the source of wealth and attachment to him through marriage as the only means to redistribution of wealth is reinforced through these romances. The struggle for social mobility against the downward pressure of precarity in contemporary China highlights the exceptional circumstances necessary to rise above insecurity. These idealized narratives attract both hope and ridicule because the stark contrast between reality and romance amplifies the severity of the social problems.

Romances are created to appeal to public sensibilities, and in the Chinese case, filtered through government censors to ensure social propriety. These romances are an archive of the anxieties and aspirations of the times. In some of the episodes, the characters make self-aware references to the unlikelihood of the Cinderella story (but it turns out to be likely after all in their particular circumstance), so there is self-referential acknowledgment in the dialogue. There are also scenes with the lead characters watching other iconic romantic dramas playing on the television in the background. The circular referentially offers a tongue-in-cheek critique of the romance genre within the romance drama itself. It is more than likely that some scenes from our favorite romantic dramas are more vivid in our memories than the scenes from our own personal lives. These cinematic portrayals churn in the public consciousness, serving to reinforce their significance. They provide a temporal register for our emotional states and give expression to collective sentiment in a readily recognizable language.

The platforms that stream these romances allow for commentary that is archived along with the episodes. For example, on the Chinese *Bilibili* platform, scrolling "real-time" comments move across the screen while the show is being streamed. The running commentary by viewers is part of the experience of interacting with the drama on screen. Unlike an encounter on the street with a stranger, the engagement with the screen encourages shared sentiment with a mass audience of anonymous participants. Entertainment media has also become the subject matter for debate and discussion on talk shows, podcasts, magazines, and newspapers. They populate the public consciousness. We collectively ponder their meaning and influence because they undeniably capture our attention, motivate our actions, inspire our dreams, and stir our imagination. The emotive appeal of these romances is "real" and influences how we "feel" these experiences. The need to express one's feelings represented in a string of emojis as commentary is especially commonplace. For some, these romances are the main source of "good feelings" in a life numbed by daily horrors and hardships. Romance is a means and method of living today, and I argue that enjoyment is empiricism for a public anthropology that is attuned to prevailing sentiment.

Entertainment media has evolved from the passive television screen. Previous anthropological studies have looked at television viewing, but the term "television" is anachronistic and fails to capture how many in China and the West consume content today.[2] In the case of

[2] Early ethnographic studies of television watching include Mankekar 1993 and Rofel 1994. Some recent studies that address the new modes of engagement include Deng 2025, Chalaby 2023, and Zhang 2022.

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China, it is mostly on smartphones or devices that can stream a variety of content.[3] These platforms are also intentionally designed for audience interaction, as in the aforementioned platform *Bilibili.* This socialized form of viewing with others creates a viewership community, but it also serves a pedagogical purpose of teaching the viewer how to express publicly acceptable sentiment or face immediate sanction from other viewers. We now communicate in digital traces. An anthropological study of these media-generated sensations considers the social milieu of their creation in order to situate their wide appeal and criticism. There is something vastly alluring about living vicariously through others. The characters live the proxy lives we have failed to manifest. The pandemic response, in particular, encouraged us to see proximity and contact with others as risky. The imperative to retreat into our own sanitized world authorized a yearning to escape. Why are we drawn to escapism? And why do these romances move us?

In *Revolution of the Heart*, literary scholar Haiyan Lee traced changes in the Chinese social consciousness around love through the Confucian, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary structures of feeling. Lee's threefold periodization of the genealogy of love

> approached sentiment as an articulatory practice, rejecting the essentialist assumption of a natural, spontaneous, and timeless dimension of human life that all social systems seek to control by means of repression, channeling, or sublimation.... To write a genealogy of love is both to deny its essence, facticity, and universality, and to examine how discourses of sentiment produce precisely these effects and for what purposes.[4]

Enjoyment as empiricism is a focus not only on what emerges in the foreground, but also on what recedes into the background. Is enjoyment a manifestation of complicity, surrender, or delusion? Maybe, but not necessarily. We are living in a new world of infused reality and sensory enhancement. Thus, romance as a method is a valid means to enter the "games of truth" that are prevalent today. The rampant commercialization of this modern period, as noted by Lee, is characterized by "the fractured moral horizon on which no single moral source claims the allegiance of all."[5] Romance is more than a genre; it is a guide to understanding how society functions. There is something deeply human about living through our imaginations to escape our present. Enjoyment of romance as a method to engage in the world offers insight into political infrastructures, social hierarchies, and elite intrigue. Life is full of afflictions, and romance is more than a salve; it offers a strategy for navigating difficult, opaque social relations.

Anthropology, as well as its main expression in ethnography as both research methodology and writing genre, has always been a creative process drawing on its own empirical foundations. The practice of anthropology is ultimately based on the capacity of the ethnographer being present and interpreting the moment for the reader. Thus, writing ethnography is arguably an act of sharing sentiment. Drawing on my "serious" enjoyment of romance during this period of confinement as opposed to mobility, I saw a similarity between how I was approaching romance as a research method for understanding social consciousness in contemporary China and "romance" as an analogy for how we fetishize and protect our disciplinary methods for analyzing the world. We do not adequately interrogate

[3] See Fu and Wang 2025.
[4] Lee 2007, 299.
[5] Lee 2007, 303.

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the notion of "romance" as generative of attachment to our research methodologies. This is particularly striking in the discipline of anthropology because ethnography is premised on the privilege of mobility and being able to enter and extract ourselves from the lives of others, and taking with us some part of them that we can refashion into representations. We engage in romanticizing our fieldsite, our arrival scene, and even our informants as collaborators, obscuring the institutions behind these romantic portrayals. To romanticize is to interpret through a particular cultural and emotional register, and romance is infused in our disciplinary analysis. The global COVID-19 pandemic left many practicing anthropologists stuck in place and highlighted how our discipline is predicated on mobility. How do we conduct fieldwork when we can no longer travel freely due to failing infrastructure, border restrictions, and weather calamities that have seemingly become more commonplace in an era of unpredictable climate and political catastrophes?

In response to the travel restrictions to China, I turned to Chinese entertainment as a means to do research and seek relief from the monotony of being away from "the field." I sought out Chinese entertainment platforms and read the accompanying commentary provided by other domestic and international viewers as a way to engage with communities. There is not sufficient space in this essay to acknowledge the extensive contributions already made by many scholars devoted to this medium of creative expression, including anthropologists; rather, this is a modest suggestion to embrace enjoyment as empiricism in the practice of public anthropology. Anthropologists have long been accused of "hanging out" as a research methodology grounded in enjoyment rather than serious rigor. But what is wrong with enjoyment? One of the attributes that draws me to fieldwork is that it dislodges me from the banality of my own daily life and allows me to explore the lives of others (with an acknowledgment of relations of power and privilege). Entertainment media provides insight, pleasure, and a different sort of "presence." Studying an industry devoted to creating shared sentiments is something we should take more seriously since it is aligned with our own disciplinary methods.

As we live more on social media, we also live through the streaming entertainment that creates alternative worlds for our distraction and pleasure. The platforms provide a ready archive and medium to communicate with countless people. Practicing public anthropology today and into the future is no longer about being present in one moment in space and time. To borrow from a recent genre-bending science fiction film, it is "everything everywhere all at once."[6] The acronym IRL (in real life) indicates that we also live everywhere and elsewhere all at once. Entertainment platforms encourage immersion into a community much like conducting fieldwork, but we are unhindered by being in one place at a time. The matrix of social media *as* entertainment has created multiple realities, and we live in the morass of truth and fiction. The culture wars continue to be fought on the unstable terrain of fact and falsehood. Fabrications, fabulists, and fables saturate our media environment and, in turn, our daily life. We consume entertainment, and it consumes us in our thoughts, dreams, and aspirations. We are finally able to live within our imaginations by creating personas and curated lives. The promise of artificial intelligence (AI) to create vivid worlds beyond our imagination is here. As AI absorbs the entirety of human creativity, it both threatens human potential and elevates it. What is the future of the human condition? Fabulations are the new human condition. Digital lives are the new materiality. And the structures of feeling generated within this matrix envelope us in enchantment and enjoyment.

[6] This is the title of the 2022 film by directors Kwan and Scheinert 2022.

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