

The Promise of Love: *Love Is All Around* and Vulnerable Masculinity in China

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INTRODUCTION

In China, the subgenre of dating-simulation games known as *bishōjo* (美少女, meaning ‘pretty girls’) games had not received as much attention from the market and academia as otome (乙女) games until the unexpected success of *Love Is All Around* (Intiny 2023). *Love Is All Around* serves as a remediation of typical *bishōjo* games, combining elements from micro-dramas (微短剧). It retains the gameplay of a male character interacting and dating with girls but replaces the two-dimensional anime-style graphics with real-life first-person short videos. Previous research on otaku’s producing and consuming *bishōjo* games has argued that there is an “ethics of affect”, which draws a line between the actual and virtual, fiction and reality, as well as two-dimension characters and three-dimension human beings (Galbraith 2021). The inclusion of real actors and scenarios in *Love Is All Around* blurs these distinction and positions the game at the intersection of *bishōjo* games, micro-dramas, and YY fiction (YY 小说). At the same time, it deeply engages with the cultural politics of memory, affect and gender in contemporary Chinese society.

Through analysing the game’s narrative, mechanics, and audiovisual representations, as well as examining news reports, interviews, and gamer reviews, the objective of this study is to ascertain why the impact of this game in China extends beyond the domain of *bishōjo* games and otaku culture. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “intimate public” (Berlant 2008), I argue that this game provides a mediated space for young Chinese male gamers to identify and negotiate their everyday experiences, memories, affects, and desires. On the one hand, as a *bishōjo* game where players can easily gain love(girls), it alleviates the vulnerable masculinity of young males in achievement (Han 2015) and post-feminist (Korobov 2011) societies through the ‘promise of love’. On the other hand, reality is not entirely absent from this fantasy text. The everyday experiences of young men’s precarious work situations and intimate relationships form the backdrop and persistent undertone of the gaming experience. Both game creators and players actively construct “unhappy archives” (Ahmed 2010) base on their lived experiences through the performance of “speaking bitterness”(suku, 诉苦) (Yang 2018). This process involves bargaining for survival and adaptation for precarity within the gendered fantasy enacted by the ludic form. However, this drama of adaptation unfolds through the reinforcement of patriarchal norms and the exploitation of women. Ultimately, it results in a form of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) that pushes the possibility of a better life and society further out of reach.

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