

# Digital Healing: from Individual Survival to Collective Care—Reimagining Workplace Health in Chinese Women’s Literature

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how contemporary Chinese women's Internet literature reflects evolving workplace values, shifting from narratives of competitive survival to modes of self-care and strategic disengagement. Focusing on the popular subgenres of palace fighting and workplace fiction within female-oriented online literature, the analysis begins by comparing *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *War and Beauty*, two landmark texts that respectively promote system participation and institutional escape. A third perspective is introduced through *Fake It Till You Make It*, a contemporary workplace novel that explores “performative participation”—a practice of appearing professionally engaged while internally resisting toxic work cultures. This subtle form of disengagement offers a realistic and empowering alternative for women navigating the pressures of career and health in modern China. By tracing a narrative trajectory from individual survival to collective care, this paper argues that online female-oriented literature offers a critical site for reimagining workplace health and resistance. The findings contribute to communication and cultural studies by highlighting how literary texts encode and circulate shifting cultural attitudes toward labor, gender, and personal well-being.

**Keywords:** Chinese Internet Literature, Performative Participation, Workplace Health

## 1. Introduction

Chinese Internet literature, particularly works authored by and for women, serves as a powerful lens for understanding evolving workplace dynamics in contemporary China<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>. I argue that these literary works document a crucial shift in how women view and navigate work - moving from participating in competition at all costs to participating only through performance while prioritizing their own health and happiness.

To substantiate my argument, this paper is structured into three parts. The first part surveys Chinese Internet literature, including its current status and genre female frequency. The second part compares *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *War and Beauty*, pioneering works in the palace fighting genre. I argue that escaping the ruthless system and seeking liberty is the theme of *War and Beauty* which is absent in *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. Instead, *The Legend of Zhen Huan* advocates for fighting within the existing system, and ultimately becoming the final and greatest winner. In the third part, I analyze a more recent work *Fake It Till You Make It*. I argue that the performative participation (i.e., participating through exaggerated performance) presented in this work represents a subtle form of disengagement and disobedience to the existing institutional systems and power structure, which is more liberating than participating in the palace fighting as depicted in *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and more realistic than merely escaping as shown in *War and Beauty*.

To start, I will introduce the current situation of Internet literature in China in the next part.

## 2. Chinese Internet Literature

Internet literature is a new type of literature that is produced and consumed in interactive online contexts<sup>[4]</sup>. This literary form emerged as a product of the Internet and other advanced digital technologies<sup>[5]</sup>. China’s online literature traced its origins to the 1990s, and embarked on a path of commercialization in the 2000s<sup>[3]</sup>. According to the latest data, the industry has achieved remarkable growth, attracting over 500 million active readers while generating revenue of over 40 billion Chinese

Yuan in 2023 [6].

Beyond its impressive readership and commercial success, Chinese online literature has also inspired numerous television adaptations based on popular online novels [7]. These TV dramas have garnered significant attention not only domestically but also internationally [8]. A notable example is *Cang Lan Jue* (whose English title is *Love Between Fairy and Devil*). Domestically, *Cang Lan Jue* ranks as one of the most popular television series in the history of iQiyi, the Chinese online video platform. Internationally, *Love Between Fairy and Devil* went viral on Netflix, one of the largest American streaming platforms [8].

Two concepts need to be defined. Male frequency literature refers to works written by and for men, while female frequency refers to works authored by and for women [9]. As these literary works target specific gender groups, they often incorporate mainstream values associated with those genders [10]. In other words, male-oriented and female-oriented literature serve as prisms that reflect society's expectations of men and women. Through these works, we can capture how gender identities are imagined within the broader social environment. Notably, the distinction between male and female frequency is not absolute, as some works written by and for men can also appeal to female readers, and vice versa.

To date, female frequency literature encompasses diverse themes, including romance, marriage, family dynamics, workplace politics, science fiction, and horror, among others [11]. In the following sections, I will examine two specific subgenres within female frequency novels: palace fighting and workplace dramas.

### 3. Palace Fighting Literature and Workplace Politics

Palace fighting literature is a popular type of female frequency literature [12]. It is often set against the background of ancient Chinese dynasties and depicts the conflicts among imperial wives/concubines [12]. Owing to the polygamy in ancient China, emperors tended to have numerous concubines. All these women lived in the imperial palace. In palace fighting narratives, once concubines enter the palace—a center of power and wealth—fighting with other consorts becomes the only way to win the emperor's love, obtain power, accumulate wealth, and bring honor to their family.

Whenever examining palace fighting, workplace politics are inseparable [13]. That is, readers engage with these narratives through the lens of workplace/office politics [13]. Concubines symbolize employees, and the palace mirrors the office environment. Women are trapped within palace walls just as employees are confined to their workplaces. Both are bound to the invisible yet unbreakable existing systems. Concubines' competition resembles workers vying for opportunities and promotions in their careers. The emperor is the big boss, like CEOs in the companies—though most of the time, difficult to access, yet everyone eagerly seeks their favor, as their approval leads to immense resources.

Next, I will compare two pioneering works in the palace fighting genre: one is *Zhen Huan Zhuan* (literally, *The Legend of Zhen Huan*) originated in Chinese mainland. In Western countries, this work is also known as *Empresses in the Palace*. However, in this paper, I will use *The Legend of Zhen Huan* to refer to this work. The other is *Jing Zhi Yu Nie* produced in Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China. When it was released, its creators gave it an English name—*War and Beauty*. To show my respect to its creators, I also use *War and Beauty* to refer to this work.

Two things need to be noted. First, strictly speaking, *War and Beauty* is solely a television series without a corresponding novel. However, the author of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* has explicitly stated that it was *War and Beauty* that inspired her work. Second, *War and Beauty* was produced in Hong Kong instead of Chinese mainland. Thus, its values embedded in the work cannot represent the corresponding thoughts that emerged in Chinese mainland, which only *The Legend of Zhen Huan* can.

#### 3.1 *The Legend of Zhen Huan* vs. *War and Beauty*

In 2006, female writer Liu Lianzi (a pen name) published *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, a sprawling novel of nearly one million words. Since its release, it has become one of the most successful online female frequency novels in Chinese mainland. Five years later, in 2011, a television adaptation was released. Initially premiering in Mainland, it later expanded to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and many other regions. This TV drama has attracted massive viewership across almost all markets, making it a true legend.

The novel tells the story of the protagonist Zhen Huan, who was selected to be the emperor's concubine and thus entered the palace. Throughout her journey, Zhen Huan experienced being framed, targeted for murder, and suffering miscarriages, among other hardships. Owing to these dark experiences, she underwent a profound transformation, evolving from someone initially unwilling to harm others into a person who was capable of strategically outmaneuvering her rivals. This change ultimately led her to the pinnacle of power, as Zhen Huan became the empress dowager with her son ascending to the throne as the new emperor.

*War and Beauty* is another palace fighting work. It was produced by Hong Kong Television Broadcasting Limited (TVB) in 2004. This drama is regarded as the originator of the palace fighting genre and has had a far-reaching influence on similar productions, particularly in Chinese mainland. Liu Lianzi has explicitly stated that her motivation for writing *The Legend of Zhen Huan* stemmed from her appreciation of *War and Beauty*.

These two works all portray concubines who viewed each other as rivals, employed immoral tactics, and harmed others in order to gain the emperor's favor and consolidate their own power. However, the endings of the two works and the ideas conveyed through them are completely different.

In the end, Zhen Huan achieved supreme power compared to her rival concubines. Yet, despite this victory, she remained forever imprisoned within the palace. Her beloved man (i.e., Prince Guo) had passed away—he was the emperor's younger brother. When the emperor discovered his feelings for Zhen Huan, he demanded that she kill him. Prince Guo, sensing this, chose to drink the poisoned wine himself to spare Zhen Huan from having to make this terrible choice, dying in her arms. When the emperor was on his deathbed, questioning who was the biological father to the boy (i.e., Hong Yan), wondering if it was really him or Prince Guo. Instead of telling him the truth directly, Zhen Huan revealed another deception: that Consort Hui's child, was not his daughter. This revelation enraged the emperor to death and served as Zhen Huan's revenge for her lover.

Consort Hui, Zhen Huan's best friend in the palace, had died from obstructed labor after becoming entangled in palace fighting. Thus, Zhen Huan was utterly alone. Moreover, her son—or more accurately, her adopted son—hinted whether she would place her biological son on the throne, implying that a new round of power struggle loomed on the horizon. Zhen Huan, despite seeing through the true nature of palace life, had no choice but to participate in the endless fighting.

*War and Beauty*, by contrast, offered a different resolution. In the end of the drama, rebel forces invaded the Forbidden City. This seemingly impenetrable fortress—previously impossible to breach, finally developed cracks due to external pressure. For people living in the palace, it was an unexpected opportunity. The four female protagonists in *War and Beauty*, were all the emperor's consorts. Two (i.e., Er Chun and An Qian) seized the opportunity to escape, while the other two (i.e., Consort Ru and Yu Ying) remained.

Yu Ying initially intended to leave but stayed to protect her mother. She had become pregnant through a forbidden relationship with the emperor's physician—a secret the emperor had already discovered. She feared that if she fled, the emperor would take retribution against her family. However, if she died in the name of protecting her chastity during the rebel invasion, the emperor would spare her family. Her plan was to kill herself while her lover, the physician, stopped her and urged her to leave. During their negotiation, the queen locked the doors and set a fire. They died in the flames, but in each other's embrace—essentially leaving the palace and the world through physical death.

Consort Ru remained for two key reasons: first, to cover for An Qian and Kong Wu's escape. Both Consort Ru and An Qian had affections for Kong Wu, the guard to the emperor. Second, as she revealed in her final monologue, she still hated the queen who had killed her child. Despite this, she encouraged the escaping concubines to experience the outside world, and have real freedom. Notably, when the queen questioned the two consorts' disappearance, it was Consort Ru who defended them and diverted the queen's intention to pursue them. In addition to Consort Ru's actions, by the end, the four consorts no longer saw each other as rivals; instead, they helped each other.

### **3.2 Escaping the Palace**

As I mentioned above, concubines are bound inside the palace, just as employees are trapped in offices. Both the palace and workplace symbolize existing institutional structures. When people are physically within these spaces, individual survival requires bowing to established systems, leading to participation in palace fighting or workplace politics.

That is, fighting represents participating in the current system, while escapism means no longer participating in such games, and completely abandoning the system. By the conclusion of *War and Beauty*, all the concubines had recognized the cruelty of palace life. Living within it, no one could be the true winner—everyone was ultimately the victim of the system. Only by leaving could they reclaim their humanity.

However, such a liberating escape is notably absent in *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. I argue this constitutes the most significant difference between these two works. While *War and Beauty* offered an escape from the oppressive system, the ending of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* emphasized worldly success—Zhen Huan was not merely a survivor but the victor of palace fighting. It is worth noting that the author pointed out that, in fact, in the end, Zhen Huan lost many things: her lover, her friends, her freedom, happiness, and health (she once hurt her own body and used it as a weapon to frame the queen). Still, this ending lack thorough reflection on the institutional system and reinforced rather than challenged the existing power structure.

The author's narrative choice reflects her own and the prevailing values of Chinese people around 2010. Chronologically, *War and Beauty* preceded *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, and Liu Lianzi was influenced by *War and Beauty* to create her own work. However, her work did not incorporate such an escape from the system. Her work is more in line with the mainstream values of Chinese mainland, a region deeply influenced by Confucianism that emphasizes the secular success.

Fortunately, values began to change over time. When Liu Lianzi created *Story of Yanxi Palace* in 2018 with a similar ending and values, it did not achieve the same acclaim as *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, suggesting Mainland audiences have developed more critical perspectives on palace fighting/workplace politics. In the following section, I will analyze one typical literary work—*Fake It Till You Make It*, to reveal contemporary women's understanding of work and life pursuits.

#### 4. Performative Participation as the Third Way

Women encounter distinct challenges in workplace settings, including gender bias, the “glass ceiling” phenomenon, and the pressures of balancing family responsibilities with career demands. Workplace health refers to one's well-being in professional environments, which encompasses physical, mental, and relationship wellbeing <sup>[14]</sup>. Hence, it is an extremely challenging task for women to maintain health in professional environments.

In my second part, I compared *The Legend of Zhen Huan* with *War and Beauty*, and argued that the biggest difference between the two is that the former focused on participating in and winning within the system, while the latter emphasized escapism and completely abandoning the system. However, in reality, for individuals with financial needs, completely abandoning the system (i.e., the work) is not practical. Then, this raises a question: is there a third way?

Liu Cuihu's *Fake It Till You Make It* offers an alternative way. This novel portrays white-collar professional life in vivid detail. Published in 2021 under the Chinese title *Zhuang Qiang Qi Shi Lu*, the author herself gave it an English title *Fake It Till You Make It*. Hence, throughout the paper, I use this name to refer to the work. The book won several awards after its publication. In 2023, its television adaptation premiered in Chinese mainland and received widespread positive comments.

Shown in the title, “faking” is the theme of the novel. There are two kinds of “faking”, with the first one is the philosophy of “fake it till you make it”. The protagonist Tang Ying (hereafter referred to as Tang), was a big fan of such belief. She was a 25-year-old lawyer at a prestigious law firm in Beijing, China's capital. Initially, she enthusiastically embraced workplace conventions and strategic self-presentation—cultivating an artificial taste and refined manner—believing these affectations would lead to access to valuable resources. When dating wealthy men, for instance, she carefully crafted her persona to align with their presumed preferences, to secure favor. Even though she could not afford luxury goods, she purchased counterfeits instead. Despite cold weather, she still wore skirts, stockings, and heels to be in line with the perfect image of a successful lawyer, while enduring significant physical discomfort.

The second fake is the behavior called “performative participation”, meaning pretending to participate in work, but actually not genuinely doing so. This approach is best exemplified by Big Wang, Tang's colleague. Initially a serious and hardworking person, Big Wang experienced a life-changing event at age 30 when she stayed up all night for a month for work. Due to such high intensity and irregular meals, she suffered from gastric bleeding. This health crisis led to her realization that sacrificing personal wellbeing for work was fundamentally wrong and unworthy.

Following this epiphany, Big Wang adopted an exaggerated performance style at work—creating the impression of dedication through performance while actually minimizing her genuine involvement. This shift occurred alongside her discovery of a true passion: becoming a food blogger and teaching young people how to cook through social media. Ultimately, Big Wang abandoned her prestigious career as a lawyer, and became a full-time food blogger with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Interestingly, the novel's author, Liu Cuihu, followed a similar path. A graduate of Peking University Law School, one of the most prestigious universities in China as well as in the world, Liu worked at a law firm in Beijing for several years. Yet, she grew tired of this career and chose to become an online writer after discovering her passion for literary creation.

The author's values – being loyal to one's true feelings – are also presented in Tang's transformation. Owing to a series of experiences and the influence of people around her, such as Big Wang, Tang abandoned the belief of “fake it till you make it” and stopped catering to workplace conventions or others' preferences. In the end, she chose a partner based on her affection and wore comfortable sneakers to work—a symbolic rejection of sacrificing personal wellbeing for work.

I argue that the first type of “faking” – “fake it till you make it” – is inherently a form of engaging in palace fighting, while the second type – performative participation – represents a nuanced form of disengagement. This performative participation embodies workplace survival wisdom, which is more liberating than participating in the palace fighting in *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and more practical than mere escapism in *War and Beauty*. When Tang purchased counterfeit goods and dressed professionally despite physical discomfort, and when she carefully crafted her persona to appeal to a wealthy man, she was actively engaging in workplace politics. In contrast, when Bing Wang merely pretended to work while deliberately investing her time and emotions in her personal passions, she demonstrated a form of workplace disengagement. Crucially, this participation does not equate to unprofessionalism. It represents a critical reflection on toxic workplace politics where dedication to work means always prioritizing professional needs, sacrificing personal time, health, and relationships when necessary.

Notably, *Fake It Till You Make It* is but one representative of several literary works that articulate this liberating perspective through performative participation. This trend reflects an emerging progressive value in both Chinese online female-oriented literature and contemporary Chinese society.

## 5. Conclusion

Participation inevitably leads to the erosion of humanity, while pure escapism remains romantically impractical. Performative participation emerges as a sophisticated third path—a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. As I presented in the whole paper, from *The Legend of Zhen Huan* to *Fake It Till You Make It*, a transformative narrative emerges. Young women are prioritizing personal well-being over workplace demands, which is comforting in a region praising collectivism.

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