

# “Paying for Love”: Commodified Intimacy and Regulated Desire in China’s Otome Games

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**Abstract**—In China’s rapidly expanding digital consumer landscape, otome games have emerged as a notable site where shifting formations of intimacy, gender, and emotional labor converge. This study draws on postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks, alongside cultural studies and feminist critique, to explore how female desire is constructed, regulated, and negotiated within these virtual romance platforms. Focusing on three prominent titles, including *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice*, *Love and Deepspace*, and *Light and Night*, the research combines close textual reading with digital ethnography of player communities on platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo and Douban. By analyzing both in-game narratives and player-generated content, this paper examines how commodified intimacy and soft mechanisms of affective governance shape female subjectivity. Rather than viewing otome games as sites of direct resistance or empowerment, the study situates them as mediated cultural forms through which contemporary Chinese women navigate desire, identity, and power within the constraints of market logic and gendered norms.

**Keywords**—Otome Games, Female Desire, Neoliberalism, Commodified Intimacy, Gender Regulation

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2024, *Love and Deepspace* emerged as the latest commercial triumph in China’s booming otome game industry. Its global registered user base surpassed 50 million, and at several points, it even overtook *Honor of Kings* (the name of its European and American version is *Arena of Valor*) and Douyin (China mainland’s version of TikTok) on the iOS top-grossing charts. Together with its sister title *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice*, the total revenue generated by Papergames and other leading companies exceeded 10 billion CNY. Even beyond digital platforms, otome games have spurred a thriving derivative economy, for instance, during the Tmall “Double 11”, a mega shopping festival in

China, Papergames’ flagship store ranked second in the trend toy category, exemplifying what some have described as a “pink economic revolution”.

Behind this phenomenon lies the continued rise of women’s educational attainment and economic power in Chinese society. From 2020 to 2024, the market size of female-oriented games grew from 60.5 to 95.8 billion CNY, marking a 58.3% increase (Fan, 2025). Women now account for 48.6% of China’s mobile gaming population, positioning them as a significant consumer force. On the surface, the popularity of otome games appears to reflect an expansion of female cultural expression and consumer autonomy, offering unprecedented visibility to women’s agency as users. Investigating the cultural dynamics of otome games thus provides a crucial entry point into understanding how contemporary Chinese women negotiate desire, self-hood, and power within digital spaces.

While the commercial success of otome games is evident, academic scholarship on this rapidly expanding industry remains limited, particularly from a cultural perspective. Existing studies have predominantly focused on market analysis, fan engagement, or emotional labor. For example, Ganzon (2019) explores how fan labor and digital communities sustain and grow the otome game market, illustrating the central role of participatory culture in shaping platform economies. Zhang (2024) investigates the psychological and social traits of Chinese otome players, shedding light on how the rise of otome games reflects a broader desire among young women for emotional control and stable intimacy in the face of real-world uncertainty. Meanwhile, Zhang and Vlachokyriakos (2025) analyze players’ emotional and social behaviors, emphasizing how deeply embedded emotional interactions in otome games motivate sustained economic investment and attachment.

However, despite these contributions, current research has largely overlooked how otome games simultaneously enable and constrain female subjectivity within the intertwined logics of commodification and gendered power. To address this gap, this study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that brings together postfeminism, neoliberalism, cultural studies, and feminist critique to examine how female desire is constructed, regulated, and negotiated through gameplay and narrative design. By foregrounding the localized dynamics of intimacy in the Chinese context, this paper offers a critical lens to understand how otome games both reflect and reshape contemporary understandings of virtual romantic experience for women.

The primary research objects are three widely recognized and commercially successful Chinese otome games: *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*, *Love and Deepspace*, developed by Papergames, and *Light and Night*, developed by Tencent Games. These titles not only represent the most prominent examples of the domestic otome game industry but also serve as cultural artifacts that reflect deeper social and ideological currents. Methodologically, the research combines close textual analysis and digital ethnography. On one hand, it examines the main storylines, interaction scripts and card designs three representative titles to identify how they construct gendered intimacy and emotional economies. On the other hand, it investigates female players' affective engagements and cultural practices by analyzing user-generated content from online forums on platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo and Douban. Data sources include official in-game narratives, especially seasonal or birthday-special content, and players' responses posted between 2023 and 2025 that received notable attention or interaction. In line with Anne Balsamo's (1991: 57) assertion that "a feminist analysis should be defined by the questions it asks and not solely by the objects it studies", this research centers on how otome games, while not being inherently subversive or oppressive, offer a productive lens through which women's digital experiences is shaped in the cultural, economic, and emotional mechanisms.

## II. EMOTIONAL DESIGNS AND THE NEOLIBERAL FANTASY OF SELF-CARE

Under the influence of a global affective culture shaped by neoliberal values of self-care and emotional healing, otome games have developed highly customized "emotional care" mechanisms that respond precisely to female users' desire for companionship. *Light and Night* constructs idealized visions of soft intimacy through narrative and character design, while also incorporating life-management features that tightly bind players' daily routines to the virtual romantic space. For example, the game's "life record system" includes tools for mood tracking, to-do lists, budgeting, and menstrual cycle management. In this setting, the male protagonist becomes more than a romantic interest — he functions as a source of psychological support and life companionship. The menstrual system, for instance, prompts characters to express care at specific times: one male lead, Lu Chen, gently says, "Little one, it's the second day of your period. You probably need a hot water bottle and a pillow. Of course, Jude and I will also be here with you". These scripted lines create a sense of personalized understanding, fostering emotional attachment and a feeling of being truly seen.

Moreover, otome games are designed to unconditionally affirm the player's value. All scenarios are structured to position the female player as the primary emotional agent and ultimate beneficiary. In *Love and Deepspace*, for instance, when the player sends a message to male lead Qi Yu saying "I made a mistake", he replies: "It's okay. Even the ocean makes mistakes—it sweeps away the shells I love and messes up my studio with sea breeze. But I still love it." Within the affective logic of neoliberalism, romantic relationships are increasingly tied to self-worth rather than long-term commitment. Such comforting dialogue appears frequently throughout the game, triggered through storyline progression and mission completion, directly addressing the need for affirmation and acceptance. As Eva Illouz (2019) argues, modern romance is no longer centered on permanence or duty but is instead defined by low-risk, high-speed, and highly controllable intimacy. Popular psychology and emotional self-help discourse have further reinforced the idea that individuals are responsible for their own

happiness. Otome games neatly align with this ideology by offering women a seemingly safe and self-directed path for emotional regulation.

Yet, at their core, the intimacy offered by otome games is packaged, priced, and periodically updated as a service product. Female players enhance intimacy by interacting with characters to raise affection levels and unlock exclusive storylines, voice clips, or illustrations, eventually “paying for love” through in-game purchases of birthday events or holiday scenes. This structure ensures visible and reliable emotional returns. As one player commented on Xiaohongshu, “Love with a 2D character is the purest. Everything you give is returned — his merch will stay with you, and drawing his card or unlocking his story will make you happy. But in real life, you can give everything and still get nothing. Other people’s love always comes with conditions. Isn’t that fake love?” This remark reveals the emotional security that virtual intimacy provides — a safe zone where unmet needs in real life are reassigned into a predictable system of rewards.

From a postfeminist perspective, the emotional architecture of otome games reflects what McRobbie (2004) describes as the “disarticulation of feminism”: a discursive strategy that appears to affirm female agency while simultaneously re-encoding patriarchal values. Female players are encouraged to believe they are in control of romantic narratives, yet these experiences remain deeply embedded in monetized systems that restructure desire into regulated forms of affective labor. As Gill (2008) notes, postfeminism does not merely reproduce objectification; instead, it constructs women as active, knowing consumers—always prepared to display sexuality on terms dictated by market rationality and within tightly constrained cultural scripts.

This monetized intimacy, grounded in gendered emotional labor and self-care ideologies, represents a new form of “pink tax” in digital contexts. As Lafferty (2019) defines, the pink tax refers to the additional cost women pay for consumer goods and services that are equal in function but marketed with gendered features. Moshary et al. (2023) observe that slight differences in formulation or packaging, such as adding “nourishing ingredients” like shea butter

to skincare products, are often used to justify higher pricing for women’s items. In otome games, this logic is transposed into emotional design: features like “deep emotional interaction” or “personalized character responses” are framed as value-added experiences designed specifically for female users, who then pay premiums for the promise of being “understood” or “seen”. For example, in *Light and Night*, a promotional banner for a birthday-exclusive wallpaper reads, “Let happiness stay with you every moment”. Here, intimacy is no longer a mutually negotiated experience but a serialized product, which is scheduled, updated, and priced. Love and affirmation become contingent not on social structures but on a player’s capacity to consume.

While otome games may, in theory, accommodate a wide range of affective relationships, the prevailing design logic in the Chinese market tends to narrow emotional configurations into a singular, player-dominated romance with male non-player characters (NPCs). Real-life female networks like close friends, colleagues, or family ties are largely absent or sidelined. In *Love and Deepspace*, for example, a female character named Taotao was initially introduced as a close friend of the protagonist, but her potential romantic entanglement with the male lead led some players to perceive her as a rival rather than a genuine female ally. Similarly, in *Light and Night*, players have criticized the disappearance of female side characters from the narrative, especially during holiday events where male characters dominate the interactions. As one player wrote, “They mentioned that the protagonist had friends from college, but they’re nowhere to be found now. During the New Year event, the male leads sent gifts and messages, but her friend An’an didn’t even check in.” The result of such design is a narrow script of emotional dependency that glosses over the structural inequalities women face in real life, and obscures the fact that meaningful emotional liberation depends on broader social and institutional transformation.

By contrast, *Code: YUAN* (released as *Ruyuan* in China), a game often categorized as “otome-adjacent” rather than a conventional otome title, offers a more complex portrayal of female subjectivity. Multiple female characters surround the protagonist, each with distinct personalities and narrative agency. These women



may serve as allies or rivals, but their story do not depend on their relationships with male leads. Such a structure allows for the construction of a more realistic sense of female agency. However, this remains a marginal exception. Mainstream Chinese otome games continue to focus on romance-centered plots, delivering “safe” male characters, emotionally soothing storylines, and pay-to-progress intimacy. In *Love and Deepspace*, for example, roughly 70% of the gameplay revolves around romantic narrative development, while only 30% is dedicated to battle or puzzle-solving mechanics, unlike *Code: YUAN*, which operates primarily as a turn-based strategy game. The dominant “single-track” model in Chinese otome design reinforces a individualized and de-socialized narrative of female empowerment. It aligns neatly with postfeminist ideals of “responsible self-care” and “choosing happiness”, while avoiding structural critiques of the conditions that shape desire itself.

### III. BETWEEN EMOTIONAL FREEDOM AND CULTURAL REGULATION

Under the global market logic of digital intimacy, structural pressures on women are further intensified within China’s online cultural context. As romance and sexuality become increasingly organized as commodified cultural products, particularly on digital platforms, women are more likely to be positioned as objects of evaluation, visibility, and eroticization (Illouz, 2019). At the same time, women’s emotional expression is frequently pathologized as irrational, overly dependent, or even controlling. As De Graeve (2019: 18) argues, “any assertiveness or generosity from women’s side then easily gets interpreted as signs of women’s purported possessive nature”. In China’s digital space, this misogynistic logic is similarly present and often amplified. Social media platforms such as Weibo have long been criticized for tolerating misogynistic trolling and cyber violence (Liu, 2023). Feminist accounts are frequently subjected to mass reporting, bans, and even real-life harassment, leaving increasingly limited space for the legitimate articulation of female desire and rights. Meanwhile, the idea that “female desire equals a threat to male freedom” is reinforced through online discourse.

Within the male-dominated game industry, women continue to be marginalized and

objectified. Most mainstream games are still designed through the lens of the male gaze, where female characters are often sexualized and rendered auxiliary. For example, in NetEase Game (a Chinese internet technology company)’s *Harry Potter: Magic Awakened*, certain animations triggered by the “stun” spell depict female avatars with flushed cheeks, half-closed eyes, and a protruding tongue—imagery widely identified as referencing the stereotypical “ahegao” face in Japanese ACGN subculture (Douban user review, 2022). As a result, many female players find it difficult to emotionally engage, and some even experience discomfort and alienation.

In contrast, otome games construct an emotionally secure space that both compensates for real-life gender dilemma and aligns with state-endorsed moral discourses. Male characters in these games are typically designed as idealized partners — gentle yet masculine, emotionally attentive yet firm — which resonates with the Chinese state’s promotion of “appropriate masculinity” and family-oriented ethics. The narrative vocabulary of otome games frequently centers around care, protection, and personal growth, filling emotional voids left by unequal gender relations in offline settings. As one interviewee noted, “Spending money on the game isn’t just for content—it’s a strategy to breathe under the weight of gender oppression” (The Initium, 2022). Some players even project these virtual emotional bonds into the offline world through cosplay, themed dates, and other forms of what may be called “affective compensation economies”. In doing so, otome games increasingly serve as cultural stabilizers, easing social tensions arising from gendered inequalities.

Despite this, expressions of intimacy in Chinese otome games remain tightly regulated. In the name of promoting healthy online content, state-issued guidelines, such as the “Game Age Appropriateness Notice”, set strict limits on representations of sex, violence, and deviance (National Press and Publication Administration of China, 2020). As a result, romantic narratives in otome games must remain de-eroticized and conform to age-based content filters (e.g., “12+” or “16+”). In early 2021, several cards from *Mr. Love: Queen’s Choice* were deemed inappropriate for allegedly bordering on sexual innuendo, prompting official censorship and platform

warnings (Lai & Liu, 2024). Even characters' expressions of desire must be couched in euphemism or "pure love" frameworks. In *Light and Night*, for instance, a sex-consent scene is framed through restrained dialogue: when the female avatar hesitates, the male lead Charlie reassures her, "That's okay. I can wait. As I said, it's your choice. You have the right to pause, reflect, or change your mind. This belongs only to you" (The Initium, 2022). In this way, otome games achieve compatibility with dominant ideologies by aligning intimacy with moralized, de-sexualized representations.

Yet female players are not merely passive recipients of this sanitized romantic discourse. Many engage in what could be called "everyday micro-resistance" by producing erotic fan works that reclaim emotional and sexual agency. When official narratives stop at chaste interactions like kissing, female players turn to platforms such as Xiaohongshu and LOFTER to write erotic fan fiction that continues the storyline beyond what the game permits. As one Xiaohongshu user remarked, "My fanfic is where I dig out the proof that we're truly in love". These creative acts are not merely supplements to official texts, they function as tactical reappropriations of desire in contexts where female sexuality is otherwise muted (Lai & Liu, 2024).

However, such bottom-up practices are often absorbed into the very systems they seek to critique. As Fiske (1991) theorizes, institutional containment strategies frequently co-opt subversive cultural activity to stabilize dominant order. In this context, fan reproduction contributes to data flows, enhances platform stickiness, and supports monetization through extended intellectual property (IP) ecosystems, all without compensating the labor involved. What appears as female agency and expression is frequently rechanneled into commercial logics. As Illouz (2019) cautions, contemporary consumer culture encourages individuals to pursue therapeutic selfhood through emotional fulfillment, yet ultimately redirects such energies toward capitalist ends.

#### IV. CONSLUSION

The dilemma faced by female players in the otome game industry echoes long-standing debates within feminist thought: can women's liberation truly be realized within systems that

continue to profit from the commodification of female bodies and desires (Srinivasan, 2021)? Within seemingly open spaces of virtual romance, female consumers are granted limited forms of expressive agency — yet these are carefully managed within the prevailing logics of gender discipline and affective commodification.

Nonetheless, certain shifts at the micro level merit attention. For example, Papergames, the studio behind the breakout hit *Mr. Love: Queen's Choice*—employed over 150 women among a team of 220 staff members as early as 2017, with women playing significant roles in art, narrative design, and operations. Yet despite this growing presence in creative and support roles, there remains limited transparency regarding gender representation at the executive level, and women continue to have restricted influence over strategic decisions and resource allocation. Without a more substantial integration of women across all levels of the industry, the oft-invoked goal of "balancing commercial viability and content quality" risks remaining a rhetorical gesture, rather than leading to meaningful shifts in the gendered dynamics of cultural production.

Importantly, this study does not propose that otome games serve as spaces of direct resistance or structural rupture. Rather, they are understood as mediated cultural artifacts where female intimacy is continuously shaped, negotiated, and redefined through the intersecting logics of market design and soft governance. It is precisely in the mundane details of gameplay and narrative interaction that traces of female subjectivity emerge, revealing how affective engagement becomes a site through which players respond to, and negotiate with, real-world gender hierarchies.

Looking forward, if otome games are to contribute more to cultural diversity and gender equity, structural efforts are required to ensure women's representation in decision-making, production, and governance. Female cultural expression should not remain confined to the consumer end of the industry, but must extend to the sites where creative authority and institutional power reside. Only then can otome games move beyond the paradigm of "female consumption upgrade" and contribute to more substantive cultural transformation and gender justice.

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