

# Emotional Resonance and Collective Identity of On-Screen Couples from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains: A Case Study of the 'Yuzhou Zhongxin' CP

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**Abstract:** This study employs Randall Collins' Interaction Ritual Chains theory as its analytical framework, with the popular on-screen couple "Yuzhou Zhongxin" CP as a case study, to explore how virtual pairings evoke emotional resonance and collective identity among fans through interactive rituals. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach combining case analysis and qualitative data, the research examines the CP's variety show appearances, social media interactions, and fan-generated content. The findings reveal that the formation of emotional resonance follows the interaction ritual chain pathway—"Situation construction → focus aggregation → emotional connection → symbolic generation"—achieved through multidimensional ritualized interactions, including the character settings in the play, off-screen engagements, and participatory fan interpretations. Meanwhile, collective identity emerges via the mechanism of "shared attention → accumulated emotional energy → internalization of group symbols → establishment of moral restraint", manifesting in the fan community's distinct linguistic codes, behavioral norms, and value systems. By extending the application of interaction ritual chains to virtual communities, this study not only enriches theoretical discourse but also offers practical insights for media marketing, proposing "ritualized interaction design" as a strategic tool for CP branding.

**Keywords:** Interaction Ritual Chains; On-Screen Couple; Emotional Resonance; Collective Identity; Yuzhou Zhongxin (CP).

## 1. Introduction: Theoretical Background and Research Significance of On-Screen CPs from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains

In the contemporary entertainment industry, on-screen CPs (couple pairings) have emerged as a distinctive cultural phenomenon, referring to virtual romantic pairings formed between two characters in film or television productions, either driven by narrative design or audience preference. Originating from the Japanese doujin culture term "カップリング" (coupling)[1], this concept has, in recent years, permeated mainstream entertainment globally amid deepening cross-cultural exchanges and the rapid evolution of digital media. The CP culture has since diversified into multiple forms, including: "Officially-sanctioned pairings" (canonical couplings established by creators), "Fan-constructed pairings" (non-canonical couplings imagined by audiences), and has spurred a wealth of user-generated content (e.g., fan fiction, derivative videos), evolving into a highly influential mode of cultural consumption.

To investigate this emerging cultural phenomenon, I adopt the Interaction Ritual Chains theory proposed by American sociologist Randall Collins as the theoretical framework. Collins posits that the essence of social interaction extends beyond mere information exchange to encompass the flow of energy. Successful interaction rituals, according to Collins, reinforce group solidarity, generate significant social influence, and ultimately transform into intangible resources such as economic capital, social capital, or cultural capital. Collins identifies four core elements constituting

interaction ritual chains: bodily co-presence (physical coexistence in shared space), barriers to outsiders (clear demarcation of interaction boundaries), mutual focus of attention (collective orientation toward a common object), and shared emotional experience (collective effervescence through emotional synchronization).

Current research on Interaction Ritual Chains theory demonstrates distinct focal points and developmental trajectories between international and domestic scholarship.

International studies predominantly concentrate on fan culture and media affect, exemplified by Jenkins' conceptualization of "textual poaching" in fan studies, which posits that fans construct subcultural identity through derivative works[2]. Baym's investigation of online music communities further reveals how social media interactions can effectively substitute "bodily co-presence" to facilitate emotional synchronization [2]. In contrast, domestic research has only recently gained momentum, with theoretical applications remaining exploratory. Pan Shuyan et al.'s analysis of online fan communities introduces the notion of "semiotic carnivalism" to interpret interaction rituals[4], while Cai Qi observes that CP fans accumulate emotional energy through "sugar consumption" (consumption of CP interactions) [5]. Notably, both international and domestic scholarship has largely neglected the systematic application of Interaction Ritual Chains theory to the study of on-screen CP phenomena, representing a significant gap in current academic discourse.

paradigmatic case for analysis. First, as a newly formed CP following the November 2024 premiere of *The Eternal Night: Starlit Journey*, it remains academically unexplored. Second, its cultural significance is evidenced by ranking third (with 205,187 aggregate popularity points) in the "On-Screen CP Awards" and dominating the heteronormative (BG) category,

earning the moniker "BG Monarch." These factors provide robust empirical support for this investigation.

By examining this specific case, we can elucidate the applicability of interaction ritual chains in contemporary fan culture studies. Consequently, this study employs the interaction ritual chains framework to analyze the "Yuzhou Zhongxin" CP, aiming to uncover how on-screen pairings catalyze emotional resonance and collective identity through interactive rituals.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Interaction Ritual Chains

The interactive ritual chain theory is proposed by American sociologist Randall Collins in the book *Interactive Ritual Chain*, which mainly comes from Durkheim's research on religious ritual and Goffman's concept of interactive ritual, and mainly explains how micro-social interaction affects macro-social structure. Collins, (2004, p.48) believes that society is a network composed of countless interactive ritual chains [6], and a successful interactive ritual needs the following four key elements: group gathering, outsider barrier, mutual attention and emotional solidarity. In the process of interactive ritual, participants can generate emotional solidarity through physical co-presence and mutual attention, thus forming collective excitement. This highly concentrated state of emotion will produce three main results: the emotional energy of group unity and the symbols that can represent the group. The emotional energy is the long-term result of the interaction ceremony, which is usually manifested as the confidence, enthusiasm and initiative of individuals participating in social interaction, and the important driving force for subsequent interaction.

In recent years, with the development of digital media technology, the interactive ceremony no longer needs to be physically present, but can be realized through virtual co-presence [7]. For example, the audience who is not physically present can also interact and communicate through livestream social media and other platforms, thus generating emotional connection. When the television "Love Game in Eastern Fantasy" played, the audience can interact with others in real time by sending a bullet screen to form a common concern and create a common emotional experience.

At present, the theory of interactive ritual chain has been widely used in the research of different fields such as online communities and variety shows. For example, in the program "Let's Farm the Land", the audience formed an emotional community through live broadcast interaction, realizing the "breaking circle" of the program [8]; In the mobile game "Justice", game members use the game as a virtual place for a series of communication behaviors such as content creation and social interaction, forming their unique group symbols. These cases provide a methodological reference for the analysis of the phenomenon of screen CP in this paper.

When the interactive ritual chain is applied to the study of screen CP, it can not only explain the formation process of fan emotional resonance in screen CP, that is, how individuals generate strong emotional investment through media interaction, but also explain how CP fans construct a sense of collective identity, that is, how individuals form groups with common symbols and behavioral norms. Both are important components of CP culture, but they focus on different objects, emotional resonance emphasizes more on the emotional experience of individuals, while collective identity

emphasizes more on the sense of belonging and identity of the group.

## 3. Formation Mechanism of Emotional Resonance in On-Screen CPs: An Interaction Ritual Chains Perspective

The audience's emotional resonance with the screen CP is essentially an emotional projection, for example, fans will be excited by the interaction of the "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" CP, and even create a variety of derivative content such as fandom and second creation videos on social media to continue their imagination. The basis of this emotional investment is the chain of interactive rituals proposed by Collins, where the audience obtains emotional energy through virtual presence, and finally forms emotional sustenance.

### 3.1. Situational Construction: A Situational Space in Which the Virtual Co-Presence is Present

In the era of digital media, this situational space is no longer limited to physical places, but extends to virtual media platforms such as short video platforms, video playback software, and microblogs. "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" is well-known because Tencent's broadcast of "Love Game in Eastern Fantasy", Tencent is a virtual platform for CP fans to interact and communicate, on this platform fans can communicate and interact through real-time barrage [8], and the second creation content of Weibo ChaoHua, Douyin, Bilibili and other platforms constitutes an extended interactive space. During the broadcast of "Love Game in Eastern Fantasy", the number of barrage interactions set a new platform record, exceeding 300 million at the earliest [9], the effective playback of genuine products reached 1.419 billion, the number of views of related Weibo topics reached 5 billion, and the number of views of Douyin drama topics exceeded 29 billion, forming a huge virtual interactive space.

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emotional investment.

### **3.2. Focus Gathering: The Formation of Common Objects of Concern**

The interactive ritual chain emphasizes that the formation of a common focus is a prerequisite for emotional bonding. The CP case of "Joy in the Universe" reflects this common concern and presents multi-layered characteristics: the basic level is the attention to the relationship between the characters in the play; The advanced level is the focus on the interaction between the actors and the actresses; At the deeper level, it is concerned about the symbolic meaning of CP (such as sincere love, tacit cooperation, etc.).

At the Starlight Awards ceremony, Ding Yuxi took the initiative to take Yu Shuxin off the stage after her award-winning speech, which was regarded by netizens as a famous scene of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" CP, which aroused a strong response from the fan group. Fans analyzed this scene in detail according to the live broadcast and meal shooting video, such as analyzing the micro-expressions of both parties (such as Yu Shuxin being surprised, Ding Yuxi's nervousness before going on stage, their eyes, etc.), deducing the psychological reactions of both parties, analyzing the timely reactions of others and other details, so as to excitedly think that this is "true" for CP. As a result, the video clip has received more than 2 million likes on Douyin, and keywords such as "knocked", "too sweet", "sincere" and "pure" often appear in the comments, which shows the language expression of emotional resonance. The actor's sincere business attitude in various interviews, the interaction between the two sides on Weibo and other social media, and the tacit interaction in the fans in Reuters videos have further strengthened the audience's trust in the authenticity of this CP.

### **3.3. Emotional Connection: The Generation of Collective Excitement**

When the focus of common attention is formed, the participants generate emotional connection through interaction, and then reach a state of collective excitement. In the consumption of screen CP, this kind of emotional connection usually has a variety of forms: emotional delivery between the audience and the character, emotional resonance between the audience, and emotional interaction between the audience and the actors.

The popularity of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" CP is mainly due to the tacit cooperation of the actors outside the play. Ding Yuxi fulfilled his promise of bungee jumping after the popularity of the drama reached the standard, and spontaneously produced a small theater for the characters, handmade beans with the same style of the characters, and made cookies for fans; Yu Shuxin publicly supported the remarks of "Ding Yuxi packed up and is ready to upgrade". The business mode of serving the audience wholeheartedly between the two parties is called "business purity", and it is this sincere business method that creates an emotional feedback loop of "actor input - fans moved - data improvement - actor more engagement"[11].

There are also obvious stage characteristics of emotional connection. In the early stage of the barrage of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" CP to the video, most of them praised the characters' appearance and acting skills ("Musheng is so handsome", "Jinjiang-style acting skills", etc.); In the middle stage, it develops into the interpretation of the CP relationship ("they have drawn eyes", "there are husband and wife", etc.);

In the later stage, a large number of fans will appear in the emotional projection of words ("this is what love looks like", "the power of positive relationship", etc.), and this staged evolution reflects the psychological process of the audience from spectators to emotional investment.

### **3.4. Symbol Generation: The Embodiment of Emotional Resonance**

Successful interactive rituals result in symbolic signs that represent the group. In the on-screen CP, the CP name ("Yu Zhou Zhongxin") itself is a core symbol, which cleverly combines the actor's name, which not only refers to real characters, but also secretly reflects the relationship between the characters. In addition, the classic lines in the play ("I like the child period, I am willing to marry the child period", "I don't care who you are, I care about you", "I just want to have Yu every year", etc.), iconic actions (Mu Sheng's "explosive sparks" spell casting gestures, etc.) and famous off-screen interactive scenes (Starlight Awards pick-up, group comprehensive Reuters double intimate interaction, etc.) have all become emotional symbols shared by the fan group.

There are two ways for these symbols to strengthen emotional resonance: one is to provide a concrete carrier for abstract emotions, which is convenient for fans to express and disseminate; The second is to serve as a sign of group identity to enhance the sense of belonging of members. For example, during the hit broadcast of "Love Game in Eastern Fantasy", a large number of user-generated content (UGC) was derived from the topic of "Have Yu Every Year", including homohumanities ("rushing" literature, "Ding Zhoujie's diary", etc.), hand-painted (couple avatars, famous scenes, etc.), video clips (Erchuang video, Lalang video, etc.), forming a rich emotional expression system.

The process of forming the emotional resonance mechanism of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" CP is not one-way, but two-way and interactive, and is the result of the joint efforts of many parties, such as the producer providing the script, the actor giving the character authenticity, the fans making creative interpretations, and the platform building an interactive space. The strength of the emotional resonance depends on how collaboratively these links are.

## **4. Formation Mechanism of Collective Identity in On-Screen CPs: An Interaction Ritual Chains Perspective**

Collective identity refers to the sense of belonging and identity of individual fans to the CP fan group, which is manifested in the observance of group norms, the use of group symbols, and the participation in group activities. Unlike emotional resonance, which focuses primarily on the psychological experience of individuals, collective identity emphasizes more on the connection between groups.

### **4.1. Common Concerns: The Foundation of Group Cohesion**

The sense of collective identity is formed on the basis of focusing on common objects, and is an important driving force for group gathering. This kind of common concern usually presents the characteristics of hierarchical diffusion: the core level of the common focus of the CP is the high attention to the interaction between Yu Shuxin and Ding Yuxi, the middle level is the attention to the series of "Eternal Night

Starship" and related derivative content, and the peripheral level is the attention to abstract values such as sincere love and tacit relationship.

"Yu Zhou Zhongxin" super talk quickly grew to 500,000 members during the broadcast of the drama, and the activity of daily super talk remained high. About 45% of the content in the super talk directly discusses the interaction between actors, 30% focuses on the relationship between the characters and the plot in the play, and the remaining 25% is a discussion of the ideal love model. This proportional distribution of focus reflects the process of identity expansion from the concrete to the abstract, and provides a multi-level content basis for the collective sense of identity.

## **4.2. Accumulation of Emotional Energy: From Individual Emotion to Group Dynamics**

Collins believes that the emotional energy generated by interactive rituals is an important force for maintaining group unity. In the fan community of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin", emotional energy is mainly accumulated through two ways: one is the emotional resonance in online interaction; The second is emotional catharsis in offline activities.

The emotional resonance of online interaction refers to the fact that fans express their support online through specific behaviors and obtain certain emotional returns: brushing and gathering playbacks, controlling comments, creating fanworks, and producing second-creation content for promotion. These behaviors seem to be to increase the heat of CP, but they are actually a way for fans to obtain emotional satisfaction. According to the feedback of fans in Chaohua, watching CP videos and literature can not only provide them with dopamine happiness, but also give them healing feelings such as "everyone has to love themselves and everyone is the center of the universe", which is a reflection of the personal experience of emotional energy.

The emotional catharsis in offline activities mainly includes activities such as fan organization movie viewing parties, birthday support, and charitable donations, transforming virtual emotions into real actions. For example, when Ding Yuxi fulfilled his commitment to bungee jumping, hundreds of fans came to the scene to support, and the neat slogans and light signs on the scene formed a strong group aura, which further strengthened the sense of identity of the members. These emotional abilities are continuously accumulated through the cycle of online and offline, and eventually become the continuous driving force for the community to be active[12].

## **4.3. Internalization of Group Symbols: A Marking System of Identity**

The interactive ritual chain theory holds that successful rituals produce a system of symbols that represent the group. In the "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" fan community, this symbolic system includes three dimensions: linguistic symbols, visual symbols and behavioral symbols, and members prove their group identity through the learning and use of these symbols.

In terms of linguistic symbols, the community has developed a unique terminology system [13]: "Miao Sheng" refers to the characters Ling Miaomiao and Mu Sheng in the play; "Cosmic couple" homonym "Yu, Zhou" alluding reality relationship; "Every year there is Yu" is changed from the classic line to express blessings, etc. These terms are both a barrier to external differentiation and a sign of internal identity.

In terms of visual symbols, fans designed CP's exclusive logo, cheering colors (the combination of starry sky blue and cherry blossom pink), hand width words, etc., to form a unified visual identity system. At the Starlight Awards, fans formed a strong visual experience through the coordinated color of the lantern signs and slogans, and the performance of this symbol is not only a way to express emotions, but also a display of the group's presence.

In terms of behavioral symbols, the community has formed a set of conventional participation norms: synchronous viewing and real-time discussion of new dramas, control and evaluation of negative comments, unified action on important dates (such as birthdays), and joint support for magazines and other businesses. These norms are demonstrated and reinforced by community opinion leaders (such as big fans, well-known stations, etc.), and gradually become the conscious actions of members.

## **4.4. Establishment of Moral Constraints: The Formation of Group Norms**

The sense of collective identity is ultimately manifested in the formation and observance of the moral order within the group, and members not only share emotions and symbols, but also need to accept common codes of conduct and value judgments [14]. The moral constraints of the "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" fan community are mainly reflected in three aspects: the maintenance of the authenticity of CP, the observance of interactive interests, and the definition of business behavior.

The maintenance of the authenticity of CP is mainly manifested in resisting the behavior of "demolishing CP", such as strictly prohibiting the mention of other CPs on both sides of the CP at the CP's home stadium, and controlling negative remarks that are over-interpreted. When Yu Shuxin or Ding Yuxi interacts closely with other artists, the community will spontaneously carry out "clarification" behaviors to maintain group identity.

In terms of interactive etiquette, the community has also formed the principle of "enclosure and self-sprouting" [15]: fans can speak freely in CP Super Talk, but avoid excessive screen swiping and "face-sticking" behaviors under the actor's personal topics; Support the second creation but respect the original; Be enthusiastic but don't force others to accept it, etc. These non-existent rules are enforced through community autonomy, and violators may face consequences such as "blackmailing" (public criticism).

Fans will also reflect their perception of the value of CP by defining the definition of business behavior. On the one hand, fans will actively support CP's various business activities. For example, with the support of fans, Yu Shuxin's "Fashion COSMOS" magazine released in November 2024 will have a sales volume of 14.09 million, becoming the first physical magazine for domestic entertainment actresses, and the final efficiency will exceed 200,000 copies, making her the first female artist to achieve this result among the five major women's magazines; The sales of Ding Yuxi's "Fashion LOFFICIEL" magazine released in January 2025 reached 28.92 million yuan, setting a new record for physical magazine sales in domestic entertainment in the past five years, and the final sales topped the overall list of domestic entertainment history. On the other hand, fans resist the "leek-cutting" behavior of excessive consumption of CP feelings, and the boycott behavior also reflects the mature consumption concept of fans [16].

## 5. Conclusion

This paper takes the theory of interactive ritual chain as the research framework and takes the CP of "Yu Zhou Zhongxin" as a typical case for analysis, and mainly discusses how the screen CP stimulates the emotional resonance and collective identity of fans through interactive rituals. The results show that the formation process of emotional resonance mainly follows the four steps of "situation construction, focus gathering, emotional connection, and symbol generation", while the collective identity follows the construction mechanism of "common concern, emotional energy accumulation, group symbol internalization, and moral constraint establishment".

At the level of emotional resonance, the virtual co-presence of the situational space (such as drama playback, social platform interaction) provides an interactive basis for fans, the character setting and key plot become the focus of common attention, and the extra-screen interaction of actors further strengthens the emotional connection, and finally realizes the concrete expression of emotions through symbols such as CP names, classic lines, and iconic actions. At the level of collective identity, fans accumulate emotional energy through online data support, second-generation content production, and offline support activities, forming unique language symbols, visual symbols, and behavioral norms, and consolidating group boundaries through moral constraints within the community (such as maintaining the authenticity of CP and abiding by interactive etiquette).

This paper not only verifies the applicability of the interactive ritual chain theory in screen CP and fan culture, but also reveals the formation mechanism of fans' emotional resonance and collective identity. For the cultural industry, this research result suggests that film and television producers and marketers can enhance audience stickiness through the method of "ritualized interactive design" (such as setting highlight plots, guiding fans to co-create, and strengthening the symbol system). For social and cultural research, the collective identity mechanism of screen CP reflects the process of forming emotional connection and sense of identity among contemporary young people through media interaction. In the future, this research can further explore the differences in fans' emotional responses to on-screen CP in different cultural backgrounds, so as to make the research more extensive and sufficient.

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