

Refashioning Print Literature:: Internet Literature in China

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REFASHIONING PRINT LITERATURE:
INTERNET LITERATURE IN CHINA

Jing Chen

In addressing the issue of modern China and world literature in the age of globalization, we should not neglect this fact: in contemporary Chinese society as well as elsewhere, the elite literary market has been increasingly shrinking, with more and more readers reading online rather than in the libraries, for there have appeared numerous netizens who write and publish online. I think it's hard to say whether or not the Internet will ruin or contribute to the popularization of serious literature: a lot of print literature, chiefly serious literature, is likely to be published on the Internet, but although that means fewer books will be printed on paper, it also means that it will possible for more and more readers to get access to serious literature, including translated world literature online. Since translated literature comprises a large part of the literary market, Internet writing might well contribute a bit to the popularization of world literature in China as well. But my concern in this article is the extent to which the Internet will help to popularize literature.

Obviously, the emergence of the Internet in our daily lives provides us with a new way to communicate and express our feelings and opinions. As a global system of interconnected computer networks, the Internet connects billions of users (or their computers) worldwide by using the standard Internet protocol suite (TCP/IP). Thus, for most users, it is the first time that they have not been limited by space and time in communicating with others, and they now have the opportunity to know other people's (public or private) stories and share their experiences in just a matter of seconds. Speed changes everything and makes things go more smoothly in our lives. Not only do the younger generations like to communicate online, but even the older scholars are gradually taking interest in communicating through the Internet.

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Actually, many years ago, in the face of a challenge raised by the emergence of new media to traditional literature, Jacques Derrida pointed out that “an entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters.”¹ At the time he expressed this worry, many people did not understand what the Internet was or even suspect that his prediction would come true. But today, we, humanities scholars and intellectuals cannot but be confronted with this fact. However, although Derrida may have recognized that love letters and print culture, including print technology, literary system, and books on which love letters depend, are challenged and reshaped by new communication technologies and media such as the computer and the Internet, he could not have known that these new technologies would sooner or later bring something new to literature, as he did not foresee what kind of new literary possibilities would emerge from the ruins of print. Several different but overlapping types of literature have emerged as computer technology has improved and the Internet has grown. For example, hypertext fiction, network fiction, and interactive fiction in the United States, generative and animated art in Europe (referred to in general as “electronic literature”), cell phone novels in Korea and Japan as well as Internet literature in China (not only in mainland China but also in many other Chinese-speaking societies). This article however, mainly focuses on what has been going on in mainland China in recent years.

Over the past decade, Internet literature has indeed accomplished remarkable achievements. Internet literature has garnered a readership of 202.67 million, amounting to 39.5 percent of all netizens in mainland China now.² That 55.5 percent of these netizens are between the ages of twenty and forty indicates that Internet literature is clearly very popular with young people, which is surprising nowadays considering that there are so many forms of entertainment available to them. Although Internet literature has developed rapidly, it is not only accepted as a part of mainstream contemporary literature but also plays an increasingly important role in literary creation, theory, and criticism in mainland China, and having become the focus of literary and cultural critics, it is considered to be the fastest growing field in literary research. Financially speaking, Internet literature has undoubtedly been successful, bringing big profits to the commercial websites that sponsor it as well as to its writers. For these reasons, we can say that the rise of Internet writing has not brought about the death of serious literature but rather has opened it up to new possibilities that are helping it survive the severe challenges presented by new media outlets. Many contemporary Chinese writers, including Wang Meng, one of the most famous novelists,

cannot produce their works without using a computer. We could even say that the rise of the Internet in China has actually brought about a revolution in literary production and circulation, including the circulation of world literature, as almost all the world masterpieces are now available on the web.

Apparently, the success of Internet literature contributes to the movement and popularization of computers, and the Internet has reshaped the way of writing, reconfiguring the relations between author, reader, and text as an interactive and dynamic system while also providing a virtual platform for everybody to publish and share their feelings and thoughts without the limitation of the rules of publishing and editing. More deeply, Internet literature has changed the ecology of literature in mainland China as a revolutionary power. That is, Internet literature has refashioned the once dominant print literature with the help of computers and Internet writing and publishing. However, the relation between new media outlets and literature reveals several paradoxes behind the success of Internet literature. People seem to believe that literature is being liberated, but they still insist on print literature, emphasizing the importance of technology and yet reducing it to a simple tool or platform. In addition, they depend on commercial power to promote the development of Internet literature, which in turn leads to literature's return to print. These factors have undoubtedly prevented Internet literature from becoming a real electronic literature.

As J. Hillis Miller has pertinently pointed out, "These new telecommunications technologies, so many new devices for raising ghosts in a new way, also generate new ideological matrices."³ Miller thinks that moving back to the paradigm of "world literature" would be a good response to this trend, to the "coming community" created by the new telecommunications technologies. He also offers us some suggestions for reconfiguring the discipline of comparative literature in the world. "It is better," he notes, "to read and teach *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in translation than not to read it at all."⁴ It is true that anyone can read literary works from different countries online, largely in English translation. Miller himself is said to have read lots of Chinese literary works in English. As for Internet literature, I want to follow the suggestion made by Miller and say that although new technologies or medias have crossed the borders of countries, the result of the interaction between them and writing, text, and culture, like Internet literature, finds its roots in the concrete context of culture and society.

In this article, I first briefly review the history of Internet literature in China and then consider what Internet literature means to us, how it overlaps and diverges from print literature, what its the newness implies, what kind of strategies characterize it, and how we should understand this literary process in the Chinese context.

A Historical Retrospect on Internet Literature in China

The earliest Chinese Internet literary works are generally thought to be the prose, poetry, and fiction published in the *China News Digest* (华夏文摘) (www.cnd.org), an online journal that first used Chinese characters in 1991, when the Internet was not available in China and was still relatively unknown by the majority of people in the West. Most of the early contributors were Chinese students studying in the United States. Through it they were able to express their feelings of homesickness by writing and reading articles in Chinese.

Meanwhile, this journal also became a channel for getting news from China because it republished articles from Chinese newspapers and magazines. Strictly speaking, it now seems more like the digitalization of print articles because they follow the linear mode of writing, and none of them use the multimedia or provide interactive functions for readers. Nevertheless, the *China News Digest* provided a free space and platform for its users, readers, and writers, giving rise to the earliest model of Internet literature, one grounded in cooperation between contributors and administrators. On the one hand, contributors, especially the writers (as opposed to the readers), were encouraged to post their original articles freely, and some of them, such as Tu Ya (图雅) and Fang Xhouzi (方舟子) (who are viewed as the first generation of authors promoting Internet literature), became famous. On the other hand, administrators had the exclusive authority to choose articles that met their standards. Some writers were dissatisfied with this procedure, however, which led them to quit.

With the development of Chinese websites in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, more and more people now have access to the Internet and can post their articles online. In fact, it was the success of one novel in particular that allowed Internet literature to become widely known to people throughout the country. This milestone work is *The First Time of Intimate Touch* by Cai Zhiheng (蔡智恒; ID is Pizicai, 痞子蔡), a PhD student in the Department of Hydraulic and Ocean Engineering at the National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan. It is a tragic love story that takes place on the university campus; apparently it was based on his real-life experiences, and so it is difficult to say that there is any sort of innovation as the plotline is quite conventional. However, because the story features the lovers' virtual communication on the bulletin board systems (BBS) and in chat rooms and includes dialogues mixed with Internet slang, this novel won the hearts of numerous netizens in a very short time. After achieving great popularity online, the novel was published in print and was hugely successful in mainland China as well. With this, Internet

literature as a proper term and a genre of literary writing became familiar to and accepted by the broad masses of people.

At almost the same time, from 1997–1999, several young writers, such as Lu Jinbo (路金波; ID is Li Xunhun, 李寻欢), Chen Wannin (陈万宁; ID is Ning Caishen, 宁财神), Xing Yusen (邢育森; ID is Lover), and Li Jie (励婕; ID is Anni Baobei, 安妮宝贝), who produced original stories and posted them on BBSs became famous in various online communities. All of their personal histories have several common characteristics: they first obtained Internet access when they were undergraduate students; most of them did not have much interest in writing before they started to write literary works online; all of them admitted that the encouragement of readers was the most important factor in their continuing to write at that time; and some of them did not even think that their writings belonged to Internet literature. The contents of their stories also have something in common in that they are based on their own experiences in universities and employ a lot of Internet slang, which was very popular in those days. As a result, by today's standards, these works can be viewed as rather naïve and immature.

Interestingly enough, recalling the reason why he and others wrote such stories, Xin Yusen said that “in the 1990s, many people hadn't read literary works at all. But the speed of dial-up is very slow so you can't do anything except write. The Internet, allowing for free creation and publication, aroused my enthusiasm for writing.”⁵ This sentiment is in fact repeated by many writers of the second generation. For most of these writers, their interests, rooted in their hearts and abilities, motivate their writing, as well as feedback and comments from readers supported by the comment function of BBSs or discussion forums. During this period, the model of Internet writing grounded in cooperation between writer and administrator changed with the development of web technology. In addition to the millions of online discussion forums, numerous online publishers of Internet literature emerged that posted the works of young writers as well as digitalized versions of printed classical works. Writers had more choices as to which websites to publish on and even began building their own website to publish their own works. At the same time, these websites also wanted to attract more writers to post more original articles to promote their reputations. The efforts made by both sides brought a period of prosperity to Internet literature; some famous writers even made their own contributions to online communities, and numerous works were widely distributed by all kinds of Internet literature sites.

In 2004, a Chinese Internet literature website named Qidian (起点中文网) was purchased by the Shanghai Shengda Network Development Co. Ltd. This marked the dawn of the commercialization of Internet

literature. This company designed an entirely new commercial model for reading: the VIP reading model. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that the website makes a contract with the author that states that the first part of the author's work can be read for free but that users must pay to read thereafter (they can either pay by the chapter or as they read, based on their interests). The writing, publishing, and sale of the work along with reader response to it is scheduled by the minute, and the author and reader interact in real time. Authors receive 50–70 percent of the profits each month, and they hold the copyright in their works. As of 2008, Qidian had 220,000 original works, 14,000,000 registered users, and 150,000 authors.⁶ Needless to say, it has become the model for the commercialization of Internet literature.

Defining Internet Literature

In the past decade, the definition of Internet literature has been a key issue. Partly due to the complexities of literary practices, the definition of Internet literature is broader than that of electronic literature. Electronic literature is “generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, and is by contrast ‘digitally born,’ a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer.”⁷ However, digitized print literature is accepted as a kind of Internet literature. It is “digitally born” and can only be read on computer.

The broadest definition of Internet literature includes classic works published in print before the new media age that have been digitized as well as those created and published on a computer and on the Internet and then printed. Because the computer and the Internet have now respectively become the most popular writing device and distribution platform, it is not difficult to digitalize contemporary printed works. As Hayles points out, “print should properly be considered a particular form of output for digital files rather than a medium separate from digital instantiation,” and so the digitalization of the printed work is a basic and unavoidable process.⁸ However, because of its close relationship to print and even though the embodied form of the text is different, the digitized book still keeps the look of the printed book, preserving pages and a linear order of writing and reading in the webpage frame. Of course, readers can choose to follow a link to read other content or to skip pages. However, they can also do this when they are reading a print book. But they cannot make comments in the body of the text, and the meaning of the work can not

be changed by their interaction with the webpage, unless they transform the webpage into another file format (for example, they could copy and paste the words into a Word or .txt file to edit themselves).

The most generally used definition of Internet literature is works originally written on a computer and published, distributed, and read on the Internet. Most Internet literary works can be put in this category. This definition particularly emphasizes the originality and creativity of the writer and distinguishes Internet literature from mere digitalization of printed matter. This definition is also often used for the works involving hypertext or incorporating multimedia, such as voices, images, and flash. Some scholars think that this kind of work might be termed “real” Internet literature, but given how restrictive the definition is, only a few works would belong to this category. With the development of computer technology and the advancement of the Internet, the definition of Internet literature will also change.

Internet Literature Is Neither Print Nor Nonprint Literature

As the historical evolution and definition of Internet literature suggests, Internet literature and print literature deeply interpenetrate one another. Examining the relationship between Internet literature and print literature, we find that the birth of Internet literature has refashioned print literature. What follows is a list of several ways in which it has.

By “refashioned” I mean that *Internet literature allows for the regeneration of dying print literature genres*. Traditional genres of print literature, such as prose, fiction, poetry, and diaries fit into the framework of Internet literature; and some genres that have been disappearing from bookshelves, like diaries and travel notes, can be found on almost every Internet literature site. Thus, we can say that the birth of Internet literature has liberated those genres repressed and marginalized in the golden days of print literature, enabling more and more people to be involved in literary production and circulation.

Internet literature is generally accepted by readers and the official system of literature. Internet literature covers all kinds of fiction and nonfiction topics, which attracts a wide range of readers, especially young people. Meanwhile, the writers of Internet literature are accepted by official organizations, such as author associations, which assert that Internet literature is a valid form of literature. Thus Internet literature has breathed new life into literature generally.

Internet literature has opened a new field for academic research. One of the most conspicuous indicators of the extent to which Internet literature has

led to the creation of new academic fields is the fact that there is a research center at the Central South China University where one can study Internet literature. Supported by a national fund, this research team focuses on the study of Internet literature and has published more than ten books on this topic. I think there will surely be more of this kind of research and that it will garner more popularity with the ongoing process of globalization in China.

The relationship between new media and literature suggests that Internet literature ought not be viewed as real electronic literature but rather as quasi-digital literature between print literature and electronic literature. There are several paradoxes in the way writers and scholars view Internet literature.

The first paradox is that both writers and critics believe that literature has been liberated in the new media context, but many of them still stick to print literature proper. Although some of them write for print literature journals as well as for websites, they still prefer to publish their best works in the former. The same is true of academics, many of whom would prefer to publish their works in print journals rather than merely online.

The common idea of the freedom of the Internet is shared by writers and critics who believe that the new media endows people with the space and opportunity to create and publish their literary works. The Internet to them is indeed synonymous with freedom and dialogue, by means of which they have the liberty to express whatever they want to express. Without the need to go through the standard publication process, anybody can be a writer of Internet literature once they have a computer connected to the Internet. It is partly true that computers and the Internet have indeed opened new doors to ordinary people. This kind of freedom, however, represents only an illusion of resistance to the traditional system of literature that has been dominated for a long time by elite literature and that has marginalized popular literature or folk literature. Since professional authors still own the power of speaking and control publishing channels like journals, presses, and newspapers, it is very difficult for ordinary people, especially young people, to be successful outside the system. Still, as a free platform and distribution channel, the Internet certainly provides an opportunity for amateurs to defy the restrictions of the system. Internet literature can thus be said to have deconstructed the dominance of (elite) print literature, giving ordinary netizens a chance to write and publish freely.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary power of the Internet is sometimes overemphasized, for most writers and critics still insist on print literature proper. But the idea that print is the only medium for serious literature is questioned by Derrida and Miller. They believe that the nature of literature,

as the spirit of human beings or as a representation of reality, cannot change even if the medium of writing or the context of literature changes, as it already has. The texts of the works of Internet literature suggest that their authors agree with this sentiment. Seldom do these works use multimedia, flash, or voice, which often can be found in electronic literature. Writers follow the linear writing of print texts and interact with readers through comments that are largely about readers' hope for more chapters or readers' attitudes toward their works. Although this kind of feedback might influence the plot of the story if the writer seriously considered it, readers cannot directly join the production of the works. Critics overemphasize the originality of a work as the writer's priority, a holdover from romanticism, but since Internet writers produce their works too fast to revise them carefully, many of these works are far from perfect.

The second paradox is that scholars and writers emphasize the importance of technology but at the same time reduce it to a simple tool or platform, failing to recognize that the importance of new media and technology goes beyond that. For example, although they think that real Internet literature should use hypertext or multimedia in its texts, they tend to regard the computer as a word processor and the Internet as a graphic interface and platform for communication. Writers and critics insist that it is human beings that are the real creators rather than the computer, for the computer is only a tool by means of which human beings express their feelings and thoughts.

The third paradox is that commercial power promotes the development of Internet literature but conversely leads to the return of literature to print. Encouraged by the cultural policy and industry in mainland China, Internet literature is commercialized at an early stage. The convergence of commercial power and popular culture push Internet literature toward print because publishers think they may be able to earn more profits from the print market. Thus, it is hard to say whether or not there is a future for Internet literature. But as we know, even internationally, writing and publishing electronically has become a powerful mode of expression that cannot be resisted. The value of Internet literature can only be discovered through future research.

Before ending this article, I would like to briefly address the question of what Internet literature means to the rise of world literature, especially in China. To fully answer this question, I would need to write another article, but here I just give my tentative conclusion. In my view, Internet literature will, by no means, be the undoing of world literature, although it has challenged (elite) print literature, including world literature in print. However, all of the major world masterpieces and canonical modern and contemporary works are available now online, from Homeric epics, Shakespeare's plays,

Goethe's *Faust*, to Kafka's short stories, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and even Haruki Murakami's works. People can easily get access to these works without going to libraries or bookstores. Researchers can also easily get various references to these works. In these ways, the Internet has undoubtedly played a positive role in promoting world literature, making it known to common readers. In addition, any number of excellent works may be uncovered by future literary scholars as more and more serious writers write their works on the computer and publish them first online. And with time, a few of them may well be included in authoritative anthologies of world literature. The popularization of Internet literature is by no means a bad thing.

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Notes

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1. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 204.

2. According to the "Statistical Report on Internet Development in China" (July 2010) published by China Internet Network Information Center. <http://www.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2010/8/24/93145.pdf>, 2012/2/20.

3. J. Hillis Miller, "World Literature': In the Age of Telecommunications," *World Literature Today* 74.3 (2000): 559.

4. Hillis Miller, "World Literature," 561.

5. Tian Zhiling, "中国网络文学十年——宁财神、李寻欢和邢育森别来无恙" ["The Descent of Chinese Internet Literature: What Is Going on with Ning Caishen, Li Xunhuan, and Xing Yusen?"], 25 May 2009, <http://www.qudong.com/news/other/20090525/34036.html>.

6. Huang Jian, "盛大开辟网络文学新'起点'," ["Shengda Brea: A New Path for Internet Literature"], *Ipdaily*, 10 June 2008. <http://www.qidian.com/News/ShowNews.aspx?newsid=1003022>.

7. N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 3.

8. Hayles, *Electronic Literature*, 5, 159.