Walking into the literary field?
The interaction between China's official and online literary scene

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Abstract

This thesis aims to examine the various factors that have influenced the development of China's online literary scene, leading to its gradual assimilation within the conventional literary system.

In nearly two decades of its development, Chinese Internet fiction witnessed important changes, in its publication context as well as in its modes of consumption. While the commercialisation of the literary websites sets the first milestone, radically changing the way in which Internet fiction is produced and consumed, a recently found interaction with the literary establishment – represented by the China Writers Association – has led to a gradual assimilation of the online literary scene within the conventional literary field, with the Association opening its threshold to Internet writers.

The first part of this thesis engages with a detailed discussion of the factors that influenced the development of the online literature scene. Throughout an analysis of these developments, the genealogy of Internet literature will be divided into three stages – each of which presents substantial differences with the others – seeking to identify the peculiarities of each stage, the evolving context of online publishing and the most successful genres associated with each period.
With most of the scholarship on Chinese Internet literature analysing the innovation brought about by the Internet as a new medium for literature publishing in comparison with conventionally published literature, this dissertation focuses on how the subsequent developments change the way Internet fiction is produced and consumed after its initial stage, once online literature has already lost its 'innocence'.

The second part focuses more closely on those works and authors that gained some sort of recognition by the literary establishment. The aim of this second part is to explore, on the one hand, what role is Internet literature is playing in the Chinese cultural and literary scene in a broader sense and, on the other hand, how these works integrate within the conventional system, for instance through the establishment of a dedicated Online Writers Association. Using the conventional notion of literature, as formulated in the regulation of important literary awards sponsored by the China Writers Association, the thesis discusses how online published fiction reflects the idea of literature as advocated by the literary establishment and accomplishes the social 'duties' traditionally associated with literature in China. After identifying the most influential genres in this sense, an in-depth analysis of a number of Internet fiction works will focus on how perceptions of contemporary China's urban reality are transmitted by urban fiction published online.

In doing so, I hope to show how the official and online literary scenes are actively interacting with each other, contributing to new developments on both sides: the former integrating in its system a new form of literature that has already proved influential among the online public, and the latter eventually gaining an official stamp of approval within the official literary system.

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Acknowledgements

Preface

Exploring the online cultural scene in nowadays China, it emerges a widespread trend among the existing studies to locate the development of the Internet within a discourse of control and resistance, or rather to focus on those new forms of social interaction or entertainment that it makes possible. Despite the lively literary scene that emerged on the Chinese Internet together with the great expansion of the medium itself, only a few of these studies are concerned with the development of the phenomenon of Internet literature, while none of them engages in a systematic analysis of the relationship between the online literary production and the established literary world and the cultural market.

Indeed, in the last decades, Internet began to affect literary production in a number of conspicuous ways.[1] The popularization of the access to the web is transforming the possibilities for creative interaction, experimentation and cultural consumption. A few scholars have attempted to provide a definition of the phenomenon of Internet literature, in its peculiarities and elements of novelty in opposition to conventional literature. The debate about whether Internet literature has to be considered "proper" literature or not has divided the critics in two groups: those who consider it as simply a form of "literary karaoke" for self-entertainment and those who celebrate web literature an "unprecedented opportunity" for people to express themselves freely.

Although Internet literature began as a popular grass-roots movement that was largely free from commercial ambition[2], the remarkable growth of the phenomenon and the unique business model set up by the most popular Internet literature websites have

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[1]   Kong, Shuyu. *Consuming Literature Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005. 176.

[2]   Xiang, Ren, Montgomery, *Chinese online literature: creative consumers and evolving business models*. Emerald Group Publishing Ltd., 2012. 118. Available online on: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/50897/

partially changed the dynamics of online literary communities, altering in particular the nature of the online-born literature as a social activity and the relationship between writers and readers in their online context.

Moreover, in recent times, the online literary scene attracted growing attention from the established literary world, as shown by the nomination of some online-produced works for important literary awards, the China Writer Association's involvement in the promotion of online produced literature, and the admission of outstanding Internet writers to the Association.

In light of the above developments, this thesis is concerned with the relationship between China's online literary scene and the literary establishment, represented by the China Writers Association, with a particular focus on the recently found interaction between the two fields. The implications of this interaction will be examined within both their online and offline context, through a discussion of the significance of the admission of Internet writers to the China Writers Association and the collaboration with major literary websites, seeking to explore how, on the one hand, the interaction with the literary establishment is affecting the development of online produced narratives and contributing to enhance its artistic maturity and, on the other hand, how this exchange can bring some innovation within the established literary field.

The analysis of Internet fiction works selected for national literary awards promoted by the China Writers Association and a discussion on the literary production of those Internet writers who joined the Association will give a first insight into how the online literary production is changing over time and what role Internet literature is playing in the Chinese cultural and literary scene in a broader sense. In particular, the works classified under the category of "urban fiction" are representative of this interaction because of the importance of realism within the official literary discourse. Keeping in mind the definition of literary work as promoted by the literary establishment, a close reading of realist fiction published online reveals how the

popular perception of literature that emerges from online narratives relates to these ideals and what is the representation of urban reality they offer to their readers.

The body of this thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter will introduce the concepts of Internet literature and Internet fiction and provide the theoretical and methodological frameworks applied to this thesis. The chapter conducts a literature review on the relevant scholarship within the fields of the Chinese Internet and Internet literature. Chapter 2 will attempt to position Internet literature within a discourse of popular literature production and provide an overview of the Chinese online literary scene. The first part of the chapter will present a short history of the development of the phenomenon and introduce the most popular literary websites, consulted throughout this research. The second part will analyse the evolution of Internet literature and the online spaces dedicated to literary writings as a result of the commercialisation of the literary websites and discuss how the role of the audience changes as a consequence of these developments.

Chapter 3 will trace the recent history of the interaction between the online literary scene and the China Writers Association, from the admission of the first Internet writer in 2010 to the establishment of a dedicated Internet Writers Association. The second part of this chapter will introduce the first case study. The discussion of Wen Yu's novel Caught in the Web is particularly relevant to this section, for this is the first online literature work to be shortlisted for the 5th edition of the Lu Xun Literary Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards promoted by the Association. After illustrating the structure, scope and regulations of the new born associations for Internet Writers, the last part of this chapter will discuss the ideological, cultural and commercial implications of this interaction, as well as the role of the literary critics in an assimilation of the online literary field within the conventional field.

Following the discussion carried out in chapter 3, chapter 4 will analyse the development of Internet literature under the multiple influences of the media, the market and the literary establishment and draw a genealogy of Internet literature, by dividing its development into three stages. The chapter will engage in an investigation

of the peculiarities of each stage, focusing on the consequential relationship between each stage and the following one, and identify how these reflect on online literary production and how these changes influence the popularity of specific literary genres. Finally, chapter 5 will introduce three case studies selected from among the Internet literature works that have received some sort of recognition from the literary establishment. Starting from a discourse of literary realism as a particularly appreciated genre within the official literary circle, and the "moral duty" of literature toward its readers implied in the guidelines of the China Writers Association, an in-depth analysis of online produced urban fiction will be given to reveal what kind of representation of urban reality emerges from online narratives and how the moral values they transmit relate to the "social responsibilities" of literature writing.

Analysing a sizeable phenomenon such as Internet literature is not possible or necessary within the scope of this thesis. The selected Internet fiction works are of specific importance because of their role as a 'vehicle' for the interaction between the two fields. Their peculiar literary genre – influenced by both an established literary genre and the online context to which they belong – is particularly relevant to the analysis of an evolving concept of realist literature, still embedded in the official discourse of the "social duties" of literature and the ethical paradigms associated with it, but which is slowly moving apart, creating works that incorporate peculiarities of an established literary genre with a new understanding of moral values and representation of urban reality.

As far as I am aware at the time of writing, no English translation exists of any of Internet fiction works discussed here, with the exception of a recent edition of Murong Xuecun's novel *Leave Me Alone: a Novel of Chengdu,* translated by Harvey Thomlinson and published in 2014, and Anni Baobei's short story *Goodbye, Vivian,* contained in a collection of the author's most popular short stories titled *The Road of Others,* published by Make-do Publishing in 2012 and translated by Nicky Harman. All the translations of the other works works of fiction discussed are by the author of

this thesis.

This thesis makes extensive use of online material. All URLs mentioned in the notes and bibliography were accessible in September 2016, when this thesis was submitted. Whereas the original pages of the cited works are no longer available online, screenshots of the Internet pages preserved by the Internet archive Wayback Machine (https://archive.org/web/) have been used for consultation and reference.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Since the Internet was introduced in China over two decades ago, the number of Chinese Internet users has been constantly growing. Together with the popularisation of the media, a lively cultural and literary scene emerged in the Chinese cyberspace. As a result of the enthusiasm for the new technology and the easily accessible spaces it offered to its users, by the end of the 1990s many young netizens with literary interests and ambitions have gone online to publish their own works or to read online fiction, making literature writing and reading one of the main reasons why Chinese people spend time online. The popularity of the phenomenon has been regarded, with some reason, as unequalled in any other country in the world, by both national and international observers.[3] Throughout the years of its development, Internet literature has managed to establish its own production and distribution model, which is becoming increasingly influential within the cultural market, through the adaptation of online produced fiction in other cultural products, such as films, TV series, online games. If this has an obviously important impact on popular culture, we could wonder whether it will win Internet literature a position within the conventional literary field.

In this chapter, I shall present a brief introduction to the notions of Internet literature

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[3] Although statistics on the percentage of Internet users accessing literary websites are not available prior the introduction of the Internet literature business model in 2003, the CNNIC statistical report on the development of the Internet in China lists accessing "electronic books" (电子书籍) as one of the most popular activities performed online by Chinese users, indicating a 37.7% of netizens making use of electronic literature commodities. The percentage of Internet users consuming Internet literature will be growing steadily in the following 5 years, as it will be discussed in more details in the following chapters. See: CNNIC, 2003. The 10th Statistical Report on the current status of Internet Development in China (Dishici zhongguo hulianwang fazhan zhuangkuang diaocha tongjibao 第 10 次中国互联网络发展状况调查统计报) Available for download on: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/index_4.htm. Last access: June 2016.

and Internet fiction, followed by my research motivations and questions. Subsequently, I conduct a literature review on the existing scholarship within the fields of studies relevant to this research. I follow this with a discussion on the theoretical frameworks and methodology applied to the various parts of this dissertation.

1. 1 Internet literature and Internet fiction: a definition

The Chinese expression *wangluo wenxue* 网络文学 can be translated in a number of different ways: Internet literature, web literature, network literature, electronic literature are some of the most common. As *wangluo* 网络 simply means 'network' or 'the Internet', it can be considered as an 'umbrella' definition, which can refer to different forms of literature and literary phenomena. These can range from conventional literature simply digitalised and spread on the Internet, to literary text written to be published and meant to be read on the screen, including experimental forms of electronic literature. In China, where "reading [and writing] literature" ranks amongst the ten most popular activities performed online by the Chinese netizens[4], this expression is rather common among Internet users.

But, what do we exactly refer to when talking about Internet literature? Ouyang Youquan, in his study *The History of the Development of Internet Literature in China,* delineates three different definitions of it. Broadly speaking, Internet literature consists of any kind of literary product that can be accessed over the Internet. This includes classics, conventional literature in digitalised forms and "born digital" literature. Following this definition, the only difference between the Internet and conventional literature is its 'carriage', the web in the former case, a printed book in the latter. The second definition describes Internet literature, in a literal sense, as

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[4]   CNNIC, 2014. The 34th Survey Report: Statistical Report on Internet Development in China. Accessed: 25 March 2015. Available for download on: http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/

original literary works written on a computer and published online for the first time.[5] This includes both online works in a conventional form and experimental texts, such as multimedia works, featuring – as the name suggests – a variety of media such as pictures, animations, music and hypertext. The third, and more specific, definition identifies Internet literature with electronic literary works that can only exist online and be consumed on a computer. This third definition refers specifically to experimental works and hypertext.[6]

Due to the popularity of Internet literature websites and original online produced fiction in China, when talking about Chinese Internet literature, both scholars and Internet users usually refer to the second definition.

When talking about online literature in the Western countries, the more specific expression 'electronic literature' or its abbreviation 'e-literature' is usually preferred over the general term 'Internet literature'. This is probably because, while in China – and other East Asian countries – online literature websites are extremely popular, in the West there is no such huge phenomenon like Chinese Internet Literature, and the debate on Internet literature usually refers to a rather marginal phenomenon, which makes a different use of the media itself.

The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) defines electronic literature as follows:

> "Electronic literature, or e-lit, refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer".[7]

As this definition clarifies, Western scholarship on media and literature considers the confrontation with technology at the level of creation as a distinguishing feature of

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5   Ouyang Youquan, *The History of the development of Internet Literature in China: A Study of Internet Literature in Chinese Language* (Wangluo wenxue fazhan shi: hanyu   wangluo wenxue diaocha jishi 网络文学发展史: 汉语网络文学调查纪实) 2008. Beijing: 中国广播电视出版社. pp. 81-83
6   *Idem.*
7   ELO, "What is e-literature"; http://eliterature.org/what-is-e-lit/; accessed 10 July 2015.

electronic literature from conventional forms of literature. Its digitalised forms is, thus, not enough to define original literature published within an online context as something consistently different from a conventional literary work.

According to the ELO, the broad category of electronic literature includes, among others, hypertext fiction and poetry, kinetic poetry, computer art installation and poetry and stories generated by a computer. This means that e-literature works cannot be easily printed, or cannot be printed at all, due to the fact that elements crucial to the text cannot be reproduced in a printed version. Following this definition, e-literature works are usually written in a *non*-linear, rather than linear form, whereas their 'interactive' or 'digital' elements are as important as their literary aspects. Some of the works that initiated the production and study of e-literature in the United States were the hypertext novel *Afternoon, a Story* by Michael Joyce [1945-] and *Victory Garden* by Stuart Moulthrop [1957-], which have been recognised as the initiators of literature composed by computer software and by networking.

Nevertheless, despite the great popularity of Internet literature in China, these forms of literary experimentation are still at an initial stage, and only account for a small part of the overall online literary production on the Chinese web, where most of the Internet literature is *linear* text rather than in an experimental form. Michel Hockx efficaciously summarizes the basic features of Internet literature in China as follows: "Chinese-language writing, either in established or in innovative literary forms, written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen"[8]. As online linear narration represents the main form of online literary production in China, to the extent to which it gradually became synonymous with 'Internet literature' over the years, I refer to these forms of conventional, *linear* narration as 'Internet literature' or 'Internet fiction', while I use "*non-linear* Internet literature", "experimental online writing" or hypertext when talking about innovative forms.

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8   Hockx, Michel. *Internet Literature in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 4.

1.2. Research motivations and main research questions

The last decades of the Twentieth Century in China witnessed the birth and development of a lively online cultural and literary scene. With Internet access becoming an ordinary every day commodity for a larger proportion of the population, online literature reading and writing turned into an extremely popular activity. The BBSs first, the literary websites later, offered Chinese netizens an unprecedented opportunity to participate in the production of a new kind of cultural product, setting the basis for an interaction that would in some cases lead to the emergence of collectively produced literary works.

The unrivalled popularity of Internet literature – and more specifically Internet fiction – in China has an indisputable influence on contemporary China's popular culture, as well as on the development of online literary spaces. The mass appeal of the recently launched literary platforms led to the rise of a unique business model, operating exclusively in China, which now dominates a large portion of the overall online literary production. The adoption of this model by virtually all the major literary websites has had a considerable influence on the whole literary production process, partially changing the dynamics between the various agents operating within the literary field – namely producers, distributors and consumers – and leading to an overlapping of the two ends of the process.

Although the online literature scene developed outside of the Chinese official literary field and independently from the print-based cultural market, in the last few years Internet literature and its unique production model managed to attract the attention of the literary establishment, represented by the Chinese Writers Association, traditionally solely concerned with 'high' forms of literature. A first step toward the acknowledgement of the influence and the cultural – if not artistic – value of some

works of fiction published online can be identified in the decision to open the threshold of the professional organisation to Internet writers, through the admission of the most successful writers to the Association and the participation of Internet writers in a number of activities sponsored by the literary establishment.

All these developments together show how far Internet literature has gone since the publication of the first online literary text at the end of the last century. However, current academic research on Chinese Internet literature fails to effectively address some of the issues related to the evolution of a previously market-free, spontaneous popular phenomenon into a more organised digital literary field, as well as the way in which the involvement of business forces change the dynamics of literary production. As most of the scholarship focuses on the characteristics of Chinese Internet literature in its initial stage, offering an exiguous representation of the phenomenon, a first aim of this research is to re-collocate the evolution of the online literary field within a broader context, while proposing a classification of the different stages of this evolution, highlighting the peculiarities and differences relevant to each period. In filling the gap on the development of the Internet literature publication context since its early stage, this thesis will discuss how and to what extent the newly introduced business model influences the resulting literary products.

Similarly, a discussion on the interaction between the online literary field and the literary establishment is almost entirely absent in recent studies on Chinese Internet literature, probably due to the novelty of the interplay with – and the recognition of the phenomenon by – the official literary field. Starting from the assumption that a collaboration between the two fields could positively produce a mutual influence, in the way in which online literary production can supposedly benefit from the guidance of the professional association, which can in turn reflect in an improvement in terms of artistic quality of Internet literature products, while the gradual assimilation of the online literary field can bring the official literary field closer to the general public, an analysis of this newly established interaction will attempt to clarify what role the

literary establishment is playing in the development of the online field and whether this interaction is, directly or indirectly, affecting online literary production.

Incorporating all these considerations, my specific research questions are: How did the shift from a market-free online literary scene to the unique Internet literature business model change the nature of online literary production? How does the recently found interaction with the established literary field influence the development of the online literary field? Does the admission of Internet writers to the China Writers Association or the selection of specific literary works for activities sponsored by the Association reveal any preference of the establishment in terms of content or artistic forms? How does selected Internet fiction reflect the idea of literature promoted by the establishment? What are the mutual benefits that this collaboration can bring about, in terms of development and innovation of the two fields? And finally, can the recent interaction with the official literary field suggest that the two fields could merge in the near future?

1.3 Circumscribing the research scope: why fiction?

Despite the boundless space the Internet offers for literary publication and the great variety of literary genres emerged with the growth of the online literary scene, fiction is by far the most produced and consumed genre on the Chinese web. Although most of the literary platforms feature sections dedicated to non-fiction genres, such as poetry or prose, fiction genres account for at least ninety percent of the overall literary output on major literary websites.[9]

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[9] *Starting Point* guidelines of literary genres list all the genres featuring on the websites followed by a short explanation. However almost all the genres listed on the page are fiction genres. Prose and scripts also appear in the list, but they are not shown on *Starting Point* homepage. (http://www.qidian.com/News/ShowNews.aspx?newsid=1007009. Last access: July 2016). *Fragrant Red Sleeves* features, on its main page, a link to a section

A number of independent literary communities specifically devoted to poetry have been established on the Internet through the years, some of which distinguished themselves among similar websites for their *avant-garde* and experimental poetry, yet they did not enjoy as much popularity as Internet fiction among the general public. Nonetheless, because of their much greater commitment to literary experimentation, these relatively marginal communities deserve a separate discussion.[10]

In an investigation of the development of the Chinese online literary scene, the influence of its unique business model on literary production and consumption, and the newly found interaction with the literary establishment, fiction is the most relevant literary genre for a number of reasons. The huge popularity of fiction genres among the online public provides a first explanation of its relevance to the focus of this research. As will be observed through the following chapters, the unique Internet literature business that has been enthusiastically welcomed by the majority of online literary communities was developed by, and for, literary communities almost exclusively devoted to fiction genres. Since such a model would not work as efficaciously on more marginal literary genres, as it mainly capitalises on the serialisation of literary works and the amount of writing a single author is able to provide in a given period of time, fiction is arguably the literary form that best suits an analysis of the consequences of the marketisation of literary products produced and published online. At the same time, the popularity of this literary genre, further demonstrated by the success of its business model, can reasonably legitimise fiction as one of the most influential literary forms on popular culture in China today.

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named "Short literature" (duanpian wenxue 短篇文学), in which short stories, prose, poetry, informal essays, song lyrics and play scripts find their space for publication. (http://article.hongxiu.com/. Last access: July 2016).

[10] For a more detailed discussion on Online poetry see: Inwood, Heather. *Verse Going Viral: China's New Media Scenes*, 2014; and: Hockx, Michel. «Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities». *China quarterly The China Quarterly*, n. 183 (2005): 670–91.

It is, once again, the great popularity of Internet fiction to provoke the lively debate on the supposed 'literariness' of online published narratives within the literary establishment, which later led the China Writers Association to seek an interaction with the online literary field. Looking at the various stages of the cooperation between the two literary fields over the last few years, it is notable how all of the Internet literature works proposed for activities sponsored by the professional Association, as well as all the pieces of works short-listed for national literary awards belong to the fiction genres.[11] Likewise, hardly any of the Internet writers who joined the China Writers Association produces literary genres other than fiction. Despite the challenges that recent narratives published online pose to the idea of literature and the ethical values promoted by the association, this first attempt of the literary establishment to interact with Internet fiction websites can reveal how fiction is arguably the online-published genre that is fit most easily within the existent literary system.

As both the main aspects that influence the development of the online literary scene – the Internet literature business model inaugurated by the Internet literature communities and the recent changes in the relationship with the conventional literary field – mainly involve websites and authors producing and publishing fiction genres, I aim to showcase a broader picture of the development of Internet literature by analysing how the production of fiction as its most popular genre has changed in its online context, as well as in its interaction with the literary establishment. By placing these discourses within a broader cultural context, I aim to show how, and attempt to analyse to what extent, Internet literature production is susceptible to multiple influences, which are radically changing the understanding of popular literature production in China.

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[11] I refer here to the literary awards sponsored by the China Writers Association and traditionally devoted to conventional forms of literature – such as the Lu Xun literary prize and the Mao Dun literary award – and promotional activities specifically organised for the promotion of online-produced literature – such as the *Starting Point Chinese Net Discussion Forum*. The interaction with the established literary field, represented by the China Writers Association, will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

1.4 Literature review

Although the development of the Internet in China and its effects on the public and social sphere have been attracting growing attention in the past few years, the online cultural and literary scene still represents a marginal part of the debate. A number of studies have been conducted on the development of the Chinese web and the social effects of the spaces this new media offers to public discussion and potential expression of dissent, but its influence on the cultural scene and literary production are still under explored. In the following subsections, I shall introduce important academic publications relevant to the focus of this thesis, divided into three fields. The first section summarises some relevant works focusing on Internet literature in China. The second area is comprised of research on the use of language in online literature. The third and last part introduces some scholarship on Internet Literature outside of China.

1.4.1 Internet literature in China

Nearly twenty years have passed since the first online-produced literary works appeared on Chinese cyberspace. In the early period of its development, a number of scholars have attempted an analysis of the phenomenon of web literature in its elements of novelty and to draft a profile of the 'web writer' and the recurring peculiarities of online-produced literary works.

In Ouyang Youquan's *The history of the development of internet literature: a study of Internet literature in Chinese Language[12]*, the 'typical' web writer is described as a

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[12]   Ouyang, *History of the Development of Internet Literature in China*.

young city dweller – usually aged between 20 and 35 years old, mainly belonging to the 'white collar' middle class, who is 'rebellious' toward official culture, as he writes to express his own individuality and opposes the rules of the conventional editorial market. The typical Internet writer is also represented as an *amateur*, who sees writing as a recreational activity, and thus does not strive for popularity in the conventional literary world or has not the aim to become a professional writer. The media space in which literary works are published is depicted as a 'free' space, in which anyone can publish his own work, without the obstacles of any editorial selection. As several scholars point out, one of the main differences between conventional and Internet literature is the role web readers play in the success or failure of a literary work. When a writer decides to publish a work in an online literary community, readers are potentially involved with the work, they can express their opinions and advice to the author, sometimes influencing the literary production. This is the case, among others, of Murong Xuecun's *Leave me alone: a novel of Chengdu*[13]. Besides the direct participation into the literary production, the choices of the consumers also play an important role in the popularity of a work. As many websites use a ranking method for which works with a higher 'hit' rate are shown on the top of the page, the 'hits' rate influences the visibility of a work and therefore indirectly enhances its popularity.

An interesting work dealing with a specific aspect of the phenomenon of Internet literature – online romance – is Jin Feng's work *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance* (2013). Jin Feng analyses the various forms of romance appeared on the Chinese web, ranging from its genealogy and connection with the tradition to the new genres that emerged online, such as fan fiction and *danmei* fiction. Although not a specific work on Internet literature, Heather Inwood's *Verse Going Viral: China's New Media Space* (2014) does an excellent job in depicting how Modern poetry communities are taking shape online and what the

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[13] In 2002, the publication online of the first chapters of Murong Xuecun's novel *Leave me alone* led to a public discussion among its readers – who posted critiques and advices, or even their own 'corrections' to some parts of the work. The 'collaboration' between the author and his readers resulted in the publication of different versions of the work. For more informations about web novels that enjoyed the readers' participation. For more on this, see: Li Xinghui, I*nternet Literature Language* (Wangluo wenxue yuyan lun 网络文学语言论), Zhongguo wenshi chuban she, 2008. 12-19.

effects of the Media on modern Chinese poetry are.

Looking at the most recent Western scholarship on Chinese Internet literature, the newly published *Internet Literature in China* (Michel Hockx, 2015) is the first comprehensive survey of the phenomenon from is *début* to recent times, presenting an effective portrait of Internet literature development throughout its new aesthetic, political, and ideological challenges. In 2016, *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature* included an article written by Heather Inwood, titled "Internet Literature: From YY to MOOC", discussing the new mission of Internet literature, after the foundation of the first Internet literature university. A group of established conventional and online writers was hired to teach Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), with the aim of training Internet writers, allowing newcomers to gain faster entry into the profession and helping Internet literature become part of the social mainstream, as well as encouraging it to expand to the international market. To this date, no extensive study has been published about the ongoing interaction between the online and the official literary fields, nor the recent establishment of the Internet Writers Association.

1.4.2 The use of Language in Internet literature works

Another widely discussed key topic related to online literary production is the variety of language used in the virtual environment, in both netizens' interaction and literary works. A preliminary review of existing academic sources on Chinese Internet Language reveals that, until now, the majority of scholars has adopted a quantitative approach, by gathering data about new lexicon and language phenomena on Chinese cyberspace, rather than a qualitative one.

A first attempt of analysis of the use of Chinese language in web literature works can be found in the above mentioned *History of the development of Internet literature: a study of web literature in Chinese Language*. Ouyang presents the main linguistic innovations found in web literature works, dividing them into a number of different

categories: neologism related to the use of computer and internet, borrowings from English and other languages, number series, latin characters and abbreviations instead of common expressions, pre-existent words that assume different meanings in a virtual context. Ouyang Youquan identifies the reasons for the formation of new lexis and phenomena, other than merely practical factors, in the desire of web writers to stand out from traditional forms of literature and express their own individuality. His study, nevertheless, does not attempt an exhaustive analysis of these phenomena on a literary and stylistic point of view.

The idea of the influence of social factors on the formation of Chinese Internet Language is presented in Gao Liwei's work *Chinese Internet Language: a study of identity construction.*[14] Here the author makes the argument that the employment of CIL is attributable to external factors, as the constraints from using a computer as a medium of communication, as well as to internal factors such as netizens' desire to construct various personal identities. The linguistic data analysed in Gao's work were collected from different internet situations – BBS, chartrooms, Internet literature, e-mails and public websites – but his main focus is on informal interaction in virtual communities.

Despite their different approach to the topic - as Ouyang Youquan focuses mainly on literature and Gao Liwei is more interested in social factors that influence the use of the language - no substantial differences can be found in their methodological approach to the question of the language: both of them use the online resources to collect data about lexical phenomena and discuss the factors that affect the formation of these phenomena. What can be inferred from this comparison is that no significant difference occurs between the use of Chinese Internet Language in social interaction and its use in web literature works.

Perhaps the only systematic analysis of the characteristics of Internet literature language can be found in Li Xinghui 李星辉's *Internet Literature Language.*[15]

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[14] Gao Liwei, *Chinese Internet Language: a study of identity construction.* Muenchen: LINCOM Studies in Chinese Linguistic, 2007.

[15] Li, Xinghui. *Internet Literature Language* (Wangluo wenxue yuyan lun 网络文学语言

Published in 2008, Li Xinghui's study engages in an investigation of the salient traits of Chinese language as it is used in online literary writing. Starting from a definition of Internet literature language, Li presents a detailed analysis of it in comparison with both conventional literary language and Chinese language in social online interaction, discussing its literary features and style, as well as its aesthetic forms. However, although Li Xinghui presents a more in-depth of the variety of Chinese language used within the online context, her work fails to identify any relevant difference between online literary language and the linguistic phenomena typical of the online social interaction. Although an assumption that the two varieties of Chinese Internet language share a consistent number of similarities can be applied to early Internet literature works, in recent narratives the use of this specific linguistic forms is gradually becoming an exception rather than the norm.

The main features of 'digital slang' in Chinese e-literature works are also summarized in Serena Zuccheri's *Web literature in China*. Here, 'digital slang' is described as the result of China's young netizens' desire for freedom of expression and 'rebel' against 'official' culture. As she clarifies, the simplification of language, far from being the effect of a simplification of thought, is rather a consequence of the desire to find new and more immediate forms of expression. The result is a dynamic and vivid language, rich in creativity and irony, which is affecting new generation's way of expression[16].

Although the boundaries between public and literary sphere are not always clearly demarcated in the context of literary forums or websites, it is limiting, in my view, to associate the language used in a literary context with the more colloquial language of social interaction, without taking into consideration the way the use of the Internet affects the production of literary works from a literary and stylistic point of view. If, on the one hand, as a form of literature born online, web literature is influenced by Internet technology, on the other hand, as a form of literature, it is also important to analyse its characteristics in relation to traditional literary forms. Even though it is not

论). Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chuban she 中国文史出版社, 2008.

[16] Zuccheri, Serena. *La letteratura web in Cina*, Roma: Nuove Edizioni Romane, 2008. 78-80.

unusual to find words or linguistic phenomena attributable to CIL in works of e-literature, this is not a necessary element of an online-produced literary work: in some cases, elements of continuity with "printed" literature are more evident than innovations due to the computer-related production process. Furthermore, as Gao Liwei points out, the effects related to the use of computer and internet changed over time, along with the technological development, and the effects of Computer Mediated Communication are no longer as important as they were a decade ago.

The point of continuity with the past is presented in "Links with the past: mainland China's online literary communities and their antecedents"[17]. In this article, Michel Hockx observes "Chinese web literature at the start of the twenty-first century represents the further development of a literary style pioneered in literary journals from the first decade of the twentieth century". Online literary communities, in fact, "foster and enhance the traditional function of literature as a social, as well as a cultural institution" assuming a similar role of literary journals in modern times. Rather than being only a form of 'popular' literature, Internet literature strives to participate in the production of "high" literature.

However, despite the absence of a systematic study of the influence of the Internet on literature and literary styles, a considerable number of studies about web literature generally depicted this phenomenon as a "literary karaoke" for self-entertainment, in which subjects and style are unoriginal, monotonous and full of conventional expressions. Shuyu Kong, in her study *Consuming literature: best sellers and the commercialization of literary production in contemporary China,* argues that, although traces of unique style and language can be found in certain individual works, one must search hard to find any literary innovation. But on the other hand, the creative potential of electronic writing is still largely unexplored. At the same time, some far-reaching changes in the nature of literary production and writing are taking

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[17] Hockx, Michel (2004), "Links with the Past: Mainland China's Online Literary Communities and Their Antecedents", in *China's Literary and Cultural Scene at the Turn of 21st Century* (ed. Jie Lu), Routledge, pp. 155-178;

place[18].

Another limitation of existing studies about Chinese Internet literature, both in China and western countries, comes from the fact that almost all of them refer their analysis to the most famous literary work published on the Chinese cyberspace, Cai Zhiheng's *The first intimate contact* (Diyici qinmi jiechu 第一次亲密接触). This novel, first published on a BBS, attracted the audience attention because of its use of 'cool' language invented by young internet users, "that mixes English acronyms with Chinese shorthand and swear words, and even obscenity with high-tech jargon"[19]. The huge popularity of this novel among Internet readers brought it to the attention of a regular publishing house which published an extremely successful book edition, making *The first intimate contact* become the first e-fiction published on the internet and turned into a best-selling printed book. The main differences between Cai Zhiheng's novel and "traditional" literary works are its language, very concise and colloquial, and strong internet focus of its plot.

Although *The first intimate contact* can be considered as the most representative work of Chinese web literature in its early stage, its recurrence in the literature on China's Internet literary scene does not favour an overall view on online literary production. Since Cai Zhiheng's novel publication in 1997, China's web literature experienced a massive growth. Nowadays, the channels of distribution of Internet literature in the Chinese cyberspace are countless, and the amount of published web literature works on a daily basis is huge. Some web literature websites turned into commercial enterprises, that follow literary works from their publication online and promote the printed edition of most successful books. Within the print culture, "Internet literature" has become a genre on its own, the literature sections of all major bookshops have shelves devoted to "web literature" just as they have shelves devoted to, say,

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[18]   Kong, *Consuming literature,* 180-183.
[19]   Kam, Louie, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 334-335.

"Chinese poetry" or "foreign fiction"[20]. In this scenario, using a single work as an example to describe the variety of this new production is no longer sufficient.

1.4.3 Internet Literature outside China

Focusing on the online cultural production, it could be of some relevance for this study to introduce some scholarship about internet literature outside China. The first evident difference that emerges from a preliminary reading of the western-produced works on online literary production is that little Western scholarship on web literature exists and it is almost exclusively focused on the most innovative forms, especially hypertext and hypermedia[21]. Most of them prefer the term 'electronic literature', or e-literature, as a separate and more experimental genre that hardly fits in the existent literary categories, rather than the more generic Internet literature. The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) proposed a definition of e-literature as "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and context provided by the stand-alone or networked computer"[22] . This definition is meant to include both works performed in digital media – such as Hypertext, Kinetic poetry or texts generated by computers, and works created on a computer but published in print.

Joseph Tobbi, in his article "Toward a semantic literary web", argues that electronic literature is not a "thing" or a "medium" or even a body of works, but "an emerging cultural form, as much a collective creation of new terms and keywords as it is the production of new literary objects"[23]. While Joseph Tobbi is concerned with defining the possibility and conditions of literature's persistence in digital environments, N.

[20] Hockx, "Virtual Chinese Literature: A comparative study of Online Poetry Communities", 670-691.
[21] Hockx, 2015. "Virtual Chinese literature", 690. See also: David Gauntlett, "Internet studies: What went wrong?". Available online on: http://www.newmediastudies.com/thes.htm (last access: June 2014).
[22] Electronic Literature Organization, *ELO's History*. URL: http://eliterature.org/about/. Last access: 2 April 2016.
[23] Tobbi, J; "Toward a Semantic Literary Web: Setting a Direction for the Electronic Literature Organization's Directory". URL: http://eliterature.org/pad/slw.html, Last access: 2 April 2015.

Katherine Hayles attempts to define a new field. As she states in her book *Electronic Literature: new horizons for the literary,* "to see electronic literature only through the lens of print is, in a significant sense, not to see it at all".[24] In her view, e-literature is 'digital born' and meant to be read on a computer and, as digitalization leaves a mark on the text, we must turn to a careful consideration of what difference the materiality of medium makes[25]. Espen J. Aarseth, in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergotic Literature,* proposes the term 'cybertext' to describe a broad text media category, rather than a literary genre, that "share the principle of calculated production". For him, they have something similar to other literary phenomena – as they produce verbal structures for aesthetic effect – but what it is really important is their added 'para-verbal dimension'. [26]

These forms of literary experimentation did indeed not or hardly develop on the Chinese internet. The bulk of web literature, including much online writing that presents itself as new or shocking, is plain (or "linear") text rather than ("non-linear") hypertext[27]. However, despite the lower degree of experimentation we can find on the Chinese Internet, web literature in China is strikingly popular[28]. With Internet and mass media emerging as two of the most important forces reshaping the cultural field in twenty-first century China, there is little doubt that the influence of web literature will influence the nature of literary works and all the factors involved - writers, publishers, and book distributors - will need to adjust and transform literature to meet the needs of a literary scene becoming more similar to a stage in a multimedia and multidimensional production process[29].

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[24] Hayles, Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary.* Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2008. 2-3.

[25] Hayles, Katherine. *Writing Machines.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002 30-33.

[26] Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.1-5

[27] Hockx, Michel. 'Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities.' *Chinaquarterly The China Quarterly*, no. 183 (2005): 670–91. pp.674.

[28] According to CNNIC statistics, in 2012 literary websites in China were attracting over 40% of Internet users. For more details, see the article: "Research report on Internet literature users" (Zhongguo wangluo wenxue yonghu diaoyan baogao 中国网络文学用户调研报告), 2012. On: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/mtbg/201206/t20120612_27451.htm>

[29] Kong, *Consuming literature,* 183.

1.5 Methodological and Theoretical frameworks

In this study of the ongoing interaction between the online and the official literary fields, I read popular Internet fiction works with a number of questions in mind: are these works 'proper' literary works? In which elements are they affected by the nature of the media they belong to and in which elements, instead, do they show continuity with conventional literature? How does the business model that stands behind the major Internet literature websites affect the production, diffusion and consumption of Internet fiction works? How does the online literary scene interact with the established literary field and with the Chinese literary and cultural scene in a broader sense? How do the selected Internet fiction works reflect the idea of literature promoted by the literary establishment and how does it embody the social responsibility associated with it? And finally: how does this interaction contribute to the development of both the conventional and the online literary scene?

1.5.1 Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis applies two theoretical frameworks to different sections of the writing. After introducing a short history of the development of Internet literature in China, the second chapter will conduct a detailed analysis on the mechanisms of publication and consumption in online literary communities and discuss how the introduction of a new business model pioneered by *Starting Point* and other popular literary websites changes the dynamics of publication and consumption of literary platforms. On the basis of this analysis, the chapter will then discuss how the role of various agents of the online literary field change as a result of these developments. The last part of the

chapter will refer to Pierre Bourdieu's academic observation on the dynamic relationship and relative positioning of the agents within the literary field assists to establish the framework in which the chapter sets out to examine the repositioning of the agents after the advent of the Internet, and supports my idea that the conditions for the re-configuration of the agents emerged together with the emergence of the online literary field in its 'innocent' stage have been greatly affected by the rise of the Internet literature business model.

In the third chapter, I shall borrow the definition of literature as formulated by the China Writers Association to help establish the recognition of the artistic value of some works of Internet fiction works by the literary establishment as a first criterion for the selection of the relevant works.

In the fifth chapter, the definition of literature as formulated by the China Writers Association will be applied to the analysis of three case studies, in order to highlight how the idea of literature promoted by the establishment is reflected in online-produced fiction, as well as reveal how online urban fiction could develop a different discourse on literary realism. In this chapter, a descriptive approach will be adopted, focusing on the content of the selected works, rather than their artistic form. The discussion will focus on the bond between the cultural product and the popular experience, rather than seeking artistic 'beauty', making this an ideal approach to a newly emerged – and in some aspects immature – cultural product, which can still offer an effective representation of the common idea of contemporary urban life, as it emerges from online narratives.

1.5.2 Structure and Methodology

The methodology of this thesis combines archival and empirical research with observation of Internet users' behaviour, to examine the evolution of the online literary field and its interaction with the literary establishment represented by the Chinese Writers Association. The investigation will be conducted through different

sections, as follows:

1.5.2.1 Retracing the evolution of Internet literature throughout its history

Before addressing the question of the recognition of the 'literariness' of Internet fiction by the literary establishment and its elements of continuity with the conventional idea of literary work, a consistent analysis of the selected works needs to be contextualised in light of the development of the media and within the social and cultural frame of the current historical moment. As a result of the fast development of the mass media and the Internet, the conditions for online literary production have profoundly changed since the late 1990s. The dynamics of the forces that shape the online literary field can inform us about the ongoing discourses within the literary fields and the evolving popular culture context, in both its links and ruptures with the recent past. Internet literature, and especially Internet fiction, is undeniably a product of contemporary China's popular culture, which emerged thanks to the expansion of the mass media and, especially, the Internet. As will be clarified in the introductory part of this work, Internet fiction shares important features with the popular fiction that emerged between the late Qing and the Republican Era (1911-1930s), which in turn connects to the rise of the vernacular fiction in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Popular fiction published online can thus be considered a re-emergence of earlier popular fiction in its conventional context. Although entertainment fiction did not enjoy particular favour within official literary circles after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the recent attention on online-published popular fiction can perhaps lead to a gradual re-institutionalization of popular fiction as a genre within the contemporary Chinese literary field.[30]

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[30] The concept of "Re-institutionalization" of popular fiction is discussed in: Shi-chen Chao (2013), *The Re-institutionalization of Popular fiction -The Internet and the New Model of Popular Fiction Prosumption in China;* Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies, Vol. 3, December 2013. However, while Chao focuses on the commercial institutionalization of Internet fiction through the 'prosumption' (production and

In order to clarify what factors influenced the development of the online literary field, the first part of this work will attempt to retrace the evolution of Internet literature throughout its history, and place some major landmarks in its development. Beginning with the introduction of *Starting Point* as the most illuminating example of the unique Internet literature business model, an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of online literary production after this model has been adopted by the majority of the websites – in comparison to the market-free virtual environment that witnessed the publication of the first Internet literature works – will highlight how and to what extent these changes are reflected in the production of the literary text.

The analysis will then proceed with the identification of the different phases of the newly established interaction between the online literary scene and the literary establishment. An extensive discussion on the way in which the Chinese Writers Association established a first contact with the online field, together with the attitude and preferences in terms of literary genres and styles that emerge from the organisational choices and the selection of the works will clarify which online fiction genres enjoy the favour of the literary establishment and are thus more easily integrated within the existent system, while discussing how these genres and works relate to the ideals that should be transmitted by literature, from the establishment point of view. The empirical data emerging from these analyses will be combined together to propose a new classification of the evolution of the online literary scene, through the identification of three different stages, each of which presents peculiar differences with the others, in terms of important developments within the production and consumption context.

1.5.2.2 Establishing a criterion for the selection of the case studies: The question of 'literariness'

consumption) of Internet novel, I shall focus on its re-institutionalisation within the existing literary field, in terms of recognition of its literary value and cultural significance by the literary establishment.

One of the most discussed issues about Chinese Internet literature in both Chinese and Western scholarship is whether it has to be considered 'proper' literature or not. The ease with which a text can be published on the web and the huge amount of works that appear online on a daily basis make an evaluation of the online literary production an arduous task. Some Internet literature websites operate a selection of the proposed works before their publication online, but the alternative spaces that the Internet offers to its users are countless. The easy and immediate access to publication and the dynamic of 'mass-approval' of online literary communities, together with the lack of a qualified editorial selection, led to the assumption within the established literature context that web literature is "simply a form of 'literary karaoke' for self-entertainment and, at worst, 'literary detritus' freely and copiously discharged onto the screen".[31] But, on the other hand, the value of a number online published works has been recognised within the conventional literary world and some well-known writers "have become loud advocates of Internet literature".[32]

What makes a text a literary work of art? Following Roman Jakobson, "the difference between literary language and ordinary language is in its (linguistic) material: ordinary language always serves specific needs, literary language has its aim in itself".[33] If it could be easy to attribute to these works some basic 'literariness' in terms of style and function, as they do not have any specific aim other than an attempt of artistic use of linguistic material, on the other hand, this does not mean that they easily fit into the existing literary system. Since the recognition of a literary work is related to a variety of factors, rather than using an artistic criterion, to support the assumption that the novels I selected for my research may reasonably be considered as 'proper' examples of literary works I follow Foucault's argument about the social and political implications of [literary] discourse: as he points out, "the social

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[31] Kong, *Consuming Literature,* 180.

[32] *Ibid.*, 177.

[33] Here, I follow Jakobson's definition of the 'poetic function' of a literary text. See: Schmitz, Thomas A. *Modern literary theory and ancient texts: an introduction*. Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2007. 20.

construction of a literary work is less a matter of composition than of authorization".[34]

In China's literary system, the 'official' literary field is represented and promoted by the China Writers Association, a branch of a comprehensive cultural bureaucracy called the All-China Federation of Literary and Artistic Circles.[35] The functions of the China Writers Association include supervisory functions on literary production, sponsoring cultural activities, meetings, and seminars on literary issues and promotion of creative writing. Although only a few of its members enjoy a professional status, the admission to the Association is considered to offer to writers prestige and access to a variety of privileges.[36] One of the ways the Writers Association promotes the public's interest in literature is by issuing a number of literary awards. The panel of judges of literary awards is composed of established writers, literary theorists and critics and the awards proved to be effective for enhancing the popularity and boosting the sales of the winning books.[37] Therefore, the selection of an Internet literature work for an important literary contest or the admission of its writer to the Association makes an excellent parameter to draw a line between "literary" or "non-literary" works, as well as between "authors" and "writers" from the perspective of the Chinese literary establishment, and can be reasonably used to establish a fist criterion of selection for the literary works relevant to this research.

As will be discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation, the competition for these awards has been only recently opened to Internet literature works. Although in some

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[34] Foucault, Michael. "What is an Author?" In *Modern Criticism and Theory*, edited by David Lodge, 196-210. New York: Longman, 1988. Quoted in: Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, 143.

[35] The Association was founded in Beijing in 1949. It was the centrepiece of Literary and Artistic Circles, served the complementary functions of providing the Party with a means of monitoring and controlling creative writing and of establishing a clear-cut ladder of success for writers within the socialist literary system. For more information about history and functions of the Association, see: Link, E. Perry. *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. 118-122.

[36] Link, *The Uses of Literature*, 121.

[37] "Literary Award Honours Realism", *China Daily*, http://www.china.org.cn/english/culture/46981.htm. Last access: April 2015.

cases only works that were subsequently published in a printed edition could be proposed for the awards[38], the nomination of these novels is important, in my view, as it shows how critics and professional writers (i.e. supposed specialists in 'literariness') use their power within the literary system to give some of the works a stamp of approval in a conventional literature context. Besides, even though until now none of the web novels has been awarded a national level literary prize, the Writer Association's decision to allow Internet novels to participate in these awards, and the subsequent decision to admit some Internet writers to the Association, shows how online literary production is attracting the attention of the established literature field and the 'official' and online literary scene are actively interacting with each other.

In China, the role of the writer is traditionally related to an assumption of social responsibility toward the public.[39] A guideline of what a valuable literary work is expected to be is provided by the Writers Association. As we can read in the "Mao Dun Literature Awards Ordinance", a literary work:

> "[The presented literary works] should have a profound ideological content, being conducive in promoting the ideas and spirit of patriotism, collectivism, socialism; effectively advocate reform, opening up and modernization of the mind and spirit; being efficaciously conducive to promote national unity, social progress and people's happiness; be conducive to advocate honest labor fight for a better life. Deeply reflect real life and [respect] its principal role of promoting the socialist core value system, reflecting the national spirit and the spirit of the time [...]. They should pay attention to the artistic quality of the work, to promote the theme, subject, style diversification [...].".[40]

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[38] This is the case of Mao Dun Literary Prize, in which the publication in a paperback edition was a condition of the award. See: "Wangluo xiaoshuo wuyuan Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang", *Henan Ribao*.

[39] Link, *The Uses of Literature*, 104.

[40] *Mao Dun Literature Awards Ordinance (*Mao Dun Wenxue Jiang pingjiang tiaoli 茅盾文学奖评奖条例, 2010). Full text available at <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2011/2011-03-01/94765.html> (Last access: January 2014)

How do Internet novels relate to this ideals? Do they reflect any of these characteristics?I will not discuss here the political issues related to the promotion of the socialism and its ideology. However, what emerges from the few guidelines related to more stylistic issues is that a literary work is expected to be realistic and offer a clear representation of contemporary society and its values. A strong tendency among recent online literary production is, indeed, the representation of contemporary metropolitan reality, in its quick changes and its new system of values (or rather the loss of values). If we read these guidelines, deprived of their political meaning, we can still see in some of the works an effective portrait of the contemporary "real life" that reflects, even if not always in the expected way, "the spirit of the time".

1.6 Conclusions

In order to understand the multiple forces that influence the development of Internet fiction, I will conduct my analysis on two levels. On a macro-level, a detailed study of the dynamics that govern literary production will be conducted in order to identify which factors have affected the online literary production throughout its development and what impact these influences have had on literary production. This will include a comparison of recurrent forms and language phenomenon in early and recent works, in an attempt to show how the development of the media influences the literary text. At the same time, the discussion on the ongoing interaction with the Chinese Writers Association will endeavour to unmask what role the literary establishment is playing in these new developments.

On a micro-level, I will analyse some Internet fiction works – selected within the "Urban fiction" (dushi xiaoshuo 都市小说) genre, and its most popular sub-genres – "Urban life" (dushi shenghuo 都市生活), "Love and Marriage" (aiqing hunyin 爱情

婚姻) , "Job and career" (zhichang lizhi 职场励志) and "Supernatural ability" (yishu chaoneng 异术超能) – to see what kind of social values they reflect and what kind of representation of contemporary China urban life they offer to their readers.

In analysing the content of these works, I will prefer a descriptive approach, while keeping in mind Antonio Gramsci's observation on popular culture[41], which shifts the focus on to "content" rather than on "form", favouring the observation of the bounds between a cultural product and the popular experience it embodies, rather than the search for an artistic "beauty".

Combining the two analyses of Internet fiction, I shall also show how Chinese online literary production reflects only in part Adorno and Horkheimer's theory on the cultural industry[42], while enhancing the shaping of a definition of popular culture as neither "culture spontaneously produced by the people for themselves" in opposition to the "officially sanctioned high culture", nor something "imposed" by the establishment and coincident with the dominant ideology, but rather an area of negotiation between the two.[43]

To conclude, this study seeks to investigate the recent changes within the online literary scene and its interaction with the established literary world. It proposes an analysis of a variety of factors that affect the production and reception of online literary works, as well as a close reading of a number web novels, seeking to unveil the elements of continuity with the conventional idea of the novel and those elements of novelty related to the nature of its production. The recognition of some works within the context of conventional literature through the nomination for important literary awards reveals an ongoing maturation process within online literary

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[41] Gramsci, Antonio, Gerratana, V. and Istituto Gramsci. *Quaderni del carcere*. Torino: G. Einaudi, 1975.

[42] Theodor W. Adorno; Max Horkheimer (1944), *The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception.* The article is available online at: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/culture-industry-enlightment-as-mass-deception/oclc/716977281&referer=brief_results> Accessed: July 2015.

[43] Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

production. On the other hand, online novels approaching the established literary world seem to move closer to the conventional idea of novel in a printed culture context, instead of being representative of the online literary scene to which they belong, casting doubt on the effectiveness of the "portrait" of web literature as represented in the existing scholarship. Focusing on the interaction between web literature and the established literary world, I intend to clarify how the online literary scene is affecting the Chinese literary and cultural sphere from a wider perspective and whether and in what ways the influence of the Internet and the new media is changing the nature of literary production. The reading of Wen Yu's *Human Flesh Search* as my first case study highlights the changing nature of online literary production across multiple media spaces: its first online publication, its interaction with the established literary world, web literature new business model and print literature world, and outlines the way in which the recent works set them apart from the canonized idea of Internet literature.

Chapter 2 – China's online cultural and literary scene

As soon as the phenomenon of Internet literature established its position within the online cultural scene, a new category of websites – online literary communities – came to light one after another, providing Internet users with a completely new mode of production and consumption of online produced literature. Throughout the 1990s, Internet literature has been widely celebrated for its freedom of expression, ease of publication and, above all, the new chances of interaction between authors and readers it offered to its audience. This last aspect more than anything else challenged the conventional idea of literary production and consumption. The Internet offered an unprecedented opportunity for publication to everyone who wanted to publish their own work, without going through the ordinary publication process, giving space to both experimental and popular genres. Although with varying results in terms of quality and artistic value, the Internet gave a great contribution to the release of those forms of literary expressions that could not find their way to publication in the conventional publishing industry.

Nevertheless, due to the fast-forwarding development of the media, the conditions for online literary production have deeply changed over the last decade. As frequently happens to the cultural phenomena which prove to be successful among the masses, Internet literature witnessed the irruption of the market, which gradually transformed Internet literature from a popular grass-roots, spontaneous and market-free phenomenon into a huge profit-making industry, assimilated by the dynamics of mass production. A significant part of online produced literature – especially fiction, which represents the most produced and consumed genre – is now part of a chain-production business, which involves various entertainment products.

Taking a step back, however, Internet fiction did not come out of the blue. Although it has been broadly celebrated as a brand new phenomenon, it can be reasonably argued that it has its roots in earlier popular forms of fiction, with which Internet literature seems to share important similarities. In the following chapter, I shall trace a brief genealogy of popular fiction in China, in order to show how its development can be associated with the development of Internet fiction. Subsequently, I shall summarise the history of the evolution of Internet literature in China, to introduce a more detailed analysis of the factors that influenced its development, as well as the evolution of the means and spaces of online literary production, with a particular focus on how the online literary scene changes as a result of the introduction of the Internet literature business model. In the last part of the chapter, I will discuss how the role of the audience changes in light of these developments.

2.1 Internet literature as a revival of popular literature?

Chinese popular fiction (tongsu xiaoshuo 通俗小说) has its tradition laid in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), with the appearance of the vernacular novel. Literati scholars edited or developed major Chinese novels into mature form in this period, such as *The Water Margin* (Shuihu Zhuan 水滸傳) and *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西游记). A number of modern popular fiction genres have their origin laid in this period: *The Water Margin* is one of the first and most influential examples of Chinese martial arts fiction, while love stories laid their tradition in the Romance Fiction of Genius and Beauty (Caizhi Jiaren Xiaoshuo 才子佳人小說), popularly composed in Ming dynasty and epitomised by two of the most well-known novel of the period, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng 红楼梦), which circulated in various versions until its publication in print in 1791, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jin

Pingmei 金瓶梅), published in 1610[44]. Thanks to the development of a new form of fiction in vernacular language, general audience with a rudimentary education became, for the first time, a large potential audience for literature and performing arts. However, despite its popularity, vernacular fiction still "[…] was not deemed a form of verbal art worthy of respect until modern times"[45], when Liang Qichao's *Uses of fiction* called for the use of fiction as an instrument to save the nation[46]. Vernacular fiction was elevated to a higher position from its previous status of "immoral, or at best frivolous, pastime"[47] during the period from the late Qing dynasty to the May Fourth Movement, which are commonly recognised as the crucial transitional time from tradition to modernity.

The Republican Era seems to continue the reform agenda of late Qing "fiction revolution"[48],with a great flourishing of literary journals and magazines, publishing popular fiction in serialized form. The *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school* was reminiscent of late Qing fiction, but it was more commercially oriented and better articulated the everyday life of the metropolis (Lee, 1999). The name of the school, initially referred to the sentimental romance and love stories that blossomed in the 1910s, later came to refer to all popular genres – comic fiction, detective stories, knight-errant fiction – that developed in multiple forms in the first half of the century. The Butterfly fiction only had a tenuous position in the literary history, tied to the political vicissitudes of the century, with the May Fourth intellectual seeing it as a residual of feudal and colonial culture, and accusing it of "decay and absurdity" in its content and form.

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[44] Andrew H. Plaks (1987), *Four Master works of the Ming Novel*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 595.

[45] Gu, Ming Dong. *Chinese Theories of Fiction: A Non-Western Narrative System*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

[46] Mostow, Joshua S. "The Uses of Fiction: Liang Qichao and his contemporaries", *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 341.

[47] Anderson, Marston. "Literature of Blood and Tears", *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. *29.*

[48] Mostow, Joshua S. "Zhou Shoujuan's love stories and Mandarin ducks and Butterflies fiction", *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 355

The following decades saw the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Mao Tse-Tung's call for "literature to serve the people" marked the beginning of a period of a increasingly strict cultural policy and control over publishing. The post-1949 literary field became increasingly policy- driven and state-dominated, while the Government's insistence on the use of "Socialist realism" and the repression of other forms made it the only 'accepted' and published form of fiction in Socialist China. As a result, entertainment oriented cultural products which did not meet the government guidelines were forbidden and popular fiction was canonically excluded from "literature".

Although Internet literature has been widely celebrated as a brand new phenomenon, completely emancipated from the conventional notion of literature, online produced popular fiction actually seems to share important similarities with those forms of popular fiction that blossomed in the early twentieth century China. Important social and political changes through the history have been frequently associated with the rise of new cultural movements and literary trends. Looking back at the historical context in which popular fiction emerged, it can be easily inferred that it is not an exception. In fact, popular fiction came to light as a form of entertainment for the masses during the last years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The new genre experiences a further flourishing alongside the emergence of a new-born cultural market, which sees the appearance of literary magazines and journals, during the early Republican period.
Similarly, online popular fiction is associated with a period characterised by the introduction of new Media and the development of the market economy. Internet fiction can be considered as a result of the combination of a more relaxed cultural policy and the liberalization of the cultural market, together with the development of the Internet, which provided Internet users with easy and immediate access to publication. As can easily be inferred, both forms of popular fiction emerged under a period of dramatic socio-economic changes, associated with the rise of a new cultural market.

Early twentieth-century popular fiction and Internet fiction also share the difficulties of classification as literary genres, as a result of the diversity of works they give life to. Popular fiction – whether it refers to the narratives published in literary magazines during the Republican period or to popular fiction produced and published online in the twenty-first century – can be classified as a "macro-genre": "popular fiction" and "Internet fiction" can both be regarded as umbrella terms which bring together a number of different fiction sub-genres, which often overlap to some extent. As it was previously noted, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school initially referred to popular romance, but was later associated with a range of other entertainment genres, such as martial arts fiction, detective stories, urban fiction. The same happens in the case of online produced fiction: under the category of "Internet fiction" it is possible to find traditional genres, similar to those assimilated by the Butterflies school, as well as new-born genres which gained their popularity thanks to the Internet: Fantasy fiction, Time Travel fiction, *Danmei* and Fan Fiction.

Besides, popular fiction and Internet fiction share the scope of the writing: both types of fiction are, in fact, produced and consumed mainly for leisure. Butterfly fiction and Internet fiction are both genres produced and meant to be consumed by the general public, they do not claim any 'high' or educational intent, and make use of a vernacular rather than a refined language. Not unlike most of the Republican Era fiction, which was mainly published in instalments on the pages of the literary magazines, most Internet fiction is published in a serial form. Online writers, in fact, usually serialize their works on literary websites, regularly publishing new chapters, often over a very long period of time.[49]

The involvement with the cultural market is also a common peculiarity of popular genres. As a result of their commercial orientation and the involvement with other

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[49] This is particularly true (but not exclusively) for fantasy fiction. Opening the ranking section of Starting Point Chinese Net, it is notable how most of the popular works have been serialized for months, or even years. For instance, Chen Dong's fantasy fiction *Hidden sky* (Zhe Tian 遮天), which ranks top of the list for "hits" rate at the time of writing, issued new chapters for about three years. <http://top.qidian.com/Book/TopDetail.aspx?TopType=1&Time=3> Accessed: 13 September 2015

mass media, both these forms of fiction are tightly connected to the media industry and to the production of a great diversity of cultural products and alternative forms of entertainment. As the media industry was still at an early stage in the Republican period, this is particularly true for online produced fiction. In China, re-adapting popular literary works into other cultural products is a common trend. In the last few years, with the rise of the popularity of online produced genres, many producers have gone on the Internet to search for material for their products, re-adapting well-known Internet fiction into screen writing for film or television or, in the case of fantasy novels, into online games. In both cases, the engagement with the popular media of its time earns popular literature (online or offline) an even higher penetration rate among the general public.

Following these reflections, it can be reasonably argued that Internet fiction shares a similar background and similar modes of distribution and consumption with early twentieth century popular fiction, and can thus be considered as a new form of popular literature in modern times, with the Internet becoming a new way for releasing those forms of literature that could not easily find their way to publication until very recent times.

2.2 The development of Internet literature in China: a brief history

The production of the earliest Internet literature works in Chinese language dates back to the early 1990s. However, the first Internet literature works in Chinese language were not published in mainland China, but in the United States, where a group of Chinese students began publishing their writing on a list-serv[50], which later developed into the first electronic magazine in Chinese language, China News Digest, established in 1991. The magazine included both original writings by its contributors

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[50] Zuccheri, *Letteratura Web in Cina*, 42.

and republications of conventional works by well-known authors, and it was originally distributed through list-servs and emails.[51] In the same year of its foundation, the magazine published the first Chinese web literature novel, Shao Jun 少君's *Struggle and Equality* (*Fendou yu pingdeng* 奋斗与平等). A few years later, another Chinese student based in New York, Fang Zhouzi, launched the first Chinese-language electronic journal entirely devoted to literature, *New Spinners of Words* (*Xin Yusi* 新语丝). Initially distributed via alt.chinese.txt, it obtained its Web domain http://www.xys.org in 1997.[52] Besides the publication of its contributors' literary works, the pages of the website contain news and information on literary critics and academic debates in China, a digital "library", organised by literary genres, a forum and a link to the literary award launched by the website.[53] Two other influential online literature publications established in the United States and that are worth mentioning here are *Olive Tree* (Ganlan shu 橄榄树) and *Cute Tricks* (Huazhao 花招), both established in 1995.[54] The former was one of the first electronic magazines devoted to poetry and has been praised for its design and in-site search functions, while the latter is said to have been the first Chinese-language literary publication to obtain its own domain and ISSN number, and is noticeable for focusing mainly on literature written by women and addressing a female public.[55]

Although some Chinese-language online produced texts began circulating on the Chinese web and Universities BBS from the second half of the 1990s, most of the Chinese studies on the development of Chinese Internet literature tend to allocate the beginning of the phenomenon on 1998, when the first online popular novel – Cai Zhiheng's *The first Intimate contact* – was published on the Chinese cyberspace. Yet, it is with the rise of literary forums and literary websites that Chinese web literature experienced the great hyping in its popularity that still survives today.

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[51] Hockx, Michel. *Internet Literature in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 30.
[52] *Idem.*
[53] Zuccheri, *Letteratura Web in Cina*, 44-45.
[54] Hockx*, Internet Literature in China,* 30-31.
[55] *Idem.*

2.2.1 Internet literature websites and online literary communities

Since the late 1990s, the Chinese Internet witnessed a massive growth in the number of its users. According to the statistics of the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the number of Internet users in China, which only counted around 2 million users at the beginning of 1999[56], had already reached 210 million at the end of 2007[57], it had nearly doubled two years later, to reach 600 million by the summer of 2014[58]. Together with the popularization of the use of Internet in China, the phenomenon of web literature enjoyed a widespread popularity in Chinese cyberspace. The popularity of online produced literature is further enhanced by the introduction of the literary websites, consumer-to-consumer self-publishing platforms, where registered users can publish their own works and readers can read them directly on their computer screens. In China, literary websites have been attracting over 40 percent of internet users since the early 2000s, reaching a peak of 45.8% in July 2014. Although the growth rate of web literature users experienced a slowdown in the last few years, the percentage of the Chinese netizens making use of literary websites from a mobile device is still growing at a noticeable rate.[59]

Between late 1990's and early 2000's, *Under the Banyan tree*[60] (hereafter Banyan

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[56] CNNIC, 1999. The 3rd Statistical Report on the current status of Internet Development in China (Disanci zhongguo hulianwang fazhan zhuangkuang diaocha tongjibao 第 3 次中国互联网络发展状况调查统计报) Accessed: 25 March 2015. Available for download on: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/index_4.htm

[57] CNNIC, 1999. The 19th Statistical Report on the current status of Internet Development in China (Disanci zhongguo hulianwang fazhan zhuangkuang diaocha tongjibao 第 19 次中国互联网络发展状况调查统计报). Accessed: 25 March 2015. Available for download on: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/index_4.htm

[58] CNNIC, 2014. The 34th Survey Report : Statistical Report on Internet Development in China. Accessed: 25 March 2015. Available for download on: <http://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/>

[59] *Idem.*

[60] The homepage of the website is accessible on: www.rongshuxia.com

Tree) was the most popular website devoted to the publication of original literature in Chinese language. Established in 1998 by William Zhu, a young American Chinese working in an advertising company based in Shanghai, *Banyan Tree* was initially a simple home page, where everyone who wished could freely publish their own writing. The home page featured a flashing icon that read "Click here to submit your work"[61], providing its users an easy and immediate access to publication. Within a few years, *Under the Banyan tree* managed to attract a huge number of contributors, becoming one of China's largest and most well-known literary platforms. During the early stage of the development of Chinese web literature, Banyan Tree contributed to the success of some of the most popular web writers, who are now popular in the printed industry as well – among which Murong Xuecun 慕容雪村 and Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝 are probably the most acclaimed. Murong, Anni Baobei and numerous other successful writers, in fact, had the first print publication of their works arranged by the website.

At the turn of the millennium, following the success of the first online literary communities, similar websites mushroomed on the Chinese cyberspace. Established in August 1999, *Fragrant Red Sleeves* (Hongxiu tianxiang 红袖添香)[62] was one of the earliest and most influential websites. Despite its smaller audience, compared to bigger portals, it boasts a great submission system and a rather high average literary quality of its novels.[63] *Fragrant Red Sleeves* was the first website to offer a "work collection" system to its users.[64] *Jinjiang Literature City* (Jinjiang wenxue cheng 晋江文学城)[65] is arguably the most well-known literary platform devoted to female writers and readers. It was founded in 2003 by a woman, and it is mostly known for

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61   Kong, *Consuming Literature.* 177-178.
62   Website home page: <http://www.hongxiu.com/>
63   Ouyang, *History of the Development of Internet Literarure in China.* 88-89
64   *Idem.*
65   The homepage of the website is accessible on: < http://jjwxc.com/>

its romantic and *danmei* fiction[66]. *Read novels* (Xiaoshuo yuedu wang 小说阅读网)[67] features three main sub-sites, which target different audiences: "Male page", containing mainly, but not exclusively, fantasy and martial arts fiction, "Female page", devoted to love stories and urban fiction and "Campus page", aimed for younger readers and university students.

While the popularity of *Banyan Tree* among Chinese online readers seems to have waned in the last few years, another website devoted to original literature, *Starting Point* (Qidian 起点, www.qidian.com*),* experienced a growing success. Established by Bao Jianfeng (宝剑锋) in Shanghai in 2002, *Starting Point* was initially a community devoted to fantasy and martial arts novels, mainly appealing to a target audience of young men. According to Ouyang Youquan, Bao Jianfeng's novel *The heroic tale of the magic knight* (Mofa qishi yingxiong chuanshuo 魔法骑士英雄传说) was the first online fantasy novel to be published in print, in 2002.[68] During the following years, the website experienced a noticeable growth in its popularity and expanded to other genres, eventually becoming the most visited literature-related website and arguably one of the largest literary communities among hundreds of similar portals on the Chinese web. In 2003, Starting Point introduced a "pay a fee for reading online" system, which will be discussed in more details later in this chapter, turning web literature production into an industry with an innovative profit model. After the commercialisation of the website, the biggest Chinese online literary community became an example for other similar websites, which soon adopted the same business model. In 2004, *Starting Point* entered the top 100 most visited websites in China, and was still ranking at 110th position over a decade later.[69]

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[66] *Danmei* fiction is a fiction genre which features romantic same-sex encounters between male protagonists, often accompanied with more or less explicit descriptions of sexual activity. For more about *Danmei* fiction see: Feng, Jin (2013). *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*, 2013.

[67] The homepage of the website is accessible on: <http://www.readnovel.com/>

[68] Ouyang, *History of the Development of Internet Literarure in China*. 27.

[69] Alexa Statistics summary for qidian.com. Alexa is an American company that provides a numeber of services for internet users and websites owner, including Internet traffic statistics. The Alexa Top Sites web service provides programmatic access to lists of web sites ordered by Alexa Traffic Rank. Top sites data is available for the web as a whole, or

2.2.2 Starting Point 起点

As with most online literary communities, there are two ways of accessing the website contents: as a 'visitor' or as a registered member. The structure of the website is not dissimilar to the model proposed by Banyan Tree at its launch. The main navigation bar at the top of the page provides access to the different areas of the websites, containing the literary works, sorted by genres: fantasy, martial art novels, urban fiction, historical fiction, games section and so on. The "Book warehouse" (Shuku 书库) catalogues all the works published on the website and provides statistics and information on the overall number, or relative to a particular genre, of the works stored in the database. From this section, it is also possible to access the website "guidelines to the fiction genres" (Qidian xiaoshuo shuku fenlei shuoming 起点小说书库分类说明), which enlists all the genres of the fiction works available on the portal and relative sub-categories, followed by a short explanation of the distinguishing features of each genre. By clicking on a fiction genre, the website redirects to the dedicated area, featuring the website's new releases, the most popular and the recommended works.

The main page of the website is named *Starting Point Chinese Net* (Qidian zhongwen wang 起点中文网). Besides *Starting Point Chinese Net*, the portal consists of three other "channels": the *Starting Point Women Net* (Qidian nüsheng wang 起点女生网), *Starting Point Literature Net* (Qidian wenxue wang 起点文学网)[70] and a section for mobile users *Starting Point mobile phones net* (Qidian shouji wang 起点手机网).

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for individual countries. The last statistic is referred to *Starting Point* ranking on Alexa during the first half of 2015. URL: http://www.Alexa.com. Accessed: 07 April 2015.

[70] *Starting Point Literature Net* (Qidian wenxue wang 起点文学网, reachable at the URL http://www.qdwenxue.com) was available on the website when I started my writings and it has been online for most of the time I have been conducting my research. The page was recently removed from the website after about five years from its introduction, between the end of November and the beginning of December 2015. The page was removed without any official communication on the website. However, some screen shots of *Starting Point Literature* main page are available on *The Way Back Machine.* For the screenshots, see: archive.org.

Starting Point Women Net is a page specifically devoted to women literature. The structure of the page retraces Starting Point main page, but it a more elegant and less "flashy" design, and mainly features romance fiction. It is interesting here to see how all the sub-genres are re-categorised under the "romance" genre: Historical romance, Martial art romance, Contemporary romance and fantasy romance. *Starting Point Literature Net* is a new addition to *Starting Point,* introduced in November 2010. The main page resembles those of *Starting Point Chinese Net* and *Women net*, and it does not have a clear orientation so far. Although the name suggests that the net is oriented towards 'highbrow' literary products, in contrast with the main channel, notwithstanding the name, the works on *Starting Point* Literary Net do not necessarily demonstrate a higher level of literary quality or aesthetic. This channel, in fact, is still mostly devoted to popular fiction, with works overlapping those on *Starting Point* main channel and *Starting Point Female Net*. The third channel, *Starting Point Mobile Phones net* is simply an alternative way of accessing the website contents when visiting from a mobile phone. It previously redirected to a mobile-friendly version of the website main page, but it has been recently changed into a page that enables users to download a newly introduced *Starting Point* application, to read literature on their mobile devices. All "channels" are accessible under a single account.

The Home page of *Starting Point*, as well as the main pages of the other three channels, features a link to the user's "Personal Area" (Geren zhongxin 个人中心), in which registered users can manage their account, save the works they are reading or willing to read – which makes them much easier to find among the hundreds of works published daily on the website – and organise their favourite works virtual "book shelves". The personal area allows up to three[71]"book shelves", to allow users to organise their contents and favourite works according to their own preferences.

The personal area also offers a number of functions for those users who wish to publish their works on the website. However, the access to publication does not seem

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[71] The number of the virtual bookshelves available for each user has been recently changed into five. See: *Starting Point,* "Personal space" (Geren zhongxin 个人中心).

to be as easy and immediate as it used to be on Banyan Tree, nor do the readers participation and writer-reader exchange during the writing process. Unlike Banyan Tree, the home page of *Starting point* does not feature a direct link for submitting a work. Starting point users who wish to publish their work on the website need to access the "author area" (Zuojia zhongxin 作家中心) on their personal page, through which they can to apply to "become an author" (Chengwei zuojia 成为作家). By clicking on the "Become an author" icon, they are redirected to a registration page, in which they are required to register with their personal and contact details, including their real name and ID number, although they can decide whether to show their real name or a choose a "pen name" (Biming 笔名) to be shown on the public pages of the website. Before the submission of the complete work, authors are required to submit a sample, usually around 5,000 words, which has to be approved by the moderators of the website before the complete text can become available to the readers.

The accepted authors are then able to autonomously publish their works, which will be accessible to the readers through a direct link on the home page – when the work we are dealing with is a featured work – or either from the section it is published in or through the in-site search functions.

Clicking on the title of a work, the user is redirected to a page containing a sort of general overview of the work in question, containing information about the author, date of publication, length of the work, "hits" rate and a few functions available to the user. Some of the interactive functions the users can choose from are: "Add to your bookshelf", "Recommend the work" or "download to read". Scrolling down the page, there is "book reviews area" (Shuping qu 书评区), in which readers can easily leave a comment, by clicking on the icon "publish a review" (Fabiao shuping 发表书评). The content of the literary work is accessed through another icon which reads "Read now" (Liji yuedu 立即阅读), provided that the content is available for free or that the user has access to the content. The page on which the novel can finally be read is a plain page, resembling the page of a printed book, featuring only a few icons, as "add to book shelf", "go back to the overview" and "leave a comment", and two small icons

to "turn the pages" of the novel. What is important to note here is that the online versions of the novels do not feature any interactive functions, but are read-only pages: even the "leave a comment" icon redirects to a separate discussion space, making a straightforward interaction with the author more difficult than it used to be on the interactive pages of *Banyan Tree*.

Starting Point offers 4 different kinds of membership, one for basic members and 3 different options for subscriptions. A basic member (Putong huiyuan 普通会员) can register for free and use one-off payments whenever he wants to purchase a work which is not available on a free account. The rate for reading on a basic account is 5RMB for 100000 characters. From the basic membership, *Starting point* users can upgrade to advanced member (Gaoji huiyuan 高级会员) and subscribe to Starting point services for a fee of 199RMB per year. The subscription allows the user to read for at a rate of 5RMB for 100000 characters, using the available credit on his account. For more exigent readers, Starting Point proposes two kinds of VIP membership: the Junior VIP membership (Chuji VIP 初级 VIP) and the Advanced VIP membership (Gaoji VIP 高级 VIP). The Junior VIP membership has a subscription fee of 1200RMB per year and a rate of 4RMB per 100000 characters, while the Advanced VIP membership costs its users 3600RMB per year, and charges a rate of 3RMB for 100000 characters for reading VIP content on the website.[72] The personal credit on a Starting Point account can be recharged using a variety of payment methods, including credit cards, paypal, alipay and some payment applications on smartphones.[73]

The home page of *Starting Point* also features a ranking section, in which the most successful works are listed by the number of "hits" or comments. In this section, we can find general rankings, in which the most successful works are listed by their "hit" rate – which can be an overall rate, or referred to a certain period of time: weekly,

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[72] The various options for Starting Point membership are described on Starting Point Membership page (Qidian huiyuan 起点会员), URL: http://vip.qidian.com/My.php (last access: December 2016)

[73] http://me.qidian.com/account/charge.aspx

monthly and annual rates are available – or specific rankings of the most appreciated works sorted by genre, the best works recommended by *Starting Point* or by the readers, as well as rankings of complete series, collected works and newly published stories. The mechanism of ranking plays a fundamental role in enhancing the popularity of a work. On *Starting Point*, several hundred works are published every day. Because of the huge amount of material the reader is exposed to, it is clearly impossible for all the work to reach the same degree of visibility or success on the website. A popular work stuck at the top of one ranking or featuring a link on the home page has a much greater chance of being noticed by the readers than a less popular work which is only found through the in-site search function. To put it in other words, while popular works can get an even higher visibility when stuck on the top of a list, unpopular or older works could become virtually impossible to find among the multitude of works stored in the database of the websites. Of course, the editors of the website can influence this exposure to a great extent.

Besides readers' choices, the visibility of a work is also directly related to the "recommendation" or to the choice of titles to be advertised on the home page. This dynamic is in some aspects similar to what happens within the conventional market: when a publisher sets up the promotion of a book, potential best-sellers and new books usually enjoy more advertisement and are displayed on visible shelves in the book stores, making them more 'attractive' for purchase. Books which did not benefit from any promotional activity risk to stay unnoticed on their shelves. However, within an online context, this can be regarded as a "reversible" mechanism: as the popularity of an online literature work is directly linked to its reception by the readers, the fate of an unpopular work can simply be reversed through the recommendation to other readers. In this sense, the online audience plays a much more active role in the reception and success of a work, because of the chance the Internet provides to be the promoters as well as the consumers of their own favourite works.

2.3 The influence of the market: Introducing the literary websites business model

A controversial aspect of online literary production is the transformation of literature websites from "amateurs writers' community to a market testing ground"[74], through the introduction of a "fee" to be paid to access popular works. This is the case, among others, of *Starting Point*. The website pioneered its model of retribution for the most successful authors and introduced a reading "fee" for its users in 2003. The shift from a "free of charge" literary space to the new "pay a fee for reading online" system gradually evolved into an innovative business model, imitated, one after another, by the most popular literary websites. On the popular literary platform that adopted this system, when a work approaches critical masses, the authors are invited to sell the copyrights of their works to the website and readers are required to pay a small sum to read the complete work.[75] In 2008, seven of the most popular Internet literature websites were purchased by the Shanda group (Shengda jituan 盛大集团, known in English as Shanda). Shanda is a company founded in Shanghai in 1999. Initially dedicated to the online gaming business, Shanda Literature (Shengda wenxue 盛大文学) was formally established[76] and Shanda Literature acquired original literature websites and three publishing houses and it claims 85 percent of the readers of Web literature and becoming the world's largest original content platform in Chinese language.[77] At the end of 2014, Shanda sold its entire stake in Shanda Games Limited and announced the sale of Shanda Literature (also known in English as Cloudary Corporation). All the literary websites are currently owned by the China Reading Group (Yuewen jituan 阅文集团), which took over Shanda Literature's position as

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[74] Kong (2005), *Consuming Literature,* 179.
[75] "Web literature turns a page with profitable storyline", China Daily, 28/03/2011. Available online, URL: www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-03/28/content_12234103.htm. Accessed in April 2013.
[76] Shanda, "It all started with a game". About Us: history. URL: http://www.shanda.com/about-us/shanda-history, Accessed December 2016.
[77] *Idem*.

the largest original content platform in Chinese language. According to the company website, *China Reading* currently numbers 600 million users and one billion of original literary works across the websites owned by the group.[78] As previously happened with the Shanda Group, little information is available online about the company that controls all the major literary platforms on the Chinese web. However, it is not difficult to grasp how Shanda first, China Reading after, hold a quasi-monopoly on Internet literature production in China, owning the copyright of all the most popular Internet literature works published on the Chinese web, as well as the copyright for a variety of related cultural products, such as cinema and TV adaptations of Internet fiction works.

What happens when a supposedly free space for users' expression and publications comes to interact with capital forces? I suggest that these changes have partially altered the dynamics of literary communities affecting, in particular, the relation between the writer and his or her audience. This model, in fact, operates a separation between writers and readers, bringing them back to the author-reader dichotomy, typical of the printed literature world.

Moreover, the success of a work among online readers often results in the publication of a printed edition. A comparative analysis of the online and offline audience's reception might be revealing on the interaction between online and conventional literary scene from the public's perspective. The popularization of the Internet and the development of large-scale mass media in China has coincided with the marketization of cultural products and a growing urbanisation. Although Internet literature at its outset has been said to have "completely broken free from the confinement of institutions and commercialization"[79], it was unlikely that online literature – and cultural production in general – could stay untouched by the market forces for long. Unlike other mass media, a work published on the Internet can immediately reach a huge potential audience, and it did not take long for cultural enterprises to become

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[78]   China Reading website: http://www.yuewen.com
[79]   Kong, (2005). *Consuming Literature,* 177.

aware of its endless commercial possibilities.

The first website to test the possibilities for a commercial exploitation of online produced literature was *Under the Banyan Tree.* In July 1999, a little more than one year after the launch of the website, its founder William Zhu established a twelve member editorial board to select the best works to be submitted for publication. A few months later, the website launched the First Internet Literature Award Contest, that soon became an annual event and, began organizing a series of promotional activities. In 2001, Zhu had contracts with several publishing houses, radio stations and other "media units", as well as with numerous writers.[80]

In the "About us" page of the website, *Starting Point* claims to be one of the "pioneers of the Internet literature profit model in the true sense"[81], having established the basis of an industry for online produced original literature. *Starting Point* was, in fact, the first website to introduce a "pay a fee for reading online" (Zaixian shoufei yuedu 在线收费阅读) system, which was established in 2003. The website initially set a rate of 2-3 yuan per 100,000 words for its readers, while writers on the website could publish their stories in serial form. If their works happened to attract a large number of readers, *Starting Point* would invite the author to sign a contract, sell the copyrights of their work to the website and split the profit equally between the two parts.[82] The effects of this model on the previously market-free literature production are multiple. The first immediate effect, as already mentioned, is the separation between "writers" and "readers", which brings the roles back to the traditional juxtaposition of producers and consumers. Setting up a model in which the reader is required to pay a fee in order to access a literary work, while the writer receives a compensation on the basis of the number of words produced, the previously celebrated possibilities for interaction between author and reader during the production of a work are greatly diminished, as the reader can access a work only

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[80] Id., 179-180

[81] *About Us – Starting Point Chinese Net* (Guanyu women – Qidian zhongwen wang 关于我们-起点中文网). Accessed 13 April 2015.
http://wwwploy.qidian.com/aboutus/aboutus.aspx.

[82] Web Literature Turns a Page with Profitable storyline. On Chinadaily.com.cn'. Accessed 29 April 2014. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/2011-03/28/content_12233912.htm

after its publication. When capital is involved, the attention shifts from "the art for the art sake" to the interest for material gain.

As a writer's compensation is directly connected to the amount of work he or she is able to produce, the published works tend to become increasingly long, because of the author's interest in the profit that will result from it, while the editors of the websites encourage writers to follow already tested narrative patterns, with the risk of rendering the products growingly homogeneous and repetitive. Is the business depriving Internet literature of its artistic potential? On this ground, it may be justifiable to suspect that the new model of online literary production is gradually dragging Internet fiction toward a culturally unanimous and increasingly monopolized model of mass production, reminiscent of Adorno's cynic discourse on the evolution of the culture industry in capitalistic societies[83]. Adorno sees behind the culture industry a cycle of manipulation which aims at the unification of the system and a cycle of reproduction – demanded by the dynamics of mass production - resulting in an endless repetition of identical products. Although it might be tempting to assume that the new model of Internet literature production identifies in Adorno's theory, when talking about China is useful to remember that the Western idea of Capitalist society and liberal market are not fully developed in the Chinese economy. As long as part of the publishing industry is owned by the State-party, it is not possible to talk about a monopoly outside of the government control. Conversely to what happened in Europe, in China the marketization of cultural products is more a result of the recent (partial) opening of the cultural market than the result of a sinister over-developed, all-controlling mass production system. On the other hand, online literature consumers still play a too important role in both literary production and consumption, a role which is still fruitful for the whole system, to suggest that the cultural enterprises behind the websites have the entire process under their control.

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[83] Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund, and Max Horkheimer. 'The Culture Industry: Enlightment as Mass Deception.' *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002. 94-136

Although it may be true that most of the production is now increasingly market-driven, the business model itself "uses" the audiences as the main "propelling force" of the production system.

2.4   The role of the audiences: online and offline readers

In a study of the development of online literary production, it is especially important to consider the online context in which these works are published. In the production of Internet literature, the interactivity, the participation of the readers and the Internet technological possibilities are undoubtedly important factors, since the very beginning of the production process. The production of a conventional novel is usually a solitary process, the author works alone, without any interaction with his potential audience during the creative process. This probably represents the most important difference between literary writing and story-telling, as the latter needs a response, an exchange with its listener as an essential part of the performance. In this sense, Internet literature brings important innovations: online literary production makes it possible for the production and consumption to happen nearly at the same time, giving web literature readers an unprecedented opportunity to be publicly involved with the work.

In online literary communities, registered members are allocated a private space, in which they are offered a variety of interactive features. In this space, they can browse and search for the preferred literary texts in the website database, vote for their preferred works of fiction, offer feedback and criticism on previously read works, share their reading habits with other readers and, most importantly, apply to become an author. Every member of online literary communities is potentially an author as well. As Levy argues, in computer-mediated spaces, the distinction between "authors

and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpreters" is blurred[84] and the act of writing becomes a social activity. Immediately after the publication online, the readers are able to write comments and suggestions to the author, that sometimes result in an active participation in the creative process. The online audience is, hence, not composed by inert spectators, but "active producers of the information, aesthetic creators of the new media art".[85]

Arguably, the chance online readers have to get involved in a work production is one of the most significant innovations brought about by Internet literature. The completely new role that the audience plays in the literary production results in a re-configuration of the literary field. According to Bourdieu's notion of the literary field, the dynamics between the various agents of commercial publishing – producers, editors, publishers, and consumers – are regulated by a relation of power, which is associated with capital. In this model, the dominant position of the publishing business is occupied by the publishers, together with the other mediatory agents – editors, printers, booksellers – which traditionally come between authors and readers. Authors and readers are placed at the two ends of the whole publication process, with the authors having to deal with editorial requirements and the readers, at the receiving end, who acquire a finished cultural product but are not involved in its production and have thus no choice on its content.

Within the online literary field, agents and institutions are re-allocated to different positions, characterised by the centralization of authors and readers and the marginalization of the role of editors and publishers, due to the changed mode of consumption.

The online literary websites are consumer-to-consumer self-publishing platforms and, as such, the role of producer (author) and consumer (reader) are easily interchangeable. When a writer decides to publish a work in an online literary community, readers are potentially involved with the work, they can express their

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[84]   Kang, Jaeho. "The *Ur*-History of Media space: Walter Benjamin and the Information
       Industry in Nineteenth-Century". *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society.*
       Vol. 22, No. 2, Special Issue: Memory and Media Space (June 2009), 246-247.
[85]   *Ibid.*, 247.

opinions and advice to the author, sometimes influencing the literary production. Moreover, any registered user on a literary website is potentially an author, while being a consumer when reading other users' work. Although there is an arguably a much larger group of 'passive' readers, compared to the number of active authors, the readers still have a chance of getting involved in the production of a work by leaving a feedback or a comment to its author. This is made possible by the publishing system, which allows the authors to publish an unfinished work – in a serialised form in most cases – which is likely to be followed by other 'instalments', that can be directly influenced by the reaction of the audience. The web pages on which the works are published – whether they are interactive or read-only pages – usually allow some space for readers participation. In late 1990s, when the model of the first literary websites was introduced by *Under the Banyan Tree*, the website – as well as other similar portals – featured an interactive web page in which readers could leave a comment on the work they were reading, with the text and the comments appearing on the same page. This made a direct and immediate interaction between an author and its audience extremely easy. This dynamics of publication, in some cases, resulted in multi-author works. This is the case, among others, for Murong Xuecun's "Leave me alone: a novel of Chengdu" (*Chengdu, jinye qing jiang wo yiwang* 成都，今夜请将我遗忘)[86].

However, as anticipated in the previous section, when the pay a fee for reading system and the VIP membership were introduced, the publication and discussion spaces have been detached, and readers comments were moved to a separate discussion page. The inability of the readers to access the work at the moment of its production did arguably affect the author-reader exchange, leaving both parts with much reduced possibilities for immediate interaction and perhaps making this

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[86] In 2002, the publication online of the first chapters of Murong Xuecun's novel *Leave me alone* led to a public discussion among its readers – who posted comments and advices, or even their own 'corrections' to some parts of the work. The 'collaboration' between the author and his readers resulted in the publication of different versions of the work. See: Li Xinghui, *Internet Literature Language* (*Wangluo Wenxue Yuyan Lun* 网络文学语言论), Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi, 2008. 12-19.

interaction less direct. Nevertheless, the serialised form in which the great majority of the works are published on literary platforms, makes direct impact of the readers comments on the work still possible, although less visible, as the comments left on the discussion pages can potentially influence the development of the narratives in the future instalments.

Although, as it has been observed, the adoption of the new Internet literature business model tends to reduce the spaces for writer-reader interaction, the online literary field can still be considered a more "democratic" space for publication, in the measure in which it offers every registered member the same chances to become a writer and publish their own work. In this sense, even without taking into account the potential possibilities for interaction, writer and reader cannot be regarded as clearly demarcated categories in this context. Since Internet literature faces an immense audience, its readers have to be an important part of its evaluation. An evaluation of the importance of the readers in the online literary production, within its new business model, is, though, a problematic task. Readers have to choose among a massive amount of works and this choice, in a market driven context, can hardly be completely free. However, since the whole business model survives on the mass participation of its users, consumers still play a relevant role in the publication mechanism. Most Internet literature platforms promote the notion of "fans economy" (Fensi jingji 粉丝经济), according to which they let the tastes of the audiences guide the production, adapt themselves to the current fashion, while aiming at a particularly designed group of readers. This brought vitality to the production system and provided the readers with more diverse, but at the same time "tailored" choices. Letting the audience hold the helm of literary production, the literary platforms minimise the management costs, as the audience produces, promotes and consumes its own literature, and maximize the profits, as the consumers-driven production ensures that the final products will meet the tastes of the readers. However, the growing commercialisation resulted in an evident homogenization of the literary platform, which, all automatically pushed toward the most popular genres or the

fashion of the moment, tend to produce works without originality, that hardly stand out among similar works, and at the same time risks eclipsing the authors producing less sensational, but perhaps more artistically valuable works.

Chapter 3 - The interaction between the online and the official literary field

Cultural production, as well as literary writing, in the People's Republic of China have always had to deal with an erratically strict – even if now increasingly relaxed – political control. The Chinese State's involvement in arts production, far from being a result of the Communist Revolution, has its antecedents back in the imperial past.[87] In Imperial China, amateur art was regarded as a recreational activity for the elite, and it was by no means a 'product' created for profit. Professional artists and performers had an extremely low social status, and the cultural market was too weak for art workers – including writers – to support themselves through their work.

The Republican Government, especially under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek in mid-1920s, has shown a rather strict cultural and ideological control. The Nanjing Ministry of Education, in fact, endeavoured to "partify" education by prescribing a new cultural orthodoxy in service of the State. The regulations it promulgated aimed both at indoctrination and the standardization of the cultural institutions.[88]

Although often regarded as oppressive, the Communist regime of Mao Zedong did much to enlarge employment opportunities for artists, through the creation of new cultural organizations. The model established in the 1950's under Mao persists today in broad outline. A set of institutions is responsible for the cultural policies and arts production in China. The Ministry of Culture operates a vast network of cultural

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[87] Richard C. Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China: New Politics of Culture.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. 3. For more on the heritage of imperial China on the relationship beween politics and art, see also: R,C. Kraus, *Brushes with power: modern politics and the Chinese art of calligraphy*, University of California Press, 1991.

[88] Qi, Bangyuan, and Dewei Wang. *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

organizations, including opera companies, arts academies and publication companies. The Central Committee's Propaganda Department is in charge with the supervision of ideology, culture and education. Extremely influential under Mao, the Propaganda Department lost most of its authority and prestige during Deng Xiaoping's government, which drastically restricted its apparatus and, consequently, its ability to control. Like the Department of Propaganda, the People's Liberation Army – which was a major employer for artists in the 1950's – lost most of its cultural influence throughout the 1980's.

The Arts Federation – also known as the All-China Federation of Literary and Artistic Circles[89] – is an umbrella organization for a network of professional associations representing various categories of artists such as writers, painters, musicians and performers. Each professional association has a national hierarchy, parallel to the Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Culture. These organizations are an important link between the Party policy and the majority of artists, who are not Party members.[90] Formerly the weakest of the cultural institutions, the China Writers Association became increasingly influential during the reform era, alongside the decline of the Propaganda Department and the Army.[91] Founded in July 1949, the organisation was initially named the China National Literature Workers Association. In September 1953, it was renamed the China Writers Association. Among the various organizations under the Arts Federation, the Writers' Association has been more influential than others. The China Writers Association is nowadays the biggest organization for writers in China and the main representative of the official literary field in the country. Many of its members, besides being state-employed writers, also perform administrative and organizational duties, or are employed as editors for the publications issued by the Association.[92] The responsibilities of the Association include supervisory functions on the literary production, sponsoring cultural activities, organising meetings and seminars on literary issues and events aimed at the

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[89]   Link, *The Uses of Literature*,118-122.
[90]   Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China : The New Politics of Culture*. 43-44
[91]   Ibid, 62.
[92]   Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China.* 44

promotion of creative writing. Although only a few members of the Association enjoy a professional status, the membership is considered to offer to writers prestige and access to a variety of perquisites, including the privilege of attending lectures and seminars, conducting workshops and other "social activities", as well as, in some cases, provide access to "creative writing funds".[93] As a government organization, the China Writers Association also works to promote socialism and its ideology and is traditionally hostile to new literary forms.

Despite its political campaigns – against 'spiritual pollution' (1983) and 'bourgeois liberalization' (1985) – and the Tiananmen incident in 1989, Deng Xiaoping's reforms made a great contribution to an initial liberalization of arts. Deng's policy in culture was broadly analogous to his policy on agriculture, commerce, or industry, which aimed at loosening political controls and introducing market relationships.[94] China's Cultural politics in the 1980s sanctioned the end of the iron rice bowl system[95] and the reduction of state subsidies. The reforms did not end state sponsorship of arts, but declared economic self-sufficiency to be a goal of cultural policy.[96] Deng's cultural reforms resulted in a weakened capacity of institutional control over arts, both because of the declined power of the Propaganda Department and the Liberation Army, and the fast-developing cultural market, with the manufacturing of cultural products now partially in the hands of private producers. The gradual privatization of China's economy ended the state monopoly on publishing, with had been held by the Central Committee's propaganda ministry since the Yan'an period.[97] The marketization of cultural production, together with its partial privatization, enhanced, in turn, a great diversification of art products. During the late 1980s a nongovernmental publishing industry, often referred to as the "second channel"

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[93] Link, *The Uses of Literature*. 119-120

[94] Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China, 55.*

[95] The "Iron rice bowl" (Tie fanwan 铁饭碗) policy, effective from the early 1960s, was a system of labor relationship characterised by life-long employment, low wages and free basic benefits. Deng Xiaoping's policy gradually removed this system in order to encourage these previosly state-owned organisations to become financially self-sufficient.

[96] Ibid., 56.

[97] Orville Schell, *Mandate of Heaven: A New Generation of Entrepreneurs, Dissidents, Bohemians, and Technocrats Lays Claim to China's Future.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994. 296. Cited in: Daria Berg, "Consuming Secrets", 327.

emerged as an alternative to the state-run publishing network.[98]

Despite the growing liberalisation of culture, the reforms also contributed to strengthen the Arts Federation and its constituent organization, which increasingly began to press to represent the professional interests of artists. The professional associations grew quickly in importance and size through the 1980s and 1990s . The China Writers Association is a clear example of this growth. The Association, in fact, had about eight hundred members at its restoration in 1979, which grew to 5,000 members in 1996[99], and over 8,900 in 2009.[100] Although the connections between the Associations and the State are still evident, the outstanding growth of the number of their members makes an effective state control over the professional organization much more difficult. Nowadays, if the leadership of the various branch of the Writers Association is frequently rather conservative, the Association also embraces young and less politically involved writers, whose works clearly move away from the "worker-peasant-soldier art"[101] that characterized the People's Republic mainstream literature before the 1980s.

The growing relative autonomy of art production brought about by the marketization of culture has also enormously increased diversity in art products, fostering the birth of new literary and artistic trends, such as the "root-seeking" and avant-garde movements in literature through the 1990s. As Jason McGrath observes, what is new in contemporary Chinese culture of the 1990s is a sort of relative autonomy of the aesthetic, whereby the market engenders new autonomies of popular culture, allowing

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[98] Berg, Daria. "Consuming Secrets: China's new print culture at the turn of the Twenty-first Century". In: Brokaw, Cynthia Joanne e Christopher A Reed, *From Woodblocks to the Internet: Chinese Publishing and Print Culture in Transition*, Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2010. 326-327

[99] Ibid, 169.

[100] "The spokesman of the China Writers Association Cries out: we really did not raise many authors!" (Zhongguo Zuoxie Fayanrenhanyuan: women zhende mei yang duoshao zuojia 中国作协发言人喊冤：我们真的没养多少作家), Xinhua Net. 2009. <http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2009-08/07/content_11839182.htm>. Accessed January 19, 2015.

[101] Li Tuo*, 2000. *Resistance to Modernity.* In: Qi and Wang, *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century*, 137-146.

new genres of entertainment art to appear.[102] The relentless development of new forms of entertainment art and the growth of market-driven mass media, together with the popularization of the Internet and the use of personal computers, led to the rise of new form of digitalized arts and, among others, to the development of Internet (or web) literature in the late 1990s.

In the first years of the development of Internet literature in China, the Writers Association was extremely negative toward this new phenomenon, that was frequently regarded as 'rubbish' rather than literature. However, during the last decade, Internet literature attained a relevant position within the contemporary China literary production and the cultural industry. While the official literary field opens up to the online literary production, online-produced literature, in its printed editions, seems to share a non-irrelevant position with 'conventional' literature within the editorial market. The recent changes in these different aspects of the Chinese contemporary literary field could suggest that the three 'fields' – conventional literature, Internet literature and the editorial market – are gradually merging together and the Internet is playing an increasingly important role in literary production.

3.1 Internet literature in interaction with the establishment

After nearly 20 years history,[103] and despite the contrasting opinions on its literary value within the official literary field, Chinese Internet literature is becoming an increasingly significant part of the literary production in contemporary China, attracting the growing attention of the established literary field, which is not only

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[102] McGrath, Jason. 2008. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market age.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008 3-6.

[103] Many scholars tend to allocate the beginning of the phenomenon of Internet literature in China in 1998, year of publication of Cai Zhiheng's *The first Intimate Contact,* when Internet literature became popular in China. However, literary works have been published on the Chinese web from 1996.

working to set up an exchange between the online and offline literary fields, but also gradually trying to absorb the most influential Internet writers within its circles.

In 2008, during the annual National meeting held in Fuzhou (Fujian), the China Writers Association discussed, apparently for the first time, the importance of the online literary production as a part of contemporary China's literature and culture. On this occasion, the Association acknowledged that, in virtue of the popularization of the Internet access and its great impact on the literary production and distribution, the online literary scene achieved a growing importance as a part of the contemporary literary production in China. The discussion also stressed the importance of paying more attention to young writers and online published works as a crucial point for the work of the Association in the coming years.[104] During the meeting, the China Writers Association discussed – apparently for the first time – the possibility of inviting some successful web writers to join the Association. An important point of the discussion was the inadequacy of the regulation on the admission of new members and the need to set up specific criteria for web writers.

Although in this occasion the specific regulation for the admission of web writers to the national Association have not been made clear yet, in the following years, a few web writers were invited to join the Association: the first Internet writer, Tangjia Sanshao 唐家三少, joined the association in 2010. According to the existing regulation, a 'conventional' writer can present a spontaneous candidacy after the publication of two works, or he or she can be recommended by two existing members of the Association. In the case of Internet writers, it is not clear if the publication in print still represents a relevant factor for the admission. However, all the web writers who joined the China Writers Association until now have published their most popular novels works in print.

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[104] "The China Writers Association will admit Internet writers" (Zhongguo zuoxie jiang xishou wangluo zuojia 中国作协将吸收网络作家), *People's Daily Online,* 2008. Available online on: <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-03/31/content_48327224.htm> Last access: February 2016.

3.2 Internet literature and literary prizes

Another step forward for the recognition of online produced literary works has been made in 2010, when an important literary award traditionally devoted to 'conventional' literature – the Lu Xun Literary Prize (Lu Xun wenxue jiang 鲁迅文学奖) – opened up to the participation of online published works. The Lu Xun Literary Prize is a literary prize awarded by the Chinese Writers' Association and one of China's most important literary prizes. Awarded every three years since 1995, the Lu Xun Prize admits works from seven categories, including novels, short stories, proses, poetry and reportage literature works. In the regulations of 5th Edition of the Award in 2010 can be read the list of the institutions allowed to recommend literary works: State approved newspapers, periodicals, publishing houses and, for the first time, State approved online publishers and websites.[105] The online literary platforms allowed to recommend the original works published on their pages are required to own an Internet publishing licence and be able to prove that the proposed authors have signed an exclusive copyright contract with the website.[106] The initiative had great success among online publishers, which could eventually gain some recognition from the literary establishment and boost the popularity of their websites, and many literary platforms recommended their best authors for the award. However, despite the number of the websites allowed to recommend their works and the numerous recommended works, only one online published work, Wen Yu's novel *Caught in the web,* was selected for the award. If, on the one hand, the participation to an important literary award could enhance the reputation of a literary website, the China Writers' Association may also have seen some potential in online published literature, as new

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[105] China Writers, *Official Announcement of the works accepted for the 5th edition of Lu Xun Literary Prize* (Guanyu zhengji diwu jie Lu Xun wenxue jiang canping zuopin de gonggao 关于征集第五届鲁迅文学奖参评作品的公告), accessed on February 2014, http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2010/2010-02-28/83008.html.

[106] China Writers, *An interview with the spokesman of the China Writers Association Chen Qirong on Lu Xun Literary Prize* (Zhongguo zuoxie xinwen fayanren Chen Qirong jiu Lu Xun Jiang da jizhe wen 中国作协新闻发言人陈崎嵘就鲁奖答记者问), accessed on February 2014. http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2010/2010-03-02/83101.html.

juvenile literature capable of bringing some innovation in the established literary field. Besides, the use of the Internet as a medium to reach a wider public can be seen as beneficial to the popularity of the award among the general public, and especially the younger generations. The recognition of the potentiality of the web is also evident in the choice to announce the selected works online.

The following year, the Mao Dun Literature Prize (Mao Dun wenxue jiang 茅盾文学奖) allowed the nomination of online published literary works as well. Mao Dun Literature Prize is a literary award specifically devoted to novels. Established in the will of the prominent writer Mao Dun and sponsored by the Chinese Writers Association, it was first awarded in 1982. The Mao Dun Prize is currently awarded every four years, and it is regarded as one of the most prestigious literature prizes in China. Seven Internet novels, recommended by popular literary platforms such as *Starting point* and *Fragrant Red Sleeve* were short-listed for the 8th Edition of the award, although none of them was selected for the prize.

The nomination of some Internet novels for national literary awards normally devoted to conventional forms of literature has at least two important implications. First, Internet literature is in interaction with the official literary field. Through their nomination for important literary awards, the literary value of some works – even if they are still regarded as an exception among the average 'mediocrity' of online published works – has been acknowledged by influential writers within the established literary field. On the other hand, the enthusiasm demonstrated by the online literary platforms for the chance Internet literature has been given to participate in important awards reveals the promptness of the online literary field to take part in activities organised by the establishment and settle and exchange with the conventional literary scene. Second, Internet literature works are leaving the limited – even if huge – public of the online literary communities to reach a wider audience that includes offline public. At the same time, the recent changes within the regulations of literary awards can be seen as an attempt of the established literary

world to reach a wider public, including online audiences. If, on one hand, the openness toward the Internet is an important step to promote the established literary world's activities and the public's interest in 'official' literature, on the other hand, the nomination of some Internet novels for national literary awards and their publication in print can indeed enhance the popularity of online literary production within the conventional literary market.

What does differentiate the selected works from the bulk of the production of Internet literature, previously referred to as "literary karaoke" or even "literary detritus freely and copiously discharged onto the screen"[107]? A comparative analysis of these works with the canonized idea of Internet novel as it is described in the existing scholarship[108] reveals a number of evident differences. First of all, most of these novels do not make use of the largely discussed Chinese Internet Language. Their use of language is more accurate, with a consistently lessened use of Internet slang and their style is more refined compared to most of the earlier works.

Secondly, the typical strong internet focus that characterised Internet novels in late 1990s gave way to 'real life' stories, often set in the contemporary metropolitan reality. Although the strong focus on the protagonists' "virtual life" is absent in more recent Internet literature works, the Internet as a part of everyday life constitutes a variably important part of the narration. The evolution of the representation of the Internet in online narratives can be interpreted as a sign that the perception of the Internet is changing from being a staggering novelty to be considered an everyday commodity available to the most. Thirdly, recent Internet literature works appear to be more mature than the first works in terms of characterization, storyline crafting, ideological or social content. [109] As the online literary communities develop into a

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[107] Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 180.

[108] Here, I refer mainly to the features of web literature and Internet language described in Ouyang's *The development of Internet Literature* (2008), and Gao's *Chinese Internet Language* (2007), introduced in my literature review.

[109] Liu, Shuming. "Internet Literature: Moving toward maturity – A comparative study of *City of Masks* and *Please, forgive me*" (Wangluo Wenxue: Cong qingse zouxiang chengshu – xiaoshuo 'Mengmian zhi cheng' he 'Wang shi' chuangzuo bijiao" 网络文学: 从青涩走向成熟—小说《蒙面之城》和《网逝》创作比较 Nanyang: Journal of Nanyang Teachers

more organised publishing environment and their offering in terms of literary genres and contents is increasingly diversified, a growing number of Internet writers engages in writing more 'serious' works, dealing with more mature themes such as urban reality, work and social problems, rather than describing the wonders of a new medium that is now taken for granted in the life of most of the urban Chinese youth. These differences with earlier Internet literature works could reveal an ongoing maturation process within Chinese online literary scene, to the extent that some Internet writers strive to produce 'high literature' products rather than writing only 'for fun'.

Nevertheless, online novels approaching established literary world seem to move closer to the conventional idea of novel in a printed culture context instead of being representative of the online literary scene they belong to. This raises important questions on the role that online literary production will play within the literary scene in the near future. Will it be still necessary to distinguish between online and offline literary scene? Or the Internet will just be considered as an alternative channel of distribution of products that share the same nature as those belonging to the printed culture world? Of course, it is still too early to evaluate the consequences of this interaction. However, the analysis of the ongoing changes on both sided – focused on those online-produced works that gained the approval of the established literary world and can thus be regarded as representative of the interchange between the two fields – highlights how the influence of the conventional literature is affecting the nature of online literary production and how the boundaries between the online and offline literary scene are becoming more blurred. The nomination of Wen Yu's *Caught in the web* for the Lu Xun Literary Prize and the subsequent publication of the printed edition of the novel make this novel an illuminating example of the interplay between the online and offline fields.

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College,11 (7), 2012.

3.2.1 Wen Yu's *Caught in the Web*

Firstly published on *Jinjiang Literature City* in 2007, with the title *Please, forgive me* (Qing ni yuanliang wo,请你原谅我), Wen Yu's first novel is a story of contemporary China metropolitan reality. It represents a particular case among web novels, as it has been the first – and only – online-produced work to be short-listed for the Lu Xun Literary Prize. Its nomination makes it an interesting case for this study since – as one of the members of the China Writers Association, Hu Ping, pointed out – among the 31 candidates proposed by Shanda Literature, this novel was the only one to meet the requirements for the award, and was thus selected.[110] Chinese Media celebrated the novel's nomination as an "ice-breaking" event, since it represents a new opening of the official literary field – traditionally hostile to new literary forms – toward the online literary field. The opening toward the web has been described as a breakthrough, able to boost to the vitality of contemporary literature creativity, and some audaciously welcomed this event as a sign of the imminent merging of the online and conventional literary scenes.[111]

Nevertheless, the number of the rejected works, besides being a symptom of a supposedly scarce literary quality of the majority of online produced works, can also reveal how conventional literary criticism is still unprepared for the evaluation of a new kind of literature, which would require a different approach.

Regardless the outcome of the award, the decision of the China Writers Association to open the award to Internet literature draws the attention of both the literary establishment and the general public to the literary websites. Although there only was one selected Internet work for the fifth edition of the award, this shows how Internet

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[110] Xinhua News, "The awkward destiny of the 'only child' Internet novel: The position of conventional writers is hard to shake" (Wangluo xiaoshuo dumiao ganga shengcun: chuantong zuojia zhuliu diwei nan han 网络小说"独苗"尴尬生存 传统作家主流地位难撼), 15 September 2015. Available online on: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/book/2010-09/15/c_12554372.htm>

[111] "The 'Internet's' Lu Xun literary prize ("Bei wangluo" de Lu Xun Wenxue Jiang "被网络"的鲁迅文学奖), 2010. http://qcyn.sina.com.cn/news/shwx/2010/1018/17362011860.html. Last access: February 2014.

literature is gradually being integrated into the mainstream idea of literary work, making it an acceptable form of literature within the official circles.

After being selected for the Lu Xun Literary Prize, Wen Yu's work has been published in a print edition, with a new title – *Caught in the Web* (Wang Shi, 网逝) – and revised content. The novel presents the simultaneous stories of different characters related, for one reason or another, to the story of the protagonist, Ye Lanqiu. Lanqiu is the only child of her parents, who both died when she was very young, leaving her to deal with the difficulties of her life on her own. Just a few years later, Ye Lanqiu is diagnosed with a terminal disease as well. She leaves the hospital in the grip of contrasting emotions, thinking of what the doctor had said, and of her own parents.

> "She left the hospital, holding in her hand the medical record, the doctor's writing as illegible as an abstruse book coming from the heaven.
> She could not read it, but the words the doctor had just told her, those were extremely clear. The expression on the doctor's face, she could understand that too.
> Understanding other people's words has its origin in the languages spoken around the world, it had to do with communication. But understanding other people's emotions, is a gift, This was an ability that she had learned from her parents, both deceased now. She had learned to understand people's feeling from their face expressions, to feel the bitterness and joys in their hearts.
> 'Is there any medical history in your family?' the doctor asked.
> Ye Lanqiu could not say a word. Her dad died of leukaemia when she was only 16 years old. And her mum.. she died from fatigue, excessively loaded with work, when she was just 17."

Since the beginning of the story, we can see that *Caught in the Web* is not a playful, undemanding work, as those Internet readers were familiar with a few years earlier.

Wen Yu engages with grievous theme as cancer, death, and suffering, while giving an in-depth portrait of the protagonist's feelings. Still in a state of confusion, after she has been diagnosed with terminal disease, the young woman sits on the bus, ignoring the old lady who was standing besides her at the bus stop. A few moments later, an old man demands her to stand and give up her seat for him, but Lanqiu refuses to leave. The old man, assuming that a young woman as Lanqiu would be able to stand, while elder people should be guaranteed a sit, in an attempt of safeguarding his supposed rights, calls the ticket inspector, urging him to ask the young lady to leave her seat:

> "Ye Lanqiu was the only lady wearing a white dress on the bus, but she did not bother to lift her head. 'This is the first stop, there is a bus coming every three minutes. If you really want a seat, that's simple: get off, wait there for three minutes and you will have your seat'.
> Ye Lanqiu's words arrived like an explosion, the ticket inspector did not have time to speak, the old man was still trying to impose his will and have his rights respected.
> "Today, young people are more and more unreasonable, they completely lack any family education!"
> "My parents died early, it is natural that I don't have any education." Ye Lanqiu's voice was not loud, but the old man had heard every single word very clearly....
> Old man heard her words, he was dumb for a moment, then blushed, stretched out his right index finger, pointing it to Ye Lanqiu's nose, then imprecated: "This is outrageous, really outrageous...…"

Here, the protagonist is portrayed in an everyday life situation, while taking the bus to go back home, after her visit at the hospital. On the bus, she has an argument with an old men expecting her to give up her seat for older people. As it can be inferred from

the guidelines of the awards issued by the China Writers association, realism is regarded to be an important quality of a valuable literary work. One of the main reasons why Wen Yu's novel has been selected for the prize is its effective portrait of the contemporary reality. Each character is introduced through a careful description of the context, usually in a common situation. The author often starts describing a trivial detail, which attracts the character's attention, then proceeds to their thoughts, gradually drawing a broader picture, and through their thoughts reconstructs their stories. For example, in introducing the protagonist Ye Lanqiu, she depicts her leaving the hospital, while holding a sheet of paper with her medical report. The illegible handwriting of the doctor, by contrast, makes her rethink about his unequivocal expression. The recollection of her conversation with the doctor becomes a device to introduce the story of her family, her father's death for leukaemia, followed from her mother's death from fatigue a one year later. However, in her narration, Wen Yu effectively highlights how appearance can sometimes be misleading and reality is not necessarily reflected in what people see. The old man on the bus, the ticket inspector, as well as the other passengers assume that Lanqiu is young and thus healthy, and her refusal to give up her seat is merely a sign of selfishness and lack of respect toward the older generation.

The episode is recorded by the female reporter, Chen Ruoxi, and broadcast on the Internet and TV. In order to increase the popularity of her news network, she encourages the public to participate in the discussion, making Ye Lanqiu become a media celebrity and a victim of attack and curses by people who see in her person a symbol of the 'decadence' of contemporary society. The reaction of the public after the broadcast of the video online is also portrayed in an effective way, the comments to the video and people's moral judgements, that quickly turn into critiques and even insults toward the protagonist.

The frequent contrast between 'appearance' and 'reality' is a key feature of the novel. The episode of the seat on the bus is the first of a series of misunderstandings in

which the protagonist is involved. The author frequently uses the contrast between observers' mostly negative opinions and the characters' thoughts to reveal the relativity of values and easy judgements. This is especially true in the case of online comments, were users protected by the anonymity of the web feel free to write any kind of insults.

Through the experiences of the various characters, the author offers a portrait of contemporary urban reality and the conditions of different social strata, implicitly denouncing the social problems specific to people with different backgrounds. Ye Lanqui is the only child of a working class family, whose parents passed away when she was very young. She has to face immense obstacles: she is not able to afford health insurance and does not have a family to rely on. Chen Ruoxi is a young journalist, trying to make her way in an extremely competitive environment. She struggles for her professional success, but she is not concerned with the moral implications of her work, as "a journalist has to report reality as it is". Lu Tianming, is the wealthy head of the company and the protagonist's old friend. He tries to help Ye Lanqiu, but is involved in a scandal and believed to have an affair with her. Lu Tianming's wife, the spouse of a wealthy man, seems to be only concerns with her jewels, cars and reputation.

On the whole, the novel is highly critic toward the contemporary society and the relativity of its values. Rather than promoting the 'socialist core value system', it seems to want to draw the attention to the lack of values in the contemporary society. However, Wen Yu's criticism is mainly conducted between the lines, offering an in-depth, full of sharp questioning portrait of the reality, instead of being an explicit attack toward it. Among the 'literati', *Caught in the web* has mainly been appreciated for its artistic maturity in comparison with the majority of Internet novels. In Shu Liuming's opinion, this work "stands out among the peers, in terms of characterization, ideological content, artistic representation, storyline crafting"[112],

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[112] Shu Liuming (2012), *Internet literature moving towards maturity* (Wangluo wenxue cong qingse zouxiang chengshu 网络文学: 从青涩走向成熟.)*;* Journal of Nanyang Teachers

while Zhang Xuesong celebrates it as a "victory of realism".[113]

3.2.2 The Media and the novel

If we approach *Caught in the web* with in mind the idea of Internet literature work as it is presented in most of the existing scholarship, the impression we get is that we are dealing with a fairly different work. Wen Yu does not make use of Internet related neologism or 'cool' expressions, categorised by Gao Liwei under the definition of Chinese Internet Language. Code-mixing phenomena are also nearly absent, although the online version of the novel contains a few words in English and some acronyms. Comparing the online version of the novel with its printed edition[114], it is possible to note how the few linguistic phenomena that could be related to the influence of CMC diminish further in latter. As the online literary production is still regarded as inferior in quality and value than the conventional production, these changes can be read as an attempt to give a stamp of 'seriousness' to the novel when approaching the conventional market, eliminating those features that are reminiscent of the online context it belongs. Whether these changes reflected the author's choice or a requirement of the editor, it is clear that these linguistic phenomena are not regarded with favour within the conventional literary field.

If the development of the Internet and Chinese character input technology made the effects of a quick writing less evident than they use to be in early Internet literature works, writing and reading on a screen still represents a spacial constraint that can leave its mark on the text in its visual aspects. The most evident effect of CMC in Wen Yu's novel are, in fact, those related to the material constraints of the screen: the

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College, 11(7).

[113] Zhang, Xuesong, *A Victory of Realism – Caught in the web, notes of the Editor* (Yi chang Xianshizhuyi de shengli – *Suosou* bianji shouji 一场现实主义的胜利—《搜索》编辑手记), *Chuban Cankao* 出版参考, 18 (2012).

[114] The full text of *Please, forgive me* is no longer available on Jinjiang Literature City, where it was originally published. However, the original version of the work has been saved by some of its online readers and is currently available for download on some online literature databases.

chapters are short, often broken down in small paragraphs, and there is a sporadic use of very long sentences. This is a typical feature of online-produced literary works: very long paragraphs or sentences may make the act of reading on a screen uncomfortable and cause a loss of continuity of the written text. Although some of the short chapters of the first publication of the novel merged together in longer ones in the paperback edition, the influence of the spatial constraints of the screen are still visible on the printed page.

Another characteristic that distinguishes *Caught in the web* from the mainstream idea of Internet literature work is the representation of the Internet that emerges from the novel. Most Internet novels published between late 1990s and early 2000s are characterized by a strong Internet focus: Internet writers show their excitement toward the new medium and tend to represent it as a 'place' of fun and freedom, that offers to its users the opportunity to speak and meet new people. The opportunity to speak is also the focus of the representation of the Internet in Wen Yu's novel, but in a completely different way. Wen Yu represents Internet technology its darker aspects, highlighting how the possibility any users have to express their own opinion can lead to episodes of abuse, moral judgements and privacy violation. Through the reactions of Internet users to Ye Lanqiu's story, Wen Yu unmasks the potential violence of the mass media and the power they have in shaping the public opinion. In this way, the Internet, rather than being celebrated as a tool for freedom and personal expression, becomes a tool of 'punishment' and pressure on the protagonist's personal life.

When it first appeared on the pages of *Jinjiang Literature City*[115] between the summer of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 with the former title *Please, forgive me*, Wen Yu's work was published in a serial format. The novel, available in its complete version to the website users, gained a considerable popularity among the *Jinjiang* community,

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[115] Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang wenxue cheng 晋江文学城) is one of the most popular online literary communities in China, available on the URL: http://www.jjwxc.net.. Since 2008 jjwxc.net is owned by Shanda Literature. Shanda Literature owns three literature websites, - Starting Point, Fragrant Red Sleeves and Jinjiang Literature City– capturing the 80% of the market share in Chinese entertainment literature.

obtaining a good – although not outstanding – 'hits rate' and a number of favourable comments.[116] In 2010, perhaps because of its nomination for the Lu Xun prize, the whole novel has been removed from the website, replaced by an invitation to purchase the e-book.[117]As it emerges from the available comments[118], in the case of *Please, forgive me,* readers did not actively participate in the creative process.

Indeed, the marketization of Internet literature websites has a considerable influence on the chances for print publication of a successful work. Since the online literary platforms have launched their business model, the transition from the online page to the printed edition became easier, as the most popular websites often work in partnership with publishing houses. Nevertheless, before a work is noticed by a potential publisher, the online consumers play an essential role in its popularity. Although the possibilities for interaction are not always as straightforward as they are described, literary platform still offer a space for discussion in which users can leave their feedback on a work and interact with other users. In online communities the popularity of a novel is linked to a dynamic of 'mass approval', within which the literary production is mostly guided by the readers' taste. Among the huge number of works published daily on the most popular website, the 'hits rate' is a fundamental factor in visibility the visibility of a work, as the works are usually listed on a ranking basis. Besides, a successful work is more likely to become a topic for discussion both on the website where it is published as well as in other online spaces. Only works that have proved to be successful within this context are usually published in print. The role of the readers can thus be considered as a key role for the popularity of a work online, as well as decisive in a potential approach to the conventional market.

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[116] The 'hits' rate is not necessarily indicative of the success of a work: longer works or works published over a longer period of time generally have a higher 'hits' rate. But this is related, besides their popularity, to the necessity of accessing the work more time, to be able to read the new instalments. See chapter 2 for more details.

[117] On the website there is no information available about the removal of the novel. But, analysing the screen shots available on archive.org, it is my impression that the novel has been removed in conjunction with the works collection period before the launch of the 5th edition of the award.

[118] Here I refer to the screen shots available on archive.org again, as the comments have been removed from the original page together with the novel.

3.2.3 Approaching the Conventional Literature and the Market

In the case of *Caught in the Web,* the encounter with the established literary world occurred before its publication in print. When Wen Yu's work was recommended for the 5th edition of the Lu Xun Prize, in fact, the novel only existed in its electronic version. Despite the lack of publication in print – or arguably because of it – the nomination for the award had a considerable influence on the novel itself. As the author observes, Internet literature works are often based on real life, written in one go, without the need of an obsessive attention to the details and often contains some mistakes in its text.[119] When a work is solely published on an online platform, the attention for details and possible mistakes is consistently diminished compared to the print world. This is arguably because a digital support, and especially a web page, is not perceived as 'permanent'. When a work approaches the conventional print literature market, its form often needs to be improved. As *Please, forgive me* did not exist in a printed edition at the time of the nomination, the author and editors had an opportunity to work on a better version of the novel before approaching the print literature world. The nomination for the award arguably further encouraged a greater attention for possible improvements. *Caught in the Web* is thus a revised version of the former *Please, forgive me.* The differences between the two versions of the novel can be found in more accurate descriptions, in a deeper analysis of the characters through their position within the society and, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the diminished presence of linguistic uses or phenomena related to the online production in the second edition. Some differences are also visible in the structure of the writing and the visual aspect of the page: in the printed edition the author chooses a different division of the chapters, combining shorter chapters together, and makes a broader use of long sentences, especially in the descriptive parts. The title of the

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[119] Wen Yu, *Human flesh search*. (Sousuo 搜索). Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe 湖南人民出版社, 2012. (Postface to the printed edition), 236.

novel has also been changed due to the recommendation for the contest. The nomination naturally gave a boost to the popularity of the novel that, from its success in the restricted reality of Jinjiang literary community, reaches the headlines on the news of all major Media.[120]

The new edition was launched in 2012, a few months before the publication of Chen Kaige's film based on the novel, both with the title *Human Flesh Search* (literally: *Search*, Sousuo, 搜索). In the case of Wen Yu, the encounter with the conventional literary world, as well as the publishing market, sanctions the end of her online career. In an interview for the presentation of the new edition of the book, Wen Yu announced her decision not to publish her second novel online. In her view, Internet literature still has to bear the established literary world's – sometimes unfair – attack. Instead, a publisher is responsible for its publications, and thus a print publication implies a higher quality of the work. For these reasons, the publication of a book is still an offer that an author cannot refuse.[121]

Wen Yu's experience and decision confirm that the online literary scene is not only made by *amateurs* without any ambition to become professional writers. Among a number of writers who regard online writing as a recreational activity and are not interested in popularity outside their online community, there are some more ambitious who strive to write more serious literature. However, Wen Yu's attitude toward the publication of her book unmasks how the online literary field can be perceived as immature even by those who publish within this system. If a web page can be considered as a suitable support for entertainment literature, a valuable evaluation of a more 'serious' literary work is still tied to the approval of the established literary field.

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[120] Zhang, Xuesong, *A Victory of Realism – Caught in the web, notes of the Editor* (Yi chang Xianshizhuyi de shengli – *Suosou* bianji shouji 一场现实主义的胜利—《搜索》编辑手记), *Chuban Cankao* 出版参考, 18 (2012)

[121] China Writers, *After the TV adaptation: is the print publication still necessary?* (Yingshi gaibianhou, wangluo xiaoshuo hai you chushu de biyao ma? 影视改编后，网络小说还有出书的必要吗?) <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/wxpl/2012/2012-11-30/147927.html>. Last access: February 2014.

3.3 Internet literature and the China Writers Association

2013 was a crucial year for the recently established dialogue between the official and online literary field. Throughout this year, the established literary field proved growing interest toward Internet literature, which is confirmed by the organization of a number of activities and events meant to promote online published works. In May, the China Writers' Association announced the list of the new members admitted to the Association, which included 16 web writers.[122] A few months earlier, the China Writers Association had invited some of the most important literature websites and online communities related to Internet literature to recommend well-known online writers to be considered for the admission to the professional association.[123] Some of the most popular web writers who joined the Association in 2013 are Liulianzi 流潋紫, Tong Hua 桐化 and Chen Dong 辰东.[124] The growing number of Internet writers admitted to the Association proves how online produced literature is no longer necessarily regarded as a vulgar entertainment product and that is gradually coming to be regarded as a legitimate part of the Chinese contemporary literary field. As the China Writers Association started to consider the admission of Internet Writers on a regular basis, Internet writing ceases being considered as a separate field, and is increasingly integrated within the conventional scene.

At the end of the same year, the *Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts* (Shanghai shijue

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[122] China Writers, "16 Internet writers will join the China Writers Association" (16 wei wangluo zuojia youwang jiaru zhongguo zuoxie 位网络作家有望加入中国作协). On: <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2013/2013-07-05/166499.html>.   Accessed on 25 March 2016.

[123] Global times, *"Battle for legitimacy"*, 10 November 2013.

[124] In this occasion, the China Writers Association admitted a total of 473 new members. There is no separate list of the admitted Internet writers. For the complete list of the new members see: <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/bk/2013-07-03/70708.html>

yishu xueyuan 上海视觉艺术学院) and *Shanda Literature* (Shanda wenxue 盛大文学) – with the support of the China Writers' Association – announced that a BA programme in Internet Literature History (*Wangluo wenxue shi zhuanye* 网络文学史专业) will be offered starting from the following academic year. The BA programme will offer courses on literature and art theory studies, story-writing, TV drama, screen writing, publishing and film adapting, history of Internet literature, as well as copyright management and marketing. The aim of the programme is to provide Internet writers with a professional training and foster the quality and the artistic value of the online published works, as well as increasing their awareness of marketing and copyright issues. The lectures will be held by well-known authors who write for one or more of Shanda Literature's popular websites: *Starting Point*, *Fragrant Red Sleeves*, *Jinjiang Literature City*. One of the confirmed lecturers for the BA programme will be the established Internet writer Tangjia Sanshao 唐家三少. The staff of the newly founded programme will not only include established Internet writers, but comprise some important personalities from the established literary field as well. In particular, the Nobel Prize winning author and established member of the China Writers Association Mo Yan, was appointed as its chancellor.[125] Although the online literary field is still considered 'immature' and in need of improvement, the establishment of a dedicated degree course is a positive sign, to the extent to which it reveal the willingness of both fields to work together and improve the quality of online produced works on a variety of aspects. In the next years, the degree programme will arguably work to turn *amateur* writers into Internet literature professionals, with a greater awareness of their artistic possibilities, as well as some basic knowledge of the publishing industry, including legal and copyright issues.

Some of the events promoted by the China Writers Association demonstrate that the 'official' sector is not only absorbing part of the online literary field and endeavouring to 'educate' it, but it is also seeking a collaboration with it. This is the case of the *Starting Point Chinese Net Discussion Forum* (*Qidian zhongwenwang zuopin*

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[125] *Battle for legitimacy*, Global times, 10 November 2013.

yantaohui, 起点中文网作品研讨会)[126], a joint conference organized by the China Writers Association in cooperation with the Shanda Literature group. The forum, held at the end of November 2013, carried out a discussion on the evolution and peculiarities of the developing online literary field and analysed five popular Internet fiction works, published on *Starting Point* and selected together with the website. The debate was attended by ten important literature experts and critics, some of whom specialize in Internet literature – Ouyang Youquan 欧阳友权, Guo Yan 郭艳, Yu Aicheng 于爱成, Ma Ji 马季 are some of them. The aim of the conference were various: promote outstanding Internet literature works, highlight these novels merits and weak points, provide the writers with an experienced point of view, in order to help them to enhance the quality of their writing. In the introductory speech, the vice chairman of the China Writers Association Chen Qirong 陈崎嵘 remarked on the importance of this conference that – although not the first conference on Internet literature promoted by the Association – was the first activity to be organized in cooperation with an online literature website. The conference was also important on a wider cultural and ideological perspective, as it was expected to discuss and integrate some points raised during the third Plenum of the eighteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held in November 2013. Specifically, the document publicizing the outcome of the Plenum attaches a great importance to the new media and the need to integrate them within the conventional cultural system. The improvements required by the cultural system include the development of a system of evaluation for all the cultural products.[127] Following the guidelines of the Plenum, the *Starting Point* Forum discussed the promotion of outstanding online produced works and the purpose of the Association to support online writers in the

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[126] China Writers, *The China Writers Association holds a "Starting Point Chinese Net Works Discussion Forum"* (Zhongguo Zuoxie juban "Qidian Zhongwen wang zuopin yantaohui" 中国作协举办"起点中文网作品研讨会"). Accessed 18 March 2014, http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2013/2013-11-29/183335.html.

[127] Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee "decision", bulletin, clarifications. (Shiba jie sanzhong quanhui jueding, gongbao shuoming 十八届三中全会《决定》、公报、说明(全文)), 2013. <http://news.eastday.com/eastday/13news/node2/n4/n6/u7ai173782_K4.html> Last access: 4 February 2015.

production of good quality literature. On this occasion, the China Writers Association, through the discussion carried out by the participating members, recognised the inadequacy of the existing criticism system and raised the question of the need for a suitable system of evaluation for Internet literature, as well as stating the establishment's intention to cooperate with the online literary field and set up a suitable criticism standard as some of the main points of the cooperation between the two fields.[128]

Facing a constantly growing online literary field,[129] the literary establishment feels the need to strengthen the dialogue with an 'unconventional' but expanding literary space, which can no longer be ignored. The development of the literary websites gave life to an extremely variegated literary panorama, with variable results in term of literary genres and artistic quality. Although an overall evaluation of the online field becomes increasingly difficult with the ever-growing number of published works, it is clear that, as some scholars recognise, Internet literature works can no longer be regarded merely as entertainment and consuming literature, but more and more works stand out among the bulk of the online published works for their quality and literary value.[130]

3.3.1 Toward an Association for Internet writers

In Autumn 2013, the Beijing branch of the China Writers Association established the *Committee for Internet literature production* (*Wangluo wenxue chuangzuo weiyuanhui* 网络文学创作委员会), becoming the first local association to have a

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[128] China Writers, "Chen Qirong: Call on the construction of an Internet literature evaluation system" (Chen Qirong: huyu jianli wangluo wenxue pingjia tixi 陈崎嵘：呼吁建立网络文学评价体系), 2013. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2013/2013-12-09/184403.html> Last access: 15 February 2014.

[129] The literature websites owned by the Shanda Literature Group currently have over 1.6 million users. On Starting Point alone an average of 500 new works are published everyday.

[130] *Battle for Legitimacy*, Global Times. http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/823767.shtml

committee dedicated to the development and the promotion of online produced literary works.[131] The aim of the committee was to promote a series of activities to help Internet writers to effectively improve their writing skills and enhance the quality of their works. In the following months, a *Committee for Internet literature production* was founded as a part of a number of other provincial and local branches of the China Writers Association, including Chongqing,[132,] Jiangsu, and Guangdong[133]

In October 2013, during a conference on China's Youth Literature (*Quanguo qingnian zuojia chuangzuo hui* 全国青年作家创作会) in Beijing, it was also made known that the Association was preparing to found an organization specifically dedicated to Internet writers.[134] Unlike the previously established committees for Internet literature production, which were smaller discussion panels, guided by influential Internet writers, and whose work had little to do with the work of the Association itself, an Internet Writers Association (*Wangluo Wenxue Zuojia xiehui* 网络文学作家协会) would be directly subordinated to the China Writers Association. The direct affiliation to the national organisation would give it a 'higher' status within the literary field, making it the most prestigious association for online writers in the country. As the most successful Internet writers have a wide audience, which results in a consistent income and can potentially have a significant influence of their public, it is

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[131] China Writers, "Beijing branch of the China Writers Association establishes a 'Committee for web literature production'" (Beijing Zuoxie chengli wangluo wenxue chuangzuo weiyuanhui 北京作协成立网络文学创作委员会), 2013.
<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/bk/2013-11-04/73040.html>. Last access: 16 April 2014.

[132] China Writers, *Chongqing Writers Association establishes a "Committee for web literature production"* (Chongqing shi zuoxie chengli wangluo wenxue chuangzuo weiyuanhui 重庆市作协成立网络文学创作委员会),. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2014/2014-03-19/196543.html>. Last access: 22 February 2015.

[133] China Writers, *The path for Internet literature classics now has a "petrol station"* (Wangluo wenxue jingdianhua lu shang you le "jiayouzhan"网络文学经典化路上 有了"加油站"), 2013. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/wxpl/2014/2014-09-23/219246.html>. Last access: 22 February 2015.

[134] China Writers, "The Intternet Writers Association will be founded – The critics: the quality of web literature is worth serious consideration" (Wangluo zuojia xiehui jiang chengli – pinglunjia: wangluowenxue zhiliang kanyou, 网络作家协会将成立-- 评论家：网络文学质量堪忧), 18 October 2013. The article is no longer available on the official website of the China Writers Association, but can be found on:
<http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2013/10-18/5397479.shtml>. Last access: July 2016.

important, in the Association's opinion, for Internet writers to gain a professional status and commit to the social responsibilities entangled in literary production. Their work and professional training would be guided by the Association, which would be directly responsible for it.[135] The purposes of the Internet Writers Association include both administrative and instructional implications. The main aim on an organisational level is to set up a common platform for online authors, in order to promote the exchange and communication with both online and conventional writers, to assist Internet writers in finding financial support for the production of valuable Internet literature works. Besides, the Association will provide specific professional training aimed at improving the artistic value of their works. The literary critics who participated in the debate observed that, despite most of the online produced literature being market and profit-driven, there are some Internet literature works that are worth serious consideration: undoubtedly, not all the writings found on the Internet are merely entertainment and consuming products, therefore, the study of this new form of literature must be encouraged and guided by the conventional literary world.[136]

In January 2014, the Zhejiang Writers' Association was the first provincial branch of the Association to establish a Web Writers Association. Zhejiang province boasts a rich literary history, for which it has always been considered as a fertile territory for literary production, and it is the native land of some of the most influential contemporary and traditional Chinese writers.[137]

In the view of the Zhejiang Writers' Association, the online literary panorama does not contradict this tradition: Zhejiang province also boasts some of the best and most popular Internet writers in China and the quality of their works is higher in value of

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[135] Xinhua News, "One after another, local branches [of the China Writers Association] establish a Web Writers Association, is Internet literature bidding its farewell to the 'loose sand era'"? (Duodi xiangji chengli wangluo zuoxie, wangluo wenxue gaobie "sansha shidai"? 多地相继成立网络作协，网络文学告别"散沙时代"？) <http://news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2014-07/05/c_1111471119.htm>. Last access: 14 February 2015.

[136] *Idem.*

[137] Zhejiang province takes great pride of its literary history. Some of the most influential Chinese writers were, in fact, born here: Lu Xun, Mao Dun and Yu Dafu are just a few of them.

the average web literature works in the country.[138] The newborn *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association* (Zhejiang wangluo zuojia xiehui 浙江网络作家协会) had around 80 members at the time of its foundation. The number of its members had reached 114 by the end of April the same year. The members of the *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association* are young – with over half of them born in the 1980's or after – and most of them hold a college degree. Male writers are slightly more numerous than females.[139] With the establishment of the first dedicated association for Internet writers, the Zhejiang Writers Association is the first provincial branch to clarify the admission procedures for writers publishing their works online. Like their conventional colleagues, Internet writers join the Association via a nomination process. Comparing the regulations on the admission to the Association for both conventional and online writers, the most noticeable difference in the process of selection and acceptance lies in the format of publication of their works: in order to join the Association, Internet writers are not required to have printed issues of their works, but they can present their candidacy with the publication of online works alone.[140] It is interesting to note here that all the Internet writers in the Zhejiang Writers Association gained their popularity through the publication of fiction, that still represents the most popular genre within the online literary panorama, while popular online poetry writers still represent an exception.

3.3.2 The Zhejiang Internet Writers Association: structure and regulations

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[138] First general assembly of the Zhejiang Web Writers' Association collected documents (Zhejiangsheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuandahui wenjian huibian,浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会文件汇编)，Hangzhou (2014).

[139] *Idem.* These statistics are based on the printed documents provided by the Zhejiang Writers Association in May 2014. As other Internet writers joined the Association after the publication of the documents in my possessions, current statistics may vary slightly from the data I reported.

[140] Interview with Cao Qiwen, secretary at the main office of Zhejiang Writers Association and chairman of the Web Writers Association; Hangzhou, May 19, 2014.

On January 7th 2014, the official date of the foundation of the *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association*, the first general meeting of the members of the association was held in Hangzhou. During the assembly, all the members of the new born organisation were invited to vote for the election of its Praesidium. As a result of the elections, the writer and chairman of the Zhejiang Writers' Association Mai Jia 麦家 was nominated honorary president, while Cao Qiwen 曹启文 was appointed as the chairman of the Web Writers Association. The Praesidium is also composed of ten vice-chairpersons, chosen among some of the established Internet writers who joined either the national Writers Association or its Zhejiang branch in the previous years . The structure of the Association is completed by its executive council – or board of directors – composed of 27 members, which include its chairman Cao Qiwen and some of the vice-chairmen.

On the same day, the general assembly approved the constitution of the Internet Writers Association. The constitution is divided into six main sections: general principles, assignments, members, organization, funds and capital asset and supplementary articles. The first section states that the Internet Writers Association is subordinated to the administration and guidance of the Zhejiang Writers' Association, which is responsible for its ideological and professional guidance, as well as the promotion of Internet literature production. The aims of the association comprise providing a common platform for all the Internet literature 'workers' (*wangluo wenxue gongzuozhe* 网络文学工作者)[141], educating them in the 'basic functions' and the 'social responsibilities' of literary production and improving the aesthetic standards of online produced literary works. As the second section specifies, the association is in charge of the organization, leadership and protection of the legal rights of its members. Its responsibilities also include providing a guide for the construction of a 'civilized' web, in the respect of the law and the moral values of the society, promoting a 'healthy' development of web literature, stressing the importance of the definition of its aesthetic standards and working on the construction of an

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[141] The 'workers' of web literature include all those who are involved in online literary production and promotion: writers, editors, members of organizations and websites that promote web literature, researchers within the field, literary critics etc.

evaluation and criticism system, in accordance with the peculiarities of online-produced literature, and encouraging debate and exchange with the conventional literature world. Moreover, the association will provide web writers with professional training and financial support, sponsor the publication of its members' works in both their printed and digital editions, promote the translation into foreign languages, as well as television, film and games adaptations. A further effort will be made in order to promote Zhejiang Internet literature outside the province and in the other Mandarin-speaking areas – Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

The membership of the Internet Writers Association is offered to all those who obtained professional achievements in the field of online produced literature – be they writers, promoters or scholars on Internet literature. There are three ways to apply to become to join the Internet Writers Association: submitting an individual application, apply through the recommendation by an organization or introduction by [at least] two members of the association. The admission of new members is scheduled twice a year, but under 'special circumstances', the Praesidium can decide to admit a new member out of the admission periods. The Internet writers association has been funded by government funds and its members' registration fees, as well as contingent further social support and private donations. The raised capital will be used toward the promotion and development of Internet literature, which includes providing professional training, promoting the development of a criticism standard for Internet literature, sponsoring literary prizes and activities, as well as the online and printed publication of the most valuable works.[142] As the first Association for web writers, the *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association* is likely to work as a model for the other local association that will be established in the near future, as it already happened for the *Shanghai Internet Writers Association*, which was established few months later.

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[142] Constitution of the Zhejiang Web Writers' Association (Zhejiang sheng wangluo zuojia xiehui zhangcheng,浙江省网络作家协会章程），in First general assembly of the Zhejiang Web Writers' Association collected documents (Zhejiangsheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuandahui wenjian huibian,浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会文件汇编），Hangzhou (2014).

3.3.3 The Chinese Internet Writers Association and other provincial branches

At the beginning of July 2014, following the example of the Zhejiang Writers Association, the Shanghai branch of the China Writers Association announced the foundation of the *Shanghai Web Writers Association*. At its foundation, the Association had 75 members, among which, 32 writers had already published online literature works in collaboration with the Shanda Literature group.[143] Shanghai is an important centre for the development of Chinese Internet literature: with over 145,000 Internet writers, the home town of *Starting Point* literature is the city that gathers the highest number of Internet writers in the country, occupying an important part of the online literature market.[144] Formally established on 3 July 2014, the Shanghai Internet Writers Association presents itself as a non-profit social organisation, founded voluntarily by Shanghai Internet Writers, and subordinated to the Shanghai Writers Association.[145] The structure and regulations are similar to the Zhejiang Internet Writers Association, but with a reduced number of members in its board of directors. The president of the association is the conventional and online writer, Chen Cun. The board of vice-directors is composed by five influential Internet writers: Sun Ganlu 孙甘露, Xue Hong 血红, Kulou Jingling 骷髅精灵, Cai Jun 蔡骏 and Luo Shui 洛水. After the foundation of the affiliated organisation for Internet writers, the official website of the Shanghai Writers Association opened a section for the Internet Writers Association. The homepage of the Internet Writers Association website features a link from which potential candidates can download the application form to apply to

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[143] Shanghai Web Writers Association established - Shanda literature stands for "half of the country" Shanghai wangluo zuoxie chengli - Shanda wenxue jizhan "banbijiangshan"上海网络作协成立 盛大文学几占"半壁江山".
http://it.shm.com.cn/085216/205733951122b.shtml. Accessed: 17 December 2014.

[144] *Idem*.

[145] "About us" (Guanyu women 关于我们), on the home page of the website of the Association. URL: <http://www.shzuojia.cn/zhuanti/wlzx/index.html>. Accessed on:31 July 2016

become a member, and a section dedicated to the activities and training opportunities available for its members.

In the following months, the Sichuan and Shanxi[146] branches of the Writers Association also announced the forthcoming foundation of the local association for Internet writers, which will be presumably inaugurated throughout the following year. At the time of my writing, the establishment of a national association for Internet writers has been announced by the Beijing Writers Association, which would be directed by Tangjia Sanshao[147], but no official information is available on the date of its formal foundation.

3.3.4 Recognition or ideological control?

Chen Qirong's speech at the first plenary assembly of the newly established *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association,* held in Hangzhou in January 2014, starts out with a warm welcome to the Internet writers and new members of the Association, which he refers to as Internet writers' new 'home'. He addresses Internet writers as 'friends' and stresses the importance of the foundation of an association for internet writers, as the favourable time and conditions demand for it. Ma Ji 马季, in a similar way, welcomes new members stating that the foundation of a dedicated Association for internet writers demonstrates the recognition of the value of Chinese Internet literature as an undeniable part of Chinese contemporary literature, by the country and the Writers Association.

Although the welcome speeches assert the equal status of Internet and conventional writers within the association, some statements and organizational choices reveal a

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[146] Xinhua News, Shanxi province: "A survey of the current situation of Shanxi province Internet writers" (Shanxi wangluo zuojia xianzhuang diaocha 山西网络作家现状调查 <http://www.sx.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2015-01/14/c_1113983745.htm> Accessed: 10 March 2015.

[147] China News, "Tangjia Sanshao will take charge of the direction of the Beijing Internet Writers Association" (Tangjia sanshao danren beijing wangluo xiehui zhuren 唐家三少"担任北京网络作家协会主任), November 2016 <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2013/11-04/5458946.shtml>

different attitude and a slight intent of control, with the establishment (i.e. the Writers Association) still claiming its position as higher in comparison to the younger counterpart, which needs to be led by the hand through its own growth and development.

The "general principles" (zongze 总则) opening the regulations of the new provincial association for internet writers clearly state that "the Zhejiang Internet Writers Association is under the administration (guanli 管理) and guidance (zhidao 指导) of the Zhejiang Writers Association". While the administrative role of the general Association can be seen as rather obvious – as the new branch for web writers is subordinate to the Association itself – the use of the term 'guide' reveals some 'educational' intent, which is confirmed several times within the text, particularly insisting on the importance of a "healthy development" of the online literary scene. The second part of the document list a number of 'educational' goals, that the Zhejiang Association plans to achieve through the establishment of a dedicated association for Internet writers. The main points of these educational objectives include guiding the Internet writers toward the construction of a 'civilized' (wenming 文明) web and instructing them on the observance of the Chinese law and moral values, with regard to the 'social responsibility' of the writer. The Association also offers to Internet writers – here referred to as *xieshou* 写手, *amateurs* – story writing, criticism and editorial training.

Besides the introductory talks and articles related to the foundation of the two associations, some administrative and organizational choices also highlight the purpose of the establishment to gradually set up some form of control on the online literary production.
Although the *Zhejiang Internet Writers Association* is supposed to be specifically dedicated to those writers who gained their popularity and the approval by the literary establishment through the publication of internet literature works, the board of directors of the Association features at its top two members of the conventional

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Writers Association: while the fiction writer and recently appointed chairman of the Zhejiang Writers Association Mai Jia 麦家 was given the title of honorary president of the Association for web writers, the leading role of the Association was assigned to the Zhejiang Writers Association and Chinese Communist Party deputy secretary Cao Qiwen 曹启文. The choice of assigning the guide of an Association devoted to Internet literature to a conventional writer, in the position of honorary president, seems to reflect an attempt to tie the online literary production to the literary establishment. Similarly, the election of a secretary and party member as its director unmasks the intent of providing it with some ideological guide, while keeping some – even if somewhat relaxed – control. The fact that both Mai Jia and Cao Qiwen are not involved in online literary production can also be seen as a further confirmation of the assumption that the conventional literary field still qualifies as a more valuable representative of 'literature', while Internet writers still need to be 'guided' from the outside .(i.e. none of the selected Internet writers 'deserves' the leading role). In fact, although the Internet writers association already had numerous members at the time of its foundation, which includes a few influential online fiction writers who had members of the conventional association for a few years, none of the leading roles is occupied by an Internet writer. Nevertheless, the election of the board of directors is a result of an egalitarian and anonymous vote, which can indicate that the Internet writers are aware of their position within the association and willing to accept this guide. It is also interesting to note here that the membership of the Zhejiang Web Writers Association is not offered to Internet writers alone, but to all the "Internet literature workers" (Wangluo wenxue gongzuozhe 网络文学工作者), that includes all the people who are involved in the online literary production, publication and distribution, as well as scholars and researchers specialising in Chinese Internet literature.

Although Zhejiang province was the first provincial branch of the Writers Association to establish a specific organisation for Internet writers, the national Writers Association and the Beijing branch can claim a longer experience in the admission of

Internet writers and in their collaboration with the online literary field. The Beijing Writers Association began accepting Internet writers in 2010, when the first Internet writer Tangjia Sanshao 唐家三少 was admitted, followed by other colleagues. Some of them are now established members of the Association and gained some consideration from the conventional counterpart as well. This is probably the reason why the national Writers Association, unlike the Zhejiang provincial branch, proposed Chen Dong 辰东 as the head of the national Association for Internet writers. Chen Dong, regarded as one of the most influential Internet writers in the last few years and author of numerous novels both online and in print, is a web writer belonging to the *Baling hou* (after-80's) generation. He was already appointed the vice-chairman of the previous *Committee for Internet literature production* (Wangluo wenxue chuangzuo weiyuanhui 网络文学创作委员会) in Beijing. Although the list of the members of the Chinese Internet Writers Association has not been made public yet, the current president of the *Department for Internet Literature* (Zhongguo Zuojia Xiehui Wangluobu 中国作家协会网络部) at the China Writers Association, the established writer and scholar Ma Ji[148], announced that some popular Internet writers such as Tangjia Sanshao 唐家三少, Tang Xintian 唐欣恬, Song Lixuan 宋丽喧 will be on the directory committee.

Besides its intent of establishing some form of control over online literary production, there are a variety of reasons that may have motivated the Chinese Writers Association to admitting Internet Writers to the professional organisation, as well as establishing a dedicated branch of the Association for Internet writers. A first motivation can be related to the desire of offering some professional supervision to a developing literary field lacking any specialised training or editorial service. Although the online literary field is well organised in terms of publication and consumption, because of the huge amount of literary works published daily, the

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[148] Although not a web writer himself, Ma Ji is one of the country most well-known scholars on Chinese Internet Literature, author and editor of numerous publications on web literature, including is recent book "Writing in the age of screen readin - A history of 10 years of web literature" (*Duping shidai de xiezuo: wangluo wenxue 10 nian shi* 读屏时代的写作: 网络文学 10 年史), published in 2008.

companies behind the literary websites often fail to provide any editorial services during and after the publication of the works. The promotion of a 'healthy development' of the online literary field is often made explicit in the documents published by the China Writers Association about its cooperation with the online field. This is mainly aimed at the violent and obscene content, which would potentially have a negative influence on the young public. Although rarely discussed in official publication, the hope for literary innovation could be another reason to explore a newly emerged, unconventional literary field. The literary works promoted by China Writers Association sometimes do not meet the tastes of the general public, especially the younger generations. Getting closer to the lively online literary scene can thus unmask a desire of winning back the esteem of the general public. Besides, including the Internet within the distribution methods of the China Writers Association can potentially multiply its audience. On the other hand, Internet writers have several reasons to yearn for the admission to the largest Association for Chinese writers. The most obvious cause is the recognition that comes with the affiliation to a prestigious organisation. Joining the China Writers Association can provide Internet writers with greater popularity, as well as a possible shortcut for publication within the conventional market. On the long term, Internet writers desire to join the conventional literary field can be related to the ambition for a professional status, which could claim the 'rival' part as equal. Although the pages of the literary websites are filled with the writings of mediocre authors, who write only for fun without a great deal of attention for the literary form, amongst them there are a number of more talented writers who publish their work online with the hope of gaining popularity and becoming established writers within the conventional field. For those writers with literary ambitions, the promise of the China Writers Association to provide professional training to the members of the Internet Writers Association can also be regarded as another good reason to join. As most of Internet writers do not have a literary background, some basic training in story-writing, literary criticism and editing can consistently improve the quality of their work. Finally, despite the different reasons and possible disagreements, a cooperation between Internet writers and the

official literary field can be beneficial for both the Writers Association and the Internet writers aiming at becoming established authors either within the conventional or the online literary scene.

3.4 Internet literature in a printed culture context

Since Chen Cun's post on the 'death' of Internet literature was published on Under the Banyan Tree in July 2001[149], the printed publication of popular Internet novels has become a common trend. Chen Cun's post, which started a nationwide debate on Internet literature, stated that, since the highest achievement for a web writer was the publication in print, Internet literature has lost its freedom and non-utilitarian nature, and is thus already past its prime. Not only do the main publishing houses issue copies of the works of the most well-known Internet writers, but some of the mainstream websites and Internet literature platforms also have their own publishing companies. The Shanda literature group, currently owning some of the most popular Internet literature websites, works in partnership with a number of publishing houses, including Jushi Wenhua 聚石文华[150], and Huawen Tianxia 华文天下[151], which both joined the Shanda group in 2009.

As the 'official' and online literary fields seem to be gradually merging together, the boundary between conventional printed literature and Internet literature is also becoming more blurred. At the beginning of its development, online literary communities used to celebrate Internet literature as free from the limits of the print industry and editorial restrictions. Ironically, after 15 years, in the ever-changing

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[149] For a complete translation of the post and more information about Chen Cun, see: Hockx (2015), *Internet Literature in China*, Columbia University Press.

[150] Jushi Culture Publishing House (Jushi wenhua 聚石文华), <http://baike.baidu.com/view/3947636.htm> accessed 10 February 2015.

[151] Huawen Tianxia Publishing House (Huawen tianxia 华文天下) accessed 10 February 2015. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4626457.htm>, accessed 10 February 2015.

context of online literary production, a printed book is still perceived as more durable than a work published on a web page. This is arguably one of the reasons why publishing a printed edition became a common trend for successful Internet literature works. While nowadays the printed editions of web novels represent a considerable part of the publishing (printed) industry market, the distinction between conventional and Internet literature tends to disappear. As soon as online produced literature became popular within the printed culture context, it was common to see, in the main book stores, separate shelves for 'Internet literature', as for other genres such as 'ancient literature', 'poetry' and so on. After a few years, the distinction between web and conventional literature in the book stores shelves tends to disappear. Today, if novels by established Internet writers such as Anni Baobei, Murong Xuecun and Guo Jingming are easily found in any book store, they tend to be listed together with conventional contemporary literature works. While I visited China in 2014 as a part of my research fieldwork on Chinese Internet literature, I visited a number of book stores to see whether they had a separate section for web literature; in nearly all the book stores I visited in Hangzhou (Zhejiang) and Shanghai, there was not a specific section for Internet fiction. Internet novels were, instead, displayed together with modern and contemporary literature works. In the case of authors who published their works online in their early careeer but are now established writers in the printed literature as well, the introduction to the book or its back cover does not mention that the book in question was first published on a website. This is the case of Anni Baobei and Guo Jingming, who after their success online, moved away from the online literary world to publish conventional novels in print. The works of some popular local web writers, such as Tong Hua, Liulianzi or Can Yue are also easily found in most of the book stores in Hangzhou, and sometimes even displayed on the small bookstalls on the streets. However, similarly to the above mentioned novels, their books usually do not feature anything that could identify them as Internet literature works, in opposition to 'conventionally produced' literary work: in most cases, only when the reader gets to read the introduction or the author's afterword it is revealed that the book in question was originally produced and published on an online

literature website. Besides, as it happened in the case of Wen Yu's *Caught in the Web*, the authors or the publishers may want to modify some parts of the text or the structure of an Internet literature work before publishing its printed edition, in order to improve the overall quality of the writing. Editorial revisions often tend to remove those feature that can distinguish a work as online produced writing, making the printed works more similar to conventionally produced contemporary fiction works.

Nevertheless, as can be inferred by some writers' choices, not all the authors who publish or have published on the web feel comfortable with being 'labelled' as Internet writers. Some authors, after having achieved a certain popularity within the printed literature market, decide against the publication of their further novels online. This is the case, among others, for Anni Baobei, Wen Yu, Guo Jingming, although with different fortune. Wen Yu, after being the only Internet writer to be shortlisted for the 5th edition of the Lu Xun literary prize in 2010, decided not to publish her second novel online. In her opinion, in fact, Internet literature was still perceived as a synonymous of bad quality, entertainment literature. As long as conventional publishing will be perceived as more valuable than online publication, the publication of a book is an offer than any ambitious writer cannot refuse. The *Balinghou* writer Guo Jingming's brief online career on Under the Banyan Tree was consolidated by the third and fourth edition of the *New Concepts Writing Competition*, sponsored by *Mengya Magazine,* in which Guo obtained the first prize. In 2003 Guo published his first novel in print, *City of Fantasy* (Huan Cheng 幻城) [152], which affirmed the author's popularity on a national level. Three years later, he was the youngest writer to join the Chinese Writers Association, when he was 23 years old. Despite his early works on Under the Banyan tree, Guo Jingming is no longer considered an Internet writer – supposedly because of its greater success as a novelist within the conventional market. Arguably the most famous online fiction writer who left the Internet for conventional publication in print is Anni Baobei. Regarded as one of the pioneers of web-based fiction in China, she gained her popularity through the

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[152] Guo Jingming only published essays and short stories on Banyan Tree in the early 2000s, before winning the first literary context launched by the website.

publication of her first short story *Goodbye, Vivian* (Gaobie Weian 告别薇安) on *Under the Banyan tree* in 2000. *Goodbye, Vivian,* together with other successful short stories, was published in print the following year, in a collection of Anni Baobei's works. After the publication of her works in print, the author decided to leave the online community – as well as her job – and devoted herself to conventional fiction writing, becoming one of contemporary China's best-selling and most productive authors. She was already an established writer when she joined the China Writers Association in 2005, long before the question of the admission of Internet writers was raised within the conventional literary circles.

Leaving aside those authors who decided to leave the online literary scene and managed to become best-selling authors within the conventional printed literature context throughout the early 2000s, since Internet literature websites proposed their current business model, the publication in print is no longer a distinguishing feature of the conventional literary field as opposite to its online 'rival'. As the cultural industry develops, a growing part of the cultural market is controlled by independent business groups that monitor the production of different cultural products. Within this business model, the online literary production and the printed publication tend to become two parts of the same business chain, making the publication in print become a natural outcome of a successful work. It is not a coincidence if the printed publication of a web novel, which represented an exception and a kind of recognition to the most successful novels only a few years ago, is now so common among successful online writers: all the Internet writers who joined the China Writers Association in 2013, as well as most of the members of the newly established Internet Writers Associations, can boast at least a few publications in print. Ironically, while China's literary establishment opens the doors of the Association to the authors publishing on the web, the no longer required publication in print is becoming increasingly common among the web writers who are being absorbed by the conventional literary world.

3.5 Internet fiction and literary critics

Arguably the biggest obstacle for Internet literature to achieve a position within the established literary field is the literary critics. While established conventional writers and numerous members of the China Writers Association seem to agree that Internet literature deserves a chance to become an accredited part of the official literary the Association represents, opinions on whether online produced writings are worth all this attention by the literary critics are still very diverse. In 2003, some established members of the China Writers Association were asked to discuss the phenomenon of web literature and share their opinion about it, in an interview published on the *Heilongjiang Daily*. One of the interviewed writers, the novelist Meng Jiucheng 孟久成, said:

> *"Web literature belongs to young people's world, its authors and readers are mostly young people, university and graduate students, most of them from a scientific background, whose literary knowledge and life experience is scarce, [whose works] feature a restricted range of topics, [...] lack of substantial contents and superficial skills, poor quality works with mediocre literary character, it is rare to find a good quality work."*[153]

In Meng's opinion, Internet literature is a phenomenon circumscribed to the younger generation's world. Online literary production appears to be characterised by free writing with a strong entertainment character, produced by young users with a weak cultural and literary culture and their own understanding of literature. Their writings

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[153] China Writers, "Three people discuss web literature" (Wangluo wenxue sanren tan 网络文学三人谈), Interview with 3 famous Chinese contemporary writers about web literature, first published on the "Heilongjiang Daily" (Heilongjiang ribao 黑龙江日报), now available on Chinawriter.com.cn. URL: http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/zx/2003/2003-08-02/1917.html, accessed on: December 2014.

seldom pay any attention to the depth of contents and does not care much about literary styles. Internet writers' use of pseudonyms instead of their real name shows a scarce literary ambition.

On online literary spaces, he adds:

> "On a BBS, anyone can write anything, watch a film and write some impressions on it, write a complaint about the food at school if it is not good; [...] Can you call this literature? This is the kind of writing that, in the course of time, becomes web literature. Therefore I believe that web literature, in its features gets close to [those of] the Internet, but it is not literature". [154]

Meng's words represent a good example of how negative the reception of Internet literature could be in the opinion of some of the most conservative members of the establishment, especially during the first few years of its development. What emerges from this interview on early online literature works is that many conventional writer shared the idea that online published literary works are mainly "Youth pretty writing" (Qingchun meiwen 青春美文), but could not be considered literature because of its writers' lack of professionalism. However, as the interviewed writers acknowledged, Internet literature is not devoid of any merit, otherwise it would not have so many readers. Despite the frequent disapproval for its lack of literary value, early Internet literature works were also praised for their vitality, quick-witted language and 'sense of the time', and their humour. If the first online-published works can, in some cases, be regarded as random notes on a diary-like BBS, later evolved into a novel, the popularization of the model of literature websites soon opened the door to a new development. The innovative model of these new literary platforms required online writers to engage into a work with some degree of 'literariness' that, even if serialized over a fairly long time, would end up being a complete work. The absolute freedom of publication on BBSs gave way to some more defined publishing space, which was

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[154] *Idem.*

specifically devoted to the publication of literature. Moreover, most of these websites operate a selection of the works submitted to be published on their pages, setting some limits to uncontrolled publication.

Nonetheless, despite provoking the blistering attack of the most conservative part of the literary establishment, which saw in Internet writing a sort of insult to 'serious' literature and those authors that earnestly engage in more refined writing, the new online literary scene also attracted the attention of more liberal intellectuals, which saw in the phenomenon a new challenge to the conventional literary world. Despite the prevalence of immature and 'non-professional' writing, the new born 'unconventional' phenomenon was already seen as capable of pushing the boundaries of literary production and bringing some innovation and vitality to the traditional understanding of literature. The development of the new media, and especially the Internet, had already started gradually reshaping the notion of cultural production, by integrating in the current system its innovative features the peculiarities of its new modes of production and distribution. As the world approached the information age, every aspect of our everyday life was being inevitably influenced by the new media. As one of the major scholars on web literature in China, Ouyang Youquan, observed over a decade ago, if the use of the Internet and digitalization are changing every aspect of people's everyday life, we cannot be surprised if literature is undergoing the same changes.[155] If the digitalization of literature does not only produce "artistic happiness", the high-tech era is still giving life to a new poetics and new form of arts.[156] What is important, in Ouyang's view, is not criticising the 'mediocrity' of online produced literature, but fostering a better understanding of it and being open-minded toward the new developments. As the same author argues in a later article, the historical recognition of Internet literature will be decided by its ability to "walk into humanities aesthetic realm" and its capability to build its own system of values,

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[155] Ouyang Youquan., "Internet literature: challenging the tradition and renewing its concepts" (Wangluo wenxue: tiaozhan chuantong yu gengxin guannian 网络文学:挑战传统与更新观念), 2001. *Social Science Journal of Xiangtan University* 25 (1).
[156] *Idem.*

through the "deconstruction of Internet technology into a more human spirit and aesthetic construction".[157]

Did Internet literature succeed in walking into the conventional literature aesthetic realm? A detailed discussion on the development of the literary aesthetic in the last decade is beyond the aim of this research. However, it is my idea that, if the conventional literary world has shown a greater openness toward the evolving online literary production in the last years, this is in part because recent Internet literature works – or at least some of them – engage more closely with the established idea of literary work, moving nearer to the conventional idea of 'literariness' and literary aesthetics. While a great deal of online produced fiction in late 1990s can be reasonably regarded as serialized versions of random notes on a diary-like BBSs, some more recent works published on literary websites present a more developed literary form. Internet literature websites, in fact, not only offer a relatively free publication space for those users looking for entertainment and leisure readings, but also welcome more ambitious writers, who use the Internet as a support to publish their literary creations. The growing number of Internet writers engaging with 'serious' literature in a 'conventional' form – as opposed to the BBSs diary-like fiction – indeed gave a great impetus to the two spheres coming to a meeting point.

In the second half of the 20th Century, and especially during the 1980s, Chinese literary criticism as well as the academic world showed a widespread indifference to the topic of modernization and new literary tendencies, referred to by Li Tuo as "resistance to modernity". As Li points out, until very recently, a critique of modernity has not been earnestly proposed or treated as a problem in the Chinese intellectual world. This is probably because a critique of modernity and the new values it brings along would necessarily require a confrontation with the mainstream

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[157] Ouyang Youquan. "Discussing the orientation of the spirit of Internet literature (Lun Wangluo wenxue de jingshen quxiang 论网络文学的精神取向), Wenyi yanjiu (Magazine of Literature and Art research), 2002(5).74–82.

ideology, which would make it particularly difficult.[158] Besides, the conventional literary criticism has always been hostile toward the popular forms of literature, as opposed to the notion of "Pure literature" (Chun wenxue 纯文学), that is still perceived as a form of "elite culture". This sort of "resistance to modernity", borrowing Li's words, made it more difficult for the establishment to integrate more 'unusual' and audacious literary forms, developed on the web, while approaching Internet literature works similar in content and form to conventional literary products was much more simple. A first interaction between the establishment and the most 'conventional' part of online production, however, gave a first impetus to the interaction between the two fields. After opening its thresholds to those authors writing 'electronic fiction in conventional form', the China Writers Association welcomed Internet writers producing relatively new genres. In this perspective, the organization of a number of activities devoted to the promotion of online produced literature within the conventional literary world is itself a proof of the growing attention drawn on the online literary field throughout the last decade. The commitment of the 'official' literary field in the organization can alone give to the works and authors involved a sort of official recognition.

Nevertheless, although the establishment of the Internet Writers Associations can be seem as a sign that Internet literature is gradually being accepted as an actual part of Chinese contemporary literature, the literary system seems not to be ready to provide an evaluation method comparable to the conventional literary criticism that could be suitable for the nature of online-produced literature. The construction of an effective literary critical standard for online-produced literature is nowadays one of the mainstream debates among those studying or involved with the publication and promotion of Internet literature. The question of whether the established literary critics are suitable or not for Internet literature works has been widely discussed in the last few years. Scholars seem to share the idea that Internet literature should not be

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[158] Li Tuo. 2000. *Resistance to Modernity: Reflection on Mainland Chinese Literary Criticism in the 1980's*. In: Qi, Bangyuan, and Dewei Wang. 2000. *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

regarded as in opposition to "conventional literature", but at the same time it does not meet the conditions to claim the "rival" position as equal. Web literature is usually classified as a branch of the general concept of literature, but not all the scholars agree on considering it a 'genre' on its own.

To set up some standards for a literary criticism for online produced literary works, literary critics have to deal with some important new questions, related to the nature of online produced literature itself.[159] The most important question that makes an evaluation of web literature difficult is arguably the amount of works produced in a restricted period of time. As Internet literature does not have to deal with spatial and temporal restrictions as much as its 'conventional' counterpart, but enjoys a nearly boundless publication space and an immediate access to publication, the amount of works published on a daily basis is massive. The most popular literary platforms on the Chinese web publish several hundreds of new literary works on a daily basis.[160] Another issue the critics would have to deal with is the "hits" criterion as the main way to appreciate the reception of a work by Internet literature readers. Not only may the 'hits' criterion be misleading, as it does not necessarily reflect the success of a work, but also it does not give any information about the readers' reception, other than the bare number of the users who have opened the online page containing the text of the work. The question that more concerns the literary critics about a suitable evaluation of online produced work is the "literariness" of Internet literature works and the lack of "professional status" or appropriate training for web writers. Facing the 'spatial' extension of a nearly boundless publication space and a number or features related to the use of the Internet and new media, an effective criticism for web literature requires the development of a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research method.[161]

The importance of setting up a system of evaluation for web literature and the

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[159] China Writers, "A preliminary discussion on the difficulties of an Internet literature criticism" (Shilun wangluo wenxue piping de kunjing 试论网络文学批评的困境), <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2013/2013-10-15/177376.html> Last access: 13 January 2016.

[160] See, as an example, the production rate on *Starting Point*, mentioned earlier in this chapter.

[161] China Writers, "A preliminary discussion on the difficulties of an Internet literature criticism".

purpose of developing appropriate standards for web literature criticism was one of the key points of the *Starting Point Discussion Forum,* in late Autumn 2013. The factors involved in the literary production that make conventional literary critics ineffective when analysing a web novel also appears in the constitution of the recently established Zhejiang Web Writers Association.

Acknowledging that the existing literary evaluation methods and criticism are not prepared to deal with the online literary production and its peculiarities, the established literary field opened a debate on what needs to be done in order to set up a more comprehensive evaluation system. In April 2014, the China Writer Association, in collaboration with the People's Daily (Renmin Ribao 人民日报), inaugurated a special column dedicated to web literature, entitled "A new look at Web literature" (*Wangluo wenxue zai renshi* 网络文学再认识). The aim of the column, as stated in its introductory note, is to investigate web literature "current situation and trends". Some of the key points of the discussion were the importance of a suitable evaluation system and the role that the established literary world has to play in promoting the development of Internet literature. A number of professional literary critics and academic scholars on web literature were invited to participate in the debate by submitting their articles for the publication on the web page of the column, in which both other specialists and common web users interested in web literature can read the articles and leave a comment. As the introductory passage underlines, after nearly 20 years of development, web literature is no longer a new phenomenon. Within the last few years, the increasing popularity of mobile devices gave a new boost to online literature consumption. Besides, as online published works are commonly re-adapted to film and TV series, online fiction is becoming more and more influential within the entertainment and cultural industry. How should the establishment approach this no longer new, but still growing, phenomenon? Li Jingze 李敬泽 proposes to approach Internet literature as a form of popular literature: Internet literature did not fall from the heaven – he states – but it is simply a new form of popular literature and, as such, it needs to be evaluated within its historical context. In Li's view, the difficulties that

the establishment is facing in evaluating online produced literature have to be ascribed not to the peculiarities of online produced works themselves, but rather to the disadvantageous position that "Popular literature" (Tongsu wenxue 通俗文学) – as opposed to the notion of "Pure literature" (Chun wenxue 纯文学) – occupies within contemporary China's literary field, as well as the lack of academic research on popular forms of literature in recent times.[162] Li's view on Internet literature as a form of popular literature is also supported by Xia Lie 夏烈, whose article underlines how previous forms of literature historically originated within a popular culture context and were only later accepted and absorbed by the mainstream culture. The established literary world should therefore strive to get involved in a constructive way and attach a greater importance to the academic research on Internet literature.[163] The participation of the audience in the production of an online literary work, which still represents one of the most important innovations of web literature, is also an important part of the discussion. The online literature production and distribution system is a reader-centred system in which, not only the success, but the survival of a work among the hundreds works published every day is closely related to its reception by the readers. The Internet literature websites business model further accentuates this aspect, as the market strategies behind the promotion of the published works lets the taste of the audience guide the production, continuously adapting itself to the readers' needs. The dynamics of audience-led production generates a high competitiveness among the writers and a great pressure over their work. In Shao Yanjun 邵燕捃's opinion, web writers' work under these conditions would not be possible without the support of the readers, who are not merely "over-consumers", but also active producers of meanings, who give writers incitement and inspiration through their "indiscreet remarks".[164] He Ping 何平 highlights how this participation

[162] Li Jingze, *Internet literature: Literary consciousness and cultural awareness* (Wangluo wenxue: wenxue zijue he wenhua zijue 网络文学：文学自觉和文化自觉), 2014. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2014/2014-07-25/212519.html>. Last access: 31 May 2015.

[163] Xia Lie, Influence the power of Internet Literature (Yingxiang wangluo wenxue de liliang 影响网络文学的力量), 24 Jun 2014 <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2014/2014-06-24/208664.html>. Accessed 31 May 2014

[164] Shao Yanjun 邵燕. New developments of the media and the 'Internet nature' (Meijia xinbian

can also have a positive influence on conventional literature, as thanks to the web, China's contemporary literature is experiencing the readers' participation in literary criticism: as China's young readers seem to be more keen on reading on the Internet, rather than purchasing a book, online reading is becoming increasingly common for online-produced fiction as well as for conventional literary works. In this context, even a conventional novel can become a 'hot topic' online.[165]

A controversial point of the discussion is the excessive degree of commercialization of online produced literary works. From its very beginning, Internet literature developed in a mass-culture environment: an open publication space on which anyone could potentially publish a work, and which gave its users the ability to reach thousands of readers within seconds. Due to its cross-border nature, Ma Ji 马季 remarks, Internet literature has always had a predictable "literary" and "commercial" double identity. Besides, popular culture *per se* is market driven as, without the support of the establishment, it can only rely on the appreciation of the audiences to support its own existence. The development of the market economy and the rise of a private publishing sector resulted in a further development of the cultural market, which gradually absorbed the online literary and cultural scene. Within the cultural market, Internet literature is now being gradually assimilated by the dynamics of market-driven production, involving different kinds of cultural products, such as online publishing, 'pay-for-reading' websites, online games, screen writing, cartoons.

As emerges from the article published in the column "A new look at Internet literature", the main concerns of the critics and scholars involved in the debate for the construction of a new critical standard for Internet literature are thus the amount of published works, the involvement of the audiences, and the impact of the market in the production and distribution of the works. All these peculiarities of web based literature indeed push the boundaries of the conventional idea of literature, posing new challenges to the existent literary criticism standards. But, what happens when an

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yu 'wangluoxing'媒介新变与"网络性"), 29 Apr 2014
<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2014/2014-04-29/202058.html> Accessed: May 2014.

[165] He Ping 何平, Discussing and confronting "New criticism" (Duihua he xieshang de 'xin piping' 对话和协商的"新批评"), 23 May 2014.
<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2014/2014-05-23/204914.html> Accessed: June 2014

online born novel is published in a conventional form? Is the conventional literary critic suitable for those works and authors who gained a position within the conventional literary world, and can thus be placed between the two 'fields'?

While the conventional literary world is gradually becoming more tolerant toward the alternative forms of cultural production and distribution, resulting from the popularization of the new media, the peculiarities of online produced literature pose important new challenges to the conventional literature as well as the established criticism. It is probably too early to say what the consequences of this interaction will be, but it is without doubt that, if the conventional world will keep its openness and promote the exchange with the online literary scene, the mutual influence of the two fields will result in profound changes on both sides.

Chapter 4 – The changing nature of online literary production

In 2010, The China Writers Association acknowledged, for the first time, the importance of the developing online literary scene as a part of China's contemporary culture. The dialogue established between the two fields, through the organisation of debates and common activities, recently turned in a gradual assimilation of Internet writers within the established literary system, with the Association opening its thresholds to Internet writers and the establishment of a dedicated Association. Nevertheless, the interaction with the establishment is just the last stage of an ongoing development process within the online literary scene.

In the last chapter, I examined the various stages of the recent exchange and collaboration between the online scene and the literary establishment, to show how the former is gradually being integrated within the existing system and, at the same time, how the influence of the Internet is pushing the boundaries of the established notion of literature. Taking a step back, in the following chapter I shall retrace the development of Internet literature across the multiple influences the online literary scene is exposed to, to demonstrate how these influences reflect in deep changes which can place some milestones in its evolution.

Therefore, after a short discussion on how the evolution of Internet literature is represented in the existing scholarship, in this chapter I shall reconstruct the evolution of Internet literature in light of the recent changes and identify three different stages in its development. The analysis of each stage will then highlight the peculiarities of each period, related to the changes in its online and offline context, and discuss how these reflect in the literary production.

4.1 The changing nature of online literary production

Although it may be still early to evaluate the impact of Internet literature on the Chinese cultural and literary scene, because of its recent development, the first two decades of online literary production allow us to draw a first outline of its evolution. A first attempt to trace a genealogy of Internet writers was made as early as a decade after the first literary works appeared on the Chinese cyberspace. In his work *The development of Internet Literature: a study of Internet literature in Chinese language* (2008), Ouyang Youquan divided Chinese Internet writers into 3 "generations" or "periods", corresponding to the stages of the development of the online literary scene.[166] The writers belonging to the first period – the contemporaries of the author of *The first intimate contact*, Cai Zhiheng – are those who began publishing original works online at the end of the Twentieth Century. Presumably because of the novelty of the phenomenon, the few representative authors listed by Ouyang in this first group all achieved a great popularity through the late 1990s: Ning Caisheng, Li Xunhuan and Anni Baobei are still mentioned among the most influential web writers of all time. The second period, which witnessed the work of online writers who have been active at the turn of the century and through the early 2000s, includes, among others, Murong Xuecun, author of the above mentioned *Leave me alone: a novel of Chengdu*, and Lu Youqing 陆幼青, author of one of the most controversial work published on *Under the Banyan tree* during its first years of activity: *Date with death.*[167] Another

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[166] The term 代 used by Ouyang to divide the three groups can be translated either as "generation" or "period". Since each group only covers a span of a few years, I prefer the second term over the first one. See: Ouyang Youquan, *The Development of Internet Literature in China* (Wangluo wenxue fazhan shi: hanyu wangluo wenxue diaocha jishi 网络文学发展史: 汉语网络文学调查纪实) 2008. Beijing: 中国广播电视出版社. 39-53

[167] Lu Youqing was a young Chinese journalist and business man. After he was diagnosed with cancer in 2000, he decided to publish a diary on Rongshuxia.net, in which he spoke frankly about his disease, wrote about some of his memories and shared reflection about life. Lu's story attracted a great media attention and was reported on China's main television station and newspaper, while hundreds of readers were following his story online. Lu's diary was published in print shortly before his death, in December 2000.

writer of the second generation who is worth mentioning here is Ning Ken 宁肯, whose novel *City of Masks* (Mengmian zhi cheng 蒙面之城) won him the second edition of the Lao She Literary Award (2002), making him the first web writer to win a literary contest, although on a local level,[168] Ning Ken is one of the few authors who engaged in literary production both online and within the traditional system. Born in Beijing in 1959, he published a few collection of poems and prose through the 1980s and early 1990s, before publishing his first work of fiction online.

Reading the names of the Internet writers listed in Ouyang's third group, Tangjia Sanshao and Can Yue stand out among the others. The former writer was, in fact, the first web writer to join the China Writers Association in 2010 and among the best selling authors in China. The second, a female writer from Zhejiang, is one of the province most popular online fiction writer and now one of the directors of the newborn Zhejiang Web Writers Association. It is interesting to note here that, while most of the representative writers of the first and second period are authors of online realist fiction (urban life and love stories), a significant part of the most well-known authors belonging to the third period gained their popularity through the publication of fantasy fiction. The period covered by this last group saw the popularisation of fantasy genres, besides real life stories. This relatively new genre owe its success online to the growth of some influential literary websites, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

The Internet writers belonging to the first period are noticeably less numerous than the following groups. This is related to the development and popularisation of the Internet in China, as well as the tiny proportion of Chinese citizens owning a personal computer at the end of the last century: Chinese Internet users at the end of 1998 numbered around 2.1 million[169], while the total amount of personal computers with

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[168] This obviously excludes the literary contests promoted by the websites and specifically devoted to online published literature. Ning Ken's *City of Masks,* first published online in 2000, has also been nominated as "The best Online Novel in Chinese language", in 2001, and subsequently published in print. The "Laoshe Literary Award" was established in Beijing in 1999, to promote outstanding literary works written by Beijing authors. It is considered the most important local literary contest in the Chinese capital. At the time of Ning Ken's participation, in 2002, the contest did not feature a separate category for online published works.

[169] CNNIC, "Statistical reports on the development of the Internet in China" (Zhongguo hulian

Internet access did not reach 750000, accounting for a rather small portion of the Chinese population. Besides, most of these were supposedly owned by companies or education institutions. This means that a very small percentage of China's population was actually able to surf the net. The number of Chinese Internet users had increased to 298 million ten years later.[170] As the statistics of the CNNIC show, while at the end of the last century, the Internet was only accessible to a small part of China's population, by the end of 2008 it had already become an everyday commodity for many.

Although Ouyang's classification can be useful to provide a general idea of which writers have been more influential during the different stages of the development of Chinese Internet literature, it fails to provide precise temporal references in dividing one period from another[171]. Similarly, he does not attempt to identify any other common feature in the writing styles, writing context or historical circumstances that can bring the authors together, other than the year(s) of publication of their first work, making it confusing when dealing with authors who have been active for a longer period of time. As discussed in the previous pages, the last fifteen years witnessed a great expansion and popularisation of the Internet which, together with the gradual marketization of Internet literature and the newly established relationship with the literary establishment, had a great influence on online literary production, causing important changes in many of its aspects. As is shown throughout this work, there are two major events that had a profound influence on the way Internet literature is produced, consumed and spread through the Internet. The first of these events can be

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wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao 中国互联网络发展状况统计报告), 1998. All the annual reports on Internet statistics can be downloaded from CNNIC website, on the "Internet Statistics" page: <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj> last access: July 2015.

[170] CNNIC, "2008 report on the development of the Internet" (2008 nian zhongguo hulianwang fazhan dashi ji 2008 年中国互联网发展大事记) <http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj> last access: July 2015.

[171] The distinction between the second and the third generation is unclear: the second generation is supposed to include the writers who published online at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the third one shall list authors who have been publishing online "over the last few years" (Ouyang's book was published in 2008). Both the lists include in fact writers who published their first work online between 2001 and 2005, overlapping for almost the whole period covered by both the single generations.

identified with the shift from a freely produced and published Internet literature to its marketization and the rise of the literary websites model, which provoked important changes within the online literary field. The second – more recent but no less important – development can be found in the intervention of the China Writers Association, which showed a growing interest in the development of the online literary scene over the last few years, and is gradually attempting to absorb the online literary production within its system.

Acknowledging these important developments, I shall argue that Ouyang's classification can be improved by proposing a more well-defined subdivision into periods or stages of Internet literature development, which I would suggest as follows: a first group of Internet writers corresponding to the early stage of development of the online literary scene (1998-2002), identifies the pioneers of the phenomenon of Internet literature and the web writers who published before the marketization of Internet literature and the accomplishment of the online literature business model. The beginning of the second period (2003-2009) coincides with the turn of Starting Point into a commercial enterprise – and the subsequent adoption of the same model by other important literary websites – and includes all the web writers who published online within this system. The third and last period (2010-2015) is marked by the active commitment of the literary establishment within the online literary production: the most successful writers of this group have been involved in various activities organised by the China Writers Association – including literary awards, discussion panels or promotion activities – or have joined the Association or one of the affiliated Web Writers Associations. This new classification incorporates Ouyang's first and second period into a single stage – as the literary production and consumption context during their period of activity did not experience great changes which can reasonably distinguish one group from the other – and adds a further period (2010-2015), which I identify as the third stage of Internet literature development, that was not covered by Ouyang's study.

Referring to this classification, I shall now attempt to illustrate the changes the writers

belonging to each group had to deal with and what was the impact of the Media on their work, how the literary production context evolved during their period of activity and whether writers active within each of these stages present any recurrent feature in their writing style. Observing this classification from a reader perspective, I shall also attempt to identify which were the most successful genres during each period.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the three stages of the development of Internet literature, I shall shortly introduce the discourse on Computer Mediated Communication, in order to clarify how the use of the Internet influences online literary production across the different periods.

4.2 The influence of the Media

When the production of a literary text takes place using a computer and is spread through the Internet, the effects of the nature of the Media on the literary production cannot be ignored. The most immediate effects of the use of a computer on a text are the main focus of the theorists of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). A number of scholars have tried to formulate a definition of the CMC. Some well-known definitions in the field is are from John December (1997):

> Computer Mediated Communication is a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes (1997).[172]

and Susan Herring:

> CMC is communication that takes place between human beings via the

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[172] Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, *Computer Mediated Communication*, 15.

instrumentality of computers (1996).[173]

The study of the way in which CMC affects the composition of a text relates to a variety of fields, from the more practical approaches concerned with material restrictions related to the use of a computer to the more recent socio-psychological approaches, involved in an investigation of how humans use digital media to manage interpersonal interaction. However, in my analysis, I will mainly focus on the practical factors that affect the production of a literary work online.[174]

The emergence of computers as a medium of communication has affected the online use of Chinese language, contributing to the appearance of new linguistic forms. The constraints related to the use of computer are at least from two sources: keyboarding and character input technology. As Gao Liwei observes, the software programs used to type Chinese characters are not as fast as people wish: although the most common 'pronunciation-based' softwares are faster than the older based on radicals or handwriting, inputting a *pinyin* combination generates many homophones and selecting the right word takes time, therefore slowing down the speed of communication. In response to this technological constraint, Chinese netizens created a new variety of language for online communications.[175] In his work, Gao applies his analysis of the variations in Chinese Internet Language to both online social interactions and literary production. Nevertheless, he does not attempt a detailed analysis of the language phenomena in online literary writing.

Although the effects of CMC are more evident in contexts that require quick interactions, such as social communications, these effects were indeed easily found

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[173] *Ibid*.

[174] For examples of a sociological and psychological approach, see: Thurlow, C., Lengel, L. & Tomic, A. (2004). *Computer mediated communication: Social interaction and the interne*t; Walther, J. B., & Burgoon, J. K. (1992). *Relational communication in computer-mediated interaction;* Riva, G. & Galimberti, C. (1998), "Computer Mediated Communication: Identity and social interaction in an electronic environment", in *Genetic, Social and General Psychology Monographs*, 124, 434-464.

[175] Gao (2001), *Chinese Internet Language*,113-115.

in the texts of the early works of Chinese Internet literature: the first online produced literary texts are often characterized by a frequent use of abbreviations, Latin characters and English words, acronyms and neologism, as well as expressions related to the use of the Internet: anything that could make typing faster was welcomed by Internet users in the late 1990s. This is obviously related to the constraints of the use of an Internet connection: in the late 1990s, Internet connection in China – as well as in most of the rest of the world – was slow, and Internet access rather expensive compared to today's standards. Furthermore, it was not common for Chinese people to own a personal computer, so those who wanted to share their stories online, used to write their works from a computer in an Internet café, adding extra costs to the whole process.

The period of the early introduction of the Internet in China corresponds to the period of activity of the Internet writers belonging to the first generation. The practical limits they had to face are already evident in the literary forms they choose: the works published by these authors are, in fact, either short, or serialized in short chapters, favouring genres such as diaries of short stories. The chapters are often broken down into short paragraphs and concise sentences are preferred over longer ones. Although the use of words or short sentences in foreign languages is quite common, the spelling is often incorrect and the use of punctuation inaccurate. Besides, due to the novelty of the Internet, the enthusiasm for the new medium fostered the use of Internet related terms, mostly in English.

It is the work of this first generation which determined the success of the much discussed Chinese Internet Language: the Internet literature production between the late 1990s and early 2000s is indeed characterised by a much more frequent use of the language phenomena which soon became a distinguishing feature of online writing. Ning Caishen, regarded as one of the pioneers of Chinese Internet literature, made an extensive use of CIL, as this extract from his work *False pure love* (Jiazhuang chunqing 假装纯情) displays:

"她说："每天按时起床，按时上下班，写完的稿子第一个给我看，不进

聊天室不上 BBS 不跟陌生人谈人生侃理想，你能做到吗？"，硬着头皮我说"能！"，"那好，我考虑一下"，她把电话挂了，我一口气没接上来，原地楞住了。不过想了一会儿，总算是还有戏，喜滋滋打开电脑连上线开泡。过了半小时，我的 **ICQ** 呱的一声："嘿嘿，宁，又让我逮住你了，这次还有什么好说的？"，我狡辨："我没进聊天室啊，正查资料呢"，"不会吧？你在 **ICQ** 上的 **IP** 和聊天室里那个'逮谁夸谁'好象是一模一样啊"，说完她就 **offline** 了，我急了，这次估计是真完了"[176]

She said: "Every day, I get up at the same time, at the same time go to and finish work, I am the first one to read the complete drafts, I don't enter the chatrooms or browse a BBS, I don't talk to strangers about my ideals.. can you do this?", forcing myself I said "I can!', "Ok, then I will think about it", she hung up the phone, I couldn't breathe, I had built up bridges with her again. I thought about it for a while, feeling finally hopeful. Filled with joy, I turned on my computer and went online. After half an hour, my ICQ croacked: "Hey, Ning, you let me catch you again, what good excuse do you have this time?"

I explained "I did not enter the chatroom, I was just checking some documents", "Really? Apparently your IP on the ICQ chatroom and the one of that 'Catch who Praise who' are exactly the same", she finished to type this then just went offline, I got nervous, this time it was really over".

False Pure Love is a typical early Internet literature work. As it can be seen in this extract, Ning Caishen's writing features a "spoken language" style, with concise sentences and frequent dialogues, with a recurring use of Internet-related expressions and acronyms. This passage features an inaccurate, and at times excessive, use of punctuation and an incorrect use of English words ("offline" is here used as a verb).

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[176] Ning Caishen (2001), *False pure love* (Jiazhuang chunqing 假装纯情) .The whole text is available on: http://www.shuku.net/novels/netters/caishen/caishen14.html (Last access: July 2015)

Ning Caishen also makes a broad use of Internet related terms and expressions: here we can see *chat room* (Liaotianshi 聊天室), *go online* (shang xian 上线), and the slang term *pao* 泡, which literally means "soak", but is frequently used to refer to someone who spends a great amount of time online.

Of course, the influence of the Media on a literary text changes with its development. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Internet access was becoming growingly popular in China and the service much more efficient. With the perpetuation of economic growth, a rising number of Chinese urban citizens was able to afford a personal computer and surfing the net became an increasingly popular everyday activity in Chinese metropolises. As the CNNIC statistics show, by the end of the period covered by the first generation of Internet writers, personal computers and Internet access had stopped being 'luxury goods' to turn into domestic commodities, and over 60% of Internet users were able to access the net from home.[177]

As the cost and the slowness of Internet access ceased being a constraint, Internet literature works started becoming longer and (in some cases) more refined. With the popularization of literary websites, numerous new genres came into life, while the number of online readers was constantly growing. The success of online literature among Chinese netizens did not pass unnoticed and some of the most popular websites managed to turn this success into financial gains.

Nevertheless, the "marketization" of online literary products worked as an opposite force: while the writers publishing online during the second period did not have to deal with the constraints related to the costs and speed of their Internet connection, the requirement of a higher production rate and the pressure by readers encouraged online fiction writers to complete the instalments of their works in the shortest possible time, for the new chapter to be released at the website's demand. The dynamics of the transformation of Starting Point into a commercial enterprise are

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[177] This obviously refers to urban citizens only. In July 2002, the total number of Internet users had almost reached 46 million, still far from reaching the 10% of China's total population. For statistic data, see: CNNIC, 2002. 中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. http://www.cnnic.cn, last access: July 2015.

already discussed in the second chapter. Here, I shall mainly focus on the effects of this conversion on the literary works published on *Starting Point* and other websites.

After the marketization of Starting Point in 2003, most of the other similar Internet literature websites adopted the same model. As users were asked to pay a fee for reading online, writers were encouraged to write more, both by the perspective of income coming from the growing audience and from the management of the websites, eager to attract more users. As a result of this dynamic, the literary texts became incredibly long and serialization came to represent the main mode of publication. The serialisation of the online works of fiction proved successful in keeping the readers hooked on their readings, resulting in consistent earnings for both the most successful writers and the websites. Some of the most successful series have been published over several years: one extremely successful work, Leiyun Fengbao 雷云风暴's work *Scratch from zero* (Cong ling kaishi 从零开始) has released new chapter for over 10 years, with the last chapter published in August 2015.[178]

Since most of the effects of CMC are related to the constraints of the use of a computer and the Internet access, we could reasonably wonder whether, with the development of the media, these effects are still relevant to the analysis of an online produced literary work. In more recent web literature works the use of expressions ascribable to the phenomenon of Chinese Internet Language are no longer as common as they were in early works and their use often represents an exception rather than the norm. However, traces of the effects of CMC are visible in some of the recent works as well, especially in the structure of the text and sentence construction. Although the peculiar writing style of Internet fiction goes mostly unnoticed on a web page, it becomes more evident when the text is transferred in a printed form. As Gao Liwei points out, the use of Chinese Internet Language is not always a consequence of the constraints of the modes of writing, but can as well be a related to a personal choice of the author of a work, in their attempt at "identity construction", although this is

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[178] The first chapter of the work was published in February 2005. The work comprises 24 "volumes", each of which comprises a variable number of chapters. The longest volume has a total of 564 chapters. <http://www.qidian.com/Book/22919.aspx>

usually more common in online interaction than in web literature works. In literary writing, the choice of the linguistic structures to be used in literary production is also related to the impression single writers want to transmit about their own work. Writers can in fact choose a specific style, depending on the kind of literary works they want to write and the idea they want to transmit to their readers. Writers who want to amuse their readers and build a 'cool' personality in their online context will therefore be more likely to use this kind of language phenomena, while authors engaging in more 'serious' works will limit the use of these expressions and use and choose a more refined literary language.

However, the use of these language forms, despite being considered 'cool' by online readers, has frequently been regarded as a symptom of 'bad quality' literary production and lack of 'professionalism' by both the literary establishment and the publishers, which often asks for revisions of online published works, before its publication in print. Consequently, Chinese Internet language was frequently used by writers who wanted to attract the readers' attention or write in a 'fun' and 'amusing' way (these phenomena are in fact more frequent in parodies and humour), while more attention to the literary form is evident in the writing of those striving to produce 'serious' literature.

The pen-names of some Internet writers can also be informative on the kind of literature they are willing to produce: Internet writers with professional ambitions are less likely to use fantasy names, such as "I eat tomatoes" (Wo chi xihongshi 我吃西红柿), or "Ning the God of Wealth" (Ning Caishen 宁财神), although this is not always the case. Both linguistic choices and pen-names can thus provide some basic information about an Internet writer and reveal whether a writer is attempting to produce 'serious' literature, or is just looking to amuse and entertain online readers. With the popularisation of literary websites, which offer a specifically literary space, those aiming at producing the first kind of literature tend to grow in number, and online literary spaces is often used by ambitious authors seeking to achieve popularity before approaching the conventional print literature world.

The shift from the second to the third generation of web writers, identified with the

intervention of the establishment, did not produce evident effects on the literary texts published online, except perhaps of a greater commitment by some ambitious author – interested in becoming professional writers by joining the Association – in producing good quality works. These is arguably because the last group of writers did not experience radical changes in their production context.

4.3 Genres and styles: Internet fiction through its evolution

The first stage of the evolution of Internet literature is the one that has witnessed the success of some of the most influential Internet writers – some of whom are now established writers within the printed literature world – but also the one which has been influenced the most by the medium it uses for the publication of its works. The development of the media and the evolution of the online literary field have experienced great changes over the last decades, which have in turn influenced the way in which fiction is published and commercialised online. Although the division into the three stages of the development of the online literary scene follows a temporal criterion, the second period can virtually include all the Internet writers who have published within the online literary system after 2003, year of the commercial turn of a number of literary websites, and still write online today. On the other hand, the last group only includes those writers who have been actively involved into an activity promoted by the literary establishment or have joined the China Writers Association, while the writers whose production is limited to the context of the websites on which their work is published can reasonably be considered as belonging to the second stage, regardless of their years of activity. Although this subdivision of the development of the online literary scene into three stages attempts to place some milestones to provide a more detailed analysis of its evolution, because of the scale of the phenomenon and the speed of its expansion, it is also important to maintain some

flexibility in its temporal references.

4.3.1 The first period: the pioneers of Internet literature

The first generation of Internet writers (1997-2002) is easily identified with the pioneers of the phenomenon of Internet literature, whose works are discussed in every study concerning online produced literature in China. When literary texts started circulating online, during the late 1990s, the Internet was still a rather uncommon commodity, and the access to the web was available to a very small portion of the Chinese population. During this time, the speed of the Internet connection was low and its cost quite high, making it impossible for the few writers already writing online to spend too much time on their writing. These resulted in works characterised by short chapter and concise language, with frequent abbreviations and language phenomenons which will be later classified under the definition of "Chinese Internet language".

The most typical genres of this period were the diary and the short stories, which did not require a prolonged commitment by both the writers and their readers. The most famous work of Internet fiction published during the 1990s, Cai Zhiheng's *The first intimate contact*, introduces one of the genres that would become representative of this first period: Cai's novel is a sort of online diary, published on a BBS, narrating the protagonist's encounter with Flying Dance, a girl he met in a chat room, whom he later decides to meet face to face. The chapters of the work depict their friendship and love born online, their first meeting and their short relationship. After some time together, however, Flying Dance is diagnosed with a terminal disease. The novel ends with the letter she writes to Cai before she dies.

The diary is a common genre during the time covered by the first group of Internet writers, and will survive during the second period, as it is proved by Lu Youqing's *Date with death* and other similar works published on *Banyan Tree.*

With his first work published online in 1997, Ning Caishen is one of the earliest Internet writers to gain a considerable popularity on mainland China's cyberspace. Together with Xing Yusen and Li Xunhuan, he was known as one of the "Three Internet literature chariots" (*Wangluo wenxue sanjia mache* 网络文学三驾马车), acknowledging the popularity of these writers as some of the most influential online writers in this first stage. Ning Caishen mainly published four kinds of works: horror and ghosts stories, later gathered together in his collection "Internet Ghost Stories" (Wangluo gui gushi 网络鬼故事), love stories – such as his well-known works "False Innocence" (Jiazhuang chunqing 假装纯情) and "Destiny" (*Yuanfen de tiankong* 缘分的天空), humour, fantastic and ridiculous stories, and informal essays, expressing the author's emotions and thought on a variety of topics. All of Ning Caishen's work feature a readable and unpretentious style, full of irony and picturesque descriptions of his characters, vividly depicting life's trivial matters or satirising traditional genres – especially martial arts fiction, in his *My own swordsman* (Wulin waizhuan 武林外传), which was subsequently re-adapted into a successful TV series – or mocking the excessive sentimentalism of some works of Internet fiction, as he does in "Countless intimate contacts" (*Wushuci qinmi jiechu* 无数次亲密接触), a parody of Cai Zhiheng's "The first intimate contact".

Despite being considered one of the first writers to gain recognition on the Internet, Lu Jinbo's career as an online fiction writer did not last more than a few years. As he began publishing his writing online between 1997 and 1998 under the name of Li Xunhuan, his work "Love lost between Internet and reality" (*Mishi zai wangluo yu xianshi zhong de aiqing* 迷失在网络于现实中的爱情), a novel narrating of love stories born on the Internet, won him great popularity among online readers. In 2002, however, Li Xunhuan decided to leave literature writing behind and devote himself to the literature publishing industry. He started his collaboration as an editor for *Under the Banyan Tree* and was subsequently promoted to general director of the publishing house founded by the website. Thanks to his position within the publishing industry, Lu Jinbo's name is still associated with Internet literature, as the publisher of some

best-selling online published novels, including Murong Xuecun's *Leave me alone: a novel of Chengdu* and Anni Baobei's *Goodbye, Vivian*.

The last of the "Three chariots", Xing Yusen, published a few popular works online, before devoting himself to screen writing in the early 2000's. His most popular works include *Living like a human* (Huode xiang ge renyang 活得像个人样), *Online hero* (Wang xia 网侠) and *Incapable of leaving again* (Dang wo zaiye wufa likai 当我在也无法离开), all featuring online romance.

Arguably the most famous female writer on the online literary scene of the late 1990s, Anni Baobei started publishing her stories on *Banyan Tree*. The success of her work was soon noticed by the management of the website and recommended to a publishing house, which issued the first collection of Anni Baobei's stories in print in 2000. Since the publication of her first collection in print, Anni Baobei became an established – and extremely productive – writer in the conventional print literature scene, comparable to Zhang Ailing for her popularity (note: Ouyang Youquan, The development of Internet literature in China). Her romantic and dark tales depict loneliness, individuality and desire in contemporary urban life, with sex, death and suicide as recurrent themes. Although she started writing online at the turn of the century, Anni Baobei's writing is reminiscent of the new wave of urban fiction that developed in China in the 1980s and 1990s,[179] with the themes revolving around private life in China's cities and a strong focus on private experience. The Internet, in her stories, is often used as a device of escape from the loneliness of everyday life, which often turns into a sort of addiction:

> "He didn't know where she was. It didn't matter. She might turn up at some point. Once you started this game, it was hard not to get sucked in. […]
> He'd come across her in a chat room, he couldn't remember which day it had been. Her name had appeared as a long string of letters: VIVIAN, an English name, but he shortened it to An. […]

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[179] Daria Berg, "Consuming Secrets", 316-317

Could such a girl really exist? He wasn't sure. He'd only met her online, he'd never seen her. It seemed unlikely someone that interesting could exist in real life. Her way of thinking made him wonder sometimes if she were a man. Still, she was endearing, her conversation was unusual and he liked her. That night, when he met her online again, he said: 'Let's meet up' [...]"

After the girl on the chat room refuses to meet him and does not show up for a few days, the protagonist's addiction turns into obsession with her, while reality and virtual space begin overlapping in the protagonist's mind:

Suddenly he was filled with dread. An was the biggest consolation of his life, but maybe she would disappear like Vivian. He waited and waited. Seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock went by. He waited online for that familiar name to pop up. "

As can be inferred by the content of numerous online published works belonging to the first period, the recounting of the protagonists' "virtual life" as opposed to their "real life" is a recurring theme in late 1990s Internet fiction. As a result of the enthusiasm for the new medium, which worked as a vehicle of "escape" from the tensions and concerns of their everyday life, the protagonists of numerous works describe their first online experiences, the chat rooms, and especially the love relationships born from the conversations with unknown people, showing how the Internet was gradually becoming an essential component of everyday life. Besides Cai Zhiheng's work, Ning Caishen's short stories often feature the protagonist looking forward to going home and surf the Internet, after a long day of work, to be able to talk to a girl he met online. Similarly, Li Xunhuan's novel mainly features love stories with girls the protagonists have come across online. The Internet, in these works, is described as a sort of beneficial medium, which allows people who would probably never meet in real life to get in contact. The Internet and the relationships born online

are usually depicted in a fun and playful way, as opposed to the grief and boredom of 'real life'.

The Internet and the people it allows to meet, people who would probably remain unknown in real life, is a recurrent theme in Anni Baobei's stories as well. In her works, these encounters can be either real or imagined: while one of the stories published in *The road of others,* a collection of her most popular stories published together in a print edition, we read about the love story of the protagonist with a foreign man, in another story from the same collection, we see the protagonist observing the people around him, in a familiar place, trying to imagine how the girl he met in the chat room looks like. However, as can be seen from the extract from *Goodbye, Vivian,* in Anni Baobei's stories the positive feelings related to the Internet often turn into a sort of addiction to – and later into obsession with – the emotions born from online friendship or love and the sense of mutual understanding it creates. The sense of loneliness caused by contemporary urban life emerges with a renewed strength from her work, while the solace offered by online born relationships appears like nothing more than an illusion.

As the Internet gradually becomes an everyday commodity in Chinese citizens' house, the enthusiasm for the new medium tends to fade away and the Internet ceases being the main focus of online produced literature. Approaching the turn of the century, while the Internet is no longer a commodity for a small, privileged part of the urban population, the online literary scene continues to expand and, with it, the variety of topic and genres published on the online literary spaces.

Although the first examples of literary websites had already existed online for a few years, during this period, the publication and consumption of Internet literature was entirely free, online writing was regarded to by many writers as a recreational activity, rather then "serious" artistic commitment, and the literary spaces offered opportunities for interaction between writers and readers, even during the production of a work. Probably the most famous product of this interaction, Murong Xuecun's

Leave me alone: a novel of Chengdu was born in this context. Often criticised for the harsh representation of city life it offers, Murong's most popular work is not only important for its content, but also for being the result of the online interaction between the author and his readers, who suggested changes in the plot that had an important influence on the final version of the novel. The novel, published in print after its great success online, is the story of three young men, and their tragi-comic struggles to make their way in Chengdu. Despite their aspirations for success in the newly emerged capitalistic society in China, the protagonists' lives are characterised by dead-end jobs, gambling debts, drinking, drugs and unhappy and unfaithful marriages. Murong's work, first published online in 2002, differs from the previously mentioned works in both its literary form and content. *Leave me alone* is a medium length novel, describing urban life in Chengdu, one of China's most populous cities, not in the positive aspects of the economic growth, but rather in the social problems emerged with it. The Internet, although it is mentioned in a few passages, it does not occupy a relevant position in the narration.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Murong Xuecun was classified as a second "generation" writer in Ouyang's work. This seems coherent with Ouyang's classification, as Murong's novel is a more complex work compared to earlier Internet fiction, and can thus be regarded as a subsequent stage. However, the context in which this work was produced makes it clearly more relevant to the first stage, when literary websites were mostly untouched by the business dynamics that characterise the second period and this allowed Murong's readers to participate into the production of his work.

With the rise of the Internet literature business model, designed by Starting Point, new factors come into play and started to radically change the dynamics of online literature writing.

4.3.2 The second period: the marketization of online literary products

Approaching the end of the period covered by the first group of Internet writers, online published works tend to become longer, featuring more complex plots and, in some cases, a more refined style. At the same time, the trend of serialising long works online opens the door to the developments that will sanction the beginning of the second period.

The second period of the development of Internet literature (2003-2009) coincides with the transformation of *Starting Point* into a commercial enterprise. In the early 2000s, with the popularisation of the access to the web, the cost of an Internet connection ceased being a limit, while the quality of the service was greatly increased. Simultaneously, the first websites devoted to online literature, such as *Under the Banyan Tree* or *Starting Point* were introducing their unique business model. With the disappearance of the high cost of Internet connection and the new retribution system for the most popular Internet writers set up by *Starting Point,* online published fiction started becoming increasingly long, with the most popular novels serialised over a very long period of time.

Probably the most important consequence of these developments is the significant increase in the number and variety of produced genres, which characterise this second stage. The expansion of the literary websites gave a great boost to online literary production, on the one hand encouraging writers to publish more and more often by providing a retribution for their work, on the other, offering its reader a nearly boundless and easily accessible range of different works to choose from. As the new business model makes its way on the Chinese cyberspace, some new genres add up to the already established genres that made the success of early Internet fiction. While 'realistic' sub-genres – diaries, romance, college life stories – are mostly organised under the common genre of urban fiction, the major Internet literature websites offer

a variety of other genres – fantasy, history, martial arts, science fiction, to mention a few – each of which includes a variety of sub-genres. New forms of fiction typical of the online literary field also start to develop, attracting a growing number of readers. This is the case of *Tongren* 同人 (fan fiction), *dan mei* 耽美 fiction (Homoerotic romance) and online games. Out of the rich diversity offered by these websites, one of the newest genres produced online stands out for its popularity: *Yishu chaoneng* 异术超能 (Supernatural ability) fiction, is a sub-genre of Urban fiction usually featuring an ordinary individual's urban life being dramatically transformed by accidentally acquiring supernatural abilities, mixing elements of fantasy and urban fiction.

In her thesis *Desire and Fantasy On-line: a Sociological and Psychoanalytical Approach to the Prosumption of Chinese Internet Fiction,* Shih-Chen Chao offers a detailed analysis of the most produced and consumed genres on *Starting Point* in the first years of activity of the website (roughly 2003 to 2010). She identifies Urban fiction and Eastern Fantasy fiction as respectively the most produced and the most consumed genres. Although her analysis features a different approach, her statistics on *Starting Point* production and consumption rates, whose time frame nicely coincides with the period I identify as the second stage of the development of Internet literature, provides useful data on the genres (and the sub-genres) which achieved more success in this period.

Besides *Starting Point* and other literary websites ranking pages, another useful way to identify the most influential Internet writers in this second period is the *Zhongguo Zuojia Fuhao Bang* 中国作家富豪榜[180]. Usually translated into English as *Writers Rich List*, this ranking was launched in 2006 for the first time, as a way to identify the most influential Chinese contemporary writers, as well as tracing Chinese people's reading habits and literary trends through the writers' earnings. Although the name might be misleading, the *Writers Rich List* ranks China's wealthiest authors in terms of royalties, derived from the publication – either in print or online – of their works. Although a few established Internet writers appear in the ranking from its first year of

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[180] All the ranking are available on the official website <http://zuojiafuhaobang.com/>

publication, it is after 2008 that Internet writers began occupying a significant portion of the list. In 2011, 9 out of 20 of the authors listed in the *Writers Rich List* published their works online. Acknowledged the fact that almost half of the country's wealthiest writers were gaining their royalties through the publication of online literature, a separate ranking was launched, and the first *Zhongguo Wangluo Zuojia Fuhao Bang* 中国网络作家富豪榜 (Internet Writers Rich List) was published in 2012. The literary genres produced by the few first writers to enter the Writers Rich List confirm the trends of popular genres in the rankings of the major literary websites: the most successful writers mostly publish Urban or Fantasy novel. Besides the most famous names such as Anni Baobei or Guo Jingming – who were already established writers within the print literature system by the time of the publication of the first *Writers Rich List* – some popular entries in the first years of the publication of the wealth ranking are Cang Yue 沧月, a famous fantasy fiction writer from Zhejiang, Liu Liu 六六, whose popularity would further grow a few years later, thanks to the adaptation of her urban novel *Woju* 蜗居 (Dwelling Narrowness) into an extremely popular TV series, and Kong Ergou 孔二狗, author of some successful urban and crime fiction works. A more surprising entry in the fourth edition of the Writers Rich List (2009) is the writer Dang Nian Ming Yue 当年明月, who achieved a place in the ranking through the publication of online historical fiction.

The first *Internet Writers Rich List* further confirms the growing popularity of fantasy fiction genres. As it can be observed in the rankings of the first three years, Eastern and Western fantasy writers prevail in the top positions. Although urban novel writers still occupy a relevant portion of the list, fantasy fiction writers here outnumber urban fiction writers. In the following years, some recurrence can be noticed in the name of the authors listed in the ranking: Tangjia Sanshao obtains the top position for four consecutive years; similarly, some other authors – Tiancan Tudou 天蚕土豆, Wang Yu 忘语, Mengru Shenji 梦入神机–classify in the top twenty for the first three years. A few of the most successful authors in the list made of their writing a full time job, resigning from their former employment to devote themselves to online fiction writing. This is the case, among others, of Chen Dong 辰东 and Tiaowu 跳舞, both

authors of fantasy fiction. A significant proportion of the Internet writers in the *Internet Writers Rich List* later joined the China Writers Association and published their most representative works in print, while a few others chose to remain within the online literary field, and still publish their works online.

Zhu Hongzhi 朱洪志, popular online with his nickname *I eat Tomatoes* (Wo chi xihongshi 我吃西红柿) is an extremely productive online fiction writer, who published his works on *Starting Point.* Since the publication of his first work in 2008, he has released over 600 works. His sixth, and one of his most representative works, *The Legend of a Space Walker* (Tunshi xingkong 吞噬星空)[181] occupies the top position in the *Starting Point* ranking for the most "clicked" works. Settled in an imaginary future, the novel features its protagonist's space adventures. The story takes place in the aftermath of an apocalypse, which only the strongest human beings survived.

After the Earth has experienced a great catastrophe, causing huge variations to the species that inhabit it, the protagonist Luo Feng inherits the powers of the celestial master Yun Mo, becoming one of the three strongest beings on the planet. As a result of a fight with giant celestial creatures, he loses his human body and is swollen by the universe. Composed of a total of 29 "volumes", each of which consists of a variable number of chapters – with the shortest volume counting twenty-seven chapters and the longest comprising as many as one hundred - *The Legend of a Space Walker* was published on *Starting Point* between 2010 and 2012. Only the first volume is currently available online for basic members, while all the remaining parts are available to VIP users only. The first chapter of the novel starts with an everyday scene, introducing the protagonist, Luo Feng, at the end of a school day:

> 天空湛蓝，就仿佛一块巨大的蓝色翡翠，盛夏的太阳仿佛一个大火球，
> 高高悬挂在这块巨大翡翠之中，看太阳位置，估计也就下午三点左右。

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[181] Xu Hongzhi 朱洪志, 2010. The Legend of a Space Walker (Tunshi xingkong 吞噬星空) <http://www.qidian.com/Book/1639199.aspx>

宜安区第三高中。

"叮叮叮……"随着响亮的铃声响彻整个校园，顿时整个校园中响起一片喧哗声，各栋教学楼中便鱼贯涌出了大量的学生，三五成群说笑着朝校门口走去。

"罗峰师兄！罗峰师兄！"一道粗厚的声音响起。

"阿峰，有人喊你。"

在学生人群当中，和同学一道走着的拿着书籍的青年，穿着普通蓝色运动服，身高大概一米七五，显得比较精瘦。此时他疑惑转头看去，喊他的是一名男生，身高大　　概有一米九，长的虎背熊腰，手臂更是粗壮的惊人。

"你是？"罗峰疑惑看着来人，自己似乎不认识眼前人。

这二人，一个壮硕的好似一头黑熊。而'罗峰师兄'和普通人一般。[. . .]

可是这名虎背熊腰的男生，却显得有些拘谨，他仔细看了看他崇拜的'罗峰师兄'. [. . .]

"罗峰师兄，我，我有事想请罗峰师兄帮忙。"壮硕男忐忑道。

The sky was azure blue, just like a huge piece of blue jadeite. The midsummer sun resembled a great ardent sphere hanging in the middle of that huge

crystal. By estimating the position of the sun, it could have been approximately 3 in the afternoon.

Yi'an district, third year of high school.

"Ding, ding,ding..." Following the loud and clear ringing of the bell resounding through the whole school, a sudden hubbub of voices filled the entire place. A multitude of students came out from each side of the building, chatting and laughing, in groups of three or five people, while walking toward the school doorway.

"Brother Luo Feng, brother Luo Feng!" a gross voice sounding out loudly. "Feng, somebody is crying out for you".

Among the various groups of students, there was a guy walking with his schoolmates and holding his school bag, dressed in an ordinary blue coloured sportswear. He must have been approximately 1.75m tall, making him look rather lean. In that moment, he was turning his head around, in hesitation. Who was calling him was a tall schoolboy, probably around 1.90m tall, with a strong and vigorous body, his arms astonishingly robust.

"You are...?" Luo Feng looked at the person approaching him, a bit confused. He didn't seem to know the guy in front of him. This guy, as sturdy as a black bear, compared to Luo Feng was very ordinary appearance. [...]

But this strong and vigorous guy looked somewhat reserved. He cautiously looked at his   respected "brother Luo Feng". [...]
"Brother Luo Feng, I... I have a problem I want to ask you to help me with". The sturdy guy said nervously.

Later in the chapter, Luo Feng's power will be revealed, and the protagonist will go through all sort of adventures. Although the schoolboy calling out for Luo Feng at the school exit looks incredibly strong, compared to Luo Feng's ordinary appearance, we will discover later that the protagonist has inherited extraordinary powers, becoming one of the three strongest men who survived on Earth after the apocalypse. In his space adventures, Luo Feng will encounter a number of space creatures he will need to fight in order to defeat his planet, as the gigantic black eagles with the golden crest. As a result of the battle, he will be trapped in the space and unable to return on the Earth. Although *I Eat Tomatoes*'s writings have proved extremely successful as an entertainment product for his online public, his works and other similar products have also been often criticised for their excessive length, which leads to frequent repetitions in the plot, their 'low quality' and unrefined literary style, as well as the violence of some scenes they depict. Despite their huge online popularity – *Legend of a Space Walker* was the best selling online fiction work in 2012[182] – this probably plays a part in his unsuccessful achievements within the conventional literary field. I Eat Tomatoes is a productive and successful writer, but the fiction genre he writes, together with the lack of commitment with the literary establishment, make him more representative of the second stage.

One of the main arguments of the critics and scholars who did not support Internet literature is that the publication system launched by *Starting Point* does not promote the quality of the works, as it forces writers to issue their work at a very high production rate, sacrificing literary quality to the speed of publication. The most successful writers on *Starting Point,* in fact, publish their instalments on a daily basis. The pressure for a prompt publication of new episodes comes from both the audience and the website, with the readers continuously demanding new chapters, and the website offering a retribution proportioned to the amount of the words published,

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[182] China Writers, "Shanda Literature announces the list of digital book sellers for 2012" (Shanda wenxue fabo 2012 nian Q1shuzi tushu xiaoshou paihaobang 盛大文学发布 2012 年 Q1 数字图书销售排行榜). 22 May 2012. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2012/2012-05-22/127959.html>. Last visit: April 2016

rather than the value of the work. As a result, authors who invest time in producing more refined writings are likely to earn less than those who sacrifice quality to speed.

Although the Writers Rich List is mostly dominated by Fantasy fiction writers, another genre – urban fiction – occupies a relevant portion of the rankings. Liu Xiahui 柳下挥's work *The girl next door (*Linjia you nü chu changcheng 邻家有女初长成) and Liu Liu's *Dwelling Narrowness* (Woju 蜗居)[183] are two of the few examples of urban fiction written by the authors listed in the *Internet Writers Rich List*. The former, the only example of romance written by a male author in the ranking, is a long and complex work featuring the love stories of its young protagonists, while the latter, written by the first female urban fiction writer to enter the *Writers Rich List* (2009), narrates the story of two sisters, who moved to Shanghai from a village in the countryside, depicting their life from their first years at university, the job hunt, the wedding, motherhood, and then divorce of the eldest sister, and the difficulties the two girls have to face in the city, succeeding to represent the challenges of a whole generation. After the release of the TV series in 2009, Liu Liu's works achieved an even greater popularity. Its frank representation of urban workers everyday life attracted a significant portion of the Chinese audience[184.] While engaging with important themes, such as family and traditions, under a new perspective, the work offers an effective portrait of the contrasting points of view of the two protagonists – dealing with the challenges and increasing costs of life in Shanghai – and their parents, back in their village. Their disagreements on crucial choices shows the older generation's inability to fully understand the difficulties of a growingly capitalistic environment, which is gradually reshaping men and women's roles in contemporary society. The first part of the novel shows how owning a house,

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[183] Although Dwelling Narrowness is no longer available on the website, where it was originally published, the whole text of the work is currently available on <http://www.99reader.cn/files/article/html/2/2506/index.html>

[184] According to an article on the People's Daily, the 43.8% of urban readers has read or heard about Liu Liu's novel. See: Zhao Enuo, Tang Ning, "Embracing reading, a "literary life" full of feelings" (Yongbao yuedu, guoyou qinghuai de 'wenxue shenghuo' 拥抱阅读，过有情怀的"文学生活), 28 Apr 2016. <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/news/2016/2016-04-28/270955.html> Last visit: April 2016

a right that was taken for granted just a few decades earlier, was becoming something increasingly difficult to achieve, when living in a big and expensive city, such as Shanghai:

> 路漫漫其修远兮。五年的血泪路走下来，她发现，攒钱的速度永远赶不上涨价的速 度，而且距离越来越远。再等下去，也许到入土的那一天, 海萍还是住在这 10 平方米的房子里。如果这幢古老的石库门房 子不拆的话，她会一直租下去，一直节衣 缩食，一直凑不够房钱，一 直跟其他五家共用二楼半的那个小厕所，一直为多摊了 几块钱的水费 而怄气。

> Road repairs were slowly going on. In five years of blood and tears down that road, she discovered that saving money never keeps up with the speed of price increases, and her goal seemed increasingly distant. If she had waited any longer, perhaps on the day of her burial, Haiping would still live in this 10 square meters house. If this old stone house was not going to be demolished, she will continue renting it, she would always have to live frugally, constantly struggle to gather enough money for her rent, she would always have to share that small toilet on the second floor with other five families, and always feel irritated to have to take more than her share in the water bill.

Haiping and her husband's struggle to survive the city's costs becomes harder after the birth of their child, when they realise how expensive baby products are transforming their plan of buying their own house into a mere fantasy. Their numerous difficulties also put their wedding to test, with Haiping silently blaming her husband for not being able to give her and their baby a respectable life, and Su Chun feeling inadequate in his role of husband and father.

If, on the one hand, *Dwelling Narrowness* depicts a seemingly hopeless struggle in city dwellers' everyday life, on the other hand it is also able to show the strength of young generation, trying to make their way in an increasingly competitive environment, Haiping's resolution to go back to work after giving birth, in order to give her child more opportunities for a better life, despite their present sacrifices.

If the first stage of the development of Internet literature featured a few major genres that characterised its début, this second stage is more characterised by its extremely diverse production, rather than a single or a few genres. If we try to identify a distinguishing genre that can discern this period from the previous, the massive growth experienced by fantasy fiction as a macro-genre is arguably the most relevant. However, the development of this genre grew alongside the development of the whole online literary scene, the literary websites and all the other popular genres published online. It would therefore be reductive trying to identify fantasy fiction as the most representative genre of this stage.

A number of changes related to the development of the literature publishing context have greatly influenced the development of all the fiction genres without distinction. Although the impact of the media on the literary text tends to be less relevant compared to the late 1990s, online literary production is still far from being exempt from any influence derived form its means of publication.

One of the most immediate consequences of the Internet literature business model introduced by *Starting Point* in 2003 is the virtual separation of the producers and the consumers of online fiction. As the websites offer different spaces for writers and readers, asking the former to sign up with a "writer account" and the latter to pay a fee to access the most popular works, the online interaction between authors and readers became increasingly difficult. While at its inception Internet literature is celebrated for removing the 'barriers' between authors, readers and publishers, this system ultimately brings the agents back to the old categories, imposing the supervision of the website on the production and publication of a work. As the financial gains encourage writers to publish more, the compelling need to keep the readers hooked to a work by regularly publishing new instalments has also earned Internet literature published within this system the derogatory reputation of "Fast food literature" (Kuaican wenxue 快餐文学): bad quality works, with coarse

language and unrefined style, repetitive plots and narrative patterns, with the only aim of being immediately consumed as a vulgar entertainment product.

On the other hand, the websites have also become a boundless resource for screenwriters and producers in search of either new material for their products, or simple inspiration. As the subsequent developments prove, not all the online produced literature is worthless vulgarity, and some Internet writers can even rival established writers in terms of influence on the public and financial gains. A significant part of the Internet writers who figure in the *Writers Rich List* have later joined the China Writers Association. Whether we want to regard this co-optation as the result of the recognition of the artistic value of some pieces of online produced fiction or as an attempt of the establishment to snatch up some control over a growingly popular phenomenon, winning a place within the 'official' literary field can play some role in rescuing the most valuable Internet literature works from being submerged by the enormous amount of works published online, while providing a shortcut to the print publication, and thus surviving for the next generations.

4.3.3 The third period: getting closer to 'real' literature

The third stage of the development of Internet literature (2010-2015) is marked by the active commitment of the literary establishment within the online literary production. The most successful writers of this period have been involved in some activities organised by the China Writers Association – including literary awards, discussion panels or events aimed at the promotion of online produced literature – or have joined the China Writers Association, either its national branch, its provincial branches or one of the recently established Web Writers Association.

About a decade after the publication of the first online literature works, the great popularity achieved by some online writers attracted the attention of the literary establishment, represented by the Chinese Writers Association. No longer a marginal

phenomenon, Internet literature was for the first time being regarded as an actual form of the 'proper literature', as advocated by the members of the professional association. As the online literary field began being considered as able to produce valuable literature, a few authors managed to shake off their reputation as 'amateur' writers, only concerned with entertaining and amusing the general public with the publication of 'bad quality' fiction. Acknowledging the growing popularity of online published fiction, the China Writers Association began organising a series of activities aimed at the study and the promotion of valuable online published literary work, in an attempt to refresh an "old fashioned" field, which was no longer able to reflect the interests of the general public. After discussing the regulation for the admission of Internet writers during their annual meeting in 2008, the Association finally opened its thresholds to their "colleagues" in 2010, by admitting Tangjia Sanshao as a member of the Beijing Association.

Although the developing online literary scene had become a subject of great interest within academic research around the turn of the century, the literary establishment and the academic world – which partially overlap with each other – were unable to reach an agreement until much later on whether online literature should be regarded as a literary phenomenon. Whereas the peak of academic interest in the topic was already surpassed after half a decade, most scholarship is limited to an analysis of the initial stages of the phenomenon.

After the question of the admission of Internet writers was brought to the attention of the annual meeting of the professional association in 2008, two years passed before the admission of the first web writer in Beijing. However, since the meeting that marked the opening of the China Writers Association to Internet literature, the establishment showed a growing interest toward the developing online literary scene, which is confirmed by the opening of important literary awards to the participation of online published works and the admission of 13 Internet writers in 2013.

Tangjia Sanshao, the first Internet writer admitted to the Association, is an extremely productive writer, who had already published several works in print before his

admission in 2010. Although the admission of a popular fantasy fiction writer can be regarded as an unexpected choice, if looking back at the aims of literature as summarised by the association, a certain recurrence of realistic genres can be seen in the choice of the works selected for the activities sponsored by the Association in the following years.

A first example of this predilection can be seen in the short-listed works for the Lu Xun prize in 2010 and the Mao Dun award in 2011. In the first occasion, only one Internet literature work was selected for the literary award: Wen Yu's *Caught in the Web,* already introduced in the previous chapter, is a successful example of urban fiction published online. The following year, five out of the seven selected works for the Mao Dun award belong to sub-genres of the broader "urban fiction" category, offering a portrait of different aspects of urban life. While Song Lixuan's *Office spy game* deals with the professional life of the younger generations in a Chinese metropolis, Rong Sanhui's *Sharp Tongue and Golden Phoenix* offers a representation of modern urban life in comparison with rural life, featuring its protagonists' decision to move to a big city in order to escape the hardships of their life in the countryside. Zheng Yanying's *From Breaths to Groans* and Gu Jian's *Unripe Fruit* introduce another two aspects of contemporary life. The former belonging to the "romance" genre, is a love story in urban settings, the latter, categorised under the "youth and college life" sub-genre, depicts contemporary students' everyday life at schools, the pressure of the exams, the dreams and hopes of the younger generations.

The cooperation of the China Writers Association with one of the most influential literary websites, *Starting Point*, was inaugurated in 2013 with a joint symposium, aimed at the discussion of a few selected works of fiction published on the website.

The selected works, 6 in total, were discussed and analysed by established writers and members of the association, as well as literary critics and scholars, in order to provide a guide to the Internet writers' professional growth and a few examples to Internet writers and consumers, to promote a positive development of Internet literature. The works selected for the symposium present a slightly broader range of genres compared to the previously discussed awards, with some of the works featuring a

combination of different genres. Whilst Yuren Erdai 鱼人二代's *So pure, so ambiguous* and Liu'an Huaming 柳暗花溟's *Diary of an Unripe Woman* proposed works from the established genre of Urban fiction, Da Yan 大眼's *The Golden Pupil* and Xu Gongzi Shengzhi 徐公子胜治's *The Master of Earth* present a combination of urban and fantasy fiction, introducing an atypical genre in the conventional literary field which, however, was experiencing growing success online

In the same year, the China Writers Association announced the admission of 13 Internet writers. This is the result of a previous campaign, in which the Association invited the most important literary websites to submit a list of their more influential writers to be considered for admission. The list of the new members, admitted on this occasion, shows how the establishment is gradually opening up to new genres, with a more significant presence of different genres, although urban fiction remains a favourite. If half of the names in the list are committed writers of urban and realistic fiction, the remaining portion shows a growing attention for new and hybrid genres, such as fantasy or historical romance.

Although the establishment initially shows some reluctance in including 'unrealistic' and 'non-educational' genres within the works worth of attention, the China Writers Association is gradually opening up to those genres that were born or gained their popularity online, including fantasy and new genres, such as "time travelling" and "supernatural ability" fiction.

This opening to the new genres becomes more distinct in 2014, when the Zhejiang Internet Writers association is established. The numerous authors admitted to the newborn organisation produce a great variety of genres, with urban fiction still occupying a relevant role, but a growing portion occupied by fantasy genres and urban-fantasy hybrid genres. Fantasy fiction writers are particularly numerous in the Zhejiang branch, where fantasy genres seem to be greatly appreciated. However, as the associations dedicated to Internet writers grow in number and size, it becomes increasingly difficult to deduce statistic on the prevalent genres.

The reasons for the China Writers Association's growing interest in the developing online literary field can be varied and cannot be all necessarily ascribable to the recognition of the literary value of the selected works. Although the *Starting Point Symposium* claimed to have as its main objective the promotion of Internet literature, the Association's promptness in acting as a guide for the professional development of Internet writers can as well be seen as an attempt to regain some sort of control on the literary production, by absorbing a new digital literary field that developed entirely outside of the Association's domain. Likewise, the frequent remarks on the promotion of a healthy developed of Internet literature also unmasks some concern on the contents of uncontrolled online published material, with violent and erotic content at the centre of the attention. The Association's concerns about the content of online published material directly relates to the social aims traditionally associated with literature: if literature has to provide a moral example to its readers, what is promoted as literature cannot be carrier for negative values or 'obscene' contents. Although alternative genres are becoming increasingly appreciated, the "urban fiction" category – even in its new varieties – remains the one which is more capable of fulfilling literature's social responsibilities, while offering genuine representations of contemporary reality. While fantasy writers prefer to offer their readers a sort of 'escape' from reality, urban fiction is more easily fit within the idea of literature advocated by the establishment, for it can more effectively transmit the 'spirit of the time', and thus help us understand what kind of values literature can convey to contemporary Chinese readers.

Nevertheless, some examples of Internet urban fiction outdistance the 'obsolete' values promoted by the association and engage in a more up-to-date representation of urban reality, giving voice to the hopes and concerns of the new generations, making their way in a deeply changing society.

4.4 The future of Internet fiction: toward the merging of the literary fields

The development and popularisation of the Internet had a profound impact on the evolution of contemporary China's popular cultural and literary scene. As the Internet became a medium easily available to a consistent part of the Chinese population, the online literary field came in contact with a number of other aspects of contemporary China's cultural life and society, which in turn influenced the publication and consumption of Internet literature.

As has been observed, the first stage of the development of Internet literature is characterised by a reduced range of literary genres, mainly diaries and short stories, in which the enthusiasm for the new medium and the acknowledgement of the possibilities it offers are often reflected in the narration. The first writers who published their works online could do so in a largely free environment, untouched by both the commercial dynamics of literature publishing and the official culture represented by the establishment. The Internet, in this stage, is thus celebrated for freeing literature from its constraints, giving everyone the possibility to publish their writings. However, this sense of freedom perceived by early Internet writers is not doomed to last long and, by the turn of the century, the 'innocence' of Internet literature is already lost.

In 2003, the introduction of the new Internet literature business model marks the beginning of a new stage. As the digitalization of cultural products ceases being 'something new', online published literature starts moving gradually closer to conventional literature, in its mode of publication, distribution and commercialisation. The introduction of a retribution for Internet writers and a pay-to-read system for its consumers inevitably brings Internet literature back to the old writer-reader opposition, which is typical of the conventional literature system, and emerges again online in this second stage. The distribution of Internet fiction becomes, consequently, much more similar to the purchase of a printed book, while the most relevant

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difference remains in the support the works are published on (paper VS digital). Nevertheless, the introduction of the new business model results in an incredible growth of the major literary websites. Organised in a market-oriented perspective, the websites are now able to host a huge amount of literary products and a more diversified range of literary genres, while the production is ultimately guided by the demand of their readers.

In this stage, the two prevalent genres – fantasy and urban fiction – are also symptomatic of two prevalent trends among online readers, which clearly indicate what readers are looking for, while browsing Internet fiction. Fantasy fiction offers its readers a tool for *escape,* achieved through the representation of a completely different world, where the protagonists are given the possibility to achieve the success or the goals they could not achieve in real life, gain incredible powers of travel through different eras. While the main aim of fantasy fiction can be identified with temporarily forgetting the concerns of everyday life, urban fiction readers are offered some comfort through the representation of it. Urban fiction published online depicts ordinary lives in contemporary cities, offering a range of characters and experiences the readers can easily identify with, gaining a sort of relief from the pressure of their own lives. This last genre is arguably the closest one to the concept of literature advocated by the literary establishment and, consequently, the first one to be assimilated within the conventional literary system.

When the literary establishment approaches the online literary scene, two new factors come into play. If the 'literariness' of online published works had been discussed since the publication of the first popular Internet fiction works, it can now be more easily identified with the recognition by the establishment. The admission of an Internet writer into the China Writers Association or the choice of a work published online for a conventional literary award contains an implicit recognition of the 'literariness' of a specific work or of the literary production of a writer.

Besides the literary recognition, the admission of a large number of Internet writers to the various branches of the professional association can also be regarded as an unspoken attempt by the establishment to keep influential authors under some sort of

control, by offering their professional guidance. Although there is a clear preference for "realistic" works in the first stage of this co-optation between the two fields, the writers association admits a consistent number of writers producing less 'conventional' genres. The various rankings and statistics discussed in the above pages show how this is particularly true for best selling authors, which are regularly invited to join the Association.

The various stages presented in these pages show how Internet literature evolves from being a marginal phenomenon to being gradually integrated within the existent literary system. Its initial success among Internet users attracts the attention of a few far sighted entrepreneurs, who manage to turn it into a profit-making activity, sanctioning the success of a number of writers. The growing – and increasingly influential – online literary scene eventually attracts the attention of the literary establishment, which is gradually trying to assimilate Internet literature into its system. These dynamics, if seen as interconnected and consequential events, can suggest that the two fields are likely to be gradually merging together, while mutually contributing to the other's development.

Although the literary establishment has recently proved keen on attracting new genres, urban fiction has long been a favoured genre. Its ability to frankly depict contemporary reality in its material and moral struggles, make it more fit into the conventional system, compared to other genres. However, the more conventional literary form that characterises this genre does not prevent it from delivering new representations of Chinese city dwellers' contemporary life, and from transmitting a system of values that does not necessarily mirror the values advocated by the establishment. In the following chapter, an in-depth analysis of a number of Internet fiction works will show how these works reflect the idea of literature promoted by the China Writers Association. The comparison of the selected works will then highlight the recurrent themes and patterns, to show how perceptions of contemporary China's urban reality are transmitted by urban fiction published online and how these narratives reflect a new system of moral values that emerges from these narrations.

Chapter 5 – Online Realism

The most recent period of the development of Internet literature is characterised by the interaction between the online and the official literary scene. This exchange, which is carried out throughout activities, debates and awards sponsored by the China Writers Association, provides a first evidence of the recognition of some online-produced fiction works within the official literary circles. The China Writers Association, a subordinate branch of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, is a professional organisation that works as a coordinator and guarantor of Chinese authors' creative activities and artistic exchanges, but its functions also include political and artistic leadership and control of literary activities, to guarantee that literary norms are implemented. Although its influence declined in the past decades, the Association is still regarded as the main representative of the official literary field, which can grant Chinese authors professional status. Following Foucault's argument on the social and political implications of literary discourse, a first step towards the recognition of Internet literature as a literary form worth of attention is thus represented by the interaction with the official literary circles, with the online literary field growingly involved into activities and awards promoted by the China Writers Association, and the Association gradually trying to integrate online-produced literature within its system.

As the guidelines to the Mao Dun Literary Award illustrate,[185] in order to be considered as valuable literature, a literary work should genuinely represent real life, transmit positive social values, reflect the national spirit and the spirit of the time. Besides its ideological and social content, the text also underlines how the China Writers Association regards realism as an important trait in literary writing. Although

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[185] For the *Mao Dun Literary Award Ordinance*, see the theoretical framework applied to this thesis, on page 39.

the literary establishment is gradually opening up to new online produced literary genres, realist Internet fiction remains a favourite in the Association's choice. As has been observed in the previous chapters, a realistic style of writing and an effective representation of contemporary reality is closely associated with the 'literariness' of a work of fiction. Within the online literary field, the genre that best reflects this ideal is urban fiction which is among the most produced and consumed literary genres online. Nevertheless, despite its recognition and the ongoing gradual assimilation within the official circles, Internet literature is still regarded as in need of the example and guidance of the conventional literary field, as implied in Chen Qirong's speech at the opening ceremony for the first general meeting of the newly established Internet Writers Association in Zhejiang province. Chen, in fact, remarks on the importance of following the example of fine works of (conventional) literature in order to constantly improve the literary value and artistic beauty of Internet literature.[186]

The selected example of online realist fiction all depict everyday life of common people in different Chinese urban realities, across different social strata. The representation of ordinary life in Chinese metropolises still does not represent a common trend in contemporary offline urban fiction, in which the portray of urban discontent and the anxiety surrounding Chinese cultural identity in at the end of the 1990s, or rather the evident rebellious intent that characterises some of the writers belonging to the "Generation X" aiming of achieving popularity through forbidden topics and scandals, tend to prevail over the representation of common people. The protagonists of all of the selected works are depicted as "positive" characters, conducting a decent life and mostly sticking to common moral principles, making online urban fiction closer to the idea of literary realism promoted by the

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[186] "Chen Qirong's Speech at the Opening Ceremony for the First General Meeting of the Internet Writers Association in Zhejiang Province" (Zhejiang sheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuan dahui kaimushi de zhici 在浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会开幕式上的致辞), in: *Fist general assembly of the Zhejiang Internet Writers Association - Collected documents* (Zhejiangsheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuandahui wenjian huibian,浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会文件汇编)，Hangzhou, 2014. Full text can be found in the appendix.

establishment, in comparison to the pessimism or rebellious intents that characterises some of the most popular contemporary offline urban fiction writers, such as Wang Anyi 王安忆 , Wei Hui 卫慧 or Mian Mian 棉棉.

Urban fiction provides a new representation of contemporary China's reality, depicted from a viewpoint that stands amongst common people, and not above them. Although realist fiction published online often does not fully reflect the idea of realism as advocated by the literary establishment, especially because of its lack of ideological commitment, it does have some social content. In this chapter, I shall present a close analysis of some urban fiction works published on the Internet, seeking to show how they embody the established idea of literature and accomplish the social responsibility towards their readers. The analysis will reveal what is the representation of urban reality that emerges from these works of fiction, with a particular attention to the social values that online writers are recurrently trying to transmit throughout their narratives.

5.1 Internet fiction: between established and innovative genres

The development of the Internet and the proliferation of online literary production, not only facilitate the production and consumption of popular literature by the masses, but also foster the emergence of new literary genres. As was observed in the previous chapters, some of the most popular online literary communities were initially devoted to a particular genre. With the expansion of the community and growth in number of Internet literature consumers, most of these websites gradually started to embrace other genres of fiction, as well as other literary forms. Nonetheless, fiction still accounts for over 90% of the overall online literary production, overshadowing other minor genres such as prose and poetry, which still have a

dedicated section on most of the websites.

Being the first website to propose its current model of production and distribution – which inspired the single models adopted by other popular platforms – and currently one of the biggest and more diversified literary communities, *Starting Point* is, again, the most illuminating example of this variety.

Starting Point offers as many as 13 fiction genres, each of which includes a number of sub-genres. These can be divided into 5 big categories: urban fiction (dushi 都市), fantasy fiction (divided into Western and Eastern fantasy, qihuan 奇幻 and xuanhuan 玄幻), martial arts and immortal swordsman fiction (wuxia 武侠 and xianxia 仙侠), historical and military fiction (lishi 历史 and junshi 军事), science fiction (kehuan 科幻). Beside established genres, such as urban or historical fiction, we find a number of new genres, or combinations of them. Some of the new, emerged on the Internet and almost exclusively produced online genres are time travel fiction and fan fiction. Among this great variety, the most popularly produced and consumed fiction genres on *Starting Point* are urban fiction and fantasy fiction (especially Eastern fantasy).[187]

As it happens for most of the online literary communities, on *Starting Point,* writers are the ones who determine which category they want their works to be classified into. Although sometimes their works of fiction do not completely conform to the guidelines of sub-genres provided by the website, publishers and editors usually do not re-categorise the works. As a result, the distinction between different genres or sub-genres is often blurred. In addition to this, many online published works of fiction feature a complex plot, which is often not ascribable to a single genre. This is particularly true for some 'hybrid' genres born online, such as *Supernatural Ability* fiction. However, even when depicting supernatural powers and fantastic stories, many Internet writers tend to settle the story in a familiar context, that is usually an urban environment.

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[187] Looking at *Starting Point* ranking section, in most of the listings, about 8 out of 10 works belong to these two genres or one of their sub-genres. *Starting Point* ranking page is accessible on: http://top.qidian.com/Default.aspx (Last access: August 2016)

In order to reveal the representation of Contemporary China's metropolitan life that emerges from online published works, in this chapter, I shall closely examine various examples of Internet fiction which feature an urban setting and a realist style of writing. Based on my methodology, illustrated in the first chapter, I selected and analysed a number of works of fiction, among those which have been selected for a national literary prize or an activity aimed at the promotion of Internet literature supported by the China Writers Association. Some of the authors of the selected works have recently been admitted to the China Writers Association, or one of its local branches, and consequently stand out among their peers for they boast a "stamp of approval" from the literary establishment on the quality of their work. Leaving an evaluation of the artistic quality to the approval of the literary establishment, my approach to the analysed texts recalls Antonio Gramsci's consideration on popular culture, privileging the "content" on the "form". In Gramsci's view, when approaching popular culture, what is important to observe is not its artistic "beauty", but rather the connection between the popular experience and the resulting cultural product.[188] In a similar way, the success of Internet literature is not owed to the artistic quality of the works, but rather has a strong bond with a common cultural background and similar experiences between Internet writers and their audience. Even more so, since most of the online writing is still "unripe" in terms of artistic maturity[189], what is important to study at this relatively early stage is how *amateur* writers use their literary and artistic skills within the online publication context to express their views on contemporary reality. For these reasons, in conducting my investigation on the representation of metropolitan reality in Internet fiction, I will mainly focus on the perception of everyday life and the common background of moral values that emerge from these narrations.

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[188] Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks (Quaderni dal Carcere). Torino: G. Einaudi, 1975. Q23, 51: 2247.

[189] The insistence of the literary establishment on artistic training can be seen as a confirmation of this immaturity.

5.2 Real life genres: Urban fiction and its sub-genres

Realist fiction is one of the achievements of twentieth-century Chinese literature. Nurtured by nineteenth-century European models, modern Chinese realist fiction arose in the May Fourth period as a remedy for "obsolete" and "decadent" classical genres,[190] in an attempt to bring some vitality to an old literary scene, that did not reflect the current needs of Chinese society. Nevertheless, although it was initially inspired by its European predecessor, Chinese Realism developed a different discourse. May Fourth writers put a political "duty" on Realism – which was not borne in its European incarnation – considering the depiction of real life as a tool for social reform, while the European counterpart was more concerned with social criticism of society's dark side.[191]

During the Maoist era, literary realism underwent different discourses, following the Department of Propaganda guidelines on literary production and the different attitudes in the Chinese Communist Party, and it was initially referred to as "proletarian realism" in Mao's talk at the Yan'an Conference of Literature and Art (1942), to be renamed as "socialist realism" in a later phase of the revolution. This definition was then combined with – to be subsequently replaced by – the notions of "revolutionary realism" and "revolutionary romanticism".[192] However, cultural and literary theories were repeatedly transformed and redefined during Maoism period. Although the name "realism" was accepted, Maoist cultural bureaucrats rejected the May Fourth realism's pessimistic vision – as well as any vision that contradicted the party line – while embracing its supposed transformative power over society.

Even excluding the decades of Mao's revolution, in twentieth century China, realism

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[190] Anderson, Marston. *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 339.

[191] Kinkley, Jeffrey C. *Corruption and Realism in Late Socialist China the Return of the Political Novel.* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007. 159-160.

[192] Chung, Hilary, and Michael Falchikov, *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China.* Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996. 30-31

has been the mainstream and most prestigious mode of writing from the 1920s until the communist revolution in 1949, and again during the first few years after Mao's death in 1976.[193]

Realism underwent a sharp reversal of prestige in the 1980s, when Chinese literary elites, in an attempt to reattain their social prestige, launched the discourse of "Pure literature" as opposite to "popular" down-market literature, which they deemed unworthy of being referred to as "art". During this period, experimentalism, literary difficulty and avant-garde were regarded as the only counterweights to the official discourse, while realism was seen as backward "naive" representionalism, which "degenerated into a label for literary convention and political orthodoxy within the state apparatus" (Zhang Xudong).[194] An interest in realistic writing rose again toward the end of the 1980s, as a result of a revival of reportage and documentary literature, whilst realism and modernism were increasingly regarded as opposite tendencies, with realism the favourite of the masses and modernism the cause of the critics.[195] The subsequent emergence of a freer literary market and China's mass culture gave a further contribution in establishing realism as a genre within a popular literature context.

Indeed, China does have a strong official discourse on realism. According to official propaganda and education even today, realism is a unitary trend, the socially responsible and politically correct mainstream tendency passed down from Lu Xun and other leftist writers of the 1930s,[196] and its social duty to of "being conducive advocate of reform, opening up and modernization" remains unchanged.[197]

In the frame of literary realism, the first examples of urban fiction (loosely defined as fiction in an urban setting) were brought about by urbanization during the Republican era, with Shanghai as the main centre of its development. Realist (and urban) fiction,

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[193] Kinkley, Jeffrey. *Corruption and Realism in Late Socialist China,* 145.
[194] Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* . Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997. 112.
[195] *Ibid. 160*
[196] *Ibid. 145.*
[197] See as an example the guidelines of the China Writers Association on the characteristics of a valuable literary work, discussed in Chapter 1.

which finds its roots in late Qing literature and arose in the Republican period, could be arguably regarded as one of the first fiction genres to shift the focus of its main protagonists from the Romantic tradition of heroes and aristocrats to the Realist tradition of ordinary people from the middle or lower social classes, portraying them as they are in real life. Although urban popular fiction – which mirrored the psychological angst of urban dwellers as they experienced rapid change in a "modernising environment"[198] – has been a marginal genre during the decades of the communist revolution, it experienced a revival as a result of the growing urbanization and especially during the years of Deng Xiaoping's policy of modernisation at the end of the 1980s. Under a fast developing industrialised and urbanised environment, realist writers face the challenge of depicting a dramatically changing society. The transition provoked by urbanisation and industrialisation provided a common background against which depict people's struggles, suffering and daily life experience. The late 1990s witnessed a new generation of young urban writers, born in the 1970s. The Chinese critics refer to these writers as "Generation X", whose members were small children at the end of the Cultural Revolution and thus have no memory of it, but "came of age when postsocialism, transnational capital, and consumerism transformed the nation".[199] The process of urbanisation, together with the liberalisation of the cultural market at the end of the twentieth century, turns mass production and consumption into an irrefutable trait of urban life, which gives a further contribution to the rapid economic development in all sectors, including the manufacturing of cultural products. The growing impact of urbanisation in China is also visible in rising number of works of fiction produced and consumed after the late 1980s, and especially in the increase in narratives featuring urban settings. Less than a decade later, with the advent of the Internet, the phenomenon of proliferation of fiction in urban settings is further amplified by the online literary production, turning urban fiction into one of the most produced and consumed genres on Internet literature web sites.

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[198] Link, Perry. *Traditional-Style Popular Urban Fiction in the Teens and Twenties*, 1977. 327-328

[199] Daria Berg, "Consuming secrets", 316.

Arguably one of the most produced genres within Internet literature production, *Urban fiction* features among the categories of all popular Internet literature websites. Although not always easy to classify, due to the overlap with other genres, it contends its position of most consumed genre with *Eastern fantasy fiction,* which is in turn the most produced genre. However, on Starting Point, *Urban fiction* overtakes all the major fiction genres in the variety of its sub-genres. It is, in fact, the only category offering as many as thirteen sub-genres to choose from,[200] focusing on different spheres of city dwellers' contemporary life. *Starting Point* offers some guidelines to elucidate the features of each genre and relative sub-genre. Due to the continuously growing number and diversity of the works, the guidelines are regularly updated, to better match the contents of the websites and the expectations of its users. At the top of the page, are listed the 'established' genres, while at the bottom are the recently included sub-genres. The management of the website also encourages the authors to contact the editors and discuss possible amendments, if they believe that none of the categories matches their own work. Out of this diversity of topics, "Urban life" (Dushi shenghuo 都市生活), "Business and careers" (Zhichang lizhi 职场励志), "Love and Marriage" (Aiqing hunyin 爱情婚姻) and "Campus life" (Qingchun xiaoyuan 青春校园) are the most frequently produced. "Urban life" fiction, accounting for almost one third of the overall urban fiction production, usually features an ordinary individual's love relationship, life and career development in a metropolitan setting. The other sub-genres, as can be inferred by their names, focus respectively on the protagonist's working life, love relationship and marital life, youth and university life. Interestingly, among the thirteen genres, mainly intent in representing contemporary China's real life, is listed a relatively new genre which crosses the boundaries with fantasy fiction – "Supernatural ability" (Yishu chaoneng 异术超能) – and managed to gain a growing popularity in the last few years.

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[200] Some genres are not demonstrated on Starting Point home page, but are included in the guidelines to Starting Point literary genres:
<http://wwwploy.qidian.com/News/ShowNews.aspx?newsid=1007009> Last access: 13 September 2015.

"Supernatural ability" fiction features an ordinary individual's urban life which is dramatically transformed by accidentally receiving supernatural powers. With regards to the production rates, "Superhuman ability" has recently slightly surpassed "Urban Life" to be the most produced sub-genre among urban narratives.[201]

The popularity of urban fiction and the diversity of its sub-genres could suggest that Internet users producing and consuming online fiction are keen consumers (and producers) of narratives that depict styles of life and background settings they are familiar with, which offers a more accessible source of inspiration for those wanting to represent contemporary reality, as most of Internet users are based in urban areas. The premises of "representing reality" implied by the choice of this genre, engages writers in the task of reconstructing their personal and public experiences in a drastically changing world. Although the artistic quality of some of the works may be questionable, it is my idea that young and 'non-professional' writers can offer a genuine representation of their contemporaries urban life and the challenges that Chinese middle class – and especially its last generations – have to face in their everyday life.

On the other hand, while many authors seem to be inclined to create a narrative based on their own life experience, the success of "Supernatural ability" fiction suggests that a consistent part of the readers prefer narratives where unusualness or impossibility takes place, although they tend to locate it in an urban setting with which they are familiar. In terms of characters and settings, the two sub-genres

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[201] According to the statistics on *Starting Point*, there are 173,500 works of fictions enlisted under Urban fiction, 55,823 under "Urban life", 61,524 fictions under "Superhuman Power". Among the remaining genres, "Campus life" (27,805 works) and "Love and Marriage" (8431 works) are the most produced. The lower popularity of "Love and Marriage" can be explained by the introduction of a new section for Romance fiction, under which "Contemporary love" fiction is particularly successful, listing a total 116,713 works. Although listed under the Urban fiction sub-genres, "Business and jobs" has been detached into a separate category in the "book store" page, and it enlists a total of 11,192 works. None of the other sub-genres reaches a number over 10,000, most of them stay under 2,000 in their respective total production. <http://all.qidian.com/Book/BookStore.aspx?ChannelId=4&SubCategoryId=-1&Tag=all&Size=-1&Action=-1&OrderId=6&P=all&PageIndex=1&update=-1&Vip=-1&Boutique=-1&SignStatus=-1>
Last access: 13 September 2015.

present a rather similar structure: both "urban life" and "superhuman ability" fiction tend to create protagonists belonging to the urban middle class, mostly ordinary people, portrayed into their everyday life, struggling with fairly common problems, ranging from professional competition, sentimental problems or family issues, immerse in an ever-changing urban environment. Their dreams and hopes depend on the city, but it is also the city the cause of the pressure and the competition which prevents them from reaching their goals. Indeed, popular works of urban fiction create characters most readers can easily identify with, which resemble the people anyone could encounter in their daily life.

In the People's Republic of China, the literary establishment represented by the China Writers Association has always put a great emphasis on literary realism, as literature was (and is) regarded as bearing in itself a social responsibility toward the readers. In order to adhere to this responsibility, a literary work is supposed to "deeply reflect real life, the spirit of the country and the essence of the time". During the quick urbanisation process and economic developed and liberalization brought about by the reforms at the end of 1980s, China's city dwellers had to deal with important changes, which made it hard for "socialist" literature to keep up with the fast social developments within a not so socialist urban environment, yet socialist models proved to be hard to be left behind. As a result, only a little part of the literature produced at the turn of the century could be said to be representative of urban life, in its capitalistic turns reflected in its evolving lifestyles, while a consistent part of mainstream literature produced and promoted by the literary establishment still engaged with the depiction of 'obsolete' models and China's rural life.[202]

With most of the Internet users residing in Chinese metropolises, of course, the expansion of the online literary scene gave a great boost to the development of urban

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[202] See, as an example, the recent nobel prize laureate, Mo Yan writes about the peasantry, about life in the countryside, about people struggling to survive, rather recurrent themes in Chinese literature after the foundation of the PRC. However, Chinese urban youth is not familiar with this environment and does not feel represented by this kind of literature.

fiction, with the great majority of Internet users residing in the cities. With this in mind, it can be inferred that China's Internet users, as representatives of China's contemporary urban youth and educated population, can effectively fulfil the need for a representation of the quick-changing metropolitan reality in present-day China.

In the following section, I shall present a discussion on a number of Internet fiction works belonging to different sub-genres of urban fiction, seeking to elucidate whether different genres offer a similar representation of urban reality and what are the common story patterns behind these genres. The first two analysed works are ascribable to "real life" genres, representing in turn contemporary China's professional, private and sentimental life. The last section analyses a work belonging to the "supernatural ability" fiction, which aims to clarify how the acquisition of supernatural powers relates to the protagonist's perception of urban life and whether the representation of urban reality that emerges from this last kind of fiction resembles the one depicted in more realistic genres.

5.2.1 Urban life, job and career: AVRIL's *Office Spy Game*

Song Lixuan 宋丽咺, real name of AVRIL, is a female Internet writer who started publishing her works on *Fragrant Red Sleeves* in 2008. Born in 1978, unlike the majority of Internet writers, she started writing fiction at the age of 30. She published several works – both novels and short stories – concerned with contemporary China's urban life. Her writings mainly feature the Chinese middle class youth's working life and struggle for professional fulfilment. Soon after the online success of her works, the websites recommended her first novel, *Fighting!* (Bu renshu 不认输) for the publication in print, which turned out as an immediate best seller. In 2010, her novel *Office Spy Game* (Bangongshi fengsheng 办公室风声)[203] was nominated for the 8th

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[203] Most of Song Lixuan's novels that have published in a print edition have an English title as well, although they have not been translated into English. The Chinese title of *Fighting!*

edition of the Mao Dun Literary Award – the first to permit the participation of Internet writers. After the nomination for the award, she gave up online writing to publish her works in print. Within a few years, she managed to turn herself into a successful writer in the conventional publishing industry and published several novels in print form. Song Lixuan joined the China Writers Association in 2013 and is currently a member of the Beijing Writers Association Committee for Internet Literature Production.

Office Spy Game is one of Song Lixuan's most popular urban fiction works, belonging to the "Job and Career" category, although it can slightly verge on the "espionage" sub-genre as well. The story presents a sequence of events happening among the staff of a five star hotel. The old state-run hotel is opening under new management and all the members of the directorate and the executive floor team are busy with the preparation. The managerial responsibilities have to be appointed to the members of the new team, and some of the existing staff have a good prospect for an important promotion. While waiting for the head director to announce the lucky candidates who will be designated for the managerial positions, everyone's attention is focused on Xia Shang and Han Xue. Xia Shang is a young woman with a positive and genuine attitude toward others and always willing to help, although at times she is too resolute, others too insecure. Han Xue is strong-tempered, skilful and ambitious woman, and daughter of the former deputy director of the tourism bureau. Occupying a managerial position within the administration of the hotel is her main career goal. In the eyes of the members of the staff, there are only two people who have a chance to be appointed to this position: the lobby senior manager, Lu Yantao, and the front desk manager, Han Xue, while both Xia Shang and Han Xue are believed to be likely to be appointed to an important role. However, the outcome of the selection does not match their expectation: Xia Shang obtained the leading position, while Han Xue is promoted to Front Office vice-director.

Literally means "I won't admit my defeat", while *Office Spy Game* original title is "Office rumors". AVRIL, 2010. *Office Spy Game* (Bangongshi fengsheng 办公室风声). <http://lz.book.sohu.com/serialize-id-15279.html>

But, a few unpleasant events turn the enthusiasm of the newly appointed staff into uneasiness and apprehension. A rumour of a leakage of confidential information reaches the personnel of the hotel. Soon thereafter, a credit card fraud occurs while an important customer, an influential hotel reviewer, is visiting the premises. However, nobody in the team seems to know who is the responsible for the leakage, and everyone is more concerned with protecting their own position, by avoiding saying anything that would potentially get them in trouble. As a result, it becomes more and more difficult to understand who is genuinely concerned for the events and who is involved with the fraud and trying to hide their responsibilities. Among the uneasiness of those sincerely worried about the turn of the events and those distressed in their attempt of hiding their complicity in the incident, everyone seems to be acting a part.

Office Spy Game is a medium length novel, consisting of four parts, each of which comprises eight chapters, with the exception of the last part, which is a single longer chapter. The first part presents the characters involved in the story – the staff of the ST Hotel and important personalities in the hotel sector – and the competition of the hotels to have a higher rating within the newly introduced rating system. From the dialogues in the first chapters, we learn that ST management has received an offer and the Hotel may be purchased by an important international company, while the future of its staff is still uncertain. The second part depicts the climax of the negotiation and the re-allocation of the managerial position. In the third part, some unpleasant events occur in the newly open hotel, causing internal conflicts among the staff. Each chapter has an average length of 3,000 to 4,000 characters, featuring a mostly colloquial, but at times more refined and descriptive language.

Throughout the story of the main female character, Xia Shang, the ongoing crisis in the ST hotel management is gradually revealed. There is a widespread sense of anxiety among the staff for the decisions of the higher levels, which could affect the professional life of all the people working for the hotel. On the background of the working place, the personal lives of the characters are also gradually revealed,

highlighting the difficulties of an increasingly diversified working class trying to make its way in an extremely competitive environment.

The story opens with a panoramic description of the setting, the old State run hotel in the city centre, during an important meeting of the elite of the hospitality sector.

> "18 June 2004, an ordinary yet special summer day. Situated in the heart of the city centre, the old brand State-run five star ST Hotel shone in its splendour under the blazing sun, the newly completed conference centre filled with numerous people, the magnificent crystal chandeliers twinkling with a seductive light. Although outside the building the intense summer heat was nearly unbearable, the air conditioning of the banquet hall made the just entered guest shiver. It was the first Grand meeting of the hotel and restaurant business in China, in the banquet hall gathered the elite of the hospitality business coming from every part of the country. The honoured guests chatted and laughed in small groups of three or five people, while waiting for the party to begin."

The people depicted in the first scene are all part of the "white collar" class: young and successful business men and women, business directors of important hotels, wealthy entrepreneurs willing to enlarge their business or upgrade it to an "elite" level. The main topic in the guests' conversations is the "stars" rating system, which has only recently been introduced in China, with the Chinese hotels still struggling to meet the standards of international hotel brands and win the trust of the public.

While in public situations people are described as mainly concerned with their appearance – properly dressed and properly behaving, busy in cordial, yet superficial, conversations, or trying to build good and potentially useful connection within their sector – the personal traits and traces of the characters' private life soon begin to emerge. When the protagonist Xia Shang, the current ST Hotel public relations managing director, sees Yuchi, the current head of the National Tourism

Administration Office, her mood suddenly changes. The quick few sentences they exchange let the readers grasp there was more than a professional relationship between the two characters in the past.

> "Shang! Can I talk to you for a moment?". [It was] Yuchi's voice.
>
> A warm female voice, with a sad note reached his ears: "I can't talk now, I'm too busy!" […]
>
> "I am sorry.. Shang, there's nothing I can say, or anything I can do, but I really hope you will be happy, because these world will no longer belong to me" Yuchi had a sigh.
>
> "There's nothing you need to apologise for. With his help, you could earn a position at the National Tourism Bureau. I don't have the ability to pave your way, so I can only let it go".
>
> "If you put it this way, there's nothing I can say. This is a present for you, just to leave you a little memory of me", Yuchi said. "This ring is a present I sincerely wanted to give you, please, accept it".
>
> "I don't want to have anything to do with you. Accept it for what reason? Should I be thankful to you? That's not going to happen. To make me hate you? That's not worth it. I will definitely not accept it".

Later on, it would be revealed that Yuchi and Xia Shang had shared a romantic relationship, but Yuchi had left her to chase a more brilliant career. While trying to avoid Yuchi, Xia Shang leaves the banquet hall. But, whilst standing outside the lounge, she overhears the voices of some of the most important personalities in the administration of ST Hotel, discussing the future of the company. From their words, she understands that ST's management is undergoing a profound crisis, with the administration divided into two opposite factions. The hotel holds an old 5 stars ranking, but it does not meet the standards for a luxury hotel, according to the new regulations. Besides, the business has not been lucrative in the last few years, and the ST Hotel has been able to stay open only thanks to a consistent loan. As a result, the

administrative personnel is divided. One faction, headed by the hotel general manager, Jian Dongfang, wants to apply for upgrading the hotel to the higher luxury category, by getting a platinum five stars ranking. However, the upgrade would require a huge renovation work, which could only be possible by applying for another big loan. The second faction, aware that applying for a big loan would expose the hotel to the risk of a bankrupt, if the business is not profitable enough to repay it, strives for the purchase of ST hotel by an international hotel group, before its financial situation grows worse.

> "Xia Shang, holding the breathe, went on listening: "Striving for improvement is undoubtedly good, but it would require large fundings to be invested in it. Selling would be the easiest and the least painful solution. ST would not lose anything more than its name, in which we would need to add the name of the managing group. If we do not sell, we may experience an even more cruel end, [running the risk of] a bankruptcy and a sale at a consistently reduced price. [...]
> In ST's 17 years of activity, there have only been a few years of real profit. Now we are constantly suffering a deficit, especially during the last year, as a result of the SARS, the loss has been disastrous."

The discussion unwillingly heard by Xia Shang highlights the main concerns of the administrative group of the hotel, but, at the same time, it reveals their indifference toward the personal consequences the subordinate staff may have to deal with, which is Xia Shang's main concern. Eventually, the ST general manager, Jian Dongfang, refuses to sell the holel and proposes, as an alternative way, to establish a new management group – which will subsequently be named "The royal club", to take care of the renovation works ST hotel has to go through.

Not all the story is settled in the workplace. At the end of the working day, the setting moves to the city and the protagonist's house, focusing more closely on her private

life. Xia Shang and Han Xue, besides being colleagues, are also close friends. In numerous scenes, the two girls are depicted while going out or seeing each other outside of ST hotel.

At the end of the first part, while their professional future is still uncertain, Xia Shang invites Han Xue for dinner at her place. The descriptions of the settings, the flat and the places the two women regularly hang out in gradually disclose more details on their lifestyle. Xia Shang lives in a modern flat at the twentieth floor of a new building. The neighbourhood is a well served area, with shops, cafes, and various amenities that reflect the social status of the people living in the area. Although Xia Shang does not occupy an important position, her life seems not to lack any comfort. She previously used to share her flat with Yuchi, who had recently left. When Xia Shang opens the door, she founds that he left his keys on the table in the lounge, together with a bunch of flowers and the diamond ring she refused at the banquet. The private settings also make a good background to describe Xia Shang's inner feelings:

> "Chosen and purchased a some cold starters and a few other items, they headed back home. Xia Shang opened the door, and suddenly stops, petrified. On the table just in front of her were the building key and a ring, with a bunch of lily flowers in full bloom, which all together looked to her like a huge joke.
>
> Yuchi had been there, he returned his keys, which he had to, but that ring.... she rushed to the table and picked the ring up. But, unexpectedly, a stabbing pain made her can't help but   release her hand, little wounds on both her fingertips. Blood started flowing out, just like the wound on her heart, silently bleeding, secretly aching."

Xia Shang's reaction to the scene that awaits her at home reveals the piercing pain of her unhealed wounds caused by the ended relationship with Yuchi, as well as her

disappointment for him choosing his career over their relationship. The ache for her sentimental life is gradually mitigated by the presence of Han Xue, who comforts her and manages to distract her from her thoughts. The description of the time the two friends spend together unveils the deeper traits of their personalities, which reflect their family background. The humility of Xia Shang, with her sincere preoccupation with her own and her colleagues' professional future, slightly contrasts with Han Xue's proud personality, which emerges more evidently after a few glasses of wine. Her resolution in pursuing her own career goals is much less concerned with her friends' and colleagues' future, compared to Xia Shang. In the same way, she seems more sympathetic to Yuchi's decision to chase an important professional opportunity, even if this meant hurting Xia Shang's feeling. However, the differences in their temperament do not seem to affect the sincere friendship between the two women.

Office Spy Game depicts the dynamics of a large business from a "behind the scene" perspective. Although the focus of the novel is the working life of its protagonists, AVRIL describes it mostly through the characters' thoughts and feelings. The description of the work environment is detailed, but perceived in a slightly negative way: the atmosphere perceived at the beginning of the novel is filled with lies, feelings of envy toward colleagues and people covering higher position, uncertainty for the professional future, as well as disillusionment for the failure of a sentimental relationship. The narration highlights the atmosphere of tension and competition among the members of the team, drawing an effective picture of how ongoing problems and tension in the working environment can affect an individual's private life. The description of the professional life is balanced by positive feelings in the protagonists' private life, as it can be the friendship and mutual trust between Xia Shang and Han Xue, although the tension for their professional life emerges from their conversation. However, the sense of tension does not abandon the reader until the end of the novel. The anxiety for the competition for the promotion and the concerns for the recent unpleasant events are both used as a device to depict the protagonists' real personality, which emerges in situations of stress.

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One recurrent point raised by the author is the ease with which some members of the staff with a family background or relevant connections can reach important position within the hospitality business. While the promotion of Xia Shang proves that the selection is based on individual merit, some other examples show how it is easier for those who have family relationships within the sector to reach higher positions. However, not all the characters who occupy an important position are described in a negative way. Xia Shang's humility often contrasts with Han Xue's daring ambition. Although in some passages of the novel the author seems to stand on Xia Shang's side, her narration is mostly neutral. Nevertheless, occupying an important position in the management of a large business is not represented as entirely positive or devoid of any risk. The author, through the words of Xia Shang or, at times, other characters, often compares the professional ascent to the act of climbing a mountain. Starting a new professional experience is compared to the act of climbing a mountain. People don't know which obstacles they will find on their way, but only those who prove to be resolute enough will get to the top. The uncertainty of the path makes it a completely new experience every time. Just like being the at the foot of a mountain, working in a less important position involves less benefits and financial gain, but it is more protected from the violent storms and wing the top is exposed to.

Emblematic is the final part, in which the two girls – after the negotiation is concluded and their promotion is finally confirmed – are taught the importance of confidentiality in their positions.

Through the representation of its characters, *Office Spy Game* offers a rich and diversified description of nowadays China middle class professional life, conveyed from the perspective of different social strata. It effectively depicts the difficulties of Xia Shang and Han Xue's career, as well as a variety of the other characters. Although the novel itself is not outstanding, Song Lixuan succeeds in the characterisation of the people encounter through the story. She presents numerous people with a different temperament, different background personal and professional experiences and

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different career goals, providing her readers a range of characters they can easily identify with. The complex plot, with frequent twists and unexpected events, manages to keep the reader hooked up to the story. These can arguably be regarded as the main reasons of the book's success.

Looking at the 'workplace fiction' from a wider perspective, this relatively new sub-genre of urban fiction exposes the social reality behind the dreams of the middle class, within an increasingly capitalistic environment. If in a first moment the economic growth provoked excitement for the new possibilities for professional development, the thrill for the growing market was soon partially replaced by sentiments of anxiety for the struggle for professional fulfilment and the atmosphere of fierce competition that young urban workers experience in contemporary China. The constant struggle for professional fulfilment, which often contrasts with the need to live by the moral values beyond those promoted by the market well represent the challenges the urban youth has to face in Chinese metropolises. The success this genre achieved online is itself proof of how the online readers' professional lives are efficaciously represented by online fiction, often informed by authorial experience, and produced by young writers who share a similar life.

5.2.2 Love and Marriage: Tang Xintian's *The Post-80 generation's New Wedding Era*

Tang Xintian 唐欣恬 is a *Balinghou* (Post-80) female urban fiction writer and a member of the China Writers Association since 2013. Like Song Lixuan, she published her works on *Fragrant Red Sleeves*. The work which determines her popularity online *Business women's subprime love* (Nü jinrongshi de cidai aiqing 女金融师的次贷爱情) can be categorised as a combination of "Love and Marriage" and "Job and career" sub-genres, featuring the story of a woman, working in finance,

who is involved in an affair with a friend of his company director, and subsequently finds out that the head of the company is entangled with a sexual scandal. The novel, as a result of its high ranking on the website, was published in print in 2009. Tang Xintian's later narrative is often more engaged in representing the protagonists' private life and inner struggles, rather than their professional lives and careers. A recurrent theme in her recent fiction is the marital life of the post-80s generation, in the surrounding of a new metropolitan reality propelled by capitalism, struggling with the challenges set by the fast-paced rhythm of life, financial problems and their families often backward mentality.

Naked Marriage – The Post-80 generation's New Wedding Era (Luohun - Balinghou de xin jiehun shidai 裸婚—80 后的新结婚时代)[204] is Tang Xintian's third novel. "Naked marriage" is an expression which emerged from the web around 2008, and is now part of the Chinese netizens' new vocabulary. It refers to the new trend among the Chinese youth to arrange their marriage without buying a house, purchasing a car or wedding rings, or even without any celebrations.[205] As a result of the pressure caused by the traditional emphasis on marriage – which is regarded as an extremely important step, or even as the "realisation" of a man or a woman's life, in Chinese tradition – Chinese younger generations claim more freedom and autonomy on their wedding choices, which do not have to be necessarily related to the ability to afford a public ceremony or guarantee a certain lifestyle but rather to the bond of love between the persons involved, to the point that it has become a 'fashionable' way of getting married among the post-90s generation. The choice of a "naked marriage" can as well be related to the financial difficulties that a consistent part of the contemporary youth faces when having to "guarantee" the future family's financial

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[204] Tang Xintian 唐欣恬, 2008. Naked Marriage – The Post-80 generation's New Wedding Era (Luohun - Balinghou de xin jiehun shidai 裸婚—80 后的新结婚时代) <http://lz.book.sohu.com/serialize-id-16440.html>

[205] The definition of naked marriage I give here is a combination of various definitions and discussions found online. According to a survey conducted on Sina.com in 2009, the 57.7% of the 5085 participants believed that love is more important in a marriage, while house and car can be purchased with a joint effort after the wedding. 35.7% did not agree, replying that some material basis is essential, while the remaining 6.6% was neutral.

security to their spouse before they tie the knot.

Naked Marriage narrates the story of Tong Jiaqian, a young woman at the beginning of her carrier in advertising for a Taiwanese company selling housewares and furniture, who suddenly has to deal with an unexpected pregnancy. Tong Jiaqian and Liu Yiyang are a young couple living in Beijing. After about seven years together, when they are both aged 24, Yiyang leaves to Shanghai on a business trip. Jiaqian decides to surprise him and join him in Shanghai, but unfortunately she forgets to bring along a box of condoms. After unprotected sexual intercourse resulted from excitement of seeing each other when they were supposed to be apart, Jiaqian unexpectedly gets pregnant. Soon after finding out Jiaqian is expecting a baby, the couple decides to settle and arrange their wedding. However, because of their young age and the lack of substantial savings, they are unable to afford a proper wedding ceremony and a house on their own, and therefore decide to move temporarily to Yiyang's family house. In order to guarantee the baby a better life and put aside more savings to buy their own house, Yiyang and Jiaqian resolve to renounce to the wedding ceremony, as well as to their wedding ring and honey moon. After their wedding, Jiaqian and Yiyang move to Liu's family house, commencing a story that the author ironically refers to as "Four generations under the same roof".[206] But after Jiaqian gives birth to her baby daughter, the quarrels with Yiyang's family become more frequent by the day. Yiyang's mother spoils the child and "monopolizes" her, exasperating Jiaqing who is unable to spend much time on her own with her daughter. The behaviour of Yiyang's mother is in sharp contrast with his father and grandmother, who have more traditional views and were hoping for a son. Their resentment for having a girl as their first descendant is highlighted by frequent cold remarks and their attitude toward the little girl, who is treated in an emotionless way. The tension between them and Jiaqian creates an unpleasant atmophere at home and

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[206] Here, the author ironically recalls *Four generations under the same roof* (Sishi Tongtang 四世同堂), a famous novel written by Lao She and published in 1949. The novel narrates the vicissitudes of a family living in a Beijing district in the period of the Japanese occupation (1937-45), and its struggles to find an agreement on how to deal with the occupation.

makes the protagonist feel full of rancour toward her husband's family. Yiyang's inability to stand on her side and come to a decision that would put an end to the family conflicts, gradually persuades Jiaqian that a divorce is the only way out. When the decision seems to be made, Yiyang's friend abruptly steps into her life and unwittingly persuades Jiaqian not to let her marriage fall apart. The couple takes a step back and decide to rent a flat, to be able to leave Liu's family house. However, their life together in the new house proves to be growingly unsatisfactory, the difficulties in taking care of the child, the financial troubles and the problems with each other's families seems to be threatening their relationship day after day.

Naked Wedding is a medium length novel, comprising sixteen rather long chapters, around 10,000 to 15,000 words each. The story is narrated in the first person, by its protagonist, Tong Jiaqian. The beginning of the novel sees Jiaqian rethinking her recent past, which had taken an unexpected turn:

> "If I had known the consequence of the child's birth earlier, that there would be a day I would have wanted to part ways with her father, then maybe I would not have given birth to this child. Or, if I had known the result of marrying this man, I wouldn't have flown wing to wing with him, and that I would have spent day and night with his mother and father, and even his father's mother, then I think I wouldn't have married him. Perhaps, if I had known before that getting pregnant was such an easy thing, and yet that, after getting pregnant, arranging an immediate wedding was such a logical thing, then I think, no matter what, that day I wouldn't have allowed him to press down on my body, without wearing a condom."

Although the title of the novel refers to the wedding, the story actually starts later, about three months after her baby's birth. When Jiaqian thinks of her past, in the introductory lines, one year has passed since she decided to surprise Yiyang during his business trip. The couple is living with Yiyang's family and their newborn child,

Jinjin. That morning, Jiaqian and Yiyang are getting ready to go out, leaving the baby with her grandparents. The couple is about to go to the general register office to get a divorce, without Yiyang's parents knowing. Jiaqian grabs her helmet and gets on Yiyang's motorbike, without saying a word. While he drives she thinks about how they and their relationship had changed. But the edge of Jiaqian's trousers gets stuck in the wheel, forcing her to go back and mend it, while Yiyang decides to go to work, delaying the registration of their divorce. As she opens the door, she overhears her father-in-law talking to her little daughter, while holding her in his arms:

> "[She is just] a slave girl, do you still have to hold her every day?" he said these words to my mother-in-law, but she replied: "I am really fond of this little slave girl. Those like you... old ideas are hard to die".
> I intentionally slammed the door, to inform them that I was back. After that, I just walked to my husband's parents' room: "Mother, father was right, you should not hold Jinjin all the time, it is not good for her growth, she won't be able to stretch her arms and legs." She continued to cradle her up and down. "I can't leave her, if I do, she just cries".
> "Isn't it that you're spoiling her, then?" I turned around and walked to my room, my last words had not reached anyone's ears.

Although for different reasons, Jiaqian struggles with both her father and mother-in-law: while the former has a very traditional mentality and he's still disappointed that his first grandchild was a girl, the latter is deeply fond of the child but tends to spoil her too much and to be overly intrusive: she always holds the baby in her arms, does not leave Jiaqian alone with her child, and always offers her – frequently unwanted – help, claiming that she is more experienced compared to her daughter-in-law. The little three bedroom house does not allow much personal space, making the cohabitation even harder. The bigger and brighter room was occupied by Yiyang's eighty years old grandmother, while his parents, apparently consenting, inhabited a smaller one. The smaller and colder room, which used to be Yiyang's room as a child,

was occupied by Yiyang and Jiaqian. Their room so small that, after Jinjin was born, her cradle was placed in Yiyang's parents room. Jianqian can only endure the pressure by telling herself that they will be leaving soon.

The grandmother didn't seem to care too much, she did not investigate further, and immediately changed the topic: "Jiaqian, are you and Yiyang considering having a second child?"

I choked on a bite of food I had in my mouth: a second child? My life vocabulary seems to have never included this word[207]. Jinjin already won all my maternal love, I shall use a lifetime effort and care to irrigate this most beautiful flower under the heaven. A second child? I cannot do it. Not considering that a single child had already lowered my and Yiyang's living standard. […]

"At the moment we are not planning to have another child". I just said what I wanted to say: "Yiyang and I don't even have half a tile of space, this already made Jinjin have to stay in father's room, if we have another one, I really don't know where we would put him".

"You could stay in my room. My room is [more] spacious".

"Regardless it is a boy or a girl, can we still stay in your room?" I said, without holding my words back.

This time, the old lady hesitated, shook her head, immerse in her thoughts, probably feeling that my words were not appropriate. Willing to nod her head, in her heart still didn't feel sure, she can only stay there stiff, forgetting that the hot soup in front of her was slowly cooling off.

Living with her husband's family, Jiaqian is constantly struggling with their traditional mentality and an almost claustrophobic lack of personal space, in both

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[207] In the original text: 二胎 (ertai), a colloquial expression used to refer to a second pregnancy or a second child.

material and emotional sense. Yiyang's relatives do not allow any private space, the couple shares the smallest room in the house despite having a baby, and Jiaqian is not given any chance to participate in raising her own daughter.

On the other hand, Yiyang's relationship with his wife's parents does not appear to be any better. They seem to blame him for not being 'good enough' for their daughter and for being unable to give Jiaqian and their baby a house and a respectable life. Jiaqian's mother does not miss any chance to remind them how small their room is and how awful it must be living in such a small house with her husband's parents under the same roof.

Soon after the second attempt of getting the documents for the divorce fails, as Jiaqian forgets to prepare a written agreement for the legal separation, Yiyang gets a promotion at work, but has to do several hours overtime to organise the company new plans. When visiting Jiaqian's parents for the first time after the child's birth, Yiyang, again, makes up an apology to leave before lunch, saying that he needs to work. Jiaqian suspects this is just an excuse to conceal an affair with his colleague, and awaits him every night till late. One night, after he returns late from work, Yiyang finally reveals his true feeling about the divorce: he still loves Jiaqian and wants to make an effort to save their marriage, but the whole situation and his wife's obstinacy made him incapable of taking a position against her. Jiaqian, surprised and moved by her husband's frankness, still does not want to take a step back, but decides to postpone the visit to the register office one more time. Although she insists telling her husband that she wants a divorce, she is still uncapable – and nearly ashamed – to inform her family about her decision. Just when her maternity leave is coming to an end, she realises how difficult it would be for her to raise her daughter on her own and, acknowledged Yiyang's renewed tenderness toward her and their baby, she eventually decides to give their marriage a second chance.

Meanwhile, Jiaqian's father's working unit made him know that they are reallocating some properties and Tong's family may have a chance to get a new flat, which he is willing to give to her daughter's family to live in. However, the *rendez-vous* he

organises to give them the good news, turns into a tremendous family argument, when it turns out that Jiaqian's mother does not agree with her husband's arrangements and still regard Yiyang as an unfit partner, unable to give his family the life it deserves. Yiyang leaves Tong's family house alone and does not return home that night. Jiaqian, understanding her husband's feeling, but still cannot help but craving a house on their own, Jiaqian tries to negotiate and persuade Yiyang to accept her father's offer.

"That matter of the house", I gulped down, in any case, it was time to face my destiny. If it was lucky, things would turn out for good, if I was not, than there would be no need to hide it, I had to face that too. "Did you think it over?"

"Yes, I did. Jiaqian, you were right. Before I really neglected you, I did not understand you are a mother, and wish to do your best to be close to your child, and I didn't understand why you couldn't come to grips with my father and grandmother occasional dissatisfaction. Now I became convinced that, my dad and grandma are my close relatives, I can accept whatever they do unconditionally, but this is not the same for you, regarding you and Jinjin, this is the greatest humiliation. Besides, my mother surely spoils Jinjin too much, and this is not good for her growth". Liu Yiyang had a sip of water, I listened in a daze, thinking to myself, is it possible that this thing was solved with just a small effort? Therefore, during Yiyang's break to drink, I did not interrupt him, until he went on speaking: "Furthermore our house is too small, making you stay in such a cold room, and making seeing your daughter so inconvenient, I am really sorry".
"Yiyang, do you mean you agree that we move?" I simply did not dare believing this pastry fell down from the sky right on my head. […] He smiled, with an emblematic look in his face.   "Let's move", he said. "We will move". Yiyang stretched out his hand and put it on mine.

After her initial resistance, Jiaqian's mother eventually agrees to let her daughter and

son in law move in the new house. However, Jiaqian's mother's words offended Yiyang, making him feel humiliated and unwilling to accept her father's offer. The couple eventually decides to withdraw the offer and rent their own flat. However, as soon as they move out, they have to face the difficulties brought about by their life with Liu's family. As a result of the obtrusive presence of Yiyang's mother, who did not let Jiaqian take care of the baby on their own, the happiness for their new house soon turns into concern, when the young parents become aware of their inexperience and the difficulties of taking care of their little daughter. Soon after, their arguments become more and more frequent.

> Jinjin was still crying, Liu Yiyang was also at a loss: "Moving, moving, moving. Did moving out bring anything good? That doctor was right, the child with us is really going to have a hard time!"
> "This is because we left too late. If we had moved earlier, by now we would have know how to take care of our child".
> "When you were on maternity leave, you were always at home. Why didn't you talk to my mother and learnt something from her?"
> "Liu Yiyang, don't try to shirk your own responsibilities. How could I learn? Was I given any opportunity [lit. did I have any space] for learning? Is she only my daughter? Why didn't you learn?"

> Yiyang and I were both tired. We were sitting on each corner of the sofa, between us a wide empty space. A bad odour filled the whole house. Besides my piercing grief for Jinjin, my heart was also filled with overwhelming frustration.

Jiaqian's frustration after realising she is not able of taking care of her own family adds up to the disappointed of going back to work, where her friends and colleagues make her notice she had gained a lot of weight because of the pregnancy. Everyone in the office reminds her that is now time to lose and get back to her previous shape. It is

in this moment that she realises how her child and her husband's family had absorbed all of her energies and her time away from work and she had taken little care of herself after Jinjin's birth. Jiaqian's life, despite the new house away from her husband's family, proves to be not as satisfying as she had expected. They cannot afford paying a nanny to take care of the child when they are both at work, and they have no choice but asking for the help of their mothers once again.

When Yiyang spends the night out after a further quarrel, the situation breaks out again. Jiaqian is now convinced he has an affair and decides to move to Shanghai, seizing an opportunity her company gives her, and taking the child with her. Meanwhile, her best friend Chen Jiaojiao investigates on Yiyang's presumed affair and eventually reveals that the voices about his affair with a colleague were not true. Simultaneously, Yiyang decides to go to Shanghai and look for Jiaqian and their child. With the help of Jiaqian mother, that has reconsidered Yiyang as her daughter's husband, he manages to find them in their Shanghai accommodation and apologises to his wife for his behaviour. Ironically, the troubles between Yiyang and Jiaqian help solving their respective problems with each other's family. Upset by the couple's split, their relatives decide to join their efforts to bring them back together. Finally, Yiyang, Jiaqian and Jinjin move back to Beijing to start their new life in their own flat, in an atmosphere of rediscovered happiness.

The main question that seems to lie behind Tang Xintian's work is whether a "naked marriage" can compromise the happiness of a couple. By narrating Jiaqian and Yiyang's story, the author exposes the dilemmas that urban China's younger generation are facing, both in their private and social lives. The protagonists of *Naked Marriage* have to struggle both with tradition and modernity, with a sort of "unusual" choice – the "naked marriage" – and the conflicts with a traditional family. Before them is a fast-developing economy, but yet they are facing financial difficulties. Although they manage to relieve their problems with the family by moving to a new flat, the complexity of urban life, without the help of their families, discloses endless

new challenges. As soon as they move to the new flat, they realise how living with their parents have made them incapable of taking care of their child without their mothers' help. Their attempt to combine a busy professional life with the need to take care of their own family is more challenging than they had expected, as well as the financial difficulties caused by the expenses of raising a baby are exacerbated by the rent to pay for the new house. The urban reality suddenly burst into Jiaqian's life, after the end of her maternal leave, posing endless new difficulties. The sense of entrapment she felt when living with Yiyang's family is now replaced by a sense of solitude and helplessness. Ironically, it will be her choice of a radical life change, which will see her embarking in an even greater challenge as a single mother in Shanghai, that will make her rediscover the value of the family and bring her back to her life with Yiyang, with a new found self-awareness and the desire to join their effort to earn a better life for themselves and their daughter.

5.2.3   Metropolitan reality and beyond: *supernatural ability* in Urban settings

Lin Han 林晗, pen-name Yuren Erdai 鱼人二代[208], is a *Starting Point* urban fiction writer. His first novel *Reborn for pursuing beauty* (Chongsheng zhuimei ji 重生追美记), published on the website in 2008, recounts the story of a man who, grieving for the loss of the woman he secretly loved, on the day of her wedding gets drunk and dies in an accident. But, he is unexpectedly given another chance and comes back to life. After his awakening, he discovers that not only he can still remember his past life, but also that he now has supernatural abilities. Due to the enthusiastic reception of his first work, Lin Han decided to publish his second novel shortly after the first. *So pure, so ambiguous* (Hen chun hen aimei 很纯很暧昧) was issued on Starting

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[208]   Literally: "Second generation's Fishman".

Point at the end of the same year. The second work exceeded the first one in popularity, sticking among the first positions of Starting Point popularity rankings for several months. *So pure, so ambiguous* is the story of Yang Ming, an ordinary student who, one day, receives a strange present: a pair of magical glasses, which will completely change his life. The glasses, which he receives by a stranger, give him a number of extraordinary abilities, mainly pertaining to his sight – 360° vision, X-ray, far sightedness, night vision – but also including the ability to transform his appearance and foresee the situations of danger he will run into.

So pure, so ambiguous is an extremely long work, published online over nearly six years[209], divided into 6 "volumes" and including a total of 2384 chapters. The first "volume", consisting of 79 chapters is available for free for Starting Point basic members, while the following chapters are available to VIP users only. The numerous chapters, although linked through the story line, can equally be regarded as short free-standing stories, each of which features an independent minor event. Therefore, readers can potentially choose to read one or a few random chapters, without affecting the understanding of the story.

Unlike the Internet writers introduced in the previous section of this chapter, and despite his huge popularity, Yuren Erdai still holds an account on Starting Point, on which all of his works (excluding the first one) are available to his readers – and still publishes his works online. Yuren Erdai's second work, *So pure, so ambiguous,* was selected for the *Starting Point Literary Works Symposium* (Qidian zhongwenwang zuopin yantaohui 起点中文网作品研讨会), organised by the China Writers Association in November 2013.

Classified into the "Supernatural ability" sub-genre, *So pure, so ambiguous* is actually a combination of urban novel, romance, youth and fantasy fiction. The plot is developed on two levels. Before receiving the glasses, Yang Ming is only an ordinary student, conducting an ordinary student life. On this level, the author portrays the

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[209] The first chapter of this work was published on *Starting Point* on 31 July 2008, and the last chapter was issued on 29 April 2013. <http://www.qidian.com/Book/1042235.aspx> Last access: 1 September 2016.

contemporary college life, the city and the society surrounding it, the protagonist's first love, the bitterness and joy of youth's everyday life. When wearing the glasses, Yang Ming acquires the ability to look through what common people normally see, achieving a deeper awareness of the society and the people surrounding him, and helping him in dealing with the difficulties of his own life. Although the narrative is based on Yang Ming supernatural powers, the representation of the protagonist's view through the glasses reveal a slightly critical intent, disclosing social and personal issues behind the appearance. In this sense, the author utilises the magic glasses as a pretext to unmask the society's dark sides.

The first four chapters of the novel introduce the protagonist, Yang Ming, in his college surroundings. Yang Ming is not exactly a keen student, he does not like studying and frequently finds excuses to skip classes. At the beginning of the novel we see him in his class, during his third year, the class representative reproaching him for his behaviour, reminding him that if he does not improve his marks he is not going to be admitted to sit the *Gaokao*, the admission exam for the university. However, Yang Ming does not really believe he has any chance to pass the exam:

> "Pigs can pass the entrance examination for university, I surely can't!" Yang Ming said, with a bitter expression on his face, let him take the university entrance examination? It would be better to let him go up to the sky and catch the moon. For Yang Ming, with the exception of Chinese and literature classes, where he could understand a bit what the teacher was talking about, the other subjects such as chemistry or physics were was just the same as listening to someone speaking an unknown language.

Yang Ming's class student representative introduced in this chapter, Chen Mengyan, is also the girl Yang Ming is in love with. However, he does not dare revealing his feelings because, as she is the most attractive girl in their class, and besides her appearance, an excellent student and very ambitious girl, while he has very poor

results at school and believes he does not have any hope to be admitted to a prestigious university, he is convinced he would never have any chance with her. Moreover, Yang Ming comes from a rather poor family, belonging to the working class, which makes it more difficult for him to be able to afford a prestigious university.

Not getting too close to people from a different social background, especially girls, was a lesson that Yang Ming had to learn early in his life. From his thoughts, we learn about his first love: Su Ya, a pretty and intelligent girl who was in Yang Ming's class on his first year. Yang Ming and Su Ya were sharing the same desk in class, they liked each other and used to spend a lot of time together. When the school professors and Su Ya's family learned about their close relationship – although at a rather innocent stage, as the two were very young – they did all they could to keep them apart. The school called both Yang Ming and Su Ya's parents to warn them against their friendship, which would distract them from their studies, compromising their chance to get a good result in their exams. Su Ya was the only daughter of a wealthy family, which considered her closeness to a poor boy rather inappropriate. The girl finally moved to another school, while his disillusionment about this event greatly influenced Yang Ming's study performance. After he was reproached for his friendship with Su Ya and the girl left his school, he lost motivation for his studies and his results began to worsen. As he no longer felt comfortable with the school environment, he started to frequently skip classes and spend more and more time on the street with a few other guys or in a bar playing pool. When the novel starts, Yang Ming is regarded in the same way as those boys belonging to poor families, who give up their studies at an early age and spend their time on the street, while in class he is considered as a trouble maker, and some of the professors are relieved when he decides to skip classes, instead of disturbing the lesson. Although Yang Ming is a very smart boy, who deliberately decides to give up any effort to achieve good results at school, as a reaction to the incident with Su Ya, nobody seems to remember that, before this, he was one of the best students in his class.

Yang Ming lives with his father, who is a workman in a nearby factory. His income is barely enough to support himself and his son, so he always makes sure Yang Ming has had enough food before starting his meals. His feelings of guilt for not being able to guarantee his son a decent life add up to his feelings of shame for having been too strict with him when he was contacted from the school dean about his friendship with Su Ya, and thus indirectly being the cause of his son's failures at school.

At noon, Yang Ming went back home for lunch. […] No matter how much work there was left at   the factory, father Yang would always return at home on time to prepare Yang Ming something to eat.

Looking at the piping hot dishes in front of him, Yang Ming reminds himself that he should put his best efforts to his study. He didn't really think that he didn't want to   study,   but rather he already felt like his abilities were not enough for his ambitions.

"Big Ming, aren't the courses at school very strict?" Father Yang kindly sat by the dining table, every day waiting until Yang Ming had finished his meal, before starting to eat.

[…] "Dad, you should eat too", Yang Ming said a little awkwardly: "School is not bad".

"There's half a year left, I will try hard, this way maybe I will be able to go to some   university, if this is not the case, I will be a worker for all my life, like my father". Father Yang sighed. He knew the reason why Yang Ming had become so dissolute, and also knew he should apologise to Yang Ming for that matter, so he hadn't try to force him: "If this year you really can't

pass the exam, we will repeat the year and then succeed, dad will pay for your fees!"

In the afternoon, as usual, Yang Ming went to school, father Yang went back to work. He had already given his "Er'ba" bike to Yang Ming, he went to the factory on foot. Actually, Yang Ming's school was closer than his factory, but

he had done so, so that Yang Ming could get back to school faster, and make up some time to revise his homework. That day, at the sight of his dad's slightly stooped back, Yang Ming's heart was deeply moved.

The description of Yang Ming's family living condition is the portrait of the working class, which is hardly able to afford life most basic commodities. The only means of transport they own is an old bicycle, which Yang Ming's father gives him, in order to save some time on his way back to school and get there on time to revise his classes. Despite the difficulties, Yang Ming's father shows a great solicitude in making sure his son has a good meal everyday and to offer him the best possible conditions to make the best of his studies. Their conversations, nevertheless, appear filled with an unspoken sense of guilt toward each other, the sense of shame of his father for causing his failures and his inability to apologise to his son, and Yang Ming's abashment for his bad results at school, despite his father's efforts.

In spite of his appearance as a careless boy, Yang Ming is actually very responsive to the problems of the lower social strata and the injustice they have to face. After having dinner with his father, Yang Ming is on his way back to school when he notices a group of boys of about his age, trying to intimidate an old street vendor and extort some money from him, in exchange for the protection from other gangs. The old man reminds Yang Ming of his father and his tireless efforts to support his family. Although the man is being attacked by three guys while he is alone, Yang Ming cannot ignore what is happening and decided to help the old vendor. He eventually gets involved in a fight, from which he remains nearly uninjured, but his glasses get smashed and break into pieces. The old man, noticing Yang Ming's rage mixed with sadness for having broken such a precious object, gives him a pair of glasses as compensation for his help, but disappears soon thereafter.

"Ah!" Yang Ming just then thought of the issue of the brick, alarmed, quickly stretched his hand and reached his overcoat side pocket, and took out the box containing his glasses. The box was already smashed, it had obviously

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been broken by Huang Mao.

[…] "Young man, don't be upset..." The old man saw that Yang Ming was somewhat ashamed, because he had just smashed his glasses into pieces.

"How can I be not upset! Over one hundred yuan!" Yang Ming said, clearly distressed. It was not because Yang Ming cared too much about money, but because is father's salary was not high at all, in order to get him a pair of glasses, they had to live frugally for quite a few days.

"......" The old man had a sigh: "Forget about it. Young man, to show my gratitude to you, I will give you a pair of glasses. But don't be upset".

[…] He took the little glasses box that the old man was passing over, opened it and looked inside. To his surprise, it was that kind of tiny glasses that scholars wear, similar to contact lenses, hence amazed asked: "Contact lenses?"

Nor having received any answer for quite a while, Yang Ming looked up, but the old man was no longer there. He had already disappeared without a trace, the things scattered on the ground disappeared with him.

"How did he vanish so quickly? Is it possible that he was one of those legendary masters coming from somewhere beyond this world?" Yang Ming shook his head, mocking himself, then conveniently put the little box with the glasses in his coat pocket, without giving it too much thought.

Yang Ming is puzzled over the old man's strange gift and his sudden vanishing, but does not give it much importance, he casually puts the little box in his pocket and goes back to school. When the professors announces that there will be a test, Yang Ming, out of habit, reaches his coat side pocket to take out his glasses. Just then, he realises that he no longer has his glasses, which were smashed in the fight, and is reminded of the old street vendor's present. Out of curiosity and with the urge to complete the test with a good result, wishing to give his father some relief from his concerns, he decided to wear the strange glasses and see if they could be of any help.

Yang Ming automatically took out the box with his glasses from his pocket. The glasses were his tool for cheating [on the tests], he usually wore them only when he was playing pool or during an exam. As soon as he took the box out, he realised that his glasses had been smashed into pieces by that Huang Mao. [...]

The relationship between Yang Ming and Zhang Bin was not bad. During the previous tests, Yang Ming had copied from him, wearing his glasses. Zhang Bin, finished his test, would put the answer sheet on a side, to make it more convenient for him to look at it. But today, without glasses, Yang Ming, even if making a great effort to focus on it, could not see it.

At first, Yang Ming just wanted to give up, but suddenly thought of that pair of contact lenses that the old man had given to him.
Yang Ming extracted that little box containing the contact lenses from his coat pocket.

[…] Yang Ming diligently looked ahead, wishing to distinguish Zhang Bin's hand writing on his answer sheet. Suddenly, something really strange happened! Yang Ming just focused on what he had in front of him and then, just like looking through the zoom of a fully automatic camera, the characters on that sheet seemed to get closer and closer, as well as becoming bigger and more focused. To his surprise, Yang Ming could see very clearly!

Yang Ming is amazed in finding out that the glasses he received from the street vendor greatly improve his vision and starts pondering over how he can use them to improve his performance at school. After this episode, Yang Ming will gradually discover all the unusual abilities that the glasses give him: they did not only improve his vision, but made him able to see at great distance and through the objects and any

kind of material. Thanks to the glasses, Yang Ming could now see what was happening in a nearby room, distinguish people hiding or moving in the dark, as well as being able to read the pages of a book without opening it. Although Yang Ming is frequently tempted to use his newly achieved abilities to cheat on his exams or to look through girl's clothes, he still tries to restrain himself and make a good use of his powers. He still keeps his promise to become a better student and revises with his maths teacher everyday after school. However, as he gets more accustomed to the abilities given him by the magic glasses, his personality begins to change, he becomes more self-confident and at times more insolent. He now knows that he can overcome all the difficulties of his everyday life with the help of his glasses and all of his insecurities and shyness seem to be gradually fading away.

Yang Ming represents the typical adolescent of his era, he does not have any particular talent or ability, he is not particularly attractive and he has a rather common family background. His vicissitudes in the story stick to real youth life experiences and aspirations. Yang Ming, at this stage, is facing the typical challenges of growing up, starting to look at the relationship with the other sex in a new way, while bearing the pressures of student life, with the most important exam of their life, the *Gaokao*, approaching at the end of the school year. The contradictions of his thoughts, the ambiguities of his frequently "unchaste" imagination and his attempts to approach the girls he likes, and his vanity are also typical of his age.

Although the genre this novel belongs to is somewhat halfway between urban and fantasy fiction, the portrayal of real life moments prevail on the descriptions of his supernatural abilities, which are mostly used as a device to describe what a naked eye is unable to see, or to analyse things beyond their appearance. The "ambiguity" mentioned in the title of the novel, which is so recurrent in the protagonist's thoughts and his way to deal with certain situations, is also the ambiguity of modern society with all its illness, the sometimes deceitful relationship between people, the social prejudice and injustice that affects the life of the lower strata of society.

Overall, *So pure, so ambiguous* well depicts the life of nowadays urban youth,

stressing the attention on both the pressures and the atmosphere of competition they have to face during the final years of their high school, which frequently becomes their only priority, regarding their commitment for their studies as more important then their both physical and psychological development and their everyday needs. It also depicts the life of "exemplary students" in opposition to the life of the gangs of street rascals, boys coming from less fortunate families who do not have the means to give them the access to a good education and try to make their way into society through their reputation on the street, or through a more humble occupation. *So pure, so ambiguous,* although it lacks the artistic value traditionally ascribed to literary works in terms of accuracy in the use of the language and the construction of the story, it still manages to offer an effective portrait of urban youth life, as well as giving voice to some social groups that often remain unrepresented in literary works, and it does it while offering an engaging plot, which has been able to keep its readers hooked to the story through the nearly six years of its serialisation online.

5.3   The representation of contemporary China's urban life through online published fiction

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the extremely strict and ever changing cultural policies and the entanglement of the literary establishment with the leading class has greatly influenced China's cultural and literary life. Although the control on the publications and the publication environment have changed to a great extent in the last decades, the influence of the previous decades of propaganda and cultural control is still visible in the cultural products issued by the members of the cultural establishment. With the development of the new media, the Internet, together with the emergence of a more liberalised cultural market, offered a way out to those authors who did not wish to be ideologically and politically "committed" in the

writing of their works. However, in the last few years, the establishment has come to terms with the emerging forms of literature, acknowledging the value of works regardless their ideological significance.

But, in which features lies the "literariness" of a text in the contemporary China's literary landscape? According to the guidelines of the China Writers Association – deprived from their political and ideological meanings – the most important features of a literary work are two: its ability to effectively portrait reality and to transmit the values and the spirit of its time.

As has been observed in the previous pages, the three selected novels offer an effective portrait of contemporary China's urban reality, each of which focuses on a different aspect of everyday life.

The first work, *Office Spy Game*, depicts the professional life of the recently emerged Chinese upper middle class. The characters featured in the novel are all "white collar" professionals, occupying managerial or executive positions within the luxury hotel business. The main concerns of the protagonists are related to the harsh competition that characterises this social group, their longing for a promotion or a further step in their career and their attempts to survive an increasingly demanding system. However, the fierce competition within their working environment seems to cause a "dehumanisation" of their personal relationships: the business world that surrounds them is depicted as a ruthless world, in which there is no space for human feelings. The elite, occupying the top of the hierarchy in the business do not consider the consequences of their decisions on the life and career of the subordinate staff, those who yearn for a promotion do not lose any chance to denounce their colleagues mistakes, in order to lessen their chances of being upgraded, and professional choices often prevail on personal life decisions, influencing their relationships with friends and family, as well as their sentimental life. When dealing with the frauds and other unpleasant events which occurred in the hotel, the two protagonists realise that, as a result of the tension about the upcoming promotions and layoffs within the hotel staff, the reciprocal trust between their colleagues has been compromised, while everyone

is too busy safeguarding their own interests. The contrast between appearance and reality is a recurrent theme in the novel.

The focus of this novel on the contemporary white collar working life gives an efficacious description of how an overly competitive working environment can absorb and influence the totality of a person's life. In order to reorganise the work of the hotel before the opening under a different management, the protagonists have to work long hours, and even after their working hours, they cannot help but taking their professional concerns with them. From the conversations between Xia Shang and Han Xue, after drinking some wine, it emerges how their sentimental life is influenced by their work and how the ambitious Han Xue is struggling to find a compromise between being fair to her colleagues and achieving her own goals. Although they do not have to deal with practical or financial issues that the majority of the population faces, their life is a continuous tension between morality and the need of being professionally competitive. Within the bitter world depicted by Song Lixuan, the friendship between the two protagonists seems to be the only sincere relationship in a huge play in which everyone else is acting a part. The portrait of the hotel business from a "behind the scene" perspective, with all its tensions and contradictions, offers an example of the competitiveness and ruthlessness of a working environment in which the financial gain and prestige occupy an increasingly important position, and the struggle of a developing social group which faces similar obstacles.

The growing urbanisation of the Chinese contemporary society not only influences the city dwellers' professional life, but it also has a great impact on the citizens' personal and family life.

Personal and sentimental life is the focus of the second discussed work of fiction, Tang Xingtian's *Naked Marriage: The Post-80 Generation New Wedding Era*. As can be inferred from the title, the novel deals with the issues that characterise the sentimental and marital life of the post-80 generation, dealing with problems that are relatively new to the previous generations. Tong Jiaqian and Liu Yiyang are a young couple living in Beijing. When Jiaqian finds out she is going to have a baby, the

couple decides to get married. However, due to the unexpected pregnancy, Jiaqian and Yiyang are not able to afford all the expenses that a wedding implies. Therefore, in order to give the baby a better life, they decide not to spend money on unnecessary things, renouncing to a wedding ceremony, expensive purchases and a honeymoon, but to simply get married and move to Yiyang's family house.

Their "unusual" choice has to face the reaction of Yiyang's family, which is not very kind and welcoming to their son's wife, and interferes with every aspect of their marital life. Jiaqian becomes a sort of servant of her husband's family and is charged with any kind of housework and responsibilities, as to pay back her debt to the hosting family. The situation gets worse when the baby is born: Jiaqian's mother in law considers her too inexperienced to take care of the baby and insists on imposing her own presence and methods, while Yiyang's father and grandmother nearly ignore the child, out of their disappointment at having a girl as their first descendant. The situation at home also deteriorates the relationship between the two protagonists, who plan to get a divorce. They eventually save their marriage and rent a flat for the three of them, but the difficulties they have to face seem to be insurmountable.

The adversities that Jiaqian and Yiyang have to face in Tang Xingtian's novel touch upon a number of issues. A recurrent theme is the contrast between traditional mentality and modern life. Although not in an explicit way, Jiaqian's family seems to reproach Yiyang for not being able to provide a house and financial security to his own family: Jiaqian's mum does not miss any chance of reminding her how small and cold the room in which they live is and how Yiyang's income must be low, and does not meet their expectation of their daughter's lifestyle. In Chinese tradition, the man is often regarded as being responsible for the house and his future family's well being, and a man who is not able to provide the means for a respectable life can still face more difficulties in finding a wife. Despite his lack of a solid financial background, Jiaqian still accepts to marry Yiyang. This narrative choice indirectly advocates in favour of the growing number of young men which have to face this kind of difficulties, stressing the feelings that bring a couple together, which need to be regarded as more important than the material wealth.

On the other hand, in Yiyang's father and grandmother's eyes, Jiaqian is guilty for having got pregnant before a regular marriage and having given life to a girl. Despite decades of communist propaganda on the equality of boys and girls, the old generations are sometimes still influenced by the idea that the birth of a boy is somewhat more valuable than the birth of a girl. Jiaqian's words toward her husband's grandmother – when she asked if she would react the same way if the second child is a boy or a girl, and when reminding her that she should not expect her grandson to be able to guarantee his son a future, since he was unable to provide a house for his wife and first child – contain a harsh critique to the idea of male superiority.

The living conditions in Yiyang's family are rather restrictive, as the couple has to live in the former Yiyang's room, which is clearly too small to host them and their daughter, whose cradle is therefore placed in Yiyang's parents room.

The period in which the couple decided to rent a flat coincides with the end of Jiaqian's maternity leave. The financial issues they have to deal with are further exacerbated by the rising costs of renting a private house in a convenient area in Beijing and the cost of childcare. Nevertheless, Jiaqian and Yiyang also have to face the difficulties of raising a baby without the help of Yiyang's mother. Despite Jiaqian's various attempts at taking care of her own daughter, the constant presence of her mother in law resulted in Jiaqian and Yiyang's inability to deal with the everyday issues of raising their own baby: Jiaqian never had a chance to spend time with her baby without Yiyang's mother around, while Yiyang is too busy with his work to take care of her.

The main question that seem to lie behind *Naked Marriage* is whether or not the financial difficulties can compromise the happiness of a couple and their marital life. Although all the events in Tang Xingtian's novel seem to infer that the hardship the protagonists have to face are compromising the happiness of their life together, their feelings toward each other eventually prevail and they decide to stay together.

Tang Xingtian's novel can be regarded as an effective portrait of contemporary Chinese youth life on a multifaceted perspective. Her work deals with questions

regarding their relationship, their financial issues related to buying or renting their own place, their difficulties in dealing with each other family as well as conciliate their professional life with their parental life. Without denying the obstacles to a young couple's independence in contemporary urban reality, she delivers an encouraging message to the younger generations that struggle between the need for financial stability and building their own family. The portrait of the contemporary life she offers through her novel is by no means edulcorated, but completely honest on the difficulties of everyday life, but still able to deliver values that go beyond the material possessions and the established cultural beliefs. Her characters are ordinary people that anyone can identify with, both in their disillusionment about the obstacles of their life and their constant effort to improve their own conditions. Her message of self-determination for contemporary young women is particularly powerful: they are not worth any less than men and they can still reach their own goals without the help of a male counterpart, even if this implies a divorce or everyday life hardships. Still, her work pays a tribute to the importance of the family and highlights how, in the author's view, the importance of its role is should not be compromised because of the development of modern society.

The third novel, Yuren Erdai's *So pure, so ambiguous*, is different from the first two discussed works mainly in two aspects: firstly, it portrays the life of a different social group – young students in the last years of their high school, approaching the *Gaokao* – which is not represented in the first two novels. Secondly, the story contains elements belonging to the fantasy genres: the protagonist of the story, Yang Ming, acquires supernatural abilities after an old street vendor gives him a pair of magic glasses. The story is narrated from a common person's perspective. Yang Ming is a common boy, he does not excel in anything nor has any particular ability, and lives a rather ordinary student life.

He is not a brilliant student at school and frequently decides to skip classes, to spend time with his friends on the street of in some kind of leisure activity, such as playing pool. The girl he is in love with, his class student representative, often reproaches him

on his behaviour at school, and tries to encourage him to study and improve his results.

Yang Ming belongs to a rather poor working class family. He lives with his father, who works in a nearby factory, and takes care of his everyday life and his education. They do not own anything, apart from an old bicycle, but his father makes great efforts to give his son the best possible life.

When he receives a pair of magic glasses, as a compensation for helping a street vendor attacked by a gang of young boys, his life begins to change. His new abilities enable him to easily overcome any everyday difficulty and to avoid the attack of the gangs he's been involved in a fight with, which are seeking a revenge.

The life of Chinese high school students, narrated through the life of an external narrator, is here depicted without any filter, in both its positive and negative aspects. The episodes settled in the classrooms well represent the concern of the upcoming exam, the pressure of their family who hope they will accepted in the best possible institution, the competition between the most ambitious students and the disillusionment of those who do not believe they can pass it. Besides their studies, the students in Yang Ming's class are portrayed in the salient traits of their temperament, their relationship with the other classmates and their family background. The scarcity of the results of some of the students is often associated with their family background: while wealthy families tend to encourage and support their children more, with the hope of a brilliant career, less wealthy family are less able to afford a prestigious education and hence are more likely to accept mediocre results. The school, as well as the families of some of the best students, tend to discourage too close friendships between children coming from different backgrounds, as the episode of Yang Ming and Su Ya shows. Despite his young age, Yang Ming is already rather disillusioned by his relationship with the opposite sex or the perspective of a brilliant career after his studies. However, when he discovers the power of the magic glasses received by the old street vendor, his temperament and his attitude toward other people gradually change and he becomes more confident on the possibilities of improving his school performance, even if this implies cheating on his tests by using his glasses, until he

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can make up for the time he lost in his first two years, and gains a stronger self-confidence in his relationship with other people. The protagonist's thoughts and the other characters' feeling are also depicted in an open and unmediated way, in the contradictions of adolescent life, its sometimes "unchaste" imagination, contrasting with the "purity" of their experiences, the hesitations in ambiguous moments and conjectures on the reasons of someone else's unexpected acts. The description, free of any prejudice, can be seen as the incarnation of the desires and hopes of young students, looking for their place within the contemporary society. Although Yang Ming can potentially make use of his abilities for "illicit" purposes, he always seems to stick to a sort of popular morality and never passes the boundaries this imposes. The X-ray vision is often used to unmask people's undisclosed feelings and the negative aspects of the society beyond its appearance.

Despite their diverse focus and the different social groups they represent, the three works deal with some common themes. The most recurrent topic is arguably the contrast between appearance and reality which is embodied by the relationship between colleagues in *Office Spy Game*, in the continuous tension between real feelings and the respect for older people in Jiaqian's everyday life with her husband's family in *Naked Marriage,* and the opposition of how the reality appears whether Yang Ming is wearing or not wearing the magic glasses, in *So pure, so ambiguous*. Another recurrent theme is the antithesis of the characters' desire and their morality, in their uninterrupted struggle between "what they want" and "what is the right choice". On a professional level, this contrast is mainly expressed through the loyalty toward the people the characters are working with and the integrity of their work. In Tang Xingtian's novel, the contrast between desire and morality is mostly expressed on an emotional level, through the protagonist's speculations of what would be the best choice for her baby and the selfish desire of having her daughter for herself. Her conviction of wanting a divorce from her husband also vacillates when thinking of the future of her baby and her ability to support both of them with her own income. However, for all the duration of the novel, Jiaqian struggles to find the best possible

compromise and achieving a happy and peaceful life, despite the difficulties. In *So pure, so ambiguous,* the contrast between desire and morality is exemplified by Yang Ming's use of his supernatural power: although at times he surrenders to the temptation of using his abilities for "illicit" purposes – as it can be looking through Mengyan's clothes – he tries to control himself in most circumstances.

The social strata depicted in the three novels are in an ascending order: the elite and "white collar" class in the first novel, the middle class in the second, the students and the working class in the last one. Although facing different obstacles, the characters of the three works all seem to share a sense of uncertainty in a fast paced world and a background continuous tension and sense of competition which makes them feel inadequate when facing the biggest difficulties of their lives. The fast changing urban life seems to be questioning the traditional values of Chinese society and to put to a test their ability to adapt to always new challenges, regardless of the social group they belong to.

The three novels together offer an effective and detailed representation of contemporary China's metropolitan life, covering all the social layers and the specific issues they have to deal with. As it can be seen from the analysis of their works, the three writers, although with different results in terms of artistic maturity, all succeed in the characterisation of the protagonists of their works, in both the representation of their life and their personal feelings. Extending these considerations to the wider online literary field, it can be reasonably argued that online urban fiction writers can deliver an effective portrait of the society they live in through their online published works. Despite the various personal and social problems depicted in the novels, the three discussed works deliver positive and optimistic messages to their audience, distinguishing online urban narrative from the pessimism of the almost contemporary urban fiction produced by the "Generation X". The authors reveal a deep awareness of the social issues that affect contemporary society, the new challenges posed by a growingly capitalistic urban environment, often in sharp contrast with tradition, sometimes manifested by the misunderstanding with the previous generations, grown

up in a completely different social context.

5.4 Conclusion: Toward a new system of values or mere consumerism?

A discussion of the "literariness" of online fiction works and the effectiveness of their portrait of contemporary reality cannot be separated from the discussion of the values these works transmit to their readers.

As has been noted through the analysis of these three Internet novels, and the discussion of Wen Yu's *Caught in the Web* in chapter three, the representation of contemporary society that emerges from online narratives is characterised by a sense of loss of the old values, as a result of the fast paced urbanisation and social developments, and a struggle for the search for new values that would better suit this reality.

What are the common values that the three analysed works transmit to their readers? As shown by the recurrence of the opposition between appearance and reality, the three works all attach a great importance to honesty in human relationship. The protagonists of the works, despite their failures and mistakes, are all "positive" characters, struggling against an unfair society that tends to penalise its weakest members. The protagonists of *Office Spy game* try to survive within an extremely competitive environment, without renouncing their professional integrity or compromising their friendship. Jiaqian, in *Naked Marriage,* tries to be reasonable when dealing with the unfair ideas of his husband's family, but sometimes cannot refrain from expressing her own feeling. The frankness of Yiyang toward her and their baby is also regarded as extremely important, and the suspicions on his loyalty cast doubt on the future of their marriage. Her contrasts with her father-in-law and his mother can also be regarded as her personal struggle of the social injustice toward

women, which characterised traditional society but is no longer justifiable in contemporary times.

Yang Ming, the main character of *So pure, so ambiguous,* although he is not a diligent student and spends most of his times on the streets with his friends, is a kind-hearted boy who is not indifferent to social injustice, as it is demonstrated by his choice to help the street vendor.

Furthermore, the three works, and especially Tang Xingtian's and Yuren Erdai's novels, contain an explicit condemnation of social prejudice, although on a different level – which incarnates the unfair traditional ideas about female children in the first case, the members of the society taking advantage of the weaker in the second. The values related to the family and friendship are also given an important place in the novels. The protagonist's efforts for achieving a better life are not represented as the realisation of a selfish desire of a comfortable life, but they turn towards a the pursue of happiness and stability for the whole family.

The characters featured in the analysed works also show a great commitment to their own goals, both on a professional and a personal perspective. Even Yang Ming, after discovering the powers of his new glasses, keeps his promise to make an effort to become a better student. The self-commitment in the characters life can also be related to a need for self-affirmation of their individuality, through the achievement of their own goals.

The analysed novels, although playfully entertaining, reveal anxieties about an at times uneasy acquiescence of a fast changing urban environment and the challenges it poses to professional, academic and personal fulfilment, often leading to a sense of apprehension over self-positioning in a constantly transforming society. A consistent part of urban fiction published online is informed by author experience, as Internet writers show a tendency to glean the subjects for their narratives from their own life experience. Although it is common to construct fictional narratives on the basis of real life experience, the narrations are real enough for their readers to find a reflection of their own life in it.

While some characters featured in the novels are reminiscent of the myth of the *xiaozi* (petty bourgeois) which emerged with earlier urban fiction after China's economic outburst, the focus here is not on the commodities the capitalist society has provided urban citizenry with, but rather on what it has deprived them of, in terms of both material possessions and moral values.

Although the city itself is usually neither portrayed in a positive nor negative way – perhaps with its negative aspects slightly prevailing on the positive, if any – the city plays a vital role in the constitution of the subject, through the delineation of public and private space.[210] This is particularly true in the second work, with the city costs being the reason of the protagonist's lack of personal space. Although the city is not always explicitly present in the narration, it deeply influences the characters' lives. If in *Office Spy Game*, the public element prevails on the private life, in *Naked Marriage* the city, although rarely present in the narration, is internalised in all the aspects of Jiaqing's life. As it happens in some examples of recent urban fiction within the conventional market, this literature portrays "not the physical city, but the way it is internalised in the consciousness of the individual".[211]

If urban narratives published online are reminiscent of some of the aspects identified by Robin Visser in his analysis of earlier urban fiction from the 1980s and 1990s, online published works in the first decade of 2000s lack the political and historical dimension that characterises post-socialist urban fiction. While one of the main motives of 'loss' and 'melancholia' in post-socialist fiction is identified in the shift from a socialist to a capitalist society, urban fiction published online is characterised by a more blurred sense of loss of moral values, at time balanced by a stronger identification with urban society. This is not surprising, given that young Internet writers – mostly born after the 1980s – have not experienced socialist society, while they are more accustomed with the developing capitalist society in comparison with their predecessors.

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[210] Visser, Robin. *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-Socialist China*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010. 234-235
[211] Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside. 225*

Although Internet fiction has always been regarded as only delivering the material values of an increasingly consumerist society, a close analysis of online literary works shows how not only the celebration of the materialistic values of consumer society are not necessarily present, or even represented as an important part of the life of fictional characters, but also that the traditional values embodied by conventional literary works survive in online published fiction, although sometimes re-elaborated in a different way. The urban narratives emerging online suggest an ongoing inquiry into contemporary China's morality, identified with persistent ethical questions still struggling to be fully explicated, which arise in conjunction with an increasingly capitalistic society.

To conclude, I argue that the analysis of the selected examples supports the idea that Internet fiction not only can transmit the values and the spirit of its time, but also depicts effectively the real life of a large portion of the population, proposing a narrative that faithfully depicts the real life of contemporary China's city dwellers. Devoid of any ideological content, urban fiction characters are common people sharing the same concerns of their readers, rather than heroes of inspiring models to follow. The social commitment of Internet urban fiction writers takes the shape of a social denounciation of the difficulties faced by the new generations in a fast changing urban reality. In this sense, online urban narratives tend to develop a form of social denounce that, although still in an immature form, calls for new moral values, without necessarily rejecting traditional values.

Chapter 6 – Walking into the literary field?

In nearly twenty years history of the development of Chinese Internet literature, the online literary production has mostly been regarded as a form of popular literary entertainment, with the only aim to entertain and satisfy Internet users' reading pleasure. Due to the popular nature of the phenomenon, the quality of online-produced works was considered inevitably inferior to conventional literature and thus not worth consideration by the established literary world. However, since the publication of the first Internet literature works, a number of changes have occurred in the Chinese online literary scene. Although in comparison with other (especially Western) countries, new forms of literary experimentation hardly developed on the Chinese Internet, important changes occurred in the works' production, diffusion and reception. On the one hand, the advent of the market on literary platforms has partially altered the dynamics of online literary production, changing the relationship between online writer and reader and the way the latter can enjoy a literary product and, in some measure, making it closer to conventional literary production. On the other hand, the online literary scene has been attracting a growing attention from the established literary world. The recent decision of the China Writers Association to allow online-produced literary work to participate in national literature awards normally devoted to conventional works, followed by the admission of Internet writers in the professional organisation, and then the establishment of a dedicated Internet Writers Association are all signs of this new established interaction.

Wen Yu's *Caught in the Web* participation to the Lu Xun Literary Award was the first example of what was likely to become a common trend: the established literary world was trying to keep an eye on the online literary scene, while the most ambitious web writers strive for the success in the conventional literary world as well as the approval from the official literary field, represented by the Association. The recognition of

some online published works by the establishment confirms an ongoing maturation process in the online field. A close reading of the novels also highlights the inadequacy of the canonized idea of web literature as it is represented in the existing scholarship and outlines the attempt of some web writers to gain some approval outside the online scene they belong. In this scenario, it is possible to suggest that the online and offline literary fields are gradually merging together in the measure in which the Internet serves as a platform of launch for talented writers, whose success is pending on the approval from the conventional literary world.

6.1 Online and offline fiction: is recent Internet fiction closer to the conventional idea of novel?

In the late 1990s, when the first Internet literature works were published on the Chinese web, Internet literature was celebrated mainly for its differences with conventional literature and the sense of freedom associated with online publication, as an alternative to the conventional publishing channels. Internet users could, in fact, reach a wide public without going through any editorial selection, they could express themselves freely and even interact with their public, in the course of the production of their work. This, of course, had a major impact on the perception of the online literary scene, both from a general public perspective – with consumers amazed by the possibilities of the new medium, and the establishment, with part of it supporting the development of this alternative literary field as capable to bring some fresh air within a literary field increasingly distant from the general public, and another reproaching its flaws in terms of artistic quality, as a result of the lack of any editorial selection.

As has been observed through the previous chapters, a great deal of the online

published fiction at the end of the 1990s was substantially different from what was expected (by the establishment) to be 'proper' literature, as well as from many of the works published on the web a decade later. While in the early years the online publication of one's own writings was closely associated with amusement, as the online literary scene evolved, a number of writers has engaged in more serious literary ambitions, resulting in more 'mature' works. Although the Internet has been prematurely celebrated for releasing the limits of literary production as it was seen until the turn of the century, it was early clear that the newly developed literary field could not stay untouched from external influences for long, primarily connected to the interactive nature of its mean of publication. While the literary establishment was still keeping at a safe distance from the 'vulgarity' of online published literature, some entrepreneurs and the major publishing houses saw the potential of the Internet as a market testing ground, and started working together to what later resulted in the extremely successful Internet literature business model. It has already been discussed how the adoption of this model by the major literary websites has abruptly erased part of the innovation brought about by Internet literature in its early years: while the "pay-to-read-online" system was making its way in the Chinese cyberspace, the barriers between readers and writers rejected by the upholders of Internet literature a few year earlier were there again, and the virtual separation between 'producers' and 'consumers' operated by this model made the interaction between the two parts increasingly difficult. If, on the one hand, the Internet literature business model eroded the perceived freedom of the online publication, on the other hand, it greatly boosted the growth and development of an online literary field. Although the publication of an online literary work was no longer free from any constraint, literary websites provided a nearly boundless space for literary publication, while organising the contents in a clear and easily accessible way. At the same time, by requiring their users to pay a small sum in order to access the works on their databases, literary websites were also able to provide a remuneration to their most successful writers. Setting aside the momentary illusions of absolute freedom perceived at the breakout of the phenomenon, Internet literature gradually moves closer to the conventional

literary field, in its modes of production and consumption, with the literary websites working as editors and publishers, while writers and readers are brought back to their traditionally opposite positions. It is true, however, that the readers play a key role in 'guiding' the production of the most appreciated genres, as the readers' response is much more immediate online that it could ever be through the conventional means of publication.

Although the Internet literature business model has been broadly criticised for promoting the production of low-quality, or even vulgar, literary products [add note], it is within this system that some of the most influential Internet writers have published their works. If, on the one hand, entertainment products of questionable quality are filling the pages of the major literary websites, the online publication system also welcomes the publication of more 'serious' literary works. Amongst a greatly varied production, both in terms of content and artistic quality, some authors have actually managed to emerge and get noticed by the literary establishment, who started paying growing attention to what was happening online shortly after the growth caused by the new system became unmistakeable.

Although a consistent proportion of writers and readers use the online literary websites to seek amusement and entertainment, some writers use these platforms as a medium through which to fulfil their literary ambition. Writers seeking to produce 'serious' literature tend to get closer to the conventional idea of fiction in their contents and literary form, mainly producing realistic genres. And it is precisely these realistic works that first attract the attention of the China Writers Association. As has been discussed earlier in these pages, the first selected works, short listed for literary awards or chosen for activities promoted by the Association, show a clear preference for urban fiction. This is not surprising, as urban fiction, and realistic genres in general, are more easily fit within the existent system than more innovative genres. However, as the analysis of the works show, urban fiction published online provides a new representation of contemporary China's reality, depicted from a viewpoint that stands amongst common people, and not above them. The recurrent themes in the

selected works also reveal a new perception of the 'social responsibilities' associated with literature, highlighting the evolving system of values through the city dwellers' eyes.

6.2 Contribution to existing scholarship on Internet Literature

This study of the ongoing interaction between the official and the online literary fields contributes to the existing scholarship on Chinese Internet literature in several ways. The second chapter of this dissertation demonstrates how the penetration of the market into a previously free publication space altered the dynamics of production and consumption of Internet literature, as well as the relationship between authors and readers within the online field. The changes caused by a shift to an increasingly market-driven publication space make the representation of Internet literature as offered in most of the existing scholarship inadequate to describe the phenomenon in its recent developments, and shows how these descriptions can only describe the phenomenon in its very early stage.

The third chapter introduces the question of the interaction between the online literary scene and the literary establishment, a very recent topic that has been almost entirely absent in the existing scholarship until now. After tracing the various phases of this interaction, the chapter engages in a systematic study of the ways in which the cooperation between the two fields takes place and informs about the regulations set up by the China Writers Association on the admission of Internet writers. By discussing the reasons that brought the literary establishment to an attempt of integrating the online literary production within the existing system, it ventures a first speculation on the possible results of this interaction.

Starting from the genealogy of Internet writers proposed by Ouyang Youquan in 2008, this study offers a more refined classification, which keeps into account the

various factors that influence the development of Internet literature throughout its evolution and divides it in three stages, by placing some milestones that separate one period from another. This classification, together with the discussions on Internet literature in interaction with the market and the established literary scene contributes to filling the gap of in the existing scholarship, showing a clearer picture of the Chinese online literary scene in light of the most recent developments.

6.3 Online Realism and Urban fiction

The literary production of the People's Republic of China has been mainly focused on realist fiction for decades. As has been observed in the previous chapters, in Maoist China, revolutionary realism and, during the Cultural Revolution, revolutionary romanticism were the only accepted fiction genres. Despite the ups and downs of the Chinese Communist Party's cultural policies, that have in turn allowed or suppressed emerging literary innovations, more or less extremist variations of the revolutionary romanticism imposed by the Cultural Revolution have long been the most produced genres. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, realism was adopted as the official literary ideology, replacing the extreme leftist revolutionary romanticism of the previous years. Notwithstanding its prevalent focus on economic growth and technological development, rather than cultural control, Deng Xiaoping's policy defined the Party's role in leading literary creation, as well as the responsibility of writers to fulfil the spiritual needs of life in the areas of thought, culture and morality, whilst urging writers to "work hard to create a new socialist human image".

Although Deng's government has also given space to periods of more relaxed control over literary production, resulting in a number of disputes, such as the debates on the "humanist spirit" or modernism as a more advanced literary form resulting from technological progress in the 1980s, the prolonged emphasis on realism has

undoubtedly influenced the bulk of the literary production, along the lines directed by the party.

In the decades following Deng's government, cultural policies became gradually less austere, and the more relaxed cultural atmosphere permitted the development of new channel for literary publication, outside of the direct control of the government, as well as the popularisation of alternative genres.. Nevertheless, the literary establishment keeps a conservative attitude toward artistic creation, as can be inferred by the China Writers Association's guidelines on literary production, and realist fiction is still preferred over the other genres for its mission of leading social transformation and its ability of faithfully reflect 'the spirit of the time'.

Although the developing cultural scene provided numerous and diversified examples of popular fiction genres, which found on the Internet a new space for flourishing, realist fiction is still perceived as a more serious genre compared to the many others offered by the market. While fantasy, detective or knight-errantry novels are conceived as entertainment genres, realistic fiction is seen as capable of a different social commitment. The surviving predilection of realist genres within the literary establishment when approaching the online literary scene, is demonstrated by the choice of the Internet fiction works to be promoted and discussed by the China Writers Association. Although the Association has opened its threshold to Internet writers producing a great range of different genres, the activities aimed at the promotion of a few specific works, with the purpose of providing examples and guidelines for a 'healthy' development of Internet literature, tend to prefer realist fiction over the other popular genres.

The perception of realist fiction as a more serious form of literature does not only occur within the official literary circles. As can be seen from the analysis of the case studies in the previous chapter, substantial hints of the perceived 'superiority' of realism as a genre can also be found online. Amongst online writers, urban fiction writers generally show a greater social commitment, as well as higher literary ambitions. Although not always in the expected way, their works do carry a social

message and attempt to give space to those values that better represent, or are perceived as needed, in contemporary urban reality.

Some of the major Internet literature websites also felt the need to give space to more serious literature, besides entertainment genres. In early 2000s, *Starting Point* opened a specific page devoted to serious literature, besides its 'woman channel' and 'mobile literature channel'. Although the page is no longer active, *Starting Point Literature* has been online for well over a decade, with the aim of providing a separate space for those writers who wanted to engage in more serious literature. As can be read in the "About us" page on the website, where the literature channel is still mentioned at the time of writing, serious literature is here identified, once again, with realist fiction.

Are these examples enough to define realism as a higher genre? Or rather, are they a sign that decades of socialist cultural policy has been effective at rooting realism as a more valuable genre in producers and consumers minds? Relatively speaking, these can both be deemed true. Looking at Internet literature from the establishment's perspective, it is easy to see how, among the great variety of literary genres published on the Internet, realist fiction is the one that deals best with the social responsibility traditionally associated to literature and has so far revealed a greater social commitment, compared to those genres that prefer a sort of 'escape' from contemporary society. Political ideology certainly played a significant role in establishing the notion of the social responsibility of literary production and thus the task of fiction of leading social transformation and contemporary writings, both online and offline, often reflect this idea. Although realist fiction published online often does not fully reflects the idea of socialist realism as advocated by the China Writers Association, it does have some social content.

6.4 Contribution to Urban fiction

Looking at the contemporary literary panorama, this thesis brings a contribution to the current understanding of contemporary urban fiction, through the analysis of online published narratives. As is shown throughout the analysis of the case studies, online published urban fiction subverts the mainstream idea of realist fiction at least in two ways: firstly, it proposes a narrative that represents the real life of urban citizens, rather than offering an ideal or a model to follow. Although this kind of representation of urban reality is not entirely absent in contemporary urban fiction published within the conventional system, it is still in contradiction with the conventional discourse on literary realism as transmitted by the literary establishment. For this reason, it is interesting to see how the establishment is indirectly welcoming new views by the admission of these authors to the Writers Association.

Secondly, online urban narratives tend to develop a form of social denunciation that, although still in an undeveloped way, calls for new moral values, without necessarily reject traditional values.

Despite its immaturity as a literary genre, urban fiction published online can be regarded as a starting point for the development of a more critical realism, which proposes a representation of China's contemporary society and of the problems city dwellers have to face in today's urban reality, without necessarily imposing a model or implying a solution. The typical optimism of socialist realism gives way to a different atmosphere. Devoid of any ideological content, urban fiction characters are common people sharing the same concerns of their readers, rather than heroes of inspiring models to follow. The commitment of Internet urban fiction writers takes the shape of a social denunciation of the difficulties faced by the new generations in a fast changing urban reality, which is proving able to develop a new form of literary realism without necessarily rejecting it as a conservative genre. Nevertheless, these writings implicitly deny the representation of contemporary China as an optimistic, healthy society – as the ideological guidelines would suggest – giving life to a more honest portrait of reality. Featuring the viewpoint of common people – here mainly intended as the developing urban 'middle class' rather than the working class and rural reality often depicted by previous realist fiction – immersed in a fast-paced

world and struggling between traditional values and new challenges, this newly emerged realism is probably much closer to its readers than the literature produced by the establishment has been able to get over the last decade(s).

6.5 General conclusions: two fields merging together?

The choice of the literary establishment to approach the online literary field, and gradually attempt to absorb it within its system, can be ascribed to a variety of reasons. The concern for the circulation of 'unhealthy' literary material also played an important part in planning the selection and promotion of Internet literature, sponsored by China Writers Association. Although not always explicated, the Association commitment in offering its guidance and expertise to the development of the online literary scene unmasks an intent of some sort of ideological control over the otherwise uncontrolled development of a popular form of literature, likely to produce controversial products. While purposely ideological and political content rarely emerges in the context of Internet fiction, the depiction of a valueless society, mostly concerned with success and financial gain rather than positive social values that emerges from part of the online writing, together with frequent 'erotic' or 'violent' content were probably enough to demand some action, from the establishment's perspective.

Besides, the great popularity of some literature websites attracted the attention of the China Writers Association, whose literary products were, in contrast, becoming growingly unpopular amongst the general public. The massive growth of the phenomenon could no longer be ignored by a literary elite that had originally been appointed in order to supervise literary production. Although until very recently online produced literature has been regarded as a vulgar product, its influence on the

public convinced the establishment to attempt a re-evaluation of Internet fiction, starting from the selection of a few authors and works that were supposed to represent the best of it.

The first step towards the recognition of Internet literature as a significant cultural phenomenon, was the decision to open important literary awards to the participation of online published novels. The China Writers Association invited the most popular literary websites to submit a list of their best writers to be considered for the 5th edition of the Lu Xun literary prize, in 2010 and the Mao Dun award in 2011. The decision to open up important awards to Internet writers was followed, almost simultaneously, by the admission of the first group of Internet writers to the Association, and to the establishment of a dedicated association a few years later. The aims of the new born association for Internet writers are to guide the literary production online, provide Internet writers with professional training and contribute to the overall development of the online field.

How does the establishment contribute to the overall development of the online literary scene? Until very recently, the activities promoted by the China Writers Association have given little contribution to the online literary scene itself, although this happened in a few isolated cases. The bulk of online literary production, mainly producing entertainment literature, has not been touched by most of these activities, nor it is interested in gaining some sort of approval by the official literary circles.

However, the discourse is different for those authors engaging in more serious literary production, who decided to use the online publication as a springboard to pursue a different literary ambition. In the case of more seriously committed writers, the affiliation with the China Writers Association can benefit their literary career in a number of ways. The more immediate effect of this interaction is the recognition of these authors' works, within a system that still (sometimes reasonably) regards Internet literature as an inferior product. The Internet writers joining the Association can also benefit from professional training, as well as a space for literary discussion.

As a great part of the publishing houses in China are still connected to the literary establishment, being part of the professional organisation can also provide more chances for the publication of a work in print. Although it is still early to evaluate the consequences of these advantages on the literary career of Internet writers, it is reasonable to suppose that, in most cases, this will result in the establishment of some more 'conservative' authors within the conventional system.

The recent establishment of a dedicated Association for Internet writers has partially changed the way in which the online and the conventional field work together and interact with each other. After the foundation of the first Internet writers association in Zhejiang, the number of the writers joining one of its affiliated branches has grown greatly. As each of the Internet writers Associations in the country currently numbers hundreds of members, it might seem unreasonable to talk about the online literary scene as a separate reality.

The online literary scene is not the only one to benefit from this interaction. The activities of promotion of Internet literature sponsored by the Association have also enhanced the ongoing debate on the literary value of fiction published online, fostering the discussion on the new perspective of contemporary literature, permitted by the new media. The admission of some Internet writers to the national China Writers Association is also resulting in the production of a greater variety of literary genres within the official literary field, traditionally anchored to the established literary forms. The interaction with the online literary field can thus bring some innovation within a rather conservative field while, at the same time, bringing it closer to the general public.

Although it is undeniable that a part of the online literary production is still not deemed worth of consideration for its lack of maturity and artistic value, part of the new digital field is gradually merging within the existent system. For Internet writers engaging in serious literary writing, the Internet is likely to become more like a first

step onto a literary publication than the final destination of their career as writers. In the span of a few years, it will probably be easier to appreciate whether those writers who decided to join their forces with the establishment will pursue a 'conventional' rather than online career, or if a sort of discrimination between 'serious' and 'entertainment' literature will be more visible on the literature websites.

6.6 Suggestions for further research

The interaction between the online and the official literary field in China is a new, yet complex field of research, that engages with a variety of factors and would benefit from a multidisciplinary approach.

As the online literary production becomes growingly integrated within the existent literary system, the monitoring of any evolution of the dynamics of this cooperation or the changes that may result from it within the online literary field would both offer interesting cues for future research. Moreover, since the China Writers Association is still not completely autonomous from the direction of the Communist Party, with members of the department of Propaganda often involved in its work, a systematic study on how China's cultural policies have changed in the last two decades would foster the understanding on how the literary field is evolving and offer some insight on how this is changing the perception of contemporary literature in China.

In the last few years, the online literary field experienced a consistent rise in the popularity of Internet literature on mobile devices. Most of the Internet literature websites offer now a mobile-friendly version or an application to consume Internet literature on mobile phones. Starting from my discussion on the development of the literary field and the influence of the Internet on literary production, it would be interesting to conduct a similar analysis of this influence specifically applied to

mobile devices, in order to find out to what extent the use of mobile phones, tablets and e-readers reconfigures the production and consumption of literature.

Following the analysis of urban narratives published online, a comparative study of the most popular genres produced and consumed within the online literature system could help clarify whether and in which ways other popular fiction genres published online will integrate within the established literary system. Assuming that the collaboration with the China Writers Association will result in new online literary spaces, directed by the literary establishment, a close observation of the literary products that would result from this landscape would offer an interesting topic for a future dissertation, seeking to find out whether the guide and training offered by the professional association will result in an improvement on the literary and aesthetic quality on online produced works.

The present thesis presents an original and comprehensive study of the recently established cooperation between the online and the official literary field in China. Whilst the areas indicated above raise potential topics for further research, this thesis explores, for the first time, the implications of the interaction between the Chinese literary establishment epitomised by the China Writers Association, and the expanding online literary field, broadening the spectrum of analysis on Chinese Internet literature beyond a textual analysis. The investigation of the collaboration and mutual influence between the online and official scene is located in the broader socio-cultural context of contemporary China. In this regard, this thesis shows how the interaction between a traditionally restrictive literary field and an 'unconventional' but expanding popular literature scene born on the web, is producing a positive influence on both parts, helping Internet literature to become part of the cultural mainstream and enhance its artistic development, while bringing innovation to the conventional literary scene.

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"The First general assembly of the Zhejiang Web Writers' Association .- collected documents" (Zhejiangsheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuandahui

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Appendix:

First general assembly of the Zhejiang Internet Writers Association - Collected documents (Zhejiangsheng wangluo zuojia xiehui diyici quanti huiyuandahui wenjian huibian,浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会文件汇编), Hangzhou (2014).

在浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会开幕式上的致辞

中国作协党组成员、副主席、书记处书记

陈崎嵘

尊敬的葛慧君部长、各位代表、网络作家朋友们：

我受中国作协党组书记李冰同志的委托，从朔风凛冽的北国，来到梦绕萦回的江南故乡，向浙江省网络作家协会的成立表示热烈的祝贺，向在座和不在座的浙江网络作家朋友们致以节日般的祝贺！祝贺浙江网络作家朋友们从此有了一个属于自己的新"家"！

我跑那么远的路赶来参加会议，想表达的当然不仅仅是这么一句话。这几天，我一直在思考一个问题：为什么全国第一个网络作家协会，会诞生于浙江？答案是：浙江条件得天独厚，天时地利人和皆备；网络作协水到渠成，可谓应运而生。

第一归因于：浙江丰沃的文学土壤。暂且不提古典文学璀璨银河中的浙江星座，仅就现代文学史看，鲁迅、茅盾、艾青、郁达夫、徐志摩、戴望舒，张抗抗、叶文玲、黄亚洲、麦家、余华、王旭烽、蒋风……据说，中国现当代文学史上的名家名作，浙江约占1/3。人们常说，枝繁叶茂；我要说，土肥才能枝繁，枝繁才能叶茂。土壤是植物生长生存最主要的基础，文学同样如此。

第二归因于：浙江网络文学的勃兴。网络文学经历了15

年发展,的确是异军突起、方兴未艾,已成为中国文坛一道靓丽的风景,也成为一个众人无法忽视的现象。浙江是网络文学的重镇。如果作一个不恰当的对比,浙江在全国网络文学界的地位比在全国传统文学界的地位还要略高一些。南派三叔、流潋紫、天蚕土豆、桐华、烽火戏诸侯、沧月、曹三公子等,在网络文学界,人气很旺,都是顶尖级大神。流潋紫的《甄嬛传》已走出浙江、走出国门,走向日、韩、美,甚至成为中央党报党刊讨论与争论的话题。由此可见,浙江网络文学界人才济济,蔚然成军,影响所及,远播海外。

第三归因于:浙江省委宣传部和省作协领导敢为天下先的创新创造意识。浙江省委宣传部领导和作协领导对网络文学高度重视,非常关注,投入了大量的精力,更具有敏锐的眼光,敢为天下先的胆魄,勇于创新的精神,善于创造变通的办法。我认为,浙江网络作家协会有许多创新创造之处。譬如,将传统文学与网络文学融合起来,由麦家主席担纲名誉主席,由作协领导兼任网络作协负责人;譬如,以新的思路考虑组织架构,将与网络文学传

播关系密切的中国移动阅读基地吸收为团体会员,与地方合作,设立创作研究基地,吸纳特聘会员等等。正是因为这一切,才使得浙江网络作家协会迅即成立,而且显得与众不同。

有上述三者,从一定意义上讲,全国第一个网络作家协会必然出现于浙江!浙江网络作家协会是浙江这块文学沃土和改革创新热土综合孕育的果实。这既是逻辑分析推理的必然,更是网络文学史将记载下来的确凿无疑的事实!

借此机会,请允许我对浙江网络作家朋友们提点希望,集中起来就是树立正确的"三观"。所谓"三观",就是世界观、人生观、价值观。

希望大家在看待世界和社会时,能戴上"望远镜",配备"显微镜",把握好"方向盘"。能分清事物的本质与现象、社会的主流与支流、发展的大势与曲折,与国家和人民一起坚定不移走中国特色社会主义道路。增强道路自信、理论自信、制度自信,增强民族自信、文化自信、历史自信。任凭风吹浪打,我似闲庭信步;任凭八级地震,我自岿然不动;任凭黑云压城,我仍面不

改色；任凭十面埋伏，我有破阵韬略。充分展示出网络作家的浩然正气、坚硬底气和淡定静气。

希望大家在对待人生问题上，正确处理个人与社会、文学与时代、作家与人民的关系。能够清醒地意识到作为一个网络作家的社会责任和文学责任。把个人的文学理想与中国梦融为一体，把艺术的追求与民族进步目标统一起来。譬如，在精彩描写"后宫"后，也能以同样的生花妙笔展示"前宫"；在畅想仙幻、魔幻中，也学会直面"人间烟火"和"布衣形象"；在穿越历史和朝代时，也能更多地回到"现代"和"当下"。把网络文学的创作与当今时代、世界风云，与人们的柴米油盐、喜怒哀乐结合起来。创作出大批反映现实生活、传播真善美、具有网络特征、广大网民喜闻乐见的优秀网络文学作品。

希望大家在认识价值标准时，明辨高下，懂得取舍。用网络文学作品形象地传播社会主义核心价值观，使网络文学成为中华民族美好的精神家园。在网络文学创作中坚守高尚的价值追求，坚持以人民为中心，而不是以人民币为中心。不以点击率为炫耀资本，不以发行量论英雄。在坚持网络文学审美特征的同时，还要虚心向传统文学学习借鉴。把传统文学那些优长吸纳融入到网络文学创作之中，不断提高网络文学的思想价值境界和艺术审美品位。

浙江网络作家协会的诞生，仅仅是万里长征的第一步，是威武雄壮话剧的序幕，是网络长篇小说的楔子。如何按照网络文学的发展要求，如何根据网络作家的特殊需求，做好工作，才是对浙江网络作家协会真正的考验。坦率地讲，我对浙江网络作家协会寄予无限的希望，充满着热切的期待，真的想开列出一长串题目和要求。但昨晚我阅看了《浙江省网络作家协会章程（草案）》之后，感到浙江作协考虑得很全面，很到位。所以，在今天会上，我只提两个字的要求：新与实。

所谓"新"，就是要以新的理念、新的思维、新的工作、新的作风，开创新的局面。要解放思想，大胆创新。新瓶一定要装新酒，新鞋一定要走新路。你们的每一项工作都是新的历史、新的记录、新的创造。努力做到网络作

协的组织架构是新的,会员入会标准是新的,会员联络方式是新的,会员的活动方式是新的。真正探索出一条符合网络文学特点、适应网络作家需求、具有浙江特色的新路子!

所谓"实",就是要树立全心全意为网络作家服务的理念,把网络作家当作协会的"主人"和"贵客",与他们广交朋友,深交朋友,以诚相待,以实相告。要以实的工作、实的举措、实的作风、实的态度为网络作家服务,使浙江网络作家们对浙江网络作家协会产生由衷的归属感、信任感、依赖感。使浙江网络作家协会真正成为广大网络作家认可和满意、温馨而和谐的网络作家之家。

我们期待着浙江网络作家协会创造新经验,开创新局面!

在即将结束我这个简短致辞时,我想说的是,浙江网络作家协会在全国率先成立,意义重大,前景看好。作为一名浙江人,作为网络文学工作者的我,禁不住浮想联翩、心潮澎湃。昨晚在万米高空飞翔中,临时凑成一首小诗,今天拿来献给浙江省网络作家协会和浙江的网络作家朋友们,以示祝贺,以资鼓励:

西子湖畔报春花,
神州文苑第一家。
虚拟世界处女秀,
江南网军领头马。
键盘沉重写百姓,
文章锦绣为中华。
隆冬吹响集结号,
瀚海冲浪闯天涯。
谢谢大家!

希望你们的作品永远年轻

——在浙江省网络作家协会第一次
全体会员大会闭幕式上的讲话

浙江省作协主席、省网络作协名誉主席
麦　家

大家下午好，首先祝贺曹启文先生当选为网络作协的主席，祝贺各位当选的副主席！也非常感谢大家选我当名誉主席。

浙江省网络作家协会的成立，对浙江文坛而言，是一件大事，对中国的网络文学甚至对整个中国文坛都会产生影响。和我相比，你们确实太年轻了。你们在网络上有着朝气蓬勃的战斗力、表现力。在网络文学这个江湖里面，你们才是真正的英雄。

我们高效率地做好成立网络作协这件事，成了全国第一家。因为浙江是网络文学的重要阵地，我们担心你们"流落他乡"。我们省网络作家协会的成立，就是要建立一个平台，要成立一个"家"，把你们都请到这个平台上来。让大家在这个平台上，互相交流，互相激发。把网络作家朋友们融到网络作协这个平台上来，让大家有"家"的感觉，这些愿望是简单的，也是丰厚诚实的。

我从事写作三十多年了，深有体会，作家是培养不了的。谁来培养？谁来塑造呢？你自己。但是写作确实会受各方面因素的影响。协会作为一个"家"，可以在生活上关心你；在

你工作处于挫折时,带给你安慰;在你心情低落时,帮你调整心情,尽快走出低谷。做这些事情,就是想让你这匹马更矫健,让你对生活更加感恩,让你对生活有更全面的感受,这样更有助于让你写出好作品。

非常高兴,通过今天的这个会议结交了更多年轻的朋友。我也通过这个会议更加深刻地体会到,文学的疆域,需要老马,也需要你们这些年轻的矫健的文学之马。希望你们写出更多的好作品,希望你们的作品永远年轻!

浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会关于筹备工作报告的决议

（浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会通过）

浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会审议并通过了曹启文同志所作的题为《坚持正确导向 提升审美品格 迎接网络文学的春天》的筹备工作报告。

大会认为，筹备工作报告着眼当前我国网络文化建设的新形势新要求，立足网络文学发展态势及浙江网络文学实际，介绍了省网络作家协会成立的背景意义，回顾了成立省网络作家协会的筹备过程，提出了今后三年我省网络文学工作的总体思路和主要目标任务。

大会号召全省广大网络文学工作者，坚持文艺"二为"方向和"双百"方针，坚持以人民为中心的创作导向，勇于担当责任，强化精品意识，提升自身素养，不断增强协会的凝聚力和影响力，努力书写浙江网络文学发展新篇章。

浙江省网络作家协会章程

（浙江省网络作家协会第一次全体会员大会审议通过）

第一章 总 则

第一条 浙江省网络作家协会是在浙江省作家协会管理指导下,浙江网络文学创作、评论、编辑和组织工作者自愿结合的专业性社团组织。

第二条 本会宗旨:团结广大网络文学工作者,坚持文艺"为人民服务,为社会主义服务"方向和"百花齐放,百家争鸣"方针,坚持以人民为中心的创作导向,传递和弘扬社会主义核心价值观,探索网络文学创作规律,提升网络文学审美价值,示范网络写作创业模式,调动网络作家积极性和创造性,引导助推更多更好的、为大众所喜闻乐见的网络文学作品,促进我省网络文学健康发展。

第三条 本会遵守国家各项法律、法规,按照社团组织的自身特点和网络文学规律,依照章程开展工作。

第四条 本会为浙江省作家协会团体会员,接受省作协的管理和业务指导。

第五条　本会会址设在杭州市。

第二章　任　务

第六条　本会以履行联络、协调、服务、指导为基本职能,发挥组织、引导、服务、维权的作用。

第七条　本会及时向会员传达国家网络文化建设精神和相关政策法规。通过调查研究,及时向党和政府反映网络文学界的建议意见和诉求。

第八条　本会引导会员参与网络文明建设,自觉遵守国家法律法规和社会道德规范,恪守良好的职业精神和职业道德,强化行业自律,自觉坚守作家责任底线、文学品格底线、道德风尚底线和法律法规底线,做一个有担当、有追求的网络文学作家,努力建设健康向上、规范有序、创新发展的网络文学生态环境。

第九条　本会坚持科学审美标准,探索建立网络文学创作评价体系,按照网络文学特点和规律开展创作研讨,加强文学评论,组织开展与传统作家的交流互动。表彰和奖励优秀的网络文学创作成果和人才。

第十条　本会鼓励推介会员作品走向市场,推动会员作品的图书和数字出版,以及外文、动漫、游戏、影视等改编,扩大会员作品的社会影响力。

第十一条　本会积极发现和培养网络文学创作、评论、编辑的新生力量,特别是为新人写手提供上升通道,发展和壮大浙江网络文学队伍。

第十二条　本会通过组织深入生活、扶持推介、培训进修、职称评定等措施,为网络文学工作者提供相关服务。

第十三条　本会立足服务会员、交流信息、促进创作的目的,办好协会所属的会刊及网站。

第十四条　本会加强与省内外网络文学界的联系和交流,加强与网络文化界的联系和合作。增进与香港特别行政区、澳门特别行政区和台湾地区的网络文学界团体和人士的联谊和交流。开展与国外相关专业团体和机构的交流。

第十五条　本会依据宪法、法律和法规,在图书出版以及手机阅读、互联网阅读、影视和游戏版权衍生等方面,

坚决抵制网络文学作品侵权盗版行为,完善与保障网络文学工作者的合法权益。

第三章 会 员

第十六条 本会由个人会员和团体会员组成。

第十七条 凡遵守国家法律法规,遵循公民道德规范和文学工作者的职业道德,赞成本会章程,本省(含在浙定居满两年以上,以及创作使用的在浙江注册的常年网络 ID)从事网络文学工作者,在网络文学创作上已经取得一定成就的,或在网络文学研究评论、网络文学编辑、网络文学组织和管理工作中取得一定业绩的,经本人申请,团体会员推荐或本会两名会员介绍,本会主席团审议批准后,即为本会会员。对浙江网络文学发展有所贡献的外省人士,本人自愿,经本会主席团审议批准后,以特聘会员名义入会,与会员享有同等权利。

第十八条 与浙江网络文学有直接关联的单位或组织,凡赞成本会章程,向本会提出申请,经本会主席团审议批准,即为本会团体会员。

第十九条 会员有遵守本会章程,执行本会决议,参加本会活动,缴纳会费的义务;有选举权、被选举权,对本会工作及领导人员的建议、批评和监督权,以及享有本会有关待遇的权利。会员有退会自由。

第二十条 本会对团体会员有联络、协调、服务的职责。团体会员接受本会委托,负责联系本会在该单位或组织的个人会员。

第二十一条 会员在维护自身创作成果、著作权和其他合法权益时,可以要求本会提供法律咨询及相应服务。

第二十二条 本会审议批准会员一般为半年一次。遇特殊情况,可由主席临时召集主席团会议,提前或推迟吸收新会员。

第二十三条 本会会员如严重违反本会章程或有严重违法行为,经本会主席团通过,停止或取消其会籍。

第四章 组 织

第二十四条 本会的最高权力机

构是浙江省网络作家会员大会(或会员代表大会)。其职权是:决定本会的工作方针和任务;制定和修改协会章程;审议协会工作报告;选举产生本届理事会;制定并通过重大决议。

会员大会(或会员代表大会)每三年召开一次。必要时由理事会决定提前或延期召开。

会员代表大会的代表通过一定的民主程序推选和特邀产生;团体会员单位的代表,从其主要负责人中通过民主协商推举产生。

第二十五条 理事会由会员大会(或会员代表大会)选举产生。在会员大会(或会员代表大会)闭会期间,理事会为本会的权力机构,其职责是:执行会员大会(或会员代表大会)的决议;向会员大会(或会员代表大会)报告工作;选举主席1人、副主席若干人组成本届主席团。

理事会视工作需要,由主席或受主席委托的副主席召集召开。

＊第二十六条 主席团由理事会选举产生。在理事会闭会期间行使职权。其职责是:制订、审议、监督本会年度工作;审批入会申请;审议、确认理事会人选增补、更换等事宜;经主席提名,任命秘书长1人、副秘书长若干人;聘任名誉主席。

在特殊情况下,经上级主管部门提议,主席团可以讨论决定相关理事任免和更替等事项,结果报下一次理事会确认。

主席团会议每年至少召开一次,由主席或受主席委托的副主席召集召开。

＊第二十七条 秘书处为本会日常办事机构,在主席团领导下主持处理日常工作。

第五章 经费及资产

第二十八条 本会经费来源:会员会费;政府拨款;社会资助和捐赠;其他合法收入等。

＊第二十九条 本会经费用于:促进网络文学创作和培养网络作家人才;开展创作、评论、评奖、采风及相关活动;编辑、发行、维护本会刊物及网站;秘书处日常办公开支。

＊第三十条 本会严格遵守财务

制度和财经纪律,严格执行国家规定的财务管理办法,接受浙江省作家协会及有关部门的审计和监督。

第三十一条 本协会资产受法律保护,任何单位和个人不得侵占、私分和挪用。

第六章 附　则

第三十二条 本章程解释权属浙江省网络作家协会主席团。

第三十三条 本章程经会员大会通过后,社团登记管理机关核准之日起生效。

浙江省网络作家协会
第一届主席团主席副主席选举办法

一、浙江省网络作家协会第一届主席团设主席 1 名、副主席 10 名,由浙江省网络作家协会第一届理事会选举产生。

二、本次大会实行等额选举,采用无记名投票方式。

三、到会人数须超过理事总数的三分之二,选举方可进行。投票选举后,收回的选票等于或少于发出的选票,选举有效;收回的选票多于发出的选票,选举无效,应重新进行选举。缺席的理事不得委托他人投票。

四、理事对选票所列的候选人,表示赞成的,在候选人姓名下方的空格内画"○";表示反对的,在候选人姓名下方的空格内画"×";表示弃权的,在候选人姓名下方的空格内不画任何符号。如果另选他人,在选票最后的空白栏内写上另选人的姓名,并在其姓名下方的空格内画"○"。写票不符合以上规定,或者所画的符号不清楚、无法辨认的,按无效票处理。

五、选票上所选的人数,等于或少于应选人数的选票为有效票;多于应选人数的选票为无效票。

六、被选举的候选人的得票数,须超过到会人数的半数始得当选。

七、本选举办法经浙江省网络作家协会第一届理事会第一次会议通过后生效。

浙江省网络作家协会第一届
主席团人员名单

一、名誉主席

麦　家

二、主席

曹启文

三、副主席

夏　烈、吴雪岚（流潋紫，女）、傅晨舟、王　洋（沧月，女）、
曹　昇（曹三公子）、陈政华（烽火戏诸侯）、李　虎（天蚕土豆）、
陆　琪、张　健（燕垒生）、蒋胜男（女）

截止到人目前 114名。
2010年5月19日 87

浙江省网络作家协会首批会员名册

姓　名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
于太封	少封	男	1990 年 6 月	绍兴市越乐教育信息咨询有限公司咨询主管
上官莹莹	何堪	女	1986 年 10 月	台州市东海翔集团企业报编辑
王　科	罪化	女	1983 年 5 月	杭州市浙江日报报业集团记者编辑
王　洋	沧月	女	1979 年 5 月	杭州市自由撰稿人
王　泰	发飙的蜗牛	男	1987 年 3 月	台州市起点中文网签约作者
王　路	在甬方的毡	男	1973 年 1 月	宁波市宁波日报社记者编辑
王　馨		女	1986 年 3 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地女频运营中心责编
韦　伊		女	1985 年 6 月	杭州市天翼阅读文化传播有限公司

姓　名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
毛晓青		女	1969 年 6 月	杭州市《山海经》杂志社执行社长、主编
叶　凯		女	1983 年 7 月	杭州市省作协创研部干部
边凌涵		女	1987 年 6 月	杭州市浙江文学院《浙江作家》编辑
刘凤鸣	三羽乌鸦	男	1978 年 5 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地女频运营中心主编
刘如文		男	1964 年 8 月	杭州市省委宣传部文艺处副处长
汤潇潇		女	1979 年 8 月	杭州市浙江在线无线中心副主任
孙宝勋	一代歪才	男	1987 年 4 月	温州市杭州狮特网络科技有限公司总监
李　虎	天蚕土豆	男	1989 年 10 月	杭州市自由撰稿人 ✳
李周静	阿荧	女	1982 年 12 月	金华市自由撰稿人
杨　挺	伏醉	男	1991 年 2 月	温州市创世中文网签约作者
杨月文	梅子黄时雨	女	1981 年 6 月	嘉兴市自由撰稿人
杨晓易		男	1980 年 10 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地原创内容运营中心责编
杨雪峰	雪帝峰	男	1978 年 4 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地原创内容运营中心责编
吴　瑜		女	1984 年 11 月	湖州市光线传媒主持人
吴开明	行道迟	男	1981 年 4 月	杭州市创世中文网签约作者
吴雪岚	流潋紫	女	1984 年 10 月	杭州市江南实验中学教师
余晶莹	梦笔锦书	女	1970 年 10 月	舟山市浙江移动嵊泗分公司
沈　荣	夜摩	男	1977 年 7 月	杭州市杭州典志文化艺术策划有限公司总经理

✳ Still published his/her works online

姓 名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
沈晔冰	刘晗	女	1980 年 2 月	嘉兴市中共嘉善县委宣传部干部
张 健	燕垒生	男	1970 年 10 月	杭州市余杭区国税局干部
张凤翔	管平潮	男	1977 年 11 月	杭州市网易（杭州）资深编辑
陆 琪		男	1979 年 6 月	杭州市自由撰稿人
陈 雅	西樵媛	女	1984 年 1 月	宁波市宁波国家高新区管委会干部
陈乃格	江湖猫	男	1988 年 10 月	温州市创世中文网签约作者
陈天琪	铃铛	女	1990 年 4 月	杭州市杭州酷歌网络有限公司
陈政华	烽火戏诸侯	男	1985 年 10 月	杭州市自由撰稿人
林中行	饕餮居士	男	1978 年 8 月	温州市纵横中文网签约作者
罗 立	黑暗左手	男	1977 年 3 月	上海市创世中文网负责人
季倩倩	况月灵	女	1987 年 4 月	温州市自由撰稿人
金圣洁	司马圣杰	男	1982 年 4 月	台州市创世中文网签约作者
金喜英	伊锦	女	1981 年 12 月	杭州市天杭教育集团教师
周 静	青琉落尘	女	1988 年 1 月	金华市创世中文网签约作者
周文俊	一叶	男	1992 年 4 月	杭州市创世中文网签约作者
周玮佳	優雅	女	1990 年 2 月	嘉兴市纵横中文网签约作者
周勤豪	非正常人类	男	1994 年 1 月	温州市网易云阅读签约作者
周燚鑫		女	1987 年 2 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地内容运营部策划经理
郑芝英	关就	女	1983 年 11 月	杭州市中国移动阅读基地推荐编辑
郑龚昕	御宅传说	男	1989 年 7 月	衢州市创世中文网签约作者

姓　名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
官锦华	李异	男	1976 年 1 月	台州市台州人峰文化传播有限公司执行董事
胡向敏	读书之人	男	1978 年 12 月	温州市农村水利管理处干部
柳明晔		女	1969 年 1 月	杭州市浙江文艺出版社社长助理
俞　江	夜色访者	男	1975 年 3 月	台州市起点中文网签约作者
饶　耿	2001	男	1983 年 9 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地原创内容运营中心主编
饶维祥	她养了条大狗	男	1993 年 2 月	绍兴市创世中文网签约作者
洪陆秀	云修斯	男	1989 年 9 月	温州市浙江电器开关有限公司行政助理
骆烨波	骆烨	男	1986 年 12 月	嘉兴市长城影视股份有限公司编剧
袁少琼	小佚	女	1984 年 3 月	宁波市 TCL 通讯（宁波）有限公司
晋杜娟		女	1978 年 3 月	杭州市省互联网信息办公室网评处副处长
夏　烈		男	1976 年 3 月	杭州市杭州师范大学文化创意产业研究院院长
夏　玲	紫伊 281	女	1976 年 2 月	金华市金东区仙桥中学教师
夏继章	妖邪有泪	男	1989 年 2 月	温州市纵横中文网签约作者
顾　飞	顾意萌	女	1985 年 6 月	温州市自由撰稿人
钱　成	蓝泽	女	1988 年 2 月	湖州市德清县博物馆
徐　亮	五月	男	1977 年 1 月	杭州市龙的天空负责人
翁来英	自知不二	男	1963 年 10 月	舟山市舟山东经文化传播有限公司艺术总监
高信永	圣骑士的传说	男	1987 年 12 月	温州市创世中文网签约作者
郭　梅		女	1967 年 12 月	杭州市杭州师范大学副教授
黄　鹏		男	1979 年 9 月	杭州市省作协办公室干部

姓　名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
黄其恕	四月	男	1970 年 9 月	湖州市文联组联部主任
曹　昇	曹三公子	男	1977 年 9 月	杭州市自由撰稿人
曹　娅		女	1980 年 9 月	台州市自由撰稿人
曹启文		男	1962 年 9 月	杭州市省作协党组副书记
彭雨悉	法随	男	1994 年 2 月	杭州市创世中文网签约作者
蒋达理	蒋离子	女	1985 年 3 月	金华市自由撰稿人
蒋胜男		女	1973 年 11 月	温州市艺术研究所编剧
蒋嘉骅	蒋话	男	1990 年 3 月	嘉兴市东华理工大学学生
傅晨舟		男	1977 年 3 月	杭州市中国移动手机阅读基地总编
蒲姿旭	聊斋公子	女	1974 年 6 月	温州市招商局《华夏温州商会》编辑
裘荣康		男	1982 年 9 月	杭州市自由编剧
戴叶青	麦穗	女	1990 年 8 月	嘉兴市雅阁电器科技有限公司
魏丽敏		女	1986 年 7 月	杭州市浙江文学院《浙江作家》编辑

特聘会员

姓　名	笔名	性别	出生年月	工作单位及职务
王　颖		女	1981 年 12 月	北京市中国作家协会创研部干部
庄　庸		男	1974 年 3 月	北京市中国青年出版社副编审
许　斌	邪月	男	1982 年 12 月	北京市纵横中文网副总经理
何铭基	何故	男	1971 年 12 月	香港小说会常务副秘书长
邵燕君		女	1968 年 3 月	北京市北京大学中文系副教授

浙江省网络作家协会
会费收取标准及管理办法

根据《浙江省网络作家协会章程》和社团财务工作的有关规定,为做好会费的收缴、使用和管理,特制定本办法。

一、会费标准

1.团体会员:每年会费为2000元。

2.个人会员:每年会费为50元。

二、缴纳时限

每年3月份为团体会员、个人会员缴纳会费时间。新入会的,上半年入会者缴纳全年会费,下半年入会的缴纳半年会费。也可以一次性缴纳3年会费。

三、缴纳办法

1.团体会员可通过银行转账,也可直接持支票到协会秘书处缴纳,协会开具票据。

协会地址:杭州市莫干山路73号金汇大厦17楼

账户名称:浙江省网络作家协会

2.个人会员可通过银行直接转至协会账号,也可持现金到协会秘书处缴纳,协会开具票据。

四、会费使用

收缴的会费严格按照协会《章程》规定用途开支,不得挪作他用。

五、会费管理

会费由协会秘书处具体负责管理,财务人员由省作家协会指派,协会法人负责经费开支的审批。会费接受省作协和有关机构的审计和监督。

财务人员应对会费收缴和财务支出情况形成财务报表,按时向秘书长及协会法人报告。秘书处每年应向主席团、理事会报告一次开支情况,接受监督。