

Redefining Relations Between Creators and Audiences in the Digital Age: The Social Production and Consumption of Chinese Internet Literature

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This article examines the ways in which the traditional relationship between authors and their audiences is being challenged and redefined in the context of Chinese Internet literature. We look at the evolution of the reader–writer dynamic in line with the development of online literary spaces in China, analyze the crucial role of social media as both curator and mediator, and trace the development of participatory cultures and commercial dynamics in these literary communities. This analysis illustrates how the relationship between authors and audiences—traditionally indirect and distant—has become, in online spaces, more direct, informal, and bidirectional while maintaining a significant commercial ethos. We argue that both the production and the consumption of Chinese Internet literature are quintessentially social activities, as online spaces open up new possibilities for communication and collaboration, both between authors and readers and among readers themselves.

Keywords: Internet literature, China, online communities, participatory culture, authorship, creativity

Internet literature has enjoyed enormous popularity and widespread participation in China over the last decade. According to a recent report from the China Internet Network Information Center (2016), there are now 297 million online literature users in China—43.1% of the country’s Internet users. A wide variety of online platforms is dedicated to Internet literature in China, including forums, literature websites, and social networks and blogs, which provide multiple channels for users to create, publish, read, and distribute literary content. In the course of its evolution and proliferation, Chinese Internet literature has had a huge cultural and economic impact, facilitating the emergence of online cultural communities and a revival and diversification of Chinese literature, both in print and online (Chen, 2012; Yang, 2010).

However, despite the multidimensional impact of this market and the sheer scale of participation, the topic of Chinese Internet literature remains understudied, particularly from a communication and new

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media studies—rather than a historical or literary—perspective. Furthermore, Hockx (2005) is right in noting the tendency of English-language research about Chinese digital culture to focus extensively on the issue of censorship. The impact of this research emphasis is crucial: “By foregrounding censorship and by highlighting what does not appear on the Chinese internet, attention is taken away from what does appear” (Hockx, 2005, p. 671).

This article aims to add to the nascent literature on Chinese online creativity by examining Chinese Internet literature from a communication perspective, with a particular focus on the changing author–audience dynamic as facilitated and shaped by online technologies. We begin by providing a useful background to the evolution and current scope of Chinese Internet literature; this overview of its development is highly relevant because, as we explain in the next section, the advancement of online literary platforms has significantly shaped the evolution of the relationship between authors and readers in these online spaces. We then consider the crucial role of social media as both a curator of content and a mediator in the communication dynamics between authors and readers, and we trace the development of participatory cultures around these literary communities, with implications for both online and offline sociability. Notably, authors’ profit-seeking motivations remain an important aspect of Internet literature sites, thereby shaping authors’ relationships to their audiences and adding a commercial element to these online communities. We conclude by suggesting a few valuable directions for future research in this area.

Chinese Internet Literature: Background

Although there is some disagreement about the definition and specific scope of online literature as a cultural form (Yongqing, 2011), for the purposes of this article, we follow Yang (2010) in defining Internet literature as “all Web-based writings that are viewed as literature by their authors or readers, regardless of genre” (p. 333). Works of Chinese Internet literature reflect a wide variety of literary forms, including fiction, poetry, and essay. The most popular genre is the serial novel, which can be further categorized by theme, including time travel, martial arts, history, and science fiction. Some genres, such as personal memoir and travel diary, are not popular in print, but flourish online. Indeed, as Web literature has become a recognized genre within print culture (Hockx, 2004), it has helped regenerate certain dying genres in print literature (Chen, 2012). The technological potential of the Internet as a platform also facilitates the rise of new forms of literature, including hypertext and interactive content and works that incorporate illustrations, background music, or animation (Zhao, 2011).

The history of Chinese Internet literature can be roughly divided into three key periods: the early stage (late 1980s–2002), the PC era (2002–10), and the mobile age (2010 and later). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese students and expats in the United States launched online newsletters, newsgroups, and magazines dedicated to Chinese-language literary works (Yang, 2010). The first Internet literature website in China appeared in 1995, the year after China made its first global Internet connection (Ouyang, 2004). Online literature enjoyed immense popularity, and the number of websites and bulletin boards dedicated to it soon skyrocketed. By 2001, there were 3,720 Chinese literature websites all over the world, of which around 70% were in mainland China (Ouyang, 2004). However, despite the popularity of these sites, Chinese Internet literature was still in its infancy. Online literary works were mainly created on bulletin board systems and posted on the Internet for free. As Yang (2010) notes, in this early period,

authors “stressed the noninstrumental aspects of literature published online, sometimes expressing an idealistic sense that Internet literature was a sign of the democratization of literary publishing” (p. 342).

In the second stage (2002–10), Internet literature was created and read mostly on personal computers, and literature sites developed rapidly. In this period, the most popular category was that of fantasy novels, and texts became much longer, from thousands of characters to millions. One of the most representative sites in this period—which remains popular today—is Qidian. Qidian perfected a complex business model that included charging readers extra for VIP memberships, determining payment by the chapter, and paying authors a monthly income of 50% to 70% of their readers’ payments (Huang, 2008); this business model became the standard and was quickly adopted by other literature sites. This period also saw a stronger commercial relationship being established between Chinese Internet literature and traditional print literature as online authors sought to leverage their online popularity into lucrative book deals, and as print publishers scouted these sites for new talent (Hockx, 2005; Yang, 2012).

After 2010, Chinese Internet literature became mobile. Readers using mobile devices reached 800 million in 2010, and mobile apps started to dominate the online literature market (Chiji, 2014). Magnates of the Chinese Internet world such as Baidu, Tencent, and Alibaba established their own Internet literature platforms, and the traditional literature sites, including Qidian, Zongheng, and Shuqi, were purchased and integrated into this new system (Y. Guo, 2016). This period also witnessed a diversification of genres and themes, including highly popular time-travel stories, historical novels, adventure stories, and more. Many works of Chinese online literature were—and continue to be—adapted into games, films, and TV series (Y. Guo, 2016). Today, the most popular online literature sites are Qidian, Chuangshi, Zongheng, Jinjiang, 17k, and Xiaoxiang (Bosidata, 2016).

When outlining the history of Chinese Internet literature, it is also important to acknowledge that websites not specifically meant for literary purposes have also played a significant role in enabling the development of Web literature in China and in fostering online communities around it. Among these, a crucial platform is Baidu Tieba, established in 2003, which remains one of the most popular Chinese Internet forums. *Baidu* is the brand name of its mother company, the largest Chinese communication platform, and *Tieba* is the pinyin of the Chinese characters meaning “post bar.” On Tieba, each *ba* (meaning “bar” in English and here carrying the connotation that Tieba is a place where people can meet and socialize) is established by users according to their interests, and the followers of a certain *ba* are people sharing an interest in the same topic. Tieba thus provided a great platform for fans of Internet literature to socialize, and for authors and readers to interact. Many early users of Baidu Tieba were literature lovers who published their works as forum posts, an especially suitable form for serial fiction.

Most prior research on Chinese Internet literature has focused on its literary characteristics (Hockx, 2004, 2005; Ma, 2008; Ouyang, 2008), its impact on Chinese print culture (Hockx, 2004, 2005; Yang, 2010), and its commercial features (Tian & Adorjan, 2016; Tse & Gong, 2012; Zhao, 2011, 2016). Nonetheless, some studies have significant communication-related implications that are relevant here. Comparing contemporary online literature with Chinese literary journals of the early 20th century, Hockx (2004) found that both are representative of “a very traditional Chinese view of literature as a socially embedded act of communication” (p. 105) centered around strong and passionate literary communities.

Zhao (2011) used the concept of “social network markets” to explore the motivations of online literature authors and the commercial dynamics that explain the success of these websites. She also addressed the labor implications of these practices, emphasizing the precarious aspects of creative labor in this context (Zhao, 2016). With a similar focus on commercial dynamics and formal and informal creative production, in her study of audiences on the Jinjiang Literature City website, S. Guo (2015) investigated the “word-of-mouth” publicity that turns anonymous Internet writers into best-selling celebrity authors and, importantly, the social structures that support literary production online. She suggests that participants on Chinese literature sites function as both peer critics and “agents of consecration,” as their affective engagement with works is redefining traditional structures of writing, reviewing, and publishing. Finally, Tian and Adorjan (2016) looked at the “commissioned production of fictions” on Internet literature sites in China, arguing that in these contexts, readers function as sponsors of production and exert a significant amount of power and control over authors.

The present article contributes to this emerging body of research by investigating the social dynamics between authors and readers—creators and audiences—from the perspective of online communication, including the tools and norms that shape these sociocommunicative processes. This focus on mediated social interaction is a valuable addition to the existing literature on online creative practice in China; in fact, recent research on Chinese online literature identified “the sociality of narrative production and consumption” (Tian & Adorjan, 2016, p. 896) as a significant need for future research. Within this context, our explication of the role of social media and of the output and activities of fan communities—both of which had not been addressed in this context—are particularly valuable, as they facilitate a better understanding of these creative communities as participatory cultures (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006). Furthermore, by looking at the communication features available on these platforms and examining the types of interaction that these structures allow, we shed new light on the evolution of Chinese online literature as a social practice. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, combining participant observation with the use of semistructured interviews allows us to get at participants’ subjective understandings and experiences, which recent work in this area (Tian & Adorjan, 2016; Zhao, 2016) has identified as a key priority.

Method

This analysis is based on a yearlong process of participant observation of key sites, apps, and platforms, complemented by semistructured interviews with both writers and readers. The first author has been active on Chinese Internet literature sites for the past 10 years as both a reader and a writer. Over the past two years, this interest developed into a more focused research inquiry consisting of participant observation on several key platforms. Specifically, the following platforms were selected for close analysis: four online literature sites (Qidian, Jinjiang, Rongshu xia, and Douban Read), five social media platforms (Baidu Tieba, Renren, Weibo, WeChat, and Douban), two blogging communities (Baidu Space and Lofter), one content sharing community (15yan), and one mobile reading app (iReader). Other less popular platforms were also consulted and reviewed, but were not included in this analysis. These platforms were chosen for two key reasons: one, because of the popularity they enjoy with both readers and writers, and two, because they represent a wide spectrum of participatory modes and loci—from commercial literature sites to social media platforms to blogs to mobile media—thus allowing us to observe the flows and

interactions among these platforms and thereby better understand the ecosystem of Chinese online literature as a whole.

On each platform, we read works that enjoyed the greatest popularity and works that were not very popular, and we examined both completed works and works in progress. We followed the reader-to-writer and reader-to-reader discussions in these spaces, but we also looked at readers' practices of sharing, rating, and rewarding these works; at authors' and readers' relevant posts on social networks; at authors' and readers' profile pages; and at reader-created derivative works, including fan fiction, illustrations, music, audio drama, videos, and animations. Finally, in addition to the literary works themselves and the interactions around them, we also took note of the communication tools and features available on each platform, given the significant ways in which they shape the modes of engagement and interaction.

We spent, on average, 30–35 hours on each platform, with more time spent on the commercial literature sites and on Weibo and WeChat because of the higher volume of material posted and circulated on these platforms and their significance to the practice of online literature in China. Detailed notes—descriptive and reflective—were taken, as were screenshots, to preserve content that might be ephemeral or in development. During this research process, the first author continued to participate on these platforms as she had been doing for the past 10 years. As a reader of online literature, she read and commented on works and followed authors on social networks. As a writer, she continued to post literary works, respond to user comments, and interact with readers on social networks. This experience facilitated a nuanced experiential understanding (Hine, 2008), but while engaging in this way, the researcher developed a “divided self” (Schaap, 2001), acting as both participant-experiencer and analyst (Walstrom, 2004). These two perspectives contributed different, valuable perspectives to the research process, as a “participant-experiencer stance supplies historical and emotional understanding of the discussions” (Walstrom, 2004, p. 175), drawing on the researcher's background as a cultural member of the community, whereas an “analyst viewpoint brings empirical insight to the systematic patterns occurring” within the group, drawing on theoretical and methodological tools.

In addition to the participant observation described, we also conducted 20 semistructured interviews with both readers and writers. Of these interviewees, eight were readers of online literature, 10 were writers, and two identified as both reader and writer. The age range of the respondents was 20 to 30 years old. Participants were recruited through direct messaging on the platforms of activity, and interviews were conducted over WeChat and Weibo. The interview protocol contained seven common open-ended questions for both readers and writers; these questions were informed by the participant-observation process and addressed participants' experiences on these platforms. Depending on the interviewees' responses, these initial questions were sometimes followed up with more specific questions that sought additional details or context regarding individual experiences.

Author–Audience Relations in the Context of Chinese Internet Literature

The Evolution of the Author–Reader Relationship

A comparison of Tieba, a major early platform for all-purpose forum-based publishing, and more mature literature-specific websites allows for an insightful reflection on the evolution of the author–audience relationship and of the significance of platform design in shaping this relationship. Although Tieba remains an important destination for Chinese Internet literature today, its popularity pales in comparison to the success enjoyed by literature-specific sites. This comparative view of its features and publishing ethos also explains its relative decline.

When authors post their works on Tieba, they already have a group of potential readers who are likely to be interested in the themes or genre of their work, as readers follow their favorite authors and the specific bas that correspond to their interests. When a serial novel author starts a post, readers can reply within that same thread to give feedback to the author, to discuss among themselves, or to urge the author to post the next installment. This type of forum gives authors and readers a lot of freedom to interact with each other closely and informally, as authors' updates and readers' responses are intertwined within the same thread. The dialogue below (screenshot in Figure 1) is an example of how readers and writers interact casually within one thread, following the writer's posting of the second chapter of their popular novel, *Ling Xi Zui* ("Intoxicated in the Connection of Two Hearts"):

Reader 1: I read through it, great job! I look forward to the next update!

Reader 2: Great novel! Martial art style! Lots of love! Would love it even more if it would be a long novel! The way that Xinliu [the heroine] came on the stage is so powerful! So cool, so special! Duozhu [the writer], please continue updating! I won't urge you, I'll just wait patiently. I'll be satisfied as long as you don't give up, hahaha!

Writer's reply: I've noticed these days there are many responses—it's so touching! To the previous poster, thank you for your support. I read your blog before, and kindly left my comments there. I feel so motivated after reading your responses. Will go back and continue writing.



Figure 1. Screenshot of reader–writer interactions on Tieba.

However, this ability of readers and writers to interact within the same thread poses significant problems in terms of following a story on Tieba, especially in the case of popular works that have frequent updates. In our interviews, Tieba readers expressed frustration with having to figure out whether the newest reply to a post was the author's update or someone else's comment, and with finding authors' updates among hundreds or thousands of replies. One of the readers commented:

Because of the forum-like structure of Tieba, every time I reopened a thread, it took me some time to find where I stopped reading it last time. . . . Sometimes I couldn't even remember which page I was on. And the threads kept being updated.

In addition, on Tieba it is not unusual for readers to continue the authors' stories themselves—in the same thread—when authors are slow to update their work. Irritated with readers' constant interruptions, many writers remind people not to reply until they finish posting a complete passage or chapter. For instance, writers often state at the beginning of the thread or of a new update, "Qing wu cha lou [Please do not interrupt updating]." Sometimes writers also delete the interrupting replies or remove the literary updates contributed by readers that hijacked the authors' narratives.

Another significant issue on Tieba is that of copyright violations. In 2014, Internet literature piracy had caused a 7.77 billion renminbi (RMB) loss to the commercial publishing industry in China; in 2015, of the Chinese Internet literature readers who read pirated works online, 64.3% had accessed them through forums (Wang Fengzhi_NT2541, 2016). On May 23, 2016, Baidu Tieba announced a temporary shutdown of thousands of literature-related forums to screen and clear pirated content (Yin, 2016). This action received support from Lin Tingfeng, the founder of Internet literature site Qidian, who commented: "We won! Although it is a temporary victory, we believe justice will finally be upheld!" (Wu, 2016).

In view of these problems, the experience of participating on Internet literature sites is largely different from that on all-purpose forums such as Tieba, which significantly shapes the nature of author–reader interactions. As Internet literature sites are designed specifically for literary publishing, reading and commenting are separated into other sections. Although readers can still use the comment section to provide feedback, discuss among themselves, and urge authors to update, they are deliberately kept separate from the writers and the writing process, which is a stark contrast to their role as equal participants on Tieba threads.

The example in Figure 2, from Internet literature site Qidian, illustrates this separation. On Qidian, the Web page of any novel has three sections (tabs): The first contains a brief introduction to the work, the second is a table of contents where readers can access the chapters and start reading, and the third (marked in blue in Figure 2) is the designated discussion section where readers can comment on the work. As shown in Figure 2, for this particular novel, there were 168,085 comments in the discussion area. Thus, whereas on Tieba readers could intersperse their contributions with writers' literary updates, or sometimes even continue the stories themselves, on Internet literature sites, this is impossible—readers can provide suggestions in the form of comments for authors to consider, but they can never directly participate in the writing process. A clearer line is drawn between reading and active engagement, and readers are more explicitly positioned as consumers of the work, which has significant implications for the relationship between author and audience.



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Figure 2. Douluo Dalu ("Soul Land"), a fantasy novel posted on Qidian. The discussion tab is circled in blue.

Social Media as Curator and Mediator

The openness and accessibility of Internet literature sites—where practically anyone can post literary works for everyone to read—is a key feature that explains their success. However, it can also pose a significant challenge. Given the sheer amount of works on these sites, identifying relevant content is often difficult, and readers look for convenient and customized ways to read online. This is where social media comes in. Although they may not have been created for Internet literature specifically, Chinese social media platforms play a crucial role in this domain.

A key example is Weibo, one of the most popular social networks in China, whose functions are similar to Twitter's. By following writers they are interested in on Weibo, users of online literature sites can customize their reading experience and see their favorite authors' posts on their own front page. Weibo also enables readers to track any updates to the favorite works by searching for story-specific and genre-specific tags, which is similar to the function of hashtags on Twitter. This customization enabled by social networks has played an important role in the development and popularity of Internet literature: It allows for a personalized reading experience for users while securing a steady online readership for authors (who are followed by their fans) and facilitating the establishment of online reading communities centered around particular authors. These groups of followers are the major consumers and distributors of online literary content and the creators of derivative works. By using Weibo as a platform to publicize their work, authors can also take advantage of their followers' social connections, as fans retweet these links within their own networks, and the popularity of the literary works snowballs.

To illustrate, Figure 3 shows how Weibo users retweeted the last chapter of *Daomu Biji* (“The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles”), a serial adventure novel that has been extremely popular in China, especially among teenagers. In their retweets, readers included @[username] to remind their friends to read the post and also used hashtags related to the literary works. The most popular such hashtags often become trending topics on the Weibo homepage, which further enhances the popularity of the work. For example, on August 17, 2015, the day when the last chapter of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* was updated, “Zhang Qiling,” the name of the main character in the novel, emerged as both a trending topic and a top search term on Weibo; by 4 p.m., the topic “Qiling back from Changbai this August” (referring to the protagonist’s returning from the Changbai Mountains, where he had guarded a bronze gate for 10 years) had been read 400 million times and followed by nearly 130,000 fans (“Daomu Biji,” 2015).



Figure 3. Screenshot of Weibo users retweeting the last chapter of Daomu Biji (“The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles”).

Another platform that plays a crucial role in the widespread success of Chinese Internet literature is WeChat—currently the most popular social media platform in China. WeChat enables users to register for official subscription accounts, which online literature authors use extensively for sharing content. An interesting feature specific to this platform, the subscription accounts that WeChat administrators consider credible (usually meaning the content is original and of a high quality and that the accounts have pushed content to subscribers regularly and frequently) can acquire an “originality declaration” (Tencent Customer Service, n.d.). Official accounts that have been bestowed this declaration allow readers to send authors monetary rewards, ranging from 1 to 200 RMB (Liu, 2015). Thus, the originality declaration not only better protects the intellectual property of the original online literary works if there is any infringement of copyright (Hao, 2016), but it also enables authors to gain profit from each new update, thus deepening the commercial aspect of the author–audience relationship, which will be addressed in more detail later in this article.

What is more, “moments,” another key function of WeChat, provides a platform for readers to share their favorite works with their WeChat social networks, thus expanding the reader community and authors’ reach. The importance of these personal connections in shaping readers’ engagement with Internet literature was noted in our interviews. One reader who uses WeChat to read online literature commented, “Because WeChat is at the same time a social media, I often go through ‘moments’ to find out what everybody is reading now, in order to discover some good subscription accounts [i.e., new writers to follow].” Other readers we interviewed noted that they often comment on the WeChat posts or moments where their friends share their recommendations.

Authors often use Weibo and WeChat to send notifications via direct message to their followers, letting them know of any updates to their works—a feature that is missing from online literature sites. Figure 4 illustrates how updates of *Qing Dao Fu* (“Scavenger”), the fourth volume of the crime fiction series *Fayi Qin Ming* (“Medical Examiner Qin Ming”), were pushed to readers through direct messages by the author on Weibo. The message contained a brief description of the new chapter, which readers could then access by clicking the embedded link. Such messages make it convenient for readers to follow serial works without needing to search or check for new updates across sites.



Figure 4. An author sends a direct message to his followers on Weibo, notifying them about a new chapter being posted.

The messaging goes both ways, as readers can also message authors directly, giving suggestions or asking questions. The writers that we interviewed noted how often they get contacted by readers on social media. One writer, who administered her own subscription account on WeChat, commented: “Readers message me directly to my account, and I choose some questions to answer. They usually urge me to update or express their own feelings after reading.”

Importantly, authors share more than just literary updates on social media: They also chat informally with readers and post personal content unrelated to their literary works. For instance, Ma Boyong, a popular writer, apart from posting literary updates on Weibo, often shares personal news and stories about his newborn son, nicknamed Ma Xiaofan—*Xiaofan* meaning “little trouble.” These posts are welcomed by readers, who comment on these personal messages and share in Ma’s baby joy. In turn, Ma appreciates his readers’ interest in his personal life. Retweeting his previous post about the birth of his baby, he noted that the birth announcement had been shared more than 6 million times and commented happily, “I just wanted to show you all how many times the post about Ma Xiaofan’s birth has been read till now.”

Authors sometimes also use Weibo to organize online Q and A sessions with their fans. For example, Hudie Lan, a popular Internet literature writer on Qidian, often uses Weibo to chat informally with his readers. On November 11, 2016, on the occasion of his 33rd birthday, Hudie Lan participated in a Q and A event on his Weibo account in which he answered 33 questions from fans. This allowed readers to communicate directly with the author about their understanding of his novel while enhancing the popularity of the work across the social network: In this Q and A, nearly all of Hudie Lan’s relevant posts received hundreds of retweets and comments and thousands of thumbs-ups. Many of the questions posed by fans started with “Happy birthday Chong Die!” Chong Die is Hudie Lan’s nickname; as *Hudie* means “butterfly,” his readers affectionately call him Chong Die, meaning “Daddy Insect,” which indicates a relationship that is perceived to be intimate and friendly. These kinds of interactions—which often include nicknames and terms of endearment, as exemplified earlier—help build a closer and more informal author–reader relationship and simultaneously strengthen the reader community.

Participatory Cultures, Collective Identities

Significantly, Chinese Internet literature sites function as participatory cultures, further eroding the traditionally clear boundary between author and audience. According to Jenkins and colleagues (2006), “A participatory culture is one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression, and strong support for creating and sharing one’s work with others; its members believe that their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection to one another” (p. 3). Chinese Internet literature sites certainly possess these key features. The barriers to participation and artistic expression are indeed low, as anyone can participate in the writing and reading process; in a sense, these sites democratize the publishing process (Yang, 2010).

Many of the writers we interviewed emphasized the joy they felt by participating in such spaces. A writer who publishes her serial fiction on Jinjiang told us:

The thing I really like about online literature is that it gives everyone a platform to display their dreams. Here, there is no threshold. Many people, who can’t realize their dreams of writing because of various limitations in their real life, can be fulfilled through online literature.

Nearly half of the writers participating in the interviews said that the most enjoyable aspect of writing online literature is sharing their works with others and receiving feedback from readers. “I enjoy writing

the things I want and sharing them with so many people," a Lofter writer said. "The thing I like most is I can write freely, and people's responses are quite amazing," another Jinjiang writer commented. "Receiving feedback from others saying they like my work is my favorite thing," noted a writer on Weibo. A poet on Douban also commented: "I enjoy people reading my works. Like-minded people."

The social aspect, especially interpersonal connections and peer support, is central to the functioning and popularity of Chinese Internet literature sites. Importantly, by fostering interaction and a sense of community, these online spaces "enhance the traditional function of literature as a social, as well as a cultural institution" (Hockx, 2004, p. 106). These social connections are also crucial for improving and maintaining the quality of the literature produced on these sites. As S. Guo (2015) describes, networks of readers and writers provide mentorship and peer support; this "affective engagement" enables the formation of "critical communities," which are incredibly valuable in supporting and enhancing members' literary work. In our interviews, a writer who publishes her works on Jinjiang and Qidian shared her experience of participating in networks of readers and writers, mainly in QQ¹ groups:

There are a lot of QQ groups established around user communities of Qidian and Jinjiang. . . . They were all created voluntarily by users themselves. . . . In writers' groups, people usually share their literary works with each other and discuss writing skills. Of course, some people advertise their works using skill-related questions as excuses. . . . There are also reader groups for popular works—for some really hot novels, there could even be six or seven relevant reader groups for one novel.

At the same time, these sites engender strong collective identities built around fandom and shared interests. Vigorous online fan communities form around Chinese Internet literature, and more specifically around certain works, authors, themes, or genres. These communities organize and participate in various online activities, such as fan-fiction writing and online competitions. Derivative works are particularly popular, as passionate fans write sequels or additional installments for their favorite works of Internet literature and share them within the online fan community. Furthermore, these derivative works can sometimes be based on prominent works of fan fiction, which are themselves based on the most popular original works of Internet literature. Such activities provide readers with a chance to exercise their creativity and connect with others, and at the same time, they can also further boost the popularity of the original works.

In forums devoted to popular Internet literary works, moderators often organize online writing activities, which can take the form of writing competitions or calls for contributions in which participants write fan fiction around topics or following rules drafted by the moderator or administrator. For instance, for the popular novel *Feng Qiu Huang*, calls for contributions were organized starting in 2011, with the aim of publishing an online Tieba journal about this novel. Derivative fan fiction, analytical articles about the original novel, and poems, lyrics, plays, and essays were all welcome, and videos and illustrations were solicited too. Many fans ended up participating in the creation of this online journal, which was published in 2014 under the name *Mei Ren Zeng Wo Jin Lang Gan* ("The Beauty Gave Me a Gold Gemstone").

¹ QQ: Chinese instant-messaging software developed by Tencent.

Such initiatives are not confined to forums, however. The literature site 17k, for instance, hosted an online writing competition in which readers were encouraged to compose derivative works based on 17k's popular online novels. The announcement introducing this competition hooked fans:

What happened?!? A second ago, you were refreshing the webpage and complaining about the [lack of] updates, and now you and your characters have already travelled to this familiar but also strange world. Only a short time ago you read this Creator's great work with admiration. You would never have imagined that now you yourself are playing the role of the Creator. (17k Novel Network, 2013)

Writers of both the original novels and the new derivative works benefited from such initiatives: The original novels on 17k got renewed exposure, and fans were provided with a platform to display their talent and express their passion for the works they loved.

In addition to written fan fiction, countless videos and illustrations are created in these online fan communities, often collaboratively. When working on these videos, fans contribute their talents and play various roles on the team, such as writing the script, composing the music, designing the artwork, drawing, editing video, singing, and dubbing. The videos are very popular within the fan community, and some receive more than a million clicks. Figure 5 is a screenshot of one of the fan-made videos for the novel *Quanzhi Gaoshou* ("The King's Avatar"). The video, titled "Bandao Yingxiong" ("Halfway Heroes") and posted on October 16, 2015, on the video-sharing website Bilibili, has so far received 126.7 million views.



Figure 5. Screenshot of "Bandao Yingxiong" ("Halfway Heroes"), a fan-made video inspired by Quanzhi Gaoshou.

These fan-made videos are not only viewed and shared within the fan community, but they can also attract attention from the original writer. Hudie Lan, the author of *Quanzhi Gaoshou*, the novel that inspired the video shown in Figure 5, has retweeted many of these videos on his Weibo account and left comments such as “Talented!” or “This video is a bit heartbreaking.” Such reactions from the original author further reinforce fan engagement with these works and validate fans’ creating and sharing derivative works.

What is more, fan activities are not limited to the online medium: Fans who meet in these online communities often organize and participate in offline gatherings as well, including fan conventions, cosplay festivals, and even camping trips. For instance, when the last chapter of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* was posted in 2015, thousands of *daomis* (as the fans of this book call each other) organized a trip to the Changbai Mountains, in northeastern China, depicted in the book as the place where the main character guarded a bronze gate and where he had been imprisoned. Thousands of *daomis* journeyed to these mountains to celebrate the release of this fictional character. This activity had a considerable economic impact, both online and offline: The retweets of the last chapter and of the hike to the mountains took over Weibo, and the number of tourists in the Changbai Mountains increased by 50% that summer (Fan, 2015). The example of the *daomi* community illustrates how offline activities often function as a way to manifest online fans’ sense of belonging (Sandvoss, 2005) and reflect fan pride (Booth & Kelly, 2013). In addition, as Porter (2004) argues, journeys to physical locations, such as the trip to the Changbai Mountains, are not unlike pilgrimages, as fans travel to a common destination while negotiating their individual and collective identities.

Commercial Aspects of the Author–Audience Relationship

The importance of commercial aspects in redefining this author–audience relationship cannot be overstated. Indeed, profit seeking is a crucial factor in this equation. As mentioned previously, in the early history of Chinese Internet literature, writers initially published on these sites simply because they loved writing and literature (Yang, 2010). Also, as we discussed, online spaces such as Tieba—which played a significant role in the evolution and maturation of Chinese Internet literature—were all about entertainment, enjoyment, and building community around shared interests. Profit was not a significant motivator for participation.

In contrast to these earlier examples, authors on today’s most prominent Internet literature websites are driven by the primary purpose of making a profit (Tse & Gong, 2012; Zhao, 2011, 2016). This is a crucial point, which has significant implications for the relationship between author and reader: No longer is this relationship simply based on entertainment and sharing the same interests, as it was in the early stages of Chinese Internet literature; it is now commercial—a relationship between seller and customer.

Authors and sites have developed a symbiotic relationship with the goal of maximizing and sharing profits. Sites generally pay for an author’s work according to the number of characters written; top authors could make more than 1,000 RMB per 1,000 characters (Lei, 2013). Another significant part of an author’s income comes directly from reading fees, on the site or on mobile apps (Tse & Gong, 2012;

Zhao, 2011, 2016). The popularity of the work—based on readers' scores, recommendations, and number of clicks—determines how much the website will pay the author. In addition, beyond the official payment system, these sites also facilitate direct monetary exchanges between authors and their readers—for example, by enabling readers to buy coins to reward authors with. Such a dynamic places the reader in the position of financial sponsor (Tian & Adorjan, 2016), which is a significant aspect of the author–audience relationship on these sites. Finally, advertising revenue also represents a large portion of authors' income—the more popular the authors are, the more money they can get through advertisements (Zhao, 2016). Besides regular advertisements that crowd the pages of Internet literature sites, authors also embed ads into their work in more subtle ways, such as by writing original stories that are specifically aimed at advertising a certain product: for instance, writing a love story to advertise a romantic mobile game. This practice is especially common on social media such as WeChat.

Furthermore, authors of Internet literature also aim to make profits outside of these sites, as more and more writers leverage their online popularity to transition into successful careers in print literature. In some cases, the last chapters of popular works will not be released online, causing readers to have to buy the print books to finish reading the entire story. In essence, the commercialization of Internet literature “initiated a reorganization of the field of literary publishing” (Yang, 2010, p. 334). Moreover, another potential revenue source is the adaptation of literary works into TV series or movies (Zhao, 2016). Authors gain profit through selling the copyrights of their works, and they might also participate in the creation of the TV series or movies as screenwriters. In the past few years, a vast number of successful TV series and movies were adapted from well-known Internet literary works; the popularity of these works online guaranteed a large initial fan base.

In our interviews, most writers said their main motivations are enjoyment and appreciation of the social aspects of participation (as quoted earlier in this article) rather than material reward. Two writers said they would like to earn money from it, but at the moment their works are not popular enough for that: A writer on Jingjiang lamented that “it is a pity that the number of clicks for my works is too low,” and a Douban writer said, “I want to earn money from it, though I can't make it hahaha!” A writer who posts her works on Qidian and Jinjiang also pointed out that motivations change over time:

At the beginning, almost all the writers wanted to earn money through online literature, but then they would find that they could gain very little money from it, unless they were truly talented and took writing as a full-time job.

She also commented on the unfair commercial structure of Internet literature sites, a perspective that reinforces Zhao's (2016) insights regarding the precarious conditions of labor in this context:

On Jinjiang, contract works of 50,000–80,000 characters that get many clicks can become VIP works, which means readers need to pay for reading each chapter . . . But writers do not get any income for contract works. After their works become VIP, their income is calculated per thousand characters, but they get no money from readers' payments. Writers are very much exploited. Although my motivation for writing is

personal interest, many people would like to earn money from writing, but unfortunately that is only possible for a lucky few.

Conclusion

Although Internet literature in China is still relatively young, the impact of this cultural form across a wide diversity of spheres is vast. As Yang (2010) aptly notes, "Internet literature not only successfully challenged the cultural hegemony of print literature but also expanded the field of literary production and consumption" (p. 334) in China. This impact is also highly significant, as we have aimed to show, in terms of redefining the relationship between authors and their audiences.

By connecting in online spaces that center on participation and social engagement, authors and readers now have the opportunity to interact more directly—although, as we argued by means of the comparison between Tieba and more specialized literature sites, platform design plays a crucial role in positioning readers vis-à-vis authors and in shaping the nature and extent of reader involvement in the creative process. A key conclusion that emerged from our research is that participation in both the consumption and production of Chinese online literature is a fundamentally social activity. Aided to a significant extent by social media, the dynamic between authors and readers, traditionally indirect and distant, has become more direct and bidirectional. In particular, we found that social media platforms perform multiple vital functions within the context of Chinese online literature: They allow authors to share both professional and—importantly—personal updates with their fans, and they enable readers to get in touch with their favorite authors in an informal manner, thus facilitating a two-way communication channel between authors and audiences, while strengthening reader communities around favorite authors, topics, and genres.

Furthermore, the salience of these social aspects in the context of Chinese online literature can be identified not only in the connection between readers and writers but also that among readers. Indeed, our research revealed the vibrancy of fan communities that form around these texts and authors; fandom in this context is characterized by strong social ties and active creative production, which results in a large body of derivative works, often produced collectively. At the same time, our study reinforces the findings of previous scholarship (Tian & Adorjan, 2016; Tse & Gong, 2012; Zhao, 2011, 2016) in noting that the relationship between authors and their audiences is marked by a strong commercial dimension, which will most likely increase in significance as the field of Chinese online literature continues to prosper.

The implications of online participation for the democratization of creative production are vital, especially given the cultural weight attached to the boundary between authors and audiences (Literat, 2012). As Yang (2012) notes,

The construction of this boundary is an important strategy of symbolic distinction in print culture. In the conventional literary field, "writer" is a sacred title. . . . On the Internet, it becomes a much more democratic title, since common readers can just as easily publish their own works. (p. 350)

As readers communicate directly with authors and with each other, offering feedback, engaging in discussions, and building participatory cultures around their shared interests, “the production of literature becomes a collective literary activity” (Yongqing, 2011, p. 187).

Given the popularity of Internet literature in China and rapid advances in the technological infrastructures supporting this kind of cultural production, we expect to see more, and more diverse, online literary platforms in the near future. As the proliferation of Chinese Internet literature continues, there are important aspects that merit further and closer analysis.

Future research should look at social attitudes toward online literature in China, which is a critical area of investigation, given the increasingly prominent role of Chinese Internet literature in the country’s public and cultural life. Although online literature is a remarkable success from technological, cultural, and commercial perspectives, many criticize it as a black sheep of Chinese culture. A commonly shared concern is that Internet literature commercializes the art of literature and is nothing more than unsophisticated entertainment. Although there are many quality online literary works, these sites also feature plenty of trash literature, or works that consist of vulgar content. These works do well in the commercial ecosystem of Internet literature sites: To gain more profits, authors of such works aim to appeal to readers by adding over-the-top plotlines or sensational content to attract more clicks.

Another significant area for future research is the demographic makeup of Chinese Internet literature websites. So far, we know little about who posts and who reads online literature. A more focused exploration of variables such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and location of participants (e.g., in China versus internationally) would add depth to our understanding of these practices. Finally, there is a need for more research in the vein of Zhao (2016) that listens closely to the voices of the participants and engages them in sharing their personal experiences with Internet literature and their motivations for participating in these online communities.

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