Electronic Literature in China

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Abstract: In her article "Electronic Literature in China" Jinghua Guo discusses how the reception and the critical contexts of production of online literature are different in China from those in the West despite similar developments in digital technology. Guo traces the development of Chinese digital literature, its history, and the particular characteristics and unique cultural significance in the context of Chinese culture where communality is an aspect of society. Guo posits that Chinese electronic literature is larger than such in the West despite technical drawbacks and suggests that digitality represents a positive force in contemporary Chinese culture and literature.

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Electronic Literature in China

In China the term used for what is known in the West as "electronic literature" is 网络文学 (wangluowenxue)meaning "network literature."Since the emergence of network literature in China in the 1990s, a debate about its definition has been taking place among Chinese literary critics and Youquan Ouyang (欧阳友权), for example, defines it as "a new literary style that seeks to create literary texts on the internet and spread these works on the internet for web users to browse or participate in them" (Ouyang, "Outline" 70; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). According to Ouyang, Chinese network literature exists today in three forms: 1) texts converted from traditional print format to electronic format and then disseminated on the internet; 2) original texts born digital and distributed on the internet; and 3) texts presented online whereby they are with the use of hypertext and multimedia technology. Thus we can say that "network literature" in China includes a range of different types of "text" (used here as an umbrella term) from the textual to the visual such as electronic literature, the publishing of scholarship, computer games, books, animation, etc. This means that in China the designation of "network literature" refers to almost that appears on the internet.

   According to recent statistics, the number of internet users in China is estimated at 649 million. Of those 294 million are "network literature" users and their growth rate is 7.1% annually (see *China Internet* 58). Indeed, network literature in China is by now an almost mature industry and by means of new platforms of network applications internet users can employ their mobile devices to read at any time and from any location. Further, "netizen" readership is having a significant impact on the traditional reading market in China; however, although network literature has achieved popularity in present-day China, specific product records about Chinese electronic literature—understood here in the Western context—are not easily found when searching the internet and this is the same with regard to one of the largest collections of electronic literature *ELO: Electronic Literature Directory* <http://directory.eliterature.org/> and thus for Western scholars it would seem that Chinese electronic literature is a marginal phenomenon. One of the few sources in English that deals with Chinese electronic literature is Michel Hockx's recent book *Internet Literature in China* where he suggests that the first Chinese-language literary texts to appear online were produced by Chinese students in the USA at a time when the internet was not yet available in China. Hockx discusses the different types of Chinese digital literature and their particularities. Interestingly, Hockx suggests that the Chinese government is becoming increasingly tolerant with cultural industries in general and the digital publishing world in particular (see also Li, Qingben).

   Among the first examples Chinese digital literature was the webpage 华夏文摘 <http://www.cnd.org/whatiscnd.html> (China News Digest), a non-profit organization established in 1989, registered in Maryland, and operated by volunteers who provided information services to Chinese communities around the world. Another example is the work developed by Xiaofei Wang (王笑飞) who set up a Chinese Poetry Network at the University of Buffalo <chpoem-1@listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu> in 1991. This network was in fact an email subscription system that shared Chinese classical poetry among its members. In 1992 Yagui Wei (魏亚桂) at the University of Indiana Bloomington encouraged the university's system administrator to open <alt.chinese.text> on Usenet, the first newsgroup to post Chinese-language items on the internet and in 1994 新语丝 <http://www.xys.org> (New Threads), one of the first online publications in Chinese was launched also in the United States. By clicking on the catalog listings, users can access examples of Chinese literature such as poems, stories, and so on. On the same website, a group of women Chinese authors established a network of women's literature publications in 1996. There are many other examples of Chinese digital literature by Chinese students and scholars during their stays overseas. Most of these resources are still in existence and can be found; however, in my opinion they cannot be considered "electronic literature" proper since they are only digitalized versions of standard print texts in Chinese and although they function at times as hypertexts, they do not have possibilities for interactivity. There are also no multimedia elements in these examples of the 1990s. Important is that these digital platforms were the beginnings of "network literature" in China proper in the following decades.

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In the mid-1990s, faculty and graduate students on university campuses throughout China became the first to obtain internet access. They launched several literary Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) for the discussion of literary topics. In those years, several websites devoted to hosting literary production began to emerge. In 1999, the first commercially operated website for creative writing was launched in Shanghai under the name 榕树下 <http://www.rongshuxia.com> (Banyan Tree) and in 2000 it acquired nationwide attention after the publication of 死亡日记 (Diary of Death), a text by Youqing Lu (路幼青), in which he chronicled the last days of his life as a sufferer of terminal cancer. Hockx mentions that Rongshu Xia statistics in 2005 claimed a subscription of 4.5 million, the daily page views of over 7 million and an online database of more than 3 million works of creative writing. Since the late 1990s, numerous websites hosting classic and/or new forms of literature have been created and some of the most popular ones are 红袖添香 <http://www.hongxiu.com/> (Armbands Novels Network), 晋江文学城 <http://www.jjwxc.net/> (Jinjiang City Literature), 起点中文网 <http://top.qidian.com> (Start Chinese Net), 盛大文学网 <http://www.cloudary.com.cn> (cloudary), 新浪读书频道 <http://book.sina.com.cn/> (Book Sina), and 中文在线 <http://www1.chineseall.com> (Chinese All). These platforms provide online space and possibilities to publish texts by writers. They can also submit regular posts about their unfinished work to their online discussion forums and in this way receive comments and feedback from readers. Responses are added to each submitted text under the same heading and based on readers' comments the work is extended and finally finished (or not). The typical format for these texts is the thread format. Since the texts develop over time and are potentially open-ended, the most experimental element of this literature is its interactivity that takes the form of readers' opinions influencing the writers' work. In addition, hundreds of specific literary websites—some institutional and others personal—have been launched throughout China.

Today's network literature in China serves two main functions: the development of creative artistic literature and the publishing and cultural industries. Between 2004 and 2008 several important mergers have taken place in the digital publishing industry. For example, 盛大 <http://www.cloudary.com.cn> (SD) purchased 起点中文网 <http://top.qidian.com/> and then merged with 晋江原创网 <http://www.jjwxc.net/> and 红袖添香 <http://www.hongxiu.com/>. 红袖添香 (Armbands Novels Network) was founded in 1999 and ranked as one of the most influential literature websites, 晋江原创网 (Jinjiang City Literature) was founded in 2003 by a group of women authors and it is today China's most famous women literature website(also popular because it publishes novels in the genre of Harlequin romances). cloudary (盛大文学网) was established in 2008 taking Chinese network literature to the level of mass literature production and by 2009 it had over "43 billion words of the original literature copyright, nearly 60 million new incremental words every day, average 400 million times visits daily, 500 million times for the highest page view day and more than 38 million registered users" (Shan, "Falseness" 77). Since then, it has become the largest platform and community for network literature in China. Nowadays, Cloudary has become the largest network literature platform driven by community in China, holding more than 70% market share of China's total original network literature. At the same time, as the largest private publishing company, Cloudary also runs three companies: 华文天下 (Chinese World Books), 中智博文 (zbowen Books), and 聚石文华 (Poly Shi Wenhua Books). These three professional library enterprises are all engaged in digital books planning, marketing, sales, and distribution each with their own characteristics and advantages. Chinese World Book Co. established long-term strategic cooperation with publishing companies in Europe and the United States, Japan, and South Korea and succeeded in the sale of large numbers of bestsellers. jswhbook Inc was founded in 2003 and became a subsidiary of Cloudary in 2010: the merged venue is a publisher of digital books from classics to various contemporary genres of literary texts.

In the particular combination of digitality in China—namely the combination of publishing digitally and the writing of electronic literature—Cloudary established itself as a leading company whose profit is high while its authors earn good money and hence authors are interested increasingly in working with and for Cloudary. Many contemporary popular writers have signed contracts with Cloudary. For example, Han Han(韩寒), a best-selling author and popular blogger was named one of the most influential people in the world by *Time Magazine* in 2010 and was interviewed by CNN as China's rebel writer; Dan Yu (于丹), professor of media studies at Beijing Normal University became popular owing because of her digital publishing of classics; Viru An (安意如), a woman writer who became famous be-

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cause of her traditional love poems; and in Taiwan there is Kevin Tsai (蔡康永), a writer and television host whose books have become bestsellers in Taiwan.

In his book Introduction to Network Literature, Ouyang classifies the development of "network literature" in China over a period of twenty years in what he terms "Three Shock Waves." Ouyang places in the first period the popularity of the 1998 serial novel 第一次亲密接触 (First Intimate Contact) and the emergence of the so-called five "dark horse" writers whose digital texts achieved extraordinary popularity. The second period begins when the novel 悟空传 (Countergod Man) was published digitally in 2000 and when the novel 风中玫瑰 (Rose in the Wind) was published in 2001. Further texts published digitally in the second period include Xuecun Murong's 成都今夜请将我遗忘 (Leave Me Alone: A Novel of Chengdu), a novel about a group of young people living in Chengdu in the 1970s, their falling in love, their marriages, professional careers, and life struggles and it attracted large numbers of online readers and caused a sensation in the literary world. The third period is when similar novels about relationships were published including 成都粉子 (Chengdu FenZi), 深圳今夜激情澎湃(Passion in Shenzhen), 成都爱情只有八月 (Chengdu: Love Only Lasts 8 Months), and 天堂向左深圳向右(Another Way to Heaven). Ouyang posits that with the third period digital literature changed from free and amateur writing to commercial and professional writing.

Compared with that of mainland of China, electronic literature in Taiwan developed earlier. Similar to developments in the U.S. and elsewhere like France (see, e.g., Miall; Vuillemin and Lenoble) where in the 1970s literature was generated and created on the computer, in Taiwan writers experimented in similar ways and with the arrival of the internet in 1994 electronic literature including poetry became popular. Many good digital works with images and sound composition of traditional and modern literary texts in Chinese are produced in Taiwan. Among the websites hosting e-poetry are 妙缪庙 (Wonderfully Absurd Temple) founded in 1997 by Da-juin Yao (姚大钧) and Jer-lian Tsao (曹志涟). This is a prime example of Taiwan electronic poetry and its new ideas have been praised by critics and scholars of digital literature all over the world (see, e.g., Lin). Another pioneer, Shuen-Shing Lee (李顺兴), is committed to the introduction of digital literature theories and their application into teaching practices in Taiwan and he founded in 1998 the website 岐路花园 <http://benz.nchu.edu.tw/~garden/a-works.htm> (The Garden of Forking Paths). Today, Lee presents poems with animation and includes works created and translated by himself. His translations, interpretations, and precise criticism of specific texts presented online have contributed to the development of e-poetry in Taiwan. Further, as the representative of the middle generation of poets in Taiwan, Shao-Lian Su (苏绍连) creates poems in a "dual voice" with which he attempts to construct a special type of e-poetry. Flash technology is integrated in his poems which show imagination and the creativity of his texts is displayed in the poetry website he founded in 1998 现代诗的岛屿 <http://poetry.myweb.hinet.net/sulien/index.htm> (Modern Poetry Islands). Qiyang Lin (林淇瀁), also known as Xiangyang (向阳), created several websites for e-poetry and e-literature including 向阳工坊 <http://hylim.myweb.hinet.net/> (Xiangyang Workshop), 向阳诗房 <http://tea.ntue.edu.tw/~xiangyang/xiangyang/> (Xiangyang Poetry Space), and 向阳文苑 <http://tns.ndhu.edu.tw/~xiangyang/index.htm> (Xiangyang Literary World). These websites are also linked to each other. Xiangyang Workshop is equipped with background music and experimental e-poems. For example, Xianyang's "一首被撕裂的诗" ("A Torn Poem") <http://tea.ntue.edu.tw/~xiangyang/workshop/netpoetry/> is regarded as a paradigmatic example for e-poetry in Chinese digital literature. Win-Way Hsiu (须文蔚) regards Lin's work as representative of Taiwan's "era of internet popularity" because Lin's poetry is a combination of text, graphics, movement, and sound. Overall, while Taiwan is somewhat behind mainland China in harnessing digitaly on the publishing side, it is on the forefront in electronic poetry.

Although electronic literature in Hong Kong did not exist before the 1990s (see Shi), in recent years electronic literature published in Hong Kong is paid some attention to although often in a derogatory context and at best it is considered "experimental writing (see, e.g., Gu). However, the development of e-poetry in Hong Kong is, in my opinion, worthy of attention. Poetry is integrated with the drawing in image poems because Chinese characters can be formed into images and thus artistic concepts can be created visually. For example, Hong Kong's poet Qing Li (黎青) uses the advantage of Chinese characters in creating image poems reflecting on NATO's Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, which published on Bulletin of Taiwanese Poetics in 1999. With a relatively liberal literary scene, Hong Kong excels in the publishing and distribution of Chinese world literature (see, e.g., Yan) including

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such on the world wide web. Of course, similar to Taiwan in Hong Kong blogging has become popular although this is not the same as the production and communication of electronic literature. One problem that persists with Hong Kong electronic literature is the lack of proper presentation including substandard editing (see, e.g., Chen).

While the historical situation of China including the social cultures of the country are different from those in Western countries, its history of digitality and electronic literature shows some parallel developments. The later development of digitality and thus electronic literature itself happened in China owing to restrictions exerted on cultural industries and practices. However, once such restrictions were eased, digitality was embraced by the urban population and thus electronic literature too became an important activity. One distinction between Western and Chinese digital arts is the more collaborative ways practiced in China versus the more individual human-computer interaction created by Western artists. While the theory and practice of Western electronic literature suggests that machines can get involved in the creation of literary texts, Chinese network literature has a bent towards the use of machines and technology in order to meet people's communal needs. Regardless of cultural implications, new technologies contribute to increase the interactive potential of art and literature. However, Chinese critics of digitality and digital literature and art emphasize the fact that meaningful interaction between human-machine interaction and the interpersonal realm should be an objective (see, e.g., Huang, "Toward" 102). Regarding the differences in literary genres between China and the West, the poetic narrative remains the preferred textual format and dominant form of digital literature in China, with Taiwan a leader in the e-poetry area. According to Ji Ma, longer digital narratives can generally be divided into seven types. The first type is the narration of changes in space-time locations with people going back to a specific historical period and using their contemporary knowledge to change the course of history. The second type is fantasy novels, but that is in many instances different from Western science fiction in that "science" is often not part of the narrative in any way and thus perhaps the genre would be better termed "speculative fiction." The third refers to urban youth life describing young people's emotions and their modern city life. Type four is about workplace struggles. The fifth type is adaptations of online computer games or other online material mostly for the purpose of marketing. The sixth type is the supernatural narrative depicting ghosts or adventure themes and thrillers. And the seventh type is military and martial arts.

In another perspective of explicating the Chinese development of digital literature, Mingfen Huang (黄鸣奋) suggests six characteristics of Chinese network literature: 1)the artist's identity is no longer the most important aspect of creativity and internet users acquire protagonist roles and use role play in their own work in order to inject emotion into the text; 2) just like the artist, the text is no longer an important aspects in cenarration develop by means of readers' participation in hypermedia; 3) traditional presentation and processes are no longer towards a fixed target and creation occurs by a complex combination of randomness and playfulness on the internet; 4) the audience is no longer silent, but participates actively with the digital text either by interacting with the text provided and/or by inputting their own contribution; 5) sources of the content of digital art are no longer "realist" (i.e., as in social realism), but "digital imagination," that is, the harmonious combination of art and activity, subjective and objective; and 6) the constructing factors for digital environments of art are not just between humans and nature, but including the machine and technical know-how. In yet another perspective, network literature critic Hongbing Ge (葛红兵) uses three concepts to describe its characteristics: openness, quickness, and leisure and posits that if we admit that literature is a form of non-utilitarian "freedom" present within human nature, network literature is the best form to have the public experience this freedom in a multimodal form. He adds that one does not need elegance, mature technique, or high writing skills and that "immaturity" perhaps an advantage instead precisely because digital literature is unlike printed literature (74). Indeed, the rich and diverse contents of digital literature and the correspondingly large size of its user community has attracted the attention of many people in China and although this interest is at this time still concentrated in urban settings, there is no doubt that as China develops, also people in the countryside will engage with electronic literature especially because of the increase of handheld digital machines. This latter aspect is where China will undoubtedly advance faster than the West where digital interaction is more over "stationary" machines such as the computer and it remains to be seen whether in the West the use of the cell phone and similar handhelds would advance.

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With regard to categories of users of digital literature it is interesting that dissimilar to the West, in China the male-female ratio of digital writers is almost equal, a factor that points to the active role of women in culture and the cultural industries. Writers come from diverse areas including some remote places, although the most popular ones tend to be in urban centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong and similar. It is also important to mention that many writers do not come from the world of traditional art. Instead, they are amateur authors, civil servants, teachers, soldiers, workers, and even farmers who have technological knowledge. The creation of digital art happens like this: an author contributes a text to a discussion forum or online literature website and if it attracts readers and comments, it remains at the top of the discussion board and its popularity and value becomes widely recognized. A further "digitalization," as it were, occurs when the text in its original form or enhanced version(s) is adapted to film, a television play, computer games, etc. It can also occur that the text is published in printed form, that is, either as a traditional print book or as a digital book. This process includes the sudden rise of a writer out of obscurity or as a new writer and this emergence of an unknown writer would not happen in the traditional processes of established print culture.

It is because of the reach and possibilities of the digital that many established writers are using online discussion forums as their main avenue to increase the sale of their work, that is, the necessity to acquire readership and audience. Publishing houses engage in cooperation with websites to find, choose, and publish books. One consequence of this is that digital literature just like print literature now has top literature awards like the Xun Lu Literature Prize (鲁迅) or the Dun Mao Prize for Literature (矛盾). All this indicates that digital literature in China has become an important part of contemporary literature owing to its ways of the digital in creation, distribution and circulation, and users' participation. While electronic literature in the West remains a specialized field, digital literature in China has changed the patterns of the literary system with regard to the production, distribution, reception, and post-processing of literary products. Compared with the high start-up costs of Western types of electronic literature, Chinese writers prefer to engage in a low-cost literary economy where it is more important to publish regularly in order to be in constant contact with one's readership.

The system differences between Western and Chinese digitality with regard to literary production I am referring to is observed by Hockx who writes that that vast majority of Chinese electronic literary production takes place in the context of millions of online discussion forums in thread format started by an author submitting a work (or a part of it) and extended by readers commenting and the author responding. Hockx also points out that the social community aspect of these sites prevents them from being considered innovative, avant-garde, or important in Western critical circles where the tradition and adherence to print culture determine that important works of electronic literature must be self-contained creations by individual and named creators. In China and possibly in other parts of the Chinese reading world as well, innovations are moving into a different direction employing the interactive features of digital online writing in order to produce unstable, multi-authored threads of writing and images which encourage participation and that involve their readership in new literary and aesthetic experiences. Further, on the one hand the communal aspect of the creation and consumption of digital literature makes one of communism's objectives—"public literature"—possible and fulfills the cooperative and democratic spirit of transferring literary discourse to the people. In addition, this results in the creation and development of 新民间文学 ("new folk literature"), a particular genre that is by definition communal. But on the other hand, the limitations of digital literature in China are also obvious. Owing to the low threshold in both quality and cost, texts pour into the internet without selection, so the government is beginning to take a closer look at those productions. Huang conducted several surveys on the National Library of China, as well as external institutions such as the Library of Congress and the Widener Library at Harvard University and concludes that, in terms of content, China produces more digital literature than any other country in the world. However, compared with the research situation of electronic literature worldwide, research into Chinese digital literature has serious shortcomings (see Huang, "Network"). There are several reasons for this: one is that digital literature developed in China on the technical low-end because, initially, computer word processing and network transmission did not support Chinese characters.

As I mention previously, it were Chinese students in the U.S. who created Chinese character processing software and thus solved the problem of word processing in Chinese. Unfortunately, even with word processing technologies used in digital literature, Western advances in digital writing techniques

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such as hyperlinks, multimedia content, the visualization of images, etc., are rarely applied in Chinese digital literary creations. And Western high-end literary editing systems and tools such as "Story Space" and "Super Card Editor" are not recommended or modified for creative online writings in Chinese. Online digital texts in China are produced merely by the simple process of using the Chinese character input method with content originally written on paper and transmitted to the internet in the traditional linear manner (on this, see, e.g., see Shan, "Falseness"). Thus, over the past twenty years, the development of digital literature in China belongs to low-technical digital creation with the exception of a few hypertext writings. This is one of the reasons why scholarship and the critical evaluation of digital literature in Chinese is yet to develop. Of course, there is also the opinion by some, even influential, scholars and writers that in principle there is no difference between a text printed and a text created and published digitally: clearly, such opinion lacks the perspective of the interactive nature of digital literature and the different function of readership. A similar situation is the case with regard to digital humanities, a recently developed field in which the theory and practice of digital literature can be located (for a bibliography of work in the field see Tötösy de Zepetnek <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/bibliographydigitalhumanities>).

As I suggest above, the designation "network literature" includes the publishing of not only electronic literature, but all sorts of digital texts and this means that also the publishing of scholarship belongs to "network literature." Similar to the U.S. and Europe, the acceptance of humanities scholarship published online is slow in China because of the academic world's cautious adaptation of publishing online and even the employment of new media in pedagogy (on this, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Jia <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2426>; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Boruszko <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/paradigm-shift-comparative-humanities-digital-humanities-pedagogy-new-media-technology-and>). Another issue is with regard to the acceptance and award of credit for online publications because there are few online only journals which are also Thomson Reuters indexed, the latter of which being an absolute requirement in China and Taiwan (also in India and Europe, but not in the U.S. and Canada) for receiving credit for a publication.

In conclusion, the development of digital media and internet-based communication have brought about huge transformations in Chinese literature and resulted in fundamental changes in the aesthetic structures, various concepts of literature, and the production and reception of literature. Using the narrative style of ordinary people has prompted literature to turn towards a new kind of folk writing style with few restrictions on the canon and more freedom for popular art. The other side of the coin is that, for some critics, technology may destroy some of the humanist characteristics which where part of art and literature for centuries and reduce the ethical responsibility of the artist/writer towards his/her community of readers. Chinese cultural industries struggle to retain this original humanist spirit without falling into the demands of the market and profitability. As Ouyang points out, the Chinese literary scene needs to balance artistic reliance on technology with a certain degree of self-discipline and community spirit in order to become a real and effective driver of Chinese cultural representations globally (Ouyang, "Digital Media "143).

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