Cross-culture, translation and post-aesthetics: Chinese online literature in/as world literature in the Internet era

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As defined by Michel Hockx, Chinese online literature is "Chinese-language writing, either in established literary genres or in innovative literary forms, written especially for publication in an interactive online context and meant to be read on-screen" (2015, 22). Since its birth in the 1990s, it has grown rapidly to become a new form of Chinese literature, with genre fiction as its mainstream. It not only has a large number of loyal fan-readers in China, but has also become increasingly popular among international readers by being translated into many languages and circulated in different countries.[1] Some scholars have even pointed out that, following Hollywood movies, Japanese animation and Korean dramas, it has become the fourth largest cultural phenomenon in the world (Ouyang and He 2019, 180). In order to address the relevance of Chinese online literature to the topic of world literature and national literature, this article will sort out its origin and history, its translation and circulation, and its doings with the concept of canon. It argues that Chinese online literature is a representation of cross-cultural writing in the Internet era, a web-based world literature with translation and circulation as its fundamental premise, and a heterotopian and post-aesthetic model deconstructing the idea of canon, which together creates a literary space of challenging, breaking through and transcending the literary theories and ideological values of traditional world literature, and rewriting the existing order and standards of world literature. The study of Chinese online literature will help us better understand the relationship between world literature and national literature in this changing world.

EARLY CHINESE ONLINE LITERATURE AS CROSS-CULTURAL WRITING

Although Chinese online literature is a new literary category and trend that has boomed in China in recent years (particularly since the 2010s) and has only since spread globally, it is not difficult to find a complex combination of the local and the universal in it when tracing its history. In a globalized era, world literature is not just limited to "the practice of comparing national literatures" (Fang 2018, 26), but is also about the "interrelationships and separations of literatures and of their contexts" (26). The core issue now is "on the relation between the universal and the local"

(Freise 2018, 191), which implies that "the phenomenon of world literature could be seen from a relational instead of from an essentialist perspective" (191). That is to say, "in order to understand what world literature is, we have to understand it generally as a network of relations", and "[a] central but not the only axis of these relations is the tension between the universal and the local" (191). Early Chinese online literature was a cross-cultural literary field where the local and the universal were negotiated consistently, with a cross-regional, cross-contextual and cross-cultural appearance. It was born not in the local Chinese context but across the ocean in the United States, with the help of America's world-leading internet technology. During this period, influential Chinese online literary magazines were invariably founded by Chinese people (especially Chinese students) living in the U.S. and focused on publishing original literary works by Chinese expatriates. The readers were also mainly from Chinese communities in North America and other countries outside China. However, this does not mean that the contributors and readers did not include native Chinese people. A review of key statistics indicates that readers from mainland China occupied a large part of these communities, and the works reprinted and excerpted in those magazines always included writers from mainland China or Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan (He 2022, 97). This fact shows that from the very beginning, Chinese online literature could not be framed by geographic or national boundaries because it was born in the context of globalization and the cyberspace of blurred geography.

In terms of writing per se, early Chinese online literature was a literary form of writing that mixed foreign experience with Chinese culture. Some of its most celebrated writers of that time included authors with the screen names Shao Jun, Tu Ya, Si Jing and Boqing Wang. Chinese students based in America wrote online in Chinese mainly because of their longing and desire for their homeland and its culture. Boqing Wang, one of the most popular online prose writers at that time, once explained his writing motive like this:

> When studying abroad, I wanted to read Chinese sometimes and gain enjoyment from it. The online magazines run by Chinese students in America enriched the Chinese-reading life of many Chinese living abroad. Eager to be part of the contributors, in May 1997, I wrote my first prose. The readers' letters I received after publication encouraged me to write more. There was another motive for writing: I wanted to share my own life with Chinese people, the ordinary life of a Chinese intellectual who lived outside of Chinatown and who was not too far ahead or too far behind in the mainstream American society – a kind of ordinary experience of most Chinese who stayed in America: studying, finding a job, and getting a green card, buying a house, owning a car, and marriage, children education, the process of entering American society, and seeing China's past and present from outside. (2001, 3)

Wang's confession can be said to represent the voice of Chinese online writers, which well explains their purpose of writing: one was to survive Chinese culture abroad, and the other was to share their expatriate lives and new insights with Chinese people both at home and abroad. Early Chinese online literature thus also consisted of two major themes: memories about their homeland and accounts of life

in America. For instance, while describing her life and work in Beijing where she grew up and felt attached to, Tu Ya also focused on the strange people, events and situations she encountered abroad. Shao Jun, on the other hand, often used a humorous and satirical tone to meticulously portray the multitude of people in and outside China. Boqing Wang, while recalling his life back in China and the unique history of China he experienced, exposed the joys and sorrows of the first group of Chinese students of the mainland living in the U.S. and their true feelings in the face of the realities.

The online works of younger Chinese students reveal their youthfulness and enthusiasm in embracing new life in a foreign country. In her work "Xingqiwu, jincheng de lieche" (Friday, the train to the city), Si Jing describes:

> As I savored one small encounter after another, the mystery of life's innumerable subtleties and beauties was unveiled one by one. Thank Heaven, I said in my mind, that I had really lived this afternoon. I knew the feeling of the warm sun shining on my body at three o'clock in the afternoon; I knew the meaning of the wind rustling the leafless branches on the lake. I savored the vibrancy of the city, the river and the lake that permeated every cell of my body. I smiled at strangers from the bottom of my heart and received the same joy from their hearts. I knew why I had chosen, been chosen, to come to this place with its rich history and yet its vitality. (1998, n.p.)

Through Si Jing's subtle perceptions, one can glimpse her cherished and loving new life and her determination and confidence in integrating into it. On the whole, those writers wrote in Chinese outside China and targeted Chinese readers around the world, which was an act of self-consolation and self-expression from a cross-cultural position. They blended the local memory with the universal's vision, showing cross-cultural realities and multiculturalism. In the process, they gradually found their identity and possibly belonging, which facilitated the construction of an emotional and spiritual community in between cultures. Their writings were inevitably influenced by the experiences of living outside China or the perspectives from the outside, thus reflecting a certain hybridity and inclusiveness. Many of the works of homesickness were not monotonous self-pitying, but rather a kind of universal exploration and integration. Behind the group of strugglers, drifters and discoverers, individual life care and the search for world truth are cleverly fused together, forming a literary style in which the local and the universal intermingle.

It was not until 1995 that the first BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) was established on a local server in mainland China, and many young people began to publish works on it. It is worth mentioning that after the establishment of BBS in mainland China, "some original literary works were distributed via BBS, but the main trend was to copy works from Taiwan" (Hockx 2015, 91). This also explains why the first online novel to hit mainland China actually came from Taiwan, namely *Diyici de qinmi jiechu* (*First intimate contact,* 1998*)* by Taiwanese online writer Pizi Cai (Ruffian Cai). As online literature shifted from the BBS era to the website era, the first online literature site in mainland China, i.e., *Zai rongshu xia* (Under the banyan tree), was established in 1997 by Chinese-American Weilian Zhu (Wil-

liam Zhu) after he returned to China. A cross-cultural line is implicated here: "This record-breaking online phenomenon, too, has its origins in the United States, since its founder […] is a U.S. citizen who moved to Shanghai in 1994" (99). These two facts not only indicate the trend of Chinese online literature returning to mainland China, but also illustrate the potential of Chinese online literature to continuously transcend the confines of geographic and cultural space. In the 21st century, after the rise of local Chinese online literature and its expansion, Chinese online literature abroad and that of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, continued to exist and develop, with a global distribution of its writers and readers, thus forming its world map of today.[2] After the local Chinese online literature rose, it not only continued to communicate with Chinese online literature abroad and benefit Chinese readers in different countries, but also began to spread to non-Chinese readers through translation, thus gradually becoming a cultural force to be reckoned with on a global scale. From its birth and early history, it can be seen that Chinese online literature had always been open-minded to communication across geographical and cultural boundaries. While putting China or Chinese people as its thematic core, it reflected on history and reality with an inclusive perspective, thinking about the world and humanity with a universal sentiment.

ETHNICITY AND COMMENSURABILITY

In the process of its recent development, Chinese online literature, more than any other parts of Chinese literature, has emphasized the highlighting of traditional Chinese cultural elements such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, while continuously absorbing the essence of world popular literature and culture. It has always insisted on Chinese culture as its narrative base but has never stopped maintaining its commensurability with world culture. It inherits China's tradition of genre fiction and the essence of classical culture and is dedicated to writing Chinese stories and Oriental legends. When it comes to genre fiction, one point needs to be emphasized here. China, due to the promotion of the so-called orthodox or mainstream literature, did not develop a recognized institution or system for producing and publishing genre fiction in the era of paper media before the Internet age. In Europe and the U.S., where there has been a mature system for it, genre writers can create and publish without relying on the Internet, and readers do not need to rely on the Internet for their daily reading needs. In the absence of such an institution in China, the timely emergence of the Internet has provided an alternative platform to meet the growing needs of the Chinese public for genre fiction. In fact, online literature has become the representative of contemporary Chinese popular literature. Although the development of genre fiction was once hindered, after it was revived by the Internet and became the mainstream of online literature, it still followed and continues to follow the long tradition of Chinese genre fiction, following the Tang legends, the Song scripts, and the chapter novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School of the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China, and the *wuxia* (martial arts) and *yanqing* (romance) novels of Hong Kong and Taiwan after the reform and opening up.[3] In other words, Chinese online literature is

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actually based on a great literary tradition that links classical China, modern China, and contemporary China.

In the imaginary worlds constructed by online genre fiction, history, military, war, romance, past, reality and future are all expressed in the most traditional and secular Chinese way. For instance, the *wuxia* and *xianxia* (immortal cultivation) genres, which have gained great popularity among European and American readers, did not originate online but have existed in Chinese literature for a long time. Meanwhile, those genres gather various traditional cultures such as Confucianism, (Chan) Buddhism and Taoism, and are intensely influenced by such classical cultural elements like Chinese mythology, martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese folk culture and religion, Chinese alchemy and others. One of the earliest works of Chinese online literature to gain popularity among foreign readers was Er Gen's *xianxia* novel *Wo yu feng tian* (2014–2016; Eng. trans. *I Shall Seal the Heavens*, 2017). This novel not only served as English readers' introduction to the world of Eastern fantasy, but also made them fascinated by the novel's Taoist core. The story follows the journey of Meng Hao, a young intellectual who changes his destiny through cultivation, with impressive imagination, grand and shocking descriptions of nature, and spectacular martial arts scenes (Er Gen 2022). International fans of the book even held a prize essay contest with the theme of "Put your dao to the text" (Shao, Ji, and Xiao 2018, 128). The presumed readers of *Wo yu feng tian* are those Chinese who know nothing about classical culture, and its use of the most simple and straightforward way to tell certain Taoist philosophies succeeds in giving the novel an aura of Chinese Taoist culture, which through translation is also perfect to be read by foreigners who are even more unfamiliar with Chinese culture: "mysterious" and fascinating but accessible at the same time.

Mo dao zu shi (2015–2018; Eng. trans. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, 2021–2023), which has had a wide impact in recent years both at home and abroad, demonstrates a complex combination of the genre of *wuxia* and *xianxia*, with a lot of Taoist-Buddhist elements and traditional cultural symbols in one piece.[4] The two main characters of the novel are both cultivators of immortality who grew up practicing Taoist cultivation or what they see as the righteous path. However, after experiencing the tragic death of his family, one of the main characters, Wei Wuxian, has no choice but to take the path of the demonic cultivation, which is considered a betrayal, and Wei Wuxian is therefore spurned by the world, becoming a demon in the eyes of others and ending up with a tragic death. After his reincarnation, he is fortunate to have the trust and shelter of the other main character, Lan Wangji, and is able to clarify himself and be accepted by the world again (Mo Xiang Tong Xiu 2019). Many readers are initially attracted to the *danmei* (boys' love) aspect (related to the Japanese Yaoi as discussed below), but eventually fall deeply into the oriental cult world built by the novel. That world, in addition to the families that follow Taoism, is scattered with Buddhist temples dedicated to Guanyin, ancient mythical Chinese beasts, and the thoughts of Five-elements and Yin-yang as well as Chinese alchemy. More importantly, the novel's portrayal of the reality and humanity features a symbolism, which enables readers to contemplate the real out-

side world. Thus, both Chinese and international readers will enter the fascinating world of traditional Chinese culture and find spiritual resonance in the story's extremely realistic outlook. Unlike the "Middle-earth" world created in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and other fantasy-worlds of Western writers, the immortal world in Chinese online literature is based on a non-realistic "virtual world". It is exactly due to this difference that foreign readers are willing to deeply immerse and release themselves in the world of the East. All of the above shows that Chinese online literature is rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture, which has laid a solid foundation for its "worlding".

However, the recent development of Chinese online literature is not only the result of internal forces brewing in Chinese literature, but also the result of stimulation and influence from other literatures and cultures. Chinese online literature has maintained its connectivity with other popular literatures, localizing and recreating them in the Chinese context. Although it is mentioned above that the Eastern world of immortality and the Western world of magic are fundamentally different, it should be noted that the relationship between the latter and the former is one of influence and being influenced; more specifically, the fantasy world of Chinese *xianxia* novels is discernibly influenced by Tolkien's fantasy novels. *Panlong* (2008–2009; Eng. trans. *Coiling Dragon*, 2015) by an anonymous author with the screen name I Eat Tomatoes (*Wo chi xihongshi*) was a huge success both at home and abroad and was one of the first Chinese online novels to break out in the English-speaking world. The reason for its success is its inheritance of Western fantasy. As is observed,

> *Coiling Dragon* is one of the representative works of Western fantasy novels popularized in China. It is a story about a Western world built on "sword and magic," following European and American styles from the world setting to the naming of the characters. English readers are not unfamiliar and can easily get into the novel. Although it was born on the Chinese site, *Coiling Dragon* was more of a "raw material processing," succeeding in "cooking" the "raw material" from Europe and America by using the online-novel writing method that was becoming mature in China at the time. (Shao, Ji, and Xiao 2018, 128)

Indeed, its author is familiar with the formula of Western fantasy. He focuses on the story of the main character, Linley Baruch, who inadvertently picks up a magical ring from his ancestral home and embarks on a fantastic journey (I Eat Tomatoes 2015). Two facts can be gleaned from this brief introduction. Firstly, the names of its characters are all Western. Linley Baruch is a typical Western name, and his ancestors, relatives and friends all have Western names without exception. Not only that, their appearances are also basically Western, with physical characteristics such as blond hair and blue eyes. Secondly, the ring is a core imagery of Western fantasy novels. In Tolkien's the *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings*, the ring represents magic and power and is an essential trigger of events. *Coiling Dragon* imitates this formula by making a ring the key to the story. Another point is that the Yulan Continent in *Coiling Dragon* looks like another "Middle-earth" where magic spells, magical beasts, giants, wildlings, clerics, pantheons, saints, etc. – typical accessories of a Western magical world – are illustrated. A Chinese writer writes Western fantasy, which is itself a process of localization and re-creation. Influenced

by the West, the genre of fantasy in Chinese online literature is becoming more and more mature, finally forming a literary force that is separate from the West.

In addition, Chinese online literature has also been deeply influenced by American and Japanese anime and games. It is said that many foreign readers, when reading Chinese online text for the first time, will naturally relate it to the world or character setting of certain anime or games from America or Japan (Ji and Li 2017, 12). The two countries entered the Internet era before China, where games and anime rather than literature were the first to become popular on the Internet. In China, which delayed entering the Internet era, the Internet technology was relatively backward, and the digital arts of anime and games did not develop as rapidly as in the two other countries. In that situation, "prioritizing the development of the cheapest and most accessible online literature became a natural choice" (12). As a later online art form, it was inevitable that it would take inspiration from its prominent predecessors, namely, the games and anime from the U.S. and Japan. Take the above-mentioned *danmei* novel as an example. *Danmei* fiction evolved from Japanese anime and is closely related to the Yaoi culture in Japan and Slash culture in Europe and America,[5] with the same creative theme as Japanese *tanbi* and boys' love in the English-speaking world.[6] Among *danmei* novels, Mo Xiang Tong Xiu's trilogy, i.e., *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, *Tian guan ci fu* (2017–2022; Eng. trans. *Heaven Official's Blessing*, 2021–2023) and *Ren zha fanpai zijiu xitong* (2014–2015; Eng. trans. *The Scum Villain's Self-Saving System*, 2021–2022) have achieved great success around the world in recent years and are loved by Asian as well as European and American readers. Their success is largely due to the reason that this genre has kept its connectivity with other successful popular cultures, which enables it to attract readers who used to belong to the Yaoi and Slash cultures.

After those discussions, it is also worth looking at the contribution of Chinese online literature in characterizing the relationship between world literature and national literature from a broader perspective. Contemporary Chinese popular literature, recognized mainly as online literature, shows its innovative aspect in dealing with the relationship between national and world literature:

> The world literature under discussion will be a mutilated utopian literary field dominated by Western literature for a long time to come. However, contemporary Chinese popular literature has made new attempts to enter the contemporary world literary space while striving to avoid the dissolution of ethnicity of the text, showing a posture of both cooperation and resistance, and working for the realization of a truly complete world literary system. (Zhang and Cui 2020, 61)

Chinese online literature is based on Chinese traditional culture and has structured a virtual space that is both real and fantastical, containing traditional Chinese thinking and values, which is a shortcut for foreign readers to quickly understand the "mysterious" East. At the same time, it is not stagnant, but always pays attention to other literatures and cultures and intentionally integrates them in the process of creation, finally able to feed other literatures and cultures after its maturity. To a certain extent, for international readers, it is not Chinese literature in the first place, but the literature of the Internet.

TRANSLATION AND CIRCULATION THROUGH THE NETWORK

Chinese online literature is a kind of world literature that makes sense in translation and circulation, and its unique web nature makes it distinctive from other literary categories in terms of the process of translation and circulation. World literature insists on the translatability of literature, and it can be the "writing that gains in translation" (Damrosch 2003, 281). Some scholars think that the reason that Chinese online literature is translated on a large scale is because of its plain themes and expressions (Guo 2017, 86). This argument is too arbitrary to be convincing. As mentioned above, genre fiction had existed as part of Chinese popular literature for a long time before it reappeared as Chinese online literature. Among these works, *wuxia* novels involve a lot of Chinese historical and cultural allusions, which make their translation quite difficult. The *wuxia* novels of Jin Yong and others were the first contemporary pieces of popular literature to go abroad in the late 1950s, but their influence was limited to Southeast Asia. Although they had entered the Western world through English translations at the turn of the century, it cannot be said that they aroused much attention there (Zhang and Cui 2020, 57). This exposes the fact that before the emergence of the online literature, some popular literary works had already spread to other cultures through translation, but they did not break through the Chinese cultural sphere on a large scale and circulate widely in other cultures, especially in the vastly different Western culture. Why did Chinese genre fiction, which was not translated and circulated well before the Internet era, spread rapidly among other cultures after it reappeared as online literature? Clearly, the themes or expressions do not make the main point, but rather the network or networkedness that accompanies the emergence of online literature. This networkedness dilutes the national attributes of the online literature and automatically eliminates the boundaries between the so-called different cultural spheres, providing the possibility for it to enter the reading domain of the world. On this basis, it is translated and circulated by both official and folk (fan) paths, thus spreading around the world.

The official path refers to the Chinese online literature translation website represented by Webnovel,[7] the international website of the biggest Chinese online literary platform Qidian, launched in 2015.[8] Online literary works published on Qidian will be selected to be translated on Webnovel. One of the highlights of Webnovel is that it enables simultaneous updating of the original text and the translated text. It allows a large number of novels that are being serialized or even new books that have just been launched to be serialized in translation at the same time (Shao, Ji, and Xiao 2018, 129). With the convenience of the Internet, the process of translation and circulation becomes untraceable, and the online literature has efficiently spread to readers all over the world.

Fengling Tianxia's *Woshi zhizun* (*I Am Supreme*, 2017–2019), the first work released simultaneously on Qidian and Webnovel, achieved no time lag between its Chinese and English reading, thus "bringing the international circulation of Chinese online literature to a new stage" (Shao, Ji, and Xiao 2018, 126). The genre and fan base are important considerations in choosing whether a work is distributed abroad. This work was chosen precisely because of its fantasy elements and the good readership

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base the author had already accumulated – his first two novels had more than 30 million hits in Qidian and hundreds of millions of hits in the reading app. It must be said that the emergence of such translation sites as Webnovel has created an unprecedentedly new model of literary community or literary exchange, where the reading interests of international readers can directly influence the creation of Chinese authors through timely comment and feedback, thus further influencing the ecology of Chinese online literature.

This in a sense enriches Damrosch's concept of world literature, defined in terms of translation and circulation. Generally speaking, there is a temporal sequence between the production of a literary work, its translation and circulation. However, Chinese online literature takes advantage of the Internet to completely deconstruct this temporal logic, making the production, translation and circulation into three parallel but mutually influential threads. By the time Chinese readers begin to read the works, the works have also reached international readers, becoming literary property that can be shared by Chinese and international readers at the same time. And the relationship between literary production and reception is no longer a one-way cause-and-effect one, but a two-way interaction.

What is more impressive is that Chinese online literature has not only been circulated in other cultures through translation but has also been reproduced in other cultures. As the international site of Qidian, Webnovel not only fulfills its translation mission, but also replicates the former model, i.e., a whole set of Chinese original online literature production mechanisms. Influenced by these mechanisms, English readers began to use Webnovel as a platform to create original online novels in English, which coincided with the platform's attempt to establish a system of original English-language authors, and a worldwide online literary creation with the Chinese model as its source was thus born. It is worth noting that "the influence of the Qidian model of Chinese online novels on English original novels is all-rounded, not only in the external payment mechanism and writer training system, but also steps into the writing pattern and typical writing routines" (Ji 2019, 107). Thus, we can see that some successful English-language online authors are interested in borrowing and imitating the proven writing formula of Chinese online literature. Spanish author Alemillach, Singaporean author Moloxiv, and American author Logan (AuthorWiz), who have successfully attracted readers on Webnovel, have one thing in common, namely, they have successfully applied the popular elements of Chinese online novels to their own writing. Take their representative novels, i.e., *Last Wish System* (2018–2020), *Number One Dungeon Supplier* (2018–2023), and *Reborn: Evolving from Nothing* (2019–2020) as examples. After reading their synopses, it is easy to summarize that all three novels have the following typical Chinese online novel themes or elements: reincarnation, cultivation, system, fantasy, evolution, etc. Logan also admitted in an interview that his novel is greatly influenced by Chinese web novels, and many of the characters in his novel are inspired by classical Chinese figures such as the Monkey King.[9] The works of those authors have achieved a high number of hits and won many readers on Webnovel, which shows that this original mechanism of literature with networkedness at its core is not only Chinese but also

universal – with the potential to develop worldwide. It is correct to say this: "What Chinese online literature can feed to the world is not only a larger scale of production, more professional genre fiction, and Chinese stories loaded with a long cultural and historical tradition, but also an original production mechanism that carries the energy of an advanced medium" (Shao, Ji, and Xiao 2018, 120). The successful internationalization of China's indigenous literary model will not only greatly increase the global influence of Chinese online literature, but also has the potential to promote the birth of an online world literature and provide it with a Chinese route.

The folk path refers to the translation websites created, organized and maintained by fan-readers and fan-translators of Chinese online literature, such as Wuxiaworld, Gravity Tales, and Volare Novels.[10] Wuxiaworld, founded by Chinese-American Jingping Lai (screen name RWX) in 2014, is the earliest and currently the most influential English translation website for Chinese online literature. The fan translation websites represented by it have formed the so-called "Wuxiaworld model": a model led by elite fans, collectively negotiated by fans, moderately commercialized and fully professionalized on the basis of spontaneous translation and independent dissemination by international fans and with full consideration of fan acceptance. It is a production mechanism that is more adapted to the cultural environment and online atmosphere of the English-speaking world (Ji 2019, 104). Although this model cannot achieve simultaneous online publication at home and abroad like the Webnovel model and has been often plagued by copyright problems, it has played the earliest and most important role in promoting the international circulation of Chinese online literature.

Most importantly, Wuxiaworld model has broken the status of Chinese online literature as a relatively marginal subculture by opening its way to Amazon, the mainstream reading market of the English-speaking world.[11] The *Coiling Dragon* series discussed above was translated by Wuxiaworld founder RWX himself. Seeing that it received great popularity from international readers, Amazon also released eight volumes of its e-book, which were best sellers. *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* has also gone through the process of spreading from the fan community to the mainstream. The novel was serialized on the Chinese online literature platform Jinjiang Wenxuecheng (JJWXC) between 2015 and 2016. During this period, international fans from various countries organized themselves to provide free translations for English readers, which played an important role in introducing the novel to the world. With its rising popularity, especially after the release of the adapted TV series of *The Untamed* (*Chenqingling*, 2019), publishers in various countries bought the rights to the novel and began to publish official translations. Though its official English translation has not been fully finished, the first two volumes that had been released reached the *New York Times* best seller list.[12] Its e-books have also received considerable popularity on Amazon. It can be seen that through translation Chinese online literature has not only achieved circulation in the English world, but also broken the categorical boundaries within the English culture itself and actively approached from the marginal to the mainstream.

SHUANG, HETEROTOPIA, AND POST-AESTHETICS

The significance of Chinese online literature to world literature does not stay at the level of aesthetic value but lies in its unique literary concept of *shuang* and the post-aesthetic paradigm. This is in a way a deconstruction of the concept of canon in world literature, traditionally referring to those literary canons of various nations that circulate worldwide. By canon, we mean the works that generations of readers have found valuable in different political, social and cultural environments in different times. The value mentioned here refers largely to the aesthetic value of literature. As Longxi Zhang points out, the value of literary works can be diverse, but the most important is its aesthetic value (2021, 32). Literature not only impresses readers with its rational insights, but also helps them gain spiritual enlightenment and a deeper understanding of life in the midst of an aesthetic experience. In this definition, Chinese online literature does not seem to belong to world literature at all. It aims at the bestseller market and intends to entertain the masses, and the aesthetic pleasure it can provide is very limited compared to traditional or highbrow literature. With highly genre-based writing, fixed narrative patterns and routines, each text does not stay in readers' minds for long, as fresh alternatives soon appear. Of course, there may be works of moderate aesthetic value among them, but whether they will become canonical remains to be seen.

Closely associated with Chinese online literature is the word *shuang* [reading enjoyment], and online literature is often referred to as the literature of *shuang*.[13] This indicates that the purpose of online writing is to make use of all means to make the core readership (fans) feel as much enjoyment of reading as they can. In traditional literary criticism, *shuang* can be interpreted as entertainment, and in the Western literary system that goes back to Aristotle, the fictional world of literature takes the real world as a basis for mimesis, i.e. imitation. Whether it is the realistic reflection of reality or the modernist exaggerated deformation of it, it is to help readers to know and change the world. However, Chinese online literature emphasizes the value of the virtual world itself. For example, the world constructed by the fantasy novel, which is the absolute mainstream of online genre fiction, is not a "fictional world" in the sense of realism, but a non-realistic "virtual world". By constructing such a non-realistic virtual world, Chinese online literature has nothing to do with the literary purpose of "knowing the world" and "changing the world", but simply entertaining the public and bringing instant pleasure. Jeremy Oon (pseudonym Cktalon), a veteran translator of Chinese online literature from Singapore, explains the appeal of Chinese online fiction as follows:

> It at first completely overturned my understanding of what traditional and serious literature was. "Reading enjoyment" and "ardor-inducement" was my first impression of online literature. When I delved deeper, these stories about how one "starts from zero" facilitates one's immersion. As such, the qualities of the protagonist, such as the eagerness to improve, allowed me to be very willing to accompany his growth and experience his plethora of emotions.[14]

It can be seen that in the virtual world of online literature, the readers are the purpose and the center. All the simulation of the rules of reality and the extraction

of its elements are to allow the readers to feel a sense of realism and thus better immerse themselves. The settings have been quietly adjusted for the readers, and even the rules of the world are designed for them, with all the surprises being opened for them. As a result, the readers' desires can be met to the maximum, which is the core mechanism that makes online literature have *shuang*.

In addition, the rise of postmodernism and cultural studies has made aesthetic value no longer the only criterion for literature, and the idea of the canon is meant to be deconstructed. Cultural critics reject value judgements and the distinction between high and low literature in a typical postmodernist style. The relationship between post-colonial literature and world literature or that between science fiction and world literature has been discussed widely. When talking about these two kinds of literature, their aesthetic value is seldom criticized and explained. While postcolonial literature has had a political mission since its inception, the rise of science fiction depends on its prophecy and warning of human future. Not talking about aesthetic value does not prevent their representative works from successfully circulating around the world and becoming world literature. This is also the case with Chinese online literature. Its rise is related to the cultural needs of the consumer era, which are characterized by excitement, immediacy and instantaneity, and aesthetic value does not play a necessary role in its emergence as world literature. In the postmodern context, the very existence of value is also questioned.

The "value" of Chinese online literature lies in the fact that it offers consumers (readers) in the Internet age a window to satisfy their basic desires. To a certain extent, all readers (including the readers of "high" literature) have basic needs and their mundane desires need to be respected and satisfied (Shao 2016, 20). Online genre fiction is often called the literature of *taolu* (routines) that satisfies the readers' basic needs. Many of them are regarded as having mediocre ideas and writing, but readers still use them as a way of daily entertainment. Here is a typical reader's mentality: "Reality is too heavy, so what does it matter if I dream for a short time in a novel, take a nap, and then go to work when I wake up? As long as I don't get carried away and sleepwalk in reality" (Dryorange 2008). From this psychology, it is not difficult to find another possible "value" of Chinese online literature, namely, "it is a very typical heterotopia" (Shao 2016, 25). The heterotopia here has two meanings. Firstly, Chinese online literature is a departure from the New Literature – the mainstream literature – established after the May Fourth New Culture Movement that began in 1919, and in the process of its development, it has bypassed the mainstream literature and become a literary heterogeneous space. It does not have to bear the ideological responsibility of the mainstream literature, and is far from the elite literary view of *yujiao yule* [education through entertainment]. Its writers do not have to be disciplined by the literary system and various literary traditions of the 20th century (realism, modernism, etc.), with their literary resources mainly coming from classical Chinese literature and the popular cultures of Europe, America, Japan and Korea. In conclusion, it is allowed to play with its own tradition (25).[15]

This stance of Chinese online literature leads to the second dimension of its heterotopia: due to fact that it is not aligned with the mainstream, it is able to represent

the dominant social order and engage in resistance and value reconstruction. As Michel Foucault has said, heterotopia is a realized utopia (1986), and in the non-realistic virtual world constructed by Chinese online literature, the utopian setting is often the beginning of everything and the basic principle of the world. This is different from other literary creations, where utopia is often at the edge of imagination. Online novels can be often written in millions of words, and their readers gradually become familiar and accustomed to that utopian world through long and repeated readings, which is the "psychological nurturing function" (Shao 2016, 27) of Chinese online literature. This function is particularly evident in the context of gender issues. In the real world, although the social status of women has been improved as never before through the unremitting efforts of generations of feminists, the situation where at least stereotypical men are "strong" and women are "weak" has not been fundamentally changed. In the online literature, the literature of *nvxingxiang* (for female) occupies almost half of the territory, and the genres of *nvzun* (female dignity), *nvqiang* (female power) and *danmei* have conducted a lot of subversive experiments in gender positioning and gender relations, giving rise to a bold online feminism. From the very beginning, the genres of *nvzun* and *nvqiang* have set up a simply (stereotypically) reverse gender utopia where women are strong and men are weak, with women occupying a higher social status and with men being reduced to subordination. The hidden logic of this type of writing is that since gender relations in the real world cannot be always satisfyingly or subversively changed, at least people can bypass it and dream creatively in a virtual space. In this way, this literary heterotopia is opposed to the real world, carrying the potential to resist.

The most subversive genre is *danmei*, which explores a more equal intimate relationship through the fantasy of two men's love and sex. Its popularity among female readers is largely because it fundamentally disrupts the biological structure of men and women, subverts gender essentialism, and thus easily crosses the barrier of gender inequality. In *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation,* Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji, the two main characters in the novel, are both male. In the first half of the story, their relationship is characterized as "strong-strong mode": they both come from noble families and are well cultivated. The novel emphasizes that they are two independent individuals who admire each other and do not give way to each other. In the second half of the story, with Wei Wuxian's reincarnation on a frail body, their relationship changes subtly to a "strong-weak mode". However, no matter what the mode is, the basic setting of male-versus-male breaks down the dichotomy between men and women in gender relations, and the inequality between men and women is nowhere to be discussed. After getting used to the emotional ties between men in the world of *danmei*, the readers, when returning to the real world, can at least realize that the imbalance of power in a relationship is not just between men and women, and then question different stereotyped ideas about gender, thus helping them to generate a far more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of gender.

As we can see, although Chinese online literature cannot be compared with the canons of great aesthetic value, its practical significance, which consists of the cultural logic of its entry into world literature, cannot be neglected. During the decades

of its rapid development, it has become the largest space of desire in the world, carrying the "primitive" desires of young people in the era of globalization, desires which are abundantly and repeatedly satisfied and stimulated to the utmost. Of course, we cannot say that Chinese online literature is completely unrelated to aesthetics. From a postmodern logic, it falls into a post-aesthetic paradigm (Ouyang 2003). The post-aesthetic paradigm of Internet art is based on web technology and is an emerging aesthetic paradigm of art in the Internet era, which is an inevitable extension of postmodern cultural logic. Only in a postmodern context can we deeply understand the aesthetic value of Chinese online literature. Its aesthetic value is no longer limited to the beauty of words and language, nor does it lie in the profundity of ideas and emotions but in every moment of connection via the Internet: from the author's creation and the reader's experience, to the circulation of online literature to every corner of the world. The beauty of Chinese online literature is not so much the beauty of literature as the beauty of the network.

CONCLUSION

Chinese online literature was born in the context of globalization and is by nature closely related to cross-cultural writing. After absorbing the essence of other literatures and cultures, it has gradually developed and grown in its country of origin and achieved international success through translation. The path of its development reflects an ongoing negotiation between the local and the universal. By making use of the network, it creates a unique mode of translation and circulation on its way from the home to the world, even contributing an indigenous mechanism of literature production to the world. However, whether it has lasting aesthetic value and can withstand the test of time has sometimes called its place in world literature into question. But it is undeniable that Chinese online literature provides us with a window through which we can glimpse the possibilities of a literary heterotopia and the post-aesthetic principles in the Internet era. As a whole, Chinese online literature represented by genre fiction shows its potential in challenging, breaking through and transcending the literary theories and ideological values of the traditional canon, and rewriting the existing order and standards of world literature.

NOTES

[1] Chinese online literature in this paper refers mainly to online genre fiction and focuses mainly on its translation into English and circulation in the English-speaking world.

[2] For a list of those countries and the main online journals, see He 2022, 99.

[3] For a review of genre fiction history in China and genre fiction history in modern China, see Zheng [1938] 2018 and Fan 2007 respectively.

[4] Although *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* is a *danmei* (boys' love) novel, it has a rare depth in presenting a grand background, exposing social reality, and exploring the complexity of human nature.

[5] The former is a genre of fictional media originating in Japan that features homoerotic relationships between male characters. The latter refers to "a type of fan fiction focusing on male homoerotic activity between protagonists of well-known movies, TV series, or novels" (Hockx 2015, 281).

6   For a detailed discussion of the genre of *danmei*, see Feng 2013, 53–83.
7   See https://www.webnovel.com/.
8   See https://www.qidian.com/.
9   See "Zhexie waiguoren mishang zhongguowangluoxiaoshuo hou, kaishi yong yingyu xie chongshengwen le" [After being impressed by Chinese online literature, those foreigners started writing reincarnation], https://www.sohu.com/a/302232532_100085085**.**
10 See https://www.wuxiaworld.com/; https://gravitytales.net/; https://www.volarenovels.com/. The latter two sites were later merged and acquired by Webnovel and Wuxiaworld respectively, thus forming a twin-peak situation of Webnovel and Wuxiaworld in the field of overseas distribution of Chinese online literature.
11 International readers of Chinese online literature, although numbering in the millions, are largely concentrated in a relatively marginal subcultural community – a community originally nurtured by Japanese light manga and light novels (Shao 2018, 122).
12 https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2022/01/02/trade-fiction-paperback/, https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/trade-fiction-paperback/.
13 For a thorough discussion of the concept of *shuang*, see Shao 2016
14 See "Zhexie waiguoren mishang zhongguowangluoxiaoshuo hou, kaishi yong yingyu xie chongshengwen le" [After being impressed by Chinese online literature, those foreigners started writing reincarnation], https://www.sohu.com/a/302232532_100085085.
15 This situation certainly also benefits from the technological barrier of media change. However, as online literature has flourished, it has now gained mainstream attention, partially entered the mainstream market, has some mainstream readers and has attracted increasing attention from academia. How long the heterogeneity of Chinese online literature can be maintained is a question worth exploring.

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Cross-culture, translation and post-aesthetics: Chinese online literature in/as world literature in the Internet era

Chinese online literature. World literature and national literature. Network. Translation. Canon.

In recent years, online fiction has emerged as a new form of Chinese literature, not only with a huge domestic readership, but also as a form increasingly favored by readers from various countries, becoming a new literary landscape in the world. Whether the emergence of Chinese online literature has had an impact on the existing world literature and its complex relationship with national literature deserves in-depth study. Taking world literature as a theoretical perspective, this paper compares the origins of Chinese online literature and its development history, explores its translation and circulation mechanisms, and probes its relationship with the canon in order to discover potential new constructions of world literature. This article finds that Chinese online literature originated from the Chinese complex of overseas wanderers, and its early writing was characterized by a mishmash of Chinese and Western influences. In the process of its development, Chinese online literature has emphasized the highlighting of traditional Chinese cultural elements, while on the other hand, it has continuously absorbed and localized the essence of world popular literature and culture. Chinese online literature is not Chinese literature in the first place, but the literature of the network. The value of Chinese online literature does not stay at the level of aesthetic value but lies in its unique literary concept of *shuang* and a post-aesthetic paradigm. The above shows that Chinese online literature is a typical representation of the cultural exchange between China and the West in the Internet era, a post-aesthetic world literature with translation and circulation as its fundamental premise, and a new representative of popular literature into world literature.

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