

# Comparison of Cultural Backgrounds of Chinese and Western Cyberliterature\*

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**Abstract**—Attention has been increasingly paid to cyberliterature which is a newly developmental type of literature. The creation and development of Chinese and western cyberliterature manifest the distinctive cultural backgrounds. Comparison of the cultural backgrounds is conducted from the following three aspects: different traditional spirit and different realistic environments of Chinese and western cyberliterature and different impact of popular literature on Chinese and western cyberliterature. Through this paper people can understand the different cultural backgrounds of Chinese and western cyberliterature more comprehensively and profoundly.

**Index Terms**—Chinese, western, cyberliterature, cultural backgrounds

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years internet has developed rapidly all over the whole world, not only greatly influencing the social economic life, but also strongly hammering the traditional ideology and changing the working and living way of people. Literature appeared following the steps of human life, changed with the advent of human life on the internet and entered the time of internet to become cyberliterature. (Guo, 2013).

By the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century cyberliterature has become a new member of Chinese and western literature. Studying the developmental states, different features and cultural backgrounds of cyberliterature and focusing on the technicality and innovation are the subject of literary research.

Nowadays in a large number of monographs and articles cyberliterature is discussed and studied. Aarseth's book *Cybertext* initiated the discussion of definition and features of cyberliterature in the West. Many western scholars participated in the discussion. Domestically a great many academic institutions and scholars are engaged in the research of cyberliterature. The teachers headed by Ouyang Youquan in Central South University published the monograph *An Outline of the Network Literature and Professor Forum of Network Literature*, established the first research institute of cyberliterature and built the website *Research of Online Culture*.

Cyberliterature in China and the West will be studied in the perspective of comparative literature. Chinese and western societies have different developmental histories, are pregnant with different cultural spirit and manifest different realistic cultural contexts and own distinct literary traditions. These cultural factors impact Chinese and western cyberliterature directly and indirectly. (Wang, 2011).

Chinese and western cyberliterature has different traditional spirit and realistic social circumstance. Popular literature has greatly influenced the development and genres of cyberliterature in China and the West. Western industrial system and online publishing develop rapidly. Internet becomes the free space for the contemporary young people in China. Those factors contribute to the difference of cultural backgrounds between Chinese and western cyberliterature.

The cultural backgrounds of cyberliterature in China and the West will be compared from the following aspects: different traditional spirit and different realistic environments and different impact of popular literature on Chinese and western cyberliterature.

## II. COMPARISON OF CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CYBERLITERATURE

### A. Different Traditional Spirit of Chinese and Western Cyberliterature

Both of Chinese and western cultures have diverse traditions and have created the glorious histories. Generally speaking, Chinese and western civilization seems to be contradictory. For example, westerners are romantic, while Chinese are realistic; Chinese culture lays emphasis on understanding, while western culture pursues speculative ideas. The reason for the different cultural spirit of Chinese and western societies dates back to the difference of natural environments. Western civilization came into being in the area of Aegean Sea. It is mountainous and adjacent to the sea. However, Chinese civilization emerged in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River with fertile land. The distinctive natural environments lead to the reality that western social economy is commercialized, while Chinese society possesses the agricultural feature. The noticeable difference of social economies impacts on Chinese and

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western culture and literature decisively and the influence spreads to the literary expression of cyberliterature.

Westerners adore personal freedom and equality, individual development and personal heroism because of ancient Greek democratic politics, which was established from the prosperous commercial economy. Westerners owned the rich overseas adventurous experiences, tempted by the huge commercial profits. Therefore they were addicted to pursuit and exploration forever. Their adventurous experiences are shown from the discovery of the New World to the exploration in outer space and natural scientific field. The adventurous spirit generated the thinking of society and people's fates. And the thinking developed into the religious transcendental appeal and contemporary western scientific reason. Under the influence of the cultural environment, the narrative literature full of wonders and horrors was the earliest literary genre. Generally speaking, western cultural spirit is represented by the religion, scientific exploration and romance. The basic feature is to realize the cultural and social continuation through the scientific exploration of the corporeal world and religious consciousness and to extend and enrich the living space in the exploration of the inner and external worlds.

Chinese agricultural economy breeds the according conservative religious system that suppresses the individual. Chinese traditional culture lays emphasis on cooperation and reality. The basic feature is to realize the cultural and social self-affirmation through the harmonious ethical awareness. The strict relationship between emperors and officials, father and son and husband and wife in feudal society stifles Chinese people to choose to live a peaceful and contented life, to fear adventures, to be shy to talk about affection and to be shameful of love. Chinese people were very concerned about the reality, but they didn't dare to criticize the suppressive society. So they expressed their opinions in poems. Chinese literature started with the lyric poems, but lacked the enthusiastic pursuit. After entering the contemporary society, Chinese people gained the unprecedented liberation of human nature and the personal freedom, but thousands of cultural traditions have been imprinted on their memories. Chinese people are realistic, but suppressed to lack the curiosity about the inner and outside worlds and the scientific exploratory spirit. They pursue precious love, but are in need of true love. That is the real living state of Chinese people.

When internet spreads rapidly to every corner of the society, the cultural information carried by the common Chinese people goes into the cyberspace. Traditional cultural spirit appears and updates on the internet in the form of symbols. Although internet is the global developmental net, cyberliterature of different languages possesses their own distinctive ethical features. The exploration and expression of love in cyberspace are immersed in the unique cultural atmosphere. The technical and scientific exploration of the western cyberliterature originates from the most primitive maritime adventurous experiences of the western nations, while the magic color of Chinese cyberliterature is the online representation of Chinese cultural spirit. Contemporary cyberliterature gives a very good explanation of the traditional cultural spirit.

#### *B. Different Realistic Environments of Chinese and Western Cyberliterature*

The expression in cyberliterature is the outpouring of the suppressed feelings outside the discourse space of the mainstream. All the happiness and sadness of the netizens come from their true existing cultural contexts. Although Chinese and western cyberliterature appears in the same computing environments, but in very different realistic social cultural contexts. The chief reason for the developmental difference of Chinese and western cyberliterature lies in the point that western countries have the highly developed cultural industry and online publishing, while people in Chinese society long for discourse right beyond the ideology of mainstream.

The development of the contemporary western cultural industry is mainly represented by the combination of mass culture and the cultural industrial system and the prosperity of the online publishing. James divides capitalism into three periods: Market Capitalism, Monopoly Capitalism and Postindustrial Capitalism. The contemporary western society is in the period of Postindustrial Capitalism or Late Capitalism. The trend of thought in this period is postmodernism. Capital and its logic permeate through the cultural field, which generates "cultural industry". From the concept, four features are summarized. The first one is the tendency of Antihumanism. The second one is the same style of art. The third one is the entertainment function. The fourth one is the commercial property of cultural industry. Those are the features of mainstream popular culture in the time of cultural industry. Cultural industry and mass culture of the western developed countries are closely related. The cultural industry of the western countries is the industrial productive system of the public popular cultural products.

In the era of mass culture, internet as the publishing media of contemporary capitalism becomes a very important link in the chain of capitalism cultural industry. Therefore in contemporary western society, creation, spread and publishing of online literary works are strongly commercialized. It is ubiquitous to publish and sell literary works on the English internet. In this sense internet as the new publishing media exists.

Internet is the communication platform of online publishing. The digitalization of the traditional literary works makes it possible to spread and publish the works on the internet. The trade is electronic and spreads quickly and fast and the cost is very low. Online publishing gains the spacious developmental room because of its obvious edge over the traditional one. Currently online publishing mainly includes online reading, printing, order and so on. In the western developed countries online publishing develops amazingly. The turnover of German online publishing increases by 15% annually. In America 80% of the publishing houses own their own websites.

In fact the number of English online literary works is no less than that of Chinese online ones. In Google "网络小说"

(cyberfictions) and “hypertext” are searched and the results are 27, 400,000 and 64,800,000. The latter number is bigger, which means there are more English online works than those of Chinese cyberliterature. The existing forms of Chinese and English cyberliterature are different and the attitudes of Chinese and western societies towards cyberliterature are quite different too. Chinese pay much more attention to cyberliterature, compared with westerners. Because English cyberliterature originates from western electronic literature and it is based on its mature development. Therefore the literary circle and people don't show much interest in cyberliterature. Chinese cyberliterature is influenced by the external factor and is absolutely something new, so it draws the widespread attention of the critics and the common people.

Another more important reason is that the developed western cultural industrial system and the prosperous development of the online publishing industry impact cyberliterature. As everyone knows the developed western countries always pay much attention to the copyright issues. In 1998 *the Digital Millennium Copyright Act*, aiming to protect the copyright of the digital products, was passed in American Congress according to the conference spirit of the world Intellectual property rights. That code has come into force since October 2000. People in western countries are keenly aware of copyright issues, so it's easy for them to accept the online paid reading. Writers' right can be protected and they can gain massive profits, if they publish works on the internet.

*Riding the Bullet* is a novella by Stephen King. This work marks King's debut on the Internet. Simon & Schuster, with technology by SoftLock, first published *Riding the Bullet* in 2000 as the world's first mass-market electronic book, available for download at \$2.50. In 2002, it was collected in King's collection *Everything's Eventual*. In 2000, the novella was nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Long Fiction and the International Horror Guild Award for Best Long Form. During the first 24 hours, over 400,000 copies of "*Riding the Bullet*" were downloaded, jamming SoftLock's server. Some Stephen King fans waited hours for the download. With over 500,000 downloads, Stephen King seemed to pave the way of the publishing future.

Later in 2000, King released *The Plant* directly via his website, unencrypted and in installments. People could pay a one-dollar fee for each installment using the honor system. He threatened, however, to drop the project if the percentage of paying readers fell below 75 percent. He viewed the release as an experiment in alternate forms of distribution, writing on his website at the time. The book received more than the desired 75 percent for its first installment, but it fell to 70 percent after installment two. With the third installment, the numbers surged back to 75 percent. All told, after six installments, King revealed that he'd made nearly half a million dollars from the release of *The Plant* in what has been called his e-book experiment.

After English cyberliterature has gone into the second period, free online works begin to decrease. Currently most of the English literary websites are operated commercially. (George, 1994). Not only can well-known writers publish their works on the internet, but also the unknown literary netizens. If “cybertext” is searched in Google, the result is 45,000. Most of the works are in the online bookstores. English websites have become the platform to sell and publish the diverse genres of literary works. Websites that include substantial free reading and downloading like Rongshuxia don't exit in English cyberliterature. The rational commercial operation of English cyberliterature inhibits it from gaining the similar prosperous development of Chinese cyberliterature.

The environment of Chinese cyberliterature is quite different. Up to now infringement is not widespread, but not rare. In 1999 Wangmeng, LiuZhenyun and other six famous writers sued “Beijing Online” for infringement, which gave rise to much discussion. Nowadays most of Chinese cyberliterature works can be read and downloaded freely; cyberwriters have no payment; websites have to pay for the maintenance of the net. Only a few websites can be sponsored by advertisement to make ends meet. Most of the other websites can't survive and close down. The biggest website Rongshuxia begins to charge fees for service. Many a netizen doesn't adapt to the commercialization of the internet. It's not easy to protect the copyright of cyberliterature in Chinese virtual environment.

The online publishing industry in Chinese starts to develop rapidly. The annual output value of online publishing reaches 2.5 billion yuan, which occupies 10% of that of domestic informational industry. More than 5000 kinds of digital products, in which cyberliterature, academic works and online games occupy a large proportion, emerge annually. But the proportion of selling of original cyberliterature is not large and the online publishing of Chinese cyberliterature works is tough. The free reading and downloading of most of the cyberliterature works draws the attention of the common people, so many people participate in the promotion of the rapid development of cyberliterature.

Another important reason for the prosperity of Chinese cyberliterature is the uniqueness of contemporary Chinese social context. The eagerness of Chinese civil society for the right of free discourse contributes to the popularity of the internet. In contemporary China, the writers' association is still the national institution. The pure culture is represented by the image of authoritative literature and the publishing house is not easily accessible to the common people. As cyberspace becomes the daily life field of the common people, mass culture begins to prosper in cyberspace. At the same time, to a certain degree, the cultural democratic issues have been solved in the very free cyberspace. Chinese common people can cross all kinds of authoritative thresholds to show their own opinions about the public affairs, to express their true feelings freely and to post and publish their personal words in this public space. The similar discourse space and channels are badly needed in Chinese society, because Chinese have been under the pressure of western hegemony. Have been confronted with all kinds of political movements, Chinese people finally gain the space of free discourse. The internet brings Chinese people not only the technical innovation, but also the greatly extended discourse

space.

Most of domestic cyberwriters were born in the 70s or 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This generation usually received the formal education. The socialist ethics and the advanced scientific technology construct their main structure of thought and knowledge. As the domestic concept is rooted among people and the scientific technology develops, they are experiencing the unprecedented reform of social economy and ideology. This is the rich and complex changing process. Every individual in this transitional period will encounter all kinds of enormous conflicts. The generation of Chinese young men will face the baptism and shock of traditional Chinese Confucian culture, socialist ideology and contemporary western thought. While pursuing the materialistic wealth and self-content, they are under the pressure of entering a higher school and finding jobs. The mental and physical exhaustion is behind the limitless desire, so they need the room to confide and release urgently beyond the mainstream ideology. With the arrival of the internet young men find the genuine room that belongs to them in the truly equal fictitious community.

In the West internet is the new spreading media in the technical sense, while its function in China is more than that. The young Chinese generation grows up in the era of reform and opening-up, but the youth suffers the substantial social and familial stress. The internet, which is nongovernmental, free and without the supervision of the authority, is the comparatively free discourse space. No matter whom you are and what your education is, so long as you don't invade others' privacy, you can express your ideas freely. (Cicconi, 2000). That is the reason why Chinese cyberliterature can attract the common people and critics. The liberated literary spirit, innovative horizon and free expression bring vitality to Chinese literature. Although inevitably Chinese cyberliterature has to undergo the intervention of online publishing and commercialization, young netizens still own the free discourse space and Chinese cyberliterature will continuously manifest its revolutionary and innovative spirit.

### C. *Different Impact of Popular Literature on Chinese and Western Cyberliterature*

In the society of poststructuralism, popular culture and works have entered people's daily life to become the commodities and daily consumer goods. The rapid development of Chinese and western online media in 20<sup>th</sup> century promotes the prosperity of popular culture. Internet as multi-media with powerful function puts popular culture into its own space. Under that influence Chinese and western cyberliterature tends to be popular.

America is the place where popular culture is the most prosperous. In the former half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American novels were in fact serious fictions. But when the time of poststructuralism comes, many American critics and historians remove the contradiction between serious and popular fictions. James believes that the boundary between elegant and popular culture in poststructuralism society has disappeared and accordingly literary works of poststructuralism characterized by popularization and commercialization come into being. (Bolter, 1991). In the 60s of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the celebrated American critic Leslie Fiedler declared that the contemporary western culture was in fact popular culture. He pointed out that the classic literature was over. At the same time he analyzed the popular tendency of many well-known writers' writing. In that kind of theoretical atmosphere, the concept of popular fictions in American society began to change. Institutions of higher learning like Washington University offered the courses of popular fictions successively and in this way popular literature entered the literary history. *The Columbia of History of the United States* written in 1988 by Columbia University includes the popular works, such as love and detective novels and science fiction. The good theoretical atmosphere, in which popular fictions are recognized, has influenced the development of the internet. Besides hypertext fictions, American cyberfictions are nearly made up of popular novels. This is the continuation of popular fictions in cyberspace.

Chinese popular literature has been regarded as "folk literature", which means it is unqualified to take its place in the higher circles, so it is excluded from the orthodox literary history. Up to date it is still ignored by people. Chinese traditional literature can't exist without popular literature and is closely tied to it since its establishment. Fictions in Chinese literary history are definitely popular novels. From the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of new culture, popular literature began to have the negative meaning. In 1922 Mao Dun criticized popular fictions, advocated to learn from the western novels and pointed out that the popular novel had an outlook that encouraged lust and destroyed everything. The tendency that affirms western serious fictions and negates Chinese popular novels has lasted till present. In the concept of Chinese contemporary and modern literature, popular and serious fictions seem contradictory, which is caused by the negation of Chinese traditional fictions. To be popular is in fact the fundamental feature and the life of Chinese novels. The content of Chinese popular fictions consists of all aspects of Chinese traditional culture and its artistic expression has its distinctive national style. Its function is to please people and to communicate the folk customs in Chinese history with thousands of years.

There's a long way to recognize the value of Chinese contemporary popular literature. In 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese literary circle once had an argument that whether to put Jin Yong's swordsmen novels into the literary history. Later his fictions were accepted by the orthodox literature, mainly because there are classic literary elements in his works and his fictions greatly impact the readers. But up to now, the other swordsmen novels in popular literature are ignored by Chinese literary critics. The attitude towards popular fictions in cyberliterature is the same. When orthodox critics are attracted by the new cyberliterature, they firstly regard it as the vanguard literature, and then want to pull it into the developing track of traditional literature. They seldom focus on the massive popular fictions on the internet. When they see the internet is completely filled with martial arts, love and "obscure" Xuanhuan novels, they believe that cyberliterature has no value.

Although in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese popular fictions were ostracized by the mainstream awareness, the popular fictions like martial arts and love novels and so on, possess the vast folk market. When internet—the comparatively free space of expression appears, popular literature begins to develop rapidly on the internet and it reaches a wide audience.

### III. CONCLUSION

Cyberliterature goes into the view of the people with the global development of internet. Internet on the scale of the whole world becomes the new environment of literary creation and research. When people are arguing about the pros and cons of globalization, internet has sneaked into people's life everywhere all over the world. Economic globalization has come true, but obstacles and difficulties stand on the way to communication of the cultural field. In the immense cyberspace, reading and communication of cyberliterature are difficult, which is hindered by technical, lingual and cultural factors. Copyright is also a hindrance. Comparison of Chinese and western cylliterature is rare. Based on the limited materials, comparison of Chinese and western cultural backgrounds is carried out.

Chinese and western cyberliterature comes into being in the same technical environment with the different developmental states and features, influenced by the different cultural traditions and realistic contexts. The different cultural backgrounds impart Chinese and western cyberliterature distinctive characteristics. The different cultural backgrounds are shown from the following three aspects: different traditional spirit, different realistic environments and different impact of popular literature on Chinese and western cyberliterature.

Chinese and western cyberliterature develops fast with a large number of subjects. Cyberliterature has the edge over the traditional one in the aspect of technology, free literary spirit and literary form. In the futuristic development, the edge will become more and more noticeable with the global expansion of the internet. The original online free spirit and convenient online publishing bring new vitality to the literature of the world and the developmental road of cyberliterature will be wider and wider.

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