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Identity Formation, Dissemination, and Media Evolution: A Review of Wu Changqing's *Pathways of Legacy and Literary Metamorphosis: On the Creation and Criticism of Chinese Internet Genre Fiction in the 21st Century*

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Abstract: Since the 21st century, China's media ecosystem has undergone rapid digital transformation, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the development of online genre literature. In response to the internet's demands for accelerated dissemination, decentralized networks, and cross-genre integration, how did online genre literature evolve during the first decade of the 21st century? Wu Changqing's book "*Inheritance Pathways and Literary Evolution employs*" comprehensive approaches including conceptual retrospection and communication environment analysis to explore convergent pathways between traditional literature and digital media writing from an academic perspective.

Keywords: Inheritance, Change, Network Literature Communication

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标题：本体塑造、传播生成与传媒发展——评吴长青的《传承路径与文学流变：21 世纪中国网络类型文学创作与批评刍议》

摘要：21 世纪以来，我国媒介生态呈现出数字化高速变革的发展态势，网络类型文学的发展机遇与挑战共存。面对高速驱动、去中心化、多类型融合的互联网传播需求，21 世纪第一个十年的网络类型文学做出了怎样的回应？吴长青的《传承路径与文学流变》一书通过概念回溯、传播环境分析等综合性手段，从学术站位上对传统文学与网络媒介写作之间的通约路径进行探索。

关键词：传承、流变、网络文学传播

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Introduction

Since the birth of the Internet, literature has gained a powerful medium for dissemination. Although the definition of online literature in literary studies has always been debated, its characteristic of spreading through network media is fixed. From the perspective of communication studies, online literature differs greatly from traditional literature in three aspects: the writing subject, the dissemination medium, and the reading audience. Wu Changqing's "Inheritance Path and Literary Evolution: A Preliminary Discussion on the Creation and Criticism of China's Online Genre Literature in the 21st Century" (World Book Publishing Guangdong Co., Ltd. 2024.) is a monograph that deeply explores the development of China's online literature and its critical mechanisms. The book adopts a comprehensive academic perspective to systematically examine the creation and criticism of online genre literature in the first decade of the 21st century from three dimensions: ontology, genre, and theoretical criticism, providing new perspectives for understanding the dissemination forms of this emerging literary form.

Kuang Wenbo (2009) summarized the characteristics of online communication as "fast dissemination and update speed, large information volume, rich content, wide coverage, easy retrieval, easy replication, multimedia, hypertext, interactivity, low cost, high efficiency, and the ability to conveniently and quickly conduct precise quantitative analysis and grasp of reader status." Facing the vast content and diverse forms of online literary works, the book "Inheritance Path and Literary Evolution" explores two focal points: the creative practices of grassroots writers in China and the media development ecology of the first decade of the 21st century. This article provides a dialectical interpretation of the series of arguments proposed by the author in the book, analyzes the dissemination characteristics of China's online literature in its first decade, and discusses the possible dissemination trends of future online literature.

1. The Subject Renewal of Communication: Everyone is an author

In his work "Inheritance Pathways and Literary Evolution", Wu Changqing posits that online literature constitutes a form of mass cultural production. This mass production signifies a transformation in the

communication subject: the authorial threshold in traditional literary creation has been lowered, creating a landscape where everyone can write. Simultaneously, the author as a communication subject embodies a complex identity—serving as both the medium for internet production and development, the audience for literary trends, and the primary creator of online literature content. When analyzing the dissemination process of online literature, it is essential to examine the social context of the communication subject, the composition of the communication subject, and the distinctive characteristics manifested by the communication subject during content production.

1.1 Will expression: multiple factors affecting online literature authors

The internet's entry into the China market and its vigorous development have played a crucial role in advancing online literature. In the book, the author uses "will" as the key term to interpret online literature, revealing the elements that give rise to diverse subjects in online literature. First, economic development drives innovation in online arts. "In 1990s China, the market economy gave birth to new mass culture, and the need to establish cultural foundations for new lifestyles replacing old ones, along with the instant sharing of public emotions through artistic forms, became imperative. (Wu Changqing, 2024)" Online literature represented by "First Intimate Contact" (1998) achieved empathy and emotional resonance through internet space, providing both authors with platforms for emotional expression and audiences with spaces for emotional interaction. Second, against the backdrop of accelerated urbanization, social contexts have become markedly different from any previous era. The psychological pain of groups like former small-town youth and urban-rural fringe residents has become urgent, necessitating online expression. "Time silently yet dazzlingly transports all Chinese writers into a modern era distinct from tradition. Even the ant tribe expresses their perceptions of contemporary China's existence through the most globalized online methods, despite their cramped urban-rural fringe dwellings. (Guo Yan, 2015, P.40-44)" Third, with the profound transformations in China's political, economic, and cultural contexts, online literature has also become one of the media for the nation's external discourse. In 2014, Kong Qingdong proposed at the academic symposium on "The Relationship Between Popular Literature, Mass Culture, and the Modern and Contemporary Literary History of China" Seminar that "the national image is a discourse pattern with multiple possibilities. (Fan Boqun, Xu Sinian, Wu Fuhui, et al.2014)" Through the use of language rich in net feeling, online literature has shaped a discourse expression form that is popular among audiences.

However, the factors influencing online literature authors extend far beyond the aforementioned aspects. In Chapter 6, Wu Changqing particularly emphasizes how ethnic minority genre literature shapes the consciousness of the Chinese nation as a community. In "Tai Yi" by Manchu author Wuwaijiangshan, Taoist philosophy is transformed into the narrative core through metaphors like the Tao Te Ching. Similarly, "Xiao Xing Ji" by Hmong author Xuehong highlights the unique historical context of Chinese culture through symbolic elements such as Taoist cultivators, Buddhist nuns, and the Sancai Trap. Online literature stands as one of the most direct and real-time mediums for showcasing societal evolution, cultural shifts, and authors' personal sentiments. Its directness stems from the genre's accessible nature, while real-time transmission is achieved through the internet's rapid dissemination capabilities.

1.2 Subjects Expansion: Literary Trends Advancing Side by Side

Wu Changqing proposed that online writers like Tianxiabachang (Zhang Muye) and Dangnianmingyue (Shi Yue) primarily catered to the audience of the 1980s “avant-garde literature”, particularly the “New Realism” movement. For these authors whose works had been published in print, the internet merely served as a parallel platform to traditional print media, maintaining no fundamental difference from their original distribution methods. The transformation began in 2003 when Sheng Da Literature implemented a paid online reading system, marking the second phase of the internet literature era and establishing a new landscape for online literature.

The demographic composition of online writers is remarkably diverse, with varying academic backgrounds. Research indicates that 70% of these authors lack formal liberal arts education. For instance, Tong Hua studied finance at Peking University; Tang Xintian earned a master’s degree in finance from the University of Chicago; Jiang Nan graduated from Peking University’s Chemistry Department and later obtained a master’s in analytical chemistry from the University of Washington; A Yue initially worked as a locomotive engineer before studying in Sichuan University’s History Department; Yanyu Jiangnan and Xugongzi Shengzhi have long worked in stock exchanges; Shi Zhangyu has been practicing medicine at a hospital; Wochi Xihongshi is a mathematics major at SuZhou University; Suibo Zhuliu holds a master’s degree in engineering... It’s evident that numerous non-liberal arts professionals, lacking formal literary training, have entered the literary creation field through the vast information flow of the digital age (Fan Boqun, Xu Sinian, Wu Fuhui, et al. 2014). Diverse social experiences and educational backgrounds have shaped the unique writing styles of online authors—blending elements from traditional literature with Western literary concepts to create a vibrant yet eclectic intellectual landscape.

1.3 Content Supplement: The Establishment of The Aesthetics of Network Literature

In his book, Wu Changqing proposes the need to establish a new aesthetic paradigm for online literature. “This digital art form combines the technical aesthetics of multimedia with the interactive, playful, and vibrant characteristics of social media platforms (Wu Changqing, 2024).” His work “Inheritance Paths and Literary Evolution” identifies three key elements shaping the aesthetic identity of online literature. The first is confronting social realities head-on. “The rapid development of the digital world doesn’t simply transcend or absorb traditional forms of experience, as some media enthusiasts claim, but rather redefines everyday life experiences to compensate for the limitations of media-driven narratives. (Wolfgang Iser, 2006)”

The book “Inheritance Paths and Literary Evolution” consistently underscores the pivotal role of “humanity” in online literature, demonstrating that recognizing human elements is crucial for establishing its aesthetic framework. Three key aspects emerge: First, immerse oneself in people’s lives to capture the joys and sorrows of ordinary people, thereby enriching textual material with diverse perspectives. Second, observing human behaviors while highlighting artistic characteristics of human actions to avoid stereotypical character portrayals. Third, crafting authentic human images. Regarding online literature dissemination, overseas distribution remains an unavoidable component. As primary dissemination, authors must uphold a people-centered aesthetic philosophy, effectively promoting Chinese virtues such as diligence, simplicity, wisdom, and kindness through digital literary works.

2. Carrier Shaping: Moving Toward Decentralization

Since the 1980s, the medium of literary dissemination has undergone two significant transformations. The first was the rise of newspaper supplements and urban newsstands in the 1990s, which provided literary youth with a platform to transition from literary reading to literary writing, giving rise to a group of freelance writers for print media. The second transformation occurred in the early 21st century, with the flourishing of the internet in China, leading to the emergence of a group of online writers, with “The Tomb Raiders Notebook” being a representative work. Although some online novels were selected for print publication by publishers due to their remarkable influence, their initial release on internet platforms still saw content creation influenced by the platform’s dissemination characteristics, exhibiting distinct features of enchantment and decentralization.

The creation of online literature serves as a powerful reflection of all aspects of content production in this field. The internet, as a primary dissemination medium, exerted significant influence on online literature during the first decade of the 21st century. “As Professor Yang Guobin noted, web pages are organic components of society, documenting, reflecting, and transforming social realities (Wu Shiwen, 2018, P.59-75).” While there are notable differences between online literature—primarily disseminated through web pages—and new media literature spread via digital platforms, the core characteristics of enchantment and decentralization remain consistently preserved.

2.1 Active Enchantment: Creating an Immersive Environment

The book “Inheritance Paths and Literary Evolution” makes its most valuable contribution by revealing the “magical” techniques of online literature. In the face of the internet’s short, flat, and fast dissemination patterns, authors employ exaggerated and eye-catching language to create dazzling and stimulating reading environments, aiming to capture readers’ attention. Taking my personal experience with online genre literature as an example, when selecting texts, I first focus on the title and cover, then the synopsis, and finally the content. In this information reception process, platforms must grab readers’ attention within a short time to have the opportunity for further content dissemination.

First, we need to analyze the communication characteristics of the internet. As a new media platform integrating various information reception channels which forming the “text+” content feature. While catering to audiences becomes increasingly challenging, the internet also establishes a collaborative reading platform between online genre literature and its readers. Second, we should examine the creative model of online literature. The decentralized, interactive, participatory, and collaborative creation model has distinct advantages. This kind not only strengthens the basic position of literary creation among the public but also stimulates the passion of the public to actively participate in literary creation. The internet serves a dual role: Firstly, by nesting multiple media formats including text, images, audio, and video, it creates an immersive communication environment that continuously enhances the appeal of online genre literature, highlighting its populist charm. Secondly, through the equitable atmosphere of decentralization, it reconstructs a public space accessible to all audiences, where “everyone seems to be an equal, viewing themselves as common citizens regardless of status or hierarchy. (Chen Yong, 2008)”

2.2 Writing Flow: Selection of Multi-track Platform

Online writers, as primary content creators, face fewer restrictions when selecting publishing platforms compared to traditional Japanese drama creators. Wu Changqing's book describes a "dual-track" creative model: authors simultaneously publish online novels on platforms like Qi Dian Chinese Network and release works in print media. This dual approach enables creators to strike a balance between commercial interests and the cultivation of personal literary sensibilities.

As online literature gains increasing influence, traditional and digital literary circles are gradually breaking through barriers, engaging in dialogue, and achieving integration. For instance, Sheng Da Literature secured authorization for online distribution of all shortlisted works for the 7th Mao Dun Literature Prize through active negotiations, subsequently publishing them on Qi Dian Chinese Literature Platform. Additionally, it collaborated with Literary Gazette to launch an online literary criticism column, actively soliciting diverse perspectives from traditional literary circles. The expansion of dissemination platforms involves two key strategies: leveraging technological advancements to enhance the speed and efficiency of online literature distribution and adopting innovative concepts to overcome developmental bottlenecks for authors, thereby revitalizing their creative vitality and expressive capabilities.

2.3 Cross Communication: Multiple Media Communication

With the deepening integration of media, group-supported online literature has achieved cross-media dissemination through its convenience. 2010 proved to be a pivotal year for the development of online literature, as new media rapidly expanded. "Mobile internet dominated half of the web, propelling online novels from PC platforms into the mobile era (Xiao Han, 2017, P.67-69)." This expansion not only broadened readership but also lowered entry barriers for authors. Meanwhile, publishing channels diversified significantly. Notably, online author Nanpaisanshu utilized Sina Weibo to serialize his novel "Laojiumen".

This has given rise to a dual dissemination model in online literature. The first approach follows Sheng Da Literature's distribution mechanism, where authors submit manuscripts to the publishing group for release through self-media platforms, web portals, and mobile apps. The second approach involves authors publishing content via social media platforms like WeChat Official Accounts and Weibo, enabling real-time audience interaction. Meanwhile, as web novels adapt into TV series, the case of "Laojiumen" demonstrates how post-broadcast viewers turned to streaming platforms to watch the original work, creating a cross-media synergy between film viewing and online novel reading.

3. Content Audience's Upgrade: Online Interaction

Wu Changqing posits that "reader-centricity" constitutes the essential characteristic of genre literature, encompassing two dimensions: the "traffic-gathering" structure and the "psychological" structure. The gathering dimension, in essence, refers to the pursuit of audience engagement and traffic acquisition. The psychological dimension involves analyzing the audience's mental and physical experiences during the consumption of online literary works. From a communication studies perspective, audiences play a pivotal role in the content creation process of online literature. Unlike traditional literature where readers first read

and then provide feedback, online literature audiences actively select, read, and engage in real-time interactions with texts. During the selection process, audiences choose content that interests them, leading to audience segmentation. After reading, some viewers leave comments and feedback through digital platforms, completing immediate interactions, while professional readers or critics initiate “online-offline” discourse pathways.

3.1 Differentiation of Reader Group: Real-time Feedback

While I hold a positive view of the book “Inheritance Pathways and Literary Evolution”, the prevailing trend in online literature production and dissemination—prioritizing quantity over quality—remains a cause for concern. As audiences deepen their engagement with the internet, their aesthetic appreciation for online literature continues to grow, driving increasing demand for high-quality works. Readers with discerning tastes are not passive consumers but active selectors of genre-specific content. This includes fantasy novels like “The Law of Evil”, historical fiction such as “Bloody Career: Li Si and the Qin Dynasty”, science fiction works like “Brain Control” and “Er Wo”, post-industrial fiction exemplified by “Mamag’s Dinosaur”, and even script-based games such as “Brain Dreams”

The growing professionalism of audiences serves as a vital catalyst for the evolution of genre-based online literature. Since the BBS era, readers have actively engaged with authors through online comment sections, voicing impressions, suggestions for improvement, or even critiques of literary works. Those deeply immersed in specific genres exhibit which was described as “spontaneous criticism” – a phenomenon where “books become enveloped by modern trends, fresh perspectives, contemporary vitality, and contemporary ambiance (Albert Thibaudet, 2015).” However, uneven audience literacy introduces emotional complexity to these interactions. The dual expressions of positive and negative sentiments often spark verbal conflicts. Beyond existing platform moderation systems, content creators in genre literature – including authors and platforms – should develop practical mechanisms to guide audience engagement. This ensures constructive dialogue rather than toxic exchanges, ultimately shaping more efficient and concrete feedback loops in digital discourse.

3.2 Multiple Criticism Channels: Combination of Online and Offline Criticism

Beyond the general audience, there exists a specialized group of online genre literature critics. Wu Changqing proposed establishing an integrated development mechanism for online genre literature criticism, combining online reviews with offline critiques to create real-time, professional audience feedback during the dissemination process. First, internet platforms as communication channels should enhance their immersive experience in studying online genre literature. Second, innovative approaches should bridge the longstanding divide between online and offline criticism. By facilitating cross-platform exchanges, critics can strengthen both professional analysis and emotional engagement, unifying text creation, dissemination, and feedback within the same framework to achieve theoretical renewal.

Meanwhile, the critique of online genre literature itself serves as a form of content dissemination. The co-development model of online and offline criticism has reduced the long-standing divide between general audiences and professional critics, enhanced the visibility of specialized critiques, and subtly guided the

general public's feedback into professional-oriented perspectives. This process ultimately elevates the reading literacy of audiences in online genre literature.

Conclusion

After reading the entire book, we witnessed the flourishing scene of diverse genres emerging and coexisting in the first decade of the 20th century. In contrast, with the leapfrog development of digital technology, the “decentralized” characteristics of the internet have become increasingly prominent. How can online genre literature break free from the shackles of fragmentation and superficiality, adopting a “diverse in spirit yet cohesive in form” content production model to enhance its dissemination? First, we need to clarify the comprehensive nature of the decentralized model in online genre literature. This encompasses both the decentralization of the genre itself as a medium and the decentralized platforms supporting its spread, embodying typical characteristics of the second media era. Second, we must understand the “bidirectional decentralized” communication pattern. Authors in online genre literature need to create foreshadowing through explicit and implicit means during content production to stimulate audience interest and facilitate interactive content perception. Simultaneously, they should actively cultivate works with national characteristics, contemporary features, and shared emotions, transforming originally targeted works for fixed audiences into universally accessible creations where everyone becomes an audience. However, how to achieve this in the second decade, what we are doing in the third decade, and how to proceed in the next decade still require more academic monographs with historical perspectives, theoretical thinking, and innovative expressions to provide answers.

The book “Inheritance Paths and Literary Evolution” demonstrates the author's significant contributions to establishing a meso-level framework for online literature studies. It systematically traces the development trajectory of online genre literature from a macro perspective while meticulously examining specific communication entities and case studies. By connecting micro-level elements to macro issues, the work conducts in-depth analysis of dynamic relationships between humans and technology, as well as humans and society at the meso level. It highlights the crucial roles of concepts like the “dual-track system” and “human-centric logic” in the creation and dissemination of online literary genres. As Zhu Shoutong's aptly observation: “While vigilance against digital operations is warranted, the literary community cannot ignore the development and prospects of online literature.” This principle equally applies to communication studies. With the accelerating digitization process, we must recognize the dissemination trends of online genre literature and actively leverage academic monographs with profound scholarly foundations and cutting-edge narrative perspectives. By fully leveraging the representatives of online genre literature in communication studies, we can facilitate more extensive exploration and research in this field.

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