

Book Review: Internet Literature in China by Michel Hockx

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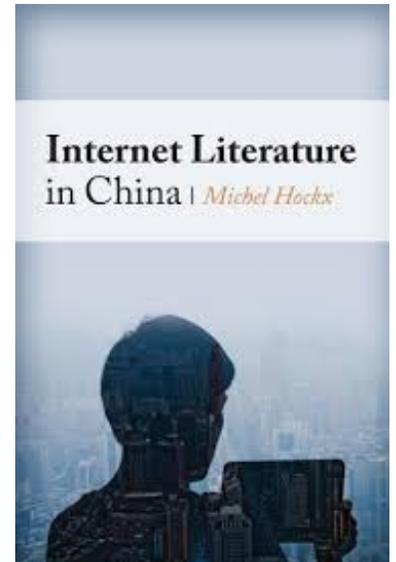
This book examines the budding Chinese literary communities and their practices on the Internet.

*In **Internet Literature in China**, author Michael Hockx's theoretical use of postsocialism as an organizing concept in the exploration of China's online literary communities is what makes this such a fantastic contribution, writes **Casey Brienza**.*

Internet Literature in China. Michel Hockx. Columbia University Press. 2015.

According to the *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, approximately 40 percent of all internet users in the People's Republic of China accessed literature online in 2012. To put this into perspective, a similar proportion of people were using the internet for shopping during the same year. Although like all statistics the numbers conceal as much as they reveal and should be interpreted with some caution – certainly they would suggest that the Chinese literary culture has entered a brave new digital world. Yet despite interactive websites dedicated to literary output and discussion which, in some cases, are already a decade or more in age, this phenomenon has been grievously understudied.

Until now. Enter Michel Hockx, professor of Chinese at SOAS, University of London and founding director of the SOAS Chinese Institute. He is interested in contemporary Chinese literary communities, specifically in relation to their strategies of self-organization, along with their relationships to the state and to publishing technologies. Other areas of research include Chinese poets and literary journals of the early twentieth century, most notably in the monograph *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911-1937* (Brill 2003). His latest book, the first ever monograph length, English language study of Internet literature in China and appropriately titled *Internet Literature in China*, clearly builds upon earlier work by expanding the study of Chinese literary communities and their practices on the Internet.



Published in attractive hardcover by Columbia University Press in 2015, this book is intended as a general overview of its subject suitable both for specialists and general readers. Specifically however, as Hockx explains, it explores 'the ways in which Internet literature brings about literary innovation and challenges existing paradigms of "electronic literature," and the ways in which this literature specifically challenges the established publishing system of the People's Republic of China, bringing about changes and adjustments to the regulatory regime'. This is occurring, crucially, in a wider socio-political context of postsocialism, where socialist mindsets linger even as socialist institutions are being dismantled.



Image Credit: Neon Internet Cafe, Justinc. Wikipedia. CC-BY-SA 2.0.

Internet Literature in China has only four substantive chapters, but each is considerable, combining both wider substantive issues with close, ethnographically-informed close readings of selected authors' textual output, some of which, sadly, have already disappeared from the 'living' digital ecosystem. Chapter 1 provides an historical overview along with an in-depth case study of Under the Banyan Tree, probably China's first successful literary website, and the online diary of the cancer patient Lu Youqing, which made it famous. Chapter 2 looks at three Internet authors, Chen Cun, Wen Huajian, and Han Han, who have each pioneered new and often interactive forms of literature, such as microblog novels, and literary criticism. Chapter 3 explores online fiction, particularly in relation to censorship, and the fourth and final chapter focuses on online poetry, including works by the avant-garde Datui and the visual poetry of Dajuin Yao.

Inasmuch as Hockx's aim was to appeal both to specialists and to general readers, there is no doubt that he has succeeded. As a sociologist with a keen interest in cultural production, publishing, and digital media, but with no particular expertise in China, I found myself at once sympathetic to the assumption that art is formed collectively, and riveted by the case studies of writers and websites which have no easy equivalent in the western world. Arguably most valuable theoretically is the use of postsocialism as an organizing concept in the exploration of China's online literary communities. For those of us weaned on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the way in which legitimate art is linked both to the state and to commerce in China is quite the departure from the usual claims about autonomous (or heteronomous) cultural fields and virtually impossible to neatly reconcile. This book challenges the Eurocentric construction of social theory. This, in my view, is a good thing!

Nevertheless, I was a bit disappointed by how otherwise conventional the range of author case studies were by cramped western standards of literary and artistic merit. Texts analyzed tended to be modernist, avant-garde, and/or experimental; the majority of authors discussed in detail were, furthermore, male. This is despite the enormous popularity, for instance, of stories featuring homoerotic encounters between male protagonists such as boys' love (BL) and slash fanfiction among Chinese women (not to mention scholars); Hockx devotes less than a page to this subject in Chapter 3. While deeply indebted to sociological approaches to the study of literature, this book is less attentive to its own reproduction of status hierarchies and judgment of taste than might otherwise be warranted. It may perhaps have also been a bit too hasty in its celebration of the amateur in Chinese internet literature irrespective of the wider political economy.

All in all, though, *Internet Literature in China* is a fantastic and novel contribution to the study of literary production in the digital age, and one that is bound to appeal far beyond the field of Chinese literature. Hockx seems to have put a decade's worth of work into his research, and I would expect this book, notwithstanding the ephemeral nature of many of his objects of study, to stand a test of time far, far longer.

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