

WORLD

THE GREAT SCRAWL OF CHINA

The nation that invented paper is now in the midst of an online-publishing boom that is making fortunes, changing lives and creating a truly populist literature for the first time

BY HANNAH BEECH

Photographs by Gilles Sabrie for TIME



The letters of the law
His online writing means that police officer Li gets barely four hours' sleep a night, but it nets him three times his official salary

A

AS LI KE TELLS IT, THE POLICE STATION IN the steel-mill county of Xiangyuan is like any other in central China. The air is heavy with industrial dust. Steam rises from mugs of tea. At their desks, idling officers, cell phones in hand, scroll absently through the latest installments of their favorite online novels. Huddled with them is Li, a shy, chubby policeman with a schoolboy buzz cut. Unbeknownst to his colleagues, the 29-year-old also happens to be a prize-winning Internet author whose latest tale features a cop with superpowers who leads a double life. Once, a fellow officer asked Li whether he had ever heard of a writer named Red Eyes, the pen name Li uses online. “Yes,” he replied, with a grin. “I’ve heard he’s very handsome.”

Web publishing is booming in China, more than anywhere else in the world. For the first time in the People’s Republic’s history, there is literature of the people by the people. After all, despite its economic transformation, China is still an authoritarian nation, where the government places more emphasis on molding public opinion than embracing a diversity of voices. Yet with more than 510 million Chinese tethered to the Internet, the online arena is the freest space in China today, even if the Great Firewall blocks some sensitive information. Anyone with an Internet connection can write a serialized novel by logging on to one of hundreds of self-publishing websites. Millions of Chinese—from migrant workers and officials to housewives and the odd cop—have tried their hands at what is known in Mandarin as *wangluo wenxue*, or “network literature.” “The Internet is where Chinese can truly express themselves,” says

Zhang Yunfan, CEO of Zongheng, an online-publishing website that gets 35 million page views per day. “If you want to know what Chinese are thinking and feeling, read online novels.”

It’s a big business too. In a society in which economic advancement is seen not just as an ambition but as an imperative, hundreds of thousands of amateur writers are making decent money by posting serialized fiction online. Yu Xiaoming, for instance, was working as a gastroenterologist in Shanghai and in his spare time posted novels inspired by the online game *World of Warcraft*. Last December, the 30-year-old quit his day job because he makes double his old \$1,600 monthly salary by posting daily updates of his fantasy fiction. An online novel can sell for as little as 30¢, with readers often paying only for later chapters of a book. But with more than 200 million Chinese reading e-fiction on cell phones, tablets and computers, the money adds up. Cloudary Corp., which owns six user-generated literary websites, reported net revenues of \$48 million in the first half of 2011; each day, an average of 58 million Chinese characters are uploaded onto its sites. “It’s a grassroots movement,” says Chen Aiyang, a 26-year-old chemistry graduate whose fantasy novels generate tens of millions of hits each. “Chinese want entertainment, and the Internet is the best place to deliver it.”

The impact of e-publishing resonates far beyond the virtual world. Successful e-novels have sparked a frenzy of print versions and related record-breaking TV shows, movies and video games. Famed director Zhang Yimou’s 2010 offering, *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, originated from an online novel. “We’re always looking for new stories, and the Internet is one of the best places to find them,” says Lee Kwok-lap, a Hong Kong director who brought to the TV screen *Every Step Surprises Your Heart*—an e-novel that had garnered 100 million hits with its tale about a modern-day woman who time-travels to the Qing dynasty. “Online, people just write from their imaginations and there are no boundaries or restrictions.”

The success of online publishing is directly related to the failures of China’s straightjacketed book business. The Middle Kingdom may have invented paper, but the communist state has long regarded



books with suspicion. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese classics and foreign fiction alike were tossed onto bonfires and burned. Today, some state-run publishing houses still see literature as a propaganda, educational or self-improvement tool, not a vehicle for something as crass as entertainment. Although a thriving trade now exists in online novels turned into paper books, many of the juicy tales that lure online readers, like risqué campus romances or brawny detective stories, would have little chance of making it to print first. In the offline world, a manuscript can only be published after censors scour each page for hidden references to sex, politics or other taboo topics. If for some reason a sensitive passage gets printed, a publishing house can be fined or even shut down.

Chinese websites that publish fiction enjoy far greater liberties. Of course, certain things can’t be said, like direct criticism of the Communist Party or examples of central government corruption. Websites are still monitored by the Culture Ministry, the Public Security Bureau, the Internet police and company censorship committees. Nevertheless, the volume of words—Zongheng, for instance, has published 100,000 novels

that are often triple the length of regular print books—makes it nearly impossible for censors to scrutinize everything in real time. Literary websites can also take advantage of the authorities’ skewed perceptions. “I think the government still thinks that network literature is not as influential as paper publishing,” says Zongheng’s Zhang. “So there is more freedom given to us to publish what we want.”

The Fiction Factory

IT’S A REMARKABLE EVOLUTION FOR A literary form that grew out of bursts of creativity on online bulletin boards in the 1990s. Back then, people would post poems or short stories and pass them nationwide through online community forums that were set up by companies, universities and media groups. “When I first went online and saw all these little essays posted, I felt such a thrill,” says Xu Lei, one of the most popular online novelists in China, who writes stories of swashbuckling tomb raiders under the pen name of Nanpai Sanshu. “I figured, Why can’t I realize my dream too? Who can stop me?”

Even in a nation where fortunes are made at warp speed, Xu’s trajectory is

‘When I first went online and saw all these little essays posted, I felt such a thrill. I figured, Why can’t I realize my dream too? Who can stop me?’

—XU LEI, AUTHOR

astounding. Back in 2007, he worked at a gambling-supplies company in eastern Zhejiang province when the global financial crisis hit. Demand for poker chips and roulette wheels plummeted. With time on his hands, the then 25-year-old began posting fanciful stories about tomb raiders, inspired by anecdotes from his antique-collecting family. Xu hoped a few friends might check them out. Instead, millions of fans materialized across China. *Secrets of*

Grave importance Xu’s antique-collecting family helped inspire his tomb-raider novels

a Grave Robber now boasts eight volumes. Even before he finished his first online book, Xu was fielding calls from publishing houses. His first printed novel sold 600,000 copies in a month. Last year he was one of China’s highest-grossing novelists, although he jokes: “I don’t fly a private jet like Stephen King does.”

Online fiction in China is now dictating the direction of print publishing. Many of the novels on best-seller lists were originally published online. Bookstores have sections dedicated to online novels, and e-publishing firms make a good portion of their profits from hard-copy titles. Often books are cleansed of sensitive material, but at other times outré topics make their way into print. Xu’s tomb-raiding tales are none-too-subtle allegories of the destruction of the nation’s cultural heritage as a result of communist political excesses. There’s even a thriving subset of books about naughty officials and their naughtier mistresses. With state-owned publishers being exposed to market forces, even the most conservative firms are looking for their own *Harry Potter* or *Sex and the City*. Online novels that have proved themselves commercially and haven’t tangled with the censors are ideal candidates.

While there’s plenty of bodice-ripping and fantasy fluff floating about on the Web, serious literature also exists. After all, if Charles Dickens could produce *Great Expectations* through cliff-hanger journal serials in 19th century Britain, why should anyone be surprised that 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize nominee Hao Qun (who goes by the pen name Murong Xuecun) wrote *Leave Me Alone: A Novel of Chengdu* in online installments? Even the government has tacitly admitted the importance of online fiction. Last year, the state-run Chinese Writers’ Association began including online novels in its annual awards—the first time it had done so.

Still, there’s no question that fantasy and love stories are the biggest online draws for Chinese men and women, respectively. Most of the romance novels in Chinese bookstores today started life online, with a particularly popular variety being maiden-meets-prince sagas set in imperial times. Ren Xin, a 31-year-old tai

chi instructor in eastern Jiangsu province, noticed that female protagonists were missing from print *wuxia* novels, a historical martial-arts genre with the same escapist lure as medieval knight tales or western shoot-'em-ups. So in 2009, she logged on to Qidian, China's largest user-generated publishing platform, which is owned by Cloudary. "Readers like my female characters because they are independent and strong," says the woman whose pen name is White Feathered Swallow. Ren's books now garner around 1 million clicks each, and she has secured a contract with a print publishing firm to write a modern romance. "It's so hard for a new writer to get published in China," she says. "There's no way I could have gotten a contract if I hadn't started writing online first."

But popularity can be dangerous. Most best-selling online titles are pirated—a systemic problem that plagues all forms of Chinese media. And if novelists are late in posting a new chapter, frustrated readers often will write their own. "There's a whole different ending out there for one of my books, and there's nothing I can do about it," says tomb-raider novelist Xu. "Sometimes I struggle to convince people that's not what I really wrote."

But the biggest danger with recognition is triggering attention from the authorities. The unpredictability of official interference is wearying, even within the looser filaments binding the Web. Successful writers have been charged with pornography, and time-travel shows have elicited a surprise scolding from China's media czars, who on occasion have effectively banned such programs for "treating serious history in a frivolous way." Thus, while the TV version of *Every Step*, which aired late last year, was a huge hit and even spawned copycat programs, the show was never rebroadcast during prime time in China, as most top-rated shows are.

"You never know what's going to be censored," sighs Zongheng's Zhang. "It could just be anything." Xu says even the most innocuous character could be forbidden. "You know how in *X-Men*, the Wolverine helps American soldiers out in different wars?" he asks, using a Hollywood example. "In China, you could never have such a character because then you'd be getting into sensitive history and wars. I'd love to develop a character like him, but I know where the line is, and I'm not going to cross it."

Buzz words More than 200 million Chinese read novels on tablets, phones and computers



'The Internet is where Chinese can truly express themselves. If you want to know what Chinese are thinking and feeling, read online novels.'

—ZHANG YUNFAN,
ONLINE PUBLISHER

Those lines are hardening. Last year, the Communist Party announced a campaign to strengthen "cultural security" and promote "socialist core values." In January, entertainment programming on satellite TV, including shows based on online novels, was slashed to make way for content emphasizing "social responsibility." Movie studios have been told to get in on the socialist-values act. Could online novels and their print analogs be next? "I don't know what those government scholars are thinking every day," says police novelist Li. "If they were to ban the kinds of topics I write about, then it would be a very sad situation because I could do nothing about it."

In the end, though, the biggest demands facing the online-writing business may not come from above but below. Grave-rober writer Xu makes a chopping motion against his neck when talking about the pressure from insatiable readers. Fiction websites say twice-daily updates are needed to keep readers hooked. Three times is even better. Once readers lose interest in a novel, it's almost impossible to lure them back since there are so many engaging stories out there. "Some writers can spend 10 years working on one book," Xu says enviously. "But on the Internet, you sometimes have to produce 10,000 characters a day because it's all about the money. Can you really call yourself a writer in that circumstance, or are you just a worker who happens to use words?"

Back in Xiangyuan, Li hunches over a keyboard in his monastic cell of a bedroom, determined to churn out 8,000 Chinese characters a day to appease his 20,000-strong fan base. Chain-smoking to keep himself awake, he rarely falls asleep before 4 in the morning before reporting for duty at the police station by 8. "The work load is unimaginable," he says. Li makes triple his police salary with his online writing. But he won't quit his day job. Xiangyuan is a conservative place where Chairman Mao's portrait still hangs in the main square. His family isn't convinced that a job sending words into the ether is a proper career. "They think that only working for the government or a coal mine is a serious pursuit," says Li. "To them, my writing is just a game." For millions of Chinese—including the authorities—it's already much more. —WITH REPORTING BY CHENGCHENG JIANG AND JESSIE JIANG/BEIJING ■