Web Novels as Vehicles of Cultural Transfer Across the Globe. Re-negotiations of Cultural Histories Between East and West

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Abstract:

The article explores the global circulation of web novels and their rising popularity in the 21st century. Moreover, the study analyses the close connection and relationship between web novels and transmedia storytelling. It focuses on the transformative dimension and adaptive productivity of digital fiction, highlighting the collaborative efforts, which contribute to its fascinating quality and easy dispersion around the globe. Often closely linked to an international readership preferring a forum-based communication, web novels are at the same time firmly rooted in a cultural imaginary, which they also stimulate and expand.

Nowadays, web fiction is becoming increasingly popular. Since the beginning of the 21st century the global impact of web novels has steadily expanded. The serial form of publishing, often favoured by web authors, proves to be most attractive, while the transposition into various media forms also seems to enhance the worldwide spreadability and dispersion of narratives.

In my article I would like to explore the function and potential of web fiction in three different respects:

– First, I would like to focus on the specific qualities of web fiction and explain the main reasons for its increasing attractiveness.

– Second, I will discuss the close connection between web novels and transmedia storytelling – that is the transformative dimension and adaptive productivity of digital fiction published in various online platforms around the globe.

– My third point will be the new role of the traditional book format, as it is emerging from the context of digital texts and their adaptations. As we shall see, users of the new social online platforms dedicated to digitally reading and writing are not altogether oblivious of the old traditional book medium. On the contrary (and perhaps paradoxically), they often develop an amazing appreciation of the printed book in its aesthetic complexity.

Accordingly, the key questions concerning this multi-faceted topic can be summarized as follows: What are the specific qualities that render web fictions attractive for authors and readers alike? What are the prominent features of web novels, what is their key to success, and, to what extent do they contribute to the evolution of world literature, in the global sense of the term?

Let me start on my first point with a representative example. Wattpad is probably one of the most well known online social reading platforms offering users diverse options of reading and creating original stories. According to the co-founders Allen Lau, a Canadian entrepreneur, and his colleague Ivan Yuen, the Toronto based platform aims at sharing creative work and removing barriers between readers and writers, such as social privileges or complicated and expensive publishing processes.

User accounts are usually free of charge and therefore easily accessible for netizens.

Significantly, the self-advertisement on the introductory page of the website resorts to the inclusive, collective pronoun „we", addressing the readers in an informal, casual style: „Hi, we're Wattpad" (https://www.wattpad.com). Moreover, the providers of the platform claim their product to be „the world's most-loved social storytelling platform" because „Wattpad connects a global community of 90 million readers and writers through the power of story" (Ibid.). Interestingly, the operators sing the praises of a very ancient cultural practice known as ‚storytelling'. They also envisage the ultimate aim of publishing the most successful digital texts as best-selling novels in the familiar form of the printed book: „Wattpad Books aspires to recognize and reflect diverse voices by taking Wattpad stories to published books and onto bookshelves around the world" (https://www.wattpad.com).

Moreover, one of the principals aims of the founders was making numerous literary texts available to mobile users, thus combining reading as a crucial cultural technique with mobility, ubiquity and the dynamics of sharing intellectual products. The growing digitization is appreciated as a favourable vehicle and convenient framework for the re-inventing of narratives and the exploration of its comprehensive forms. Within this framework, digitalisation is supposed to entail the democratisation and widespread dissemination of fictions.

As a frequently quoted early example of popular web fiction, Scott Zakarin's *The Spot* (1995-1997) deserves to be mentioned because it is often referred to as a prototype. – The term 'webisode' was coined to describe its characteristic form and features (Smed, 2021) – it was streamed on the website thespot.com from 1995 to 1997, and, the series tells its story through characters' journal entries. Furthermore, it was highly praised for its interactivity with its audience, which was considered a novelty in the 1990s.

Apparently, there are great differences in quality, originality, and, style among web novels. If they are well written and successful, however, their availability on the internet and their spreadability will sooner or later enhance their popularity. Thus, fascinating and original web novels will attract even more attention and are bound to be adapted to other media. There are abundant examples of internet novels being transformed into television or web series. In this respect it seems not at all surprising that Allen Lau is also a board member of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), „a cultural organization with a mission to transform the way people see the world through film" (https://company. wattpad. com/allen-lau).

This observation leads me to my second point: Web fiction frequently inspires transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling is a relatively recent type of narrative crossing the boundaries not only of genres, but also of different media. In the last few years, it has attracted scholarly awareness and has been analyzed by scholars of literary history, narratologists, and, media experts alike (see, for instance, the contributions of Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan, Carlos Alberto Scolari, Annette Simonis and Barbara Strautmann, who explore diverse aspects of the phenomenon). As Henry Jenkins has proposed in his compelling definition, „transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2007). Marie-Laure Ryan has discussed the interesting question, whether transmedia narratives are a top-down or a bottom-up phenomenon (Ryan, 2015, p. 5), i.e. the question in how far the storytelling is not only hosted, but also inspired and controlled by the great media franchises. This controversy is still an ongoing discussion among the experts, and has not yet been decided clearly.

In this context, it is no coincidence that Wattpad promises its authors a brilliant career of their texts as models for films and other

popular adaptations, reaching beyond the limitations of the textual medium: „Your original story could be the next big hit. Wattpad Studios discovers untapped, unsigned, and talented writers on Wattpad and connects them to global multi-media entertainment companies"(https://www.wattpad. com). Obviously, the large media platforms assume a key role in discovering and supporting eligible works and their authors.

Indeed, transmedia storytelling substantially contributes to the dynamics of producing web novels and of their reception. The transmedial dimension serves as a vehicle of dissemination and spreading through the World Wide Web, crossing cultural boundaries with unexpected ease and participating in globalisation.

At the same time the transmedial dimension itself becomes a powerful vehicle of cultural transfer. When being transferred to visual media (like film, manga etc) the story, or more precisely, the narrative core, is abstracted and becomes more or less independent from its specific linguistic basis (cp. Ryan, 2013). This facilitates and stimulates its transnational circulation. The storyworld and plot of a web novel can inspire a Tv series which in turn may stimulate a manga or an animé. At the same time the increasing popularity of the narrative favour's international translations of the original work as well as translations of the corresponding screen play in form of subtitles etc.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the internet publishing form is favourable towards cultural exchange, stimulating the circulation of narratives around the globe. The production and translation of Chinese web novels and their enthusiastic reception in the West (U.S., Canada, U.K., Spain, Germany, Russia etc.) may serve as a prominent example for the transnational and transcultural dynamics of contemporary reading on the web. In contemporary China, webnovels (also named Internet Literature or *wangluo wenxue*) constitue the dominant form of digital fiction (see Hockx, 2015, p. 4, Skains, 2022). A widespread Chinese term addressing internet literature writers is *xieshou*, 'writing hands' (cp. Hockx, 2015, p. 5), which, interestingly, focuses on the original process of

writing, including all the material aspects of the handicraft. Y. Zhang regards the „advent of new media in the 1990s"as a liberating event entailing the end of an „elite monopoly of literary institutions" (Zhang, 2015, p. 3). Since then, Internet or Web literature „has swiftly spread to cultivate tastes and values alternative or even oppositional to elite culture" (ibid., see also Fanetti, 2022).

Webnovels are often serialized stories constructed in a collaborative, forum-based, online community. They can, however, also be individual creations. Internet publishing also attracts many individual authors, who aim at a larger, potentially global audience. Some recent Chinese web novels, especially the modern fantasy genre, invested with additional elements of historical and detective fiction, such as for instance *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī*, *The Grandmaster of demonic cultivation*, are being read by millions of overseas fans, mostly in English translations, but also in Mandarin, by users with a migration background. Significantly they have been termed „the country's most successful cultural export". The international success of the web novel *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī* (Chinese: 魔道祖师), engl. *The Grandmaster of demonic cultivation*, written by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu is mostly due to the corresponding film series *The Untamed* (*Chen qing ling*, 2019) which first aired in China on the network Tencent Video in summer 2019 in 50 episodes. (See https://www.imdb.com/title/ tt10554898/) A shorter version, a 20-episode special edition of the drama, aired on WeTV starting on December 25, 2019. As a result of its great success, the production seemed a good candidate for an international or transnational audience and was also streamed on Netflix.

As has been mentioned above, the drama series was based on the popular web novel *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī*. The novel was received somewhat controversially in contemporary China, because it included BL content, depicting a close friendship between the two protagonists, which gradually developed into an erotic relationship. The main characters, Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji are sect members and cultivators in a fantasy world that is typical of the genre of the so called xianxia novel. In the xianxia genre of Chinese fantasy,

we encounter a heterogeneous mixture of Chinese mythology, Taoism, Buddhism, Chinese martial arts, traditional Chinese popular beliefs, etc. (see Cheong & Qin, 2022, p. 19).

Without going into detail concerning the semantics of the elaborate and complex narrative, one observation seems evident: The fascination of the story apparently stems from the subtle combination of elements from Chinese mythology and martial arts with key components of international fantasy literature and film (compare Simonis, 2022).

The pair of young actors were celebrated as rising stars and soon became very high in demand in the production industry and with advertising companies. An audiobook and a manhua accompanied the lasting success of the novel and the TV drama. Not least of all, it deserves to be mentioned that in the wake of the popularity of the donghua and the TV drama the web novel has been published as a book in several editions in Main China as well as in Taiwan and Singapore. Most editions have a representative form, some are richly illustrated editions.

Since its first airing the series has also inspired numerous fanfiction published in the World Wide Web, in social media and media collections or archives. The *Archive of our own* currently includes 42342 fanfictions based on *The Untamed*, while the novel *The Grandmaster of demonic cultivation*, and ist multiple adaptations have inspired a total number of 60748 texts in the *Archive* since 2017 on the same website).

This takes me to my third and last observation – what about the book, the traditional format of world literature? As it becomes obvious on closer examination, it would be over-hasty and premature to claim that the book has been rendered superfluous or redundant by recent media developments. On the contrary, the rise of the web novel has not abolished the book-based novel, but has stimulated its evolution in the 21st century.

In contemporary culture, we can observe an interesting phenomenon, which can best be described as a re-emerging of the traditional medium of the book in the context of transmedial pro-

cesses. Surprisingly, the traditional book format often provides the final climax within the transformation process and the series of adaptations. This is illustrated by numerous fan videos showcasing the process of unboxing a recently printed book originating from a web novel.

Numerous fan-made videos on Tiktok, Facebook and YouTube testify the unboxing of the book or the series of three books of *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī* / *The Grandmaster of demonic cultivation*, treating this ancient medium as a precious object, an object of art to be meticulously examined and treasured (See, for instance: https://www.tiktok.com/@autoranahabreu/video/712208080119741 1589?lang=ceb-PH, https://www.tiktok.com/@yuyu15ting/video/ 7065576286214753562, https://youtu.be/lvqZu_Qd8IM [25.01.2023].)

Finally, the chain of subsequent adaptations inspired by the digital internet text is returning to the most traditional medial representation of the written text, that is the form of the book, fascinating by its solid nature with its haptic, sensual and visual attributes, immediately catching the attention of the readers.

The numerous fan videos on ‚unboxing' are enacting the fascination still emanating from the book, skimming reverently through its pages, enjoying the sudden intimacy of the sensual encounter with a highly cherished text, formerly only available in its virtual, digital form, celebrating the final triumph of this media type. The published book finally seems to prevail as the perhaps superior personification of successful fiction, when compared to the more transitory digital versions of the texts.

Especially the expensive, richly illustrated versions, often termed as ‚limited editions', of the work of fiction in question, seem to reveal and establish its true character as a work of art.

Apparently, in the case of web fiction and its numerous transformations, the analogue medium of the book no longer functions as starting point of the transmedia storytelling, because it has been replaced by the digital internet format. Interestingly, the expected order of adaptations seems to be reversed. The publication of a book edition in print often appears to be the last part of a chain of adap-

tations. Nonetheless it still occupies a privileged position within the chain of adaptations, insofar as it reappears as the final version of the transformative process, if not as the ultimate aesthetic incarnation of the story.

The emergence or re-appearance of the book in the course of the successful career of the web novel manifests its resilience as a preferred carrier medium of the narrative. In comparison, the digital version seems slightly inferior to the prestigious and colourful book editions.

Let us finally have a look at the transcultural aspect of web novels and their transmedial adaptations. Evidently, the potential of cultural transfer highly depends on genre and genre conventions. As has been elaborated above, the example of *Mó Dào Zǔ Shī* proved to be eligible for transcultural and transmedia adaptations. Nowadays, the fantasy genre offers most promising transcultural components. The mythological concepts of resurrection and self-cultivation in *The Grandmaster of demonic cultivation* are not specifically Chinese but seem common elements in different mythologies, therefore they are liable to transcultural circulation. The same applies to the mission of revenge in the wuxia genre.

Many elements of mythological and fantastic worldbuilding constitute common ground between different nations and their cultural imaginary; therefore, they provide transcultural tendencies and are easily appreciated by international audiences. At the same time, cultural idiosyncrasies will not be considered an obstacle for the process of international reception when they are combined with and embedded in a larger transcultural framework.

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