Michel Hockx, *Internet Literature in China*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015. xiii + 251 pp.: US$50.00. ISBN 9780231160827.

In the past decade, the Chinese Internet has been booming—both in the amount of users that daily engage in activities through newly developed applications, websites, and services and in the spectrum of research that has been dedicated to analyze its usage effects and political implications. Internet studies in China predominantly focus on the democratizing potential of this technology, whereas in recent years, we have witnessed a refreshing approach to the study of Chinese Internet phenomena for “what they are” (see Herold and Marolt’s *Online Societies in China: Creating, Celebrating and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival* and *China Online: Locating Society in Online Spaces*). It is within this framework that *Internet Literature in China* by Michel Hockx finds its most significance. The author provides the readers with a well-rounded overview and in-depth interpretations of Chinese online literary works, their innovations, experimentations, and new forms of aesthetics empowered by the online spaces which, even if framed within a post-socialist system that still attempts to maintain, conceptualize and in a way coerce the normativity of/over the literature, provide an escapist solution, a testing ground for avant-gardes’ experimentations and challenging boundaries. Hockx’s work is divided into four chapters, each one of which deals with a distinctive feature of this online literary phenomenon.

What we find in the first chapter is a vibrant exposition of the development of Internet-based literature, filled with accounts of the innovations generated by online writers in the online web-sites/spaces. What Hockx admirably strives to convey is the necessity for a change in the dogmatic perception and conceptualization of online literature itself, maintaining that “the Internet does provide a new literary and that it has established and will continue to establish its own conventions and values” (p. 29). In this regard, Hockx’s analysis of the early discussion forums does stand as a case of the prominent difference between the two kinds of literature and their own raison d’être. The involvement of the community and interactions between writers and readers worked as the main distinction between traditional literature and the online one (pp. 32, 40). Furthermore, the author intelligently guides us through the literary development of one of the first literary websites in China, Under the Banyan Tree (*Rongshu Xia*), and the serialized diary of Lu Youqing, “Date with Death” (*Yusishen xiangyue*), that appeared on the website to corroborate the pioneering potential of the emergence of new literary styles—in this case diary chronicles in the online space (p. 58).

Hockx is always cogent in historicizing the evolution of the new literary online spaces as well as addressing the state control exercised over the publishing (online and offline) world. Unhealthy content has been one of the targets of censorship as being seen as detrimental toward the formation
of a harmonious society (pp. 115-116). The author, in chapter 3, carries us through the so-called obscene and erotic contents in online fiction and the mechanisms adopted by writers and editors to elude censorship. Hockx’s challenging of the normative standpoints on what can be considered erotic-obscene or how we assess the artistic value of with this kind of content stands as core questions within the legal matter as well as within new forms of literary aesthetics. In an excerpt from Black and Blue (Heilan) online magazine, the story “Lin Xiaohe Visits the Toilet” (Lin Xiaohe ruce), pregnant with colored depictions of toilets and defecation, exemplifies not only technical skills achieved by vibrant online literary communities but also the seriousness and the aesthetic value of their artistic works (p. 140).

In the two remaining chapters, chapter 2 and 4, the author challenges the nonlinear canon that, arguably, characterizes online literature by providing excerpts from chronicles and poetry. In both Internet chronicles and poetry, innovation, experimentation, and transgression resonate at their best. In chapter 2, the work “Random Notes on Sex” (Xing biji), published on the website Minority Vegetable Garden (Xiaozhong Caiyuan) by Chen Cun, appeared in a single installment thread—including contributions by users (becoming commentators therefore coauthors)—hence breaking free from the dogmatic nonlinear canon to find linearity being at service of the online experimentation. “Writing at will” (suibian xie) or “random writing” (luanxie), as Chen Cun defines the writing style of the chronicle, called into question the very essence of what could or should be treated as a literary work (p. 75). As a matter of facts, as Hockx puts it, “Chen’s purpose throughout has been to create a kind of literature that is as free as possible from conventions and that is supported by and fostered among small, marginal communities” (pp. 83-84). In chapter 4, instead, the author gives us an account of the level of moral transgression and experimentations that can be found in the online poetry, particularly with the works of Dajuin Yao (Yao Dajun), which freely oscillate among visual, text, and sound experiences. The author walks us through various evanescent “extracts” of Yao’s works to demonstrate, also, the level of experimentation and manipulation of the Chinese characters in the Internet-based poetry when compared with the canonical classical Chinese poetry, its fixed system of rules and, perhaps intrinsically, its tradition. Online Chinese poetry is, as Hockx elegantly concludes, “developing its own standards and conventions […] overcoming many of the limitation and boundaries inherent to the print-culture system” (p. 185).

Another worth noting didactical feature of this book can be found in the Introduction section where Hockx delivers his own attempt in finding a methodology able to suit innovative researches within the field of Chinese Studies; a methodology required due to the “ephemerality of the online material” (p. 18). The author listed several software and websites, such as Zotero or the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, which have helped him in this 10-year long ongoing “adventure.” This is particularly beneficial as a pedagogical tool for first time approaches to this kind of research and for the archiving and preservation of contemporary Chinese Internet data.

This review can only contribute to deliver a smattering of information regarding the vast amount of material and literary analyses provided by the author. Internet Literature in China is an attractive and intriguing reading that offers unique slices of the new online literary expressions and trends that have been occurring and evolving in China in the past 10 years.

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