In just ten years, the map of mainland Chinese literature has radically changed.¹ The first radical change has been “online literature.” This seems to be a uniquely mainland Chinese phenomenon. Although other places in the world may have online literature, the atmosphere is not as vibrant as it is in mainland China, and the assault on “paperback literature” is also not as great as we see here. Including the poetry and novels by “Tuya” and others since about 1992, not even twenty years have passed in mainland Chinese online literature. However, if we scan this data—the word count of novels released on the main online literature websites every day;² the number of inquiries and posts on some popular online novels;³ the proportion of online novels found on a trip

¹ By “ten years” I mean the time in which these radical changes occurred and the time in which it really formed. Of course, this did not happen in just ten years. In the early 1990s, Wang Shuo’s novels left Beijing and were widely accepted by many who were not used to the Beijing accent. This shows that these changes were already beginning to occur.

² According to data available on the official Shanda Literature Corporation website (www.sd-wx.com.cn), in the third quarter of 2010, the seven online literature websites owned by them had daily uploads averaging 83 million words. In December 2012, the CEO of Shanda, Hou Xiaoliang, in response to criticism from CCTV, claimed that they have a daily upload of nearly 100 million words. Since this is part of commercial promotion and “crisis management” public relations, these figures are probably exaggerations, but even if we cut this number and compare it to the word count of paperback works (since 2010, every year there are about 1,000 to 1,200 new full-length novels published; at an average of 300,000 words per book, the total paperback publishing in a year is less than the growth rate of Shanda in a week), then the growth of online literary works is truly shocking.

³ Since Thug Cai’s First Intimate Contact [Diyici qinmi jiechu, 1998] came online on the mainland, there have been a host of online novels that have attracted large quantities of comments, like Murong Snowy Village’s Chengdu, Please Forget Me Tonight [Chengdu, qing jiang wo yiwang, 2002], which within a week had over 200,000 comments posted; and Blue Horizon Pharmacist’s 1980s: Sleeping in Dongguan [80 niandai: shui zai Dongguan], which within less than half a year received over two million comments.
to the new release shelf of any decent-size bookstore; the number of online novels that have been made into films; as well as the dedication of young people on the subways or hospital wards to reading novels on their phones—you can certainly say, “today, there is enough online literature to divide the realm of paperback literature.”

This is not surprising. China is a highly literate country. Every year, China adds countless new aspiring young authors, but, despite this massive wave of aspiring writers, there are very few places for them to get a foot in the door. There is no need to discuss the big issues, but for the literary field, it seems as if major paperback works all fall under the authority of the government at various levels. Throughout the 1990s, the government generally became more restrictive when it came to any kind of literary works. The “literary world” formed under these long-term institutional constraints, in which regulations were solidified, and the boundaries of genres were closed, and it was just at this time that the cost of entry got higher. The book market, formed by the

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4 The massive number of literary works that became popular online and later became published as paperbacks still have, besides as a share of the bookstores in which these literary works are directly published into paper form, the possibility of leading to the digitization of conventional literature itself on a much deeper level. The main distinction between online literature and paperback literature is not in its material form (computer screen or paper), but under these different material/technological circumstances, the intrinsic logic of these works created by the depth of intervention in the formation of these works (from creation to reading). If we just compare the differences between “cellphone novels” to the masterworks of authors like Liu Zhenyun and Zhang Wei, then we can understand the clear differences in this intrinsic logic. Bluntly put, if the majority of literary works in bookstores were produced along the lines of the intrinsic logic of online literature (fortunately, this has yet to happen), then regardless of whether these works are published online, they will illustrate the total defeat of the “paper character” of literature.

5 Of course, just because one reads a novel on a cellphone does not make it necessarily an online novel. In July 2008 while I was in the ward of a midsize hospital in northern Shanghai, I randomly interviewed five young patients and their family members. They all liked to read online novels. They felt that it was convenient and cheap, and, among the novels saved on their phones, about one-third were the online versions of paperback literature (the rest were online novels).

6 To take the Chinese Writers Association (CWA), compared to the 1980s, throughout the 1990s, the authors of vibrant works continually had weaker influence over the Writers Association at both the local and national level. An increasing number of officials (many of which came directly from the Publicity Department at all levels of government) took leadership positions in the CWA and affiliated publications. Even though many of them were enthusiastic about literary works and were quite accomplished individuals, their status was ultimately as officials and not writers. At the same time, the CWA’s influence over new writers also continued