

Cultural Confidence and Global Vision of Chinese New Era Literature: A Case Study of the Web Novel *Lord of the Mysteries*

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Abstract

This paper examines the cultural confidence and global vision of Chinese new era literature through a case study of the Chinese web novel *Lord of the Mysteries*. While web literature inherently excels in dissemination, its potential to inform serious literature remains underexplored. *Lord of the Mysteries* exemplifies literary excellence through its meticulous historical contextualization, profound character development, and rigorous world-building. These elements collectively enable the novel to transcend cultural boundaries and resonate with a global audience. Consequently, this study suggests a dual transformation: web literature may increasingly prioritize literary depth, whereas serious literature could benefit from embracing accessibility. To bridge this divide, creators must balance artistic integrity with reader engagement, producing works that are both critically valuable and broadly appealing.

Keywords

Chinese literature, literary modernization, international vision, web literature, "Lord of the Mysteries"

1. Introduction

The concept of modernization defies singular definition or universal standardization—a perspective that not only unveils its inherent complexity but also offers critical guidance for contemporary Chinese cultural development. As Liu Daxian observes in *The Literature and Art News*, Chinese literature has navigated a distinctive modernization path: while assimilating Western literary theories, it persistently anchors itself in native traditions, selectively integrates foreign cultural elements, and reinterprets classical texts to forge a uniquely Chinese "new literature." This evolutionary trajectory, spanning from the Old and New Democratic Revolutions to socialist reconstruction, crystallized the principle of "literature for the people"—a practice deeply rooted in China's sociopolitical realities. Throughout this process, Chinese literature has systematically pursued indigenous aesthetic paradigms that reflect national identity.

Wang Damini and Hu Huanlong (2015) contend that modern Chinese literature, though influenced by Western paradigms, remains fundamentally grounded in ancient Chinese cultural ethos. This duality raises a pressing question: how might Chinese literature reconcile its pursuit of indigenous aesthetics with the imperative to cultivate a global vision? Emerging trends in web literature provide a potential framework. Li Z. (2023) notes that web literature prioritizes entertainment and instant gratification, attributes tied to its digital medium—readers typically engage through mobile devices, fostering fragmented, skimming-oriented consumption. Yet, as exemplified by *Lord of the Mysteries*, contemporary web literature increasingly synthesizes serious literary techniques with popular appeal, signaling a transformative convergence.

Authored by "Cuttlefish That Loves Diving" and serialized since 2018, *Lord of the Mysteries* has emerged as a cultural phenomenon with global resonance. Set in a Victorian-inspired world, the novel innovatively amalgamates Cthulhu Mythos horror, steampunk technology, Kabbalah

mysticism, and SCP Foundation-style anomalies, crafting a multilayered universe of mystery. Its narrative breaks conventions through non-linear timelines and a multi-temporal framework, strategically employing devices like the "Tarot Society"—a clandestine organization that regulates plot progression through ritualized gatherings. Character construction adopts a "traits + details" methodology, blending archetypal qualities with granular psychological realism, thereby establishing a new benchmark for web novel character development.

2. Reassessing Global Reach: A Case Study of *Lord of the Mysteries*

The international dissemination efficacy of contemporary Chinese literature remains a contested issue. To contextualize this debate, consider the case of Can Xue—a 2024 American Literary Prize laureate—whose translated works on Amazon Kindle hold modest commercial traction, ranking #17,970 overall and below 200th in the "Chinese Literature" category. Despite limited visibility, her novels demonstrate qualitative engagement, evidenced by 40 reader reviews and a 4.3/5 average rating (see Figure 1). This dichotomy between commercial performance and reader reception underscores the complexity of measuring literary globalization.



Figure 1: Sales Performance of Can Xue's Novels on Amazon

Quantitative data reveals a broader trend: per the Digital China Development Report 2023, China's online literature sector has achieved remarkable global penetration, boasting a ¥4 billion overseas market, 620,000 original works, and 230 million users across 200+ regions by 2023. Such metrics starkly contrast with traditional literature's stagnating reach, which He Chengzhou (2018) attributes to systemic barriers including cultural discount, Western-centric literary canons, and the decline of physical book markets. Crucially, online literature's digital-native distribution model—optimized for mobile-first consumption—grants inherent advantages in accessibility and scalability, factors that print-dependent serious literature struggles to replicate.

A critical caveat emerges: direct comparisons between serious and online literature's global impact via platforms like Amazon are structurally flawed. While serious literature prioritizes print with digital supplements, online literature operates inversely—digital primacy enables algorithmic discoverability and democratized access, naturally amplifying its public reach. Furthermore, the genre's emphasis on entertainment value aligns with global audiences' preference for immersive, low-barrier engagement, as exemplified by *Lord of the Mysteries*.

This disparity invites introspection for serious literature's globalization strategies. Could adopting web literature's adaptive frameworks—such as transmedia storytelling, cultural hybridization techniques, or data-driven audience targeting—bridge the accessibility gap without compromising artistic integrity? The success of *Lord of the Mysteries* suggests potential synergies worth exploring.

3. 2. Entertainment and Literary Synergy in *Lord of the Mysteries*

Lord of the Mysteries exemplifies the potential for web literature to achieve global resonance, evidenced by its English edition on Qidian International amassing 47.7 million views and translations into French, Thai, and six other languages. This success stems from a dual commitment to entertainment appeal and literary sophistication, challenging conventional boundaries between popular and serious fiction.

3.1. Strategic Cultural Hybridization

The novel's global ascendancy exemplifies what Appadurai (1996) terms "mediascapes"—the transnational flow of cultural imagery facilitated by digital platforms. By transposing its narrative to a neo-Victorian alternate history replete with Industrial Revolution signifiers (soot-choked factories, penny dreadful tabloids), *Lord of the Mysteries* strategically employs what semioticians call "cultural shorthand." This calculated hybridization—Anglicized character names like "Leonard Mitchell" and "Audrey Hall"—functions as cognitive lubricant, reducing interpretive friction for Western audiences while retaining quintessentially Chinese narrative structures, such as the xianxia cultivation trope repackaged as "Sequence Potion advancements."

However, mere cultural pastiche cannot sustain cross-border appeal. The author-translator dyad's mediation proves pivotal. Yuan Ye's Mao Dun Award-winning prose—characterized by jinxuanfeng (tightly wound suspense) pacing—undergoes meticulous transcreation by CKtalon. Their approach exemplifies Venuti's (1995) "ethics of difference": preserving the original's philosophical complexity (e.g., the "Fool's" existential dilemma echoing Zhuangzi's paradox of selfhood) while recalibrating metaphors for Western cognitive frames. For instance, the Chinese idiom "骑虎难下" (riding a tiger and finding it hard to dismount) becomes "Sisyphean predicament," transplanting cultural specificity into universally legible existentialism.

2, 4, and 6 Daffodil Street were terrace buildings with multifaceted hipped roofs. Their exteriors were painted grayish blue, and three chimneys stood erected.

The place obviously did not have lawns, gardens, or porches. The entrances directly faced street.

Tingen City Housing Improvement Company's Scarter took out a bunch of keys and while opening the door, introduced, "Our terrace houses do not have foyers, so you enter directly into the living room. There's an oriel window facing Daffodil Street, so there's pretty good lighting..."

水仙花街2号、4号和6号是联排的建筑，采用多边形四坡屋顶，整体外观灰蓝，三个烟囱醒目耸立。

这里当然没有草坪和花园，也没有门廊，入口直接对着街道。

“廷根市改善住房公司”的斯卡特拿着一串铜制的钥匙，边打开大门边介绍道：

“我们的联排房屋都没有门厅，进入就是起居室，有一个朝向水仙花街的凸肚窗，采光相当不错……”

For Figure 2: English content

For Figure 3: Chinese content

3.2. Literary Depth: Beyond Genre Conventions

The novel's literary merit emerges through its subversion of web fiction norms. Rejecting the genre's typical breakneck pacing, the opening chapters employ deliberate narrative deceleration to construct a naturalistic industrial landscape. This formalist choice—reminiscent of Zola's *Germinal*—immerses readers in the proletarian struggle, exemplified by the tragic arc of Old Kohler. A factory worker elevated from poverty only to perish in state-engineered smog, his final lament—"We are straws in the field; the wind may fell us, or we may fall without it"—synthesizes historical verisimilitude (the 1952 London Smog Disaster) with existential pathos, epitomizing Lukács' (1971) theory of typicality in realism.

3.3. Hyperdiegesis: Cohesive Worldbuilding as Literary Device

The novel's literary ambition manifests most profoundly in its hyperdiegetic architecture. Unlike the fragmented universes common to serialized web fiction, *Lord of the Mysteries* constructs a rigorously systemic world anchored in Victorian political economy. Currency exchange rates, labor migration patterns, and class-based spatial segregation are not mere

backdrop but narrative agents that shape character agency—a technique aligning with Jameson's (1991) conceptualization of cognitive mapping. This diegetic integrity fosters what Wolf (2012) terms "subcreation," where consistent internal logic sustains reader immersion while enabling allegorical critique of industrial capitalism.

3.4. Toward a New Literary Paradigm

Lord of the Mysteries reconfigures the entertainment-literature dichotomy. Its synthesis of genre tropes with social realism suggests web literature's capacity to enact what Bourdieu (1993) termed "position-taking"—strategically negotiating between autonomous (artistic) and heteronomous (market) literary poles. For serious literature, the novel's success implies that adopting web fiction's transmedia storytelling techniques could enhance accessibility without sacrificing critical engagement. Conversely, web literature might leverage such models to evolve from ephemeral entertainment to enduring cultural artifacts. This dialectic invites a reimagining of literary value in the digital age—one that transcends medium-based hierarchies to prioritize narrative innovation and cultural resonance.

4. Reconciling Artistic Integrity and Reader Engagement in Literary Praxis

The ontological question of literature's purpose—whether to serve as an autonomous aesthetic form or a vehicle for mass entertainment—has long polarized literary discourse. The provocative declaration of "the death of the novel" by avant-garde writer Ma Yuan, countered by Wang Meng's insistence on literature's enduring social relevance, crystallizes this fundamental tension. Their debate mirrors Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947) critique of the "culture industry," wherein artistic authenticity risks subordination to market-driven commodification. While polemics about literature's supposed demise remain contentious, the marginalization of serious literature within contemporary mass culture constitutes an empirical reality—a phenomenon accelerated by digital media's reshaping of cultural consumption patterns.

Reader agency undeniably exerts gravitational pull on literary production. As Bourdieu's (1993) field theory posits, the literary arena operates through constant negotiation between artistic autonomy and heteronomous market forces. Works that entirely disregard audience resonance risk cultural oblivion, as evidenced by the fading relevance of 1980s Chinese experimental fiction beyond academic circles. Yet, the inverse approach—sacrificing literary essence for commercial viability—reduces writing to what Jameson (1991) termed "the cultural logic of late capitalism," where aesthetic value becomes contingent on exchange value. The sustainable path, therefore, lies in dialectical synthesis: honoring literature's mission to "defamiliarize" reality while engaging readers through culturally legible narratives.

This dialectic manifests vividly in Chinese web literature's evolution. The early 2000s witnessed what critics dubbed the "chaotic carnival" period—a digital Wild West dominated by jingoistic historical fantasies and erotic romances designed for algorithmic popularity. These works, while temporarily captivating domestic audiences through what Barthes (1975) would call "readerly texts" (scriptible), lacked the "writerly" depth required for cross-cultural endurance. As the market matured, a paradigm shift emerged: works synthesizing universal aesthetic principles (truth, goodness, beauty) with localized storytelling began achieving both commercial success and critical recognition. The trajectory mirrors Moretti's (2000) world-literature model, where peripheral literatures enter global circulation through strategic cultural translation.

This equilibrium carries profound implications for Chinese literature's globalization. The current literary ecosystem exhibits paradoxical trends: while prestigious awards increasingly recognize digital-native authors, traditionalists lament a perceived "crisis of literariness." Yet,

as *Lord of the Mysteries* demonstrates, the solution may lie not in rigid genre hierarchies but in Bakhtinian (1981) dialogism—allowing "high" and "low" cultural forms to interanimate. Literature's vitality depends not on institutional validation but on its capacity to construct what Iser (1978) termed "implied readers"—audiences actively co-creating meaning through interpretive gaps.

The digital age demands reimagined creative praxis. For web literature, maturation requires embracing what Huyssen (1986) described as "the great divide" reconciliation—infusing entertainment frameworks with modernist reflexivity. Conversely, serious literature must adopt what Jenkins (2006) calls "transmedia storytelling," leveraging digital platforms' participatory potential without compromising thematic complexity. As McLuhan (1964) foresaw, the medium itself becomes integral to the message: print literature's linearity may give way to hypertextual experimentation, while web novels could evolve into interactive storyworlds.

Ultimately, *Lord of the Mysteries* signals a Copernican shift: literary value no longer orbits fixed aesthetic canons but emerges through dynamic reader-text-context interactions. This paradigm, while challenging traditional authorship notions, aligns with the Confucian ideal of wen yi zai dao (文以载道)—literature as a vessel for universal truth, now navigated through digital-age currents.

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