



A HISTORY OF CYBER LITERARY CRITICISM IN CHINA

Ouyang Youquan



A History of Cyber Literary Criticism in China

This is the first scholarly attempt to write a history of cyber literary criticism in China. The author uses the Internet as the departure point, literature as the horizontal axis, and criticism as the vertical axis, to draw a detailed trajectory of the development of cyber literary criticism in China.

The book comprises two parts. The first part focuses on the representation of historical facts about cyber literary criticism, covering five topics: the evolution of cyber literary criticism in the context of the new media; major types of cyber literary critics and their criticism; academic achievements in cyber literary studies; the form, contents, and rhetorical expressions of so-called netizens' critical commentaries; and important events in the history of cyber literary criticism. The second part discusses the historical changes in literary criticism as responses to cyber literature, covering another five topics: the conceptual transformation in literary criticism of the Internet era; the establishment of evaluation criteria for cyber literature; changes in the function of cyber literary criticism; changes in the constitution of cyber literary critics; and the impact of cyber literary criticism.

This book will be an essential read to students and scholars of East Asian Studies, literary criticism, and those who are interested in cyber literature in general.

Ouyang Youquan is Professor at the School of Literature and Journalism, Central South University, China. His research interests include literary theories and cyber literature. He has published many books, including *The Ontology of Cyber Literature*, *Studies of Literature and Art in the Context of Digitalization*, and *The Transformation of Art in Digital Media*.



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Introduction

To Write a History of Cyber Literary Criticism

Cyber literary criticism, as this book will discuss, refers to a type of literary criticism that deals with cyber literature, especially original writings posted online. While some texts of cyber literary criticism are published on the Internet, others are published in traditional media as commentaries on writers, works, phenomena, and other issues of cyber literature. Thus, those who write cyber literary criticism include not only ordinary netizens who love literature and write actively online but also scholars and media workers who engage in the study of cyber literature.

As cyber literature is still in its youth, its criticism is also just at the early stage of development. As such a type of literary criticism is still not yet full-blown, its limited academic impact cannot make it adequately acknowledged by scholars in the mainstream of literary studies. It is even regarded by some as not yet officially started and still in a state of preparation. In such a context, our discussion on the construction of a history of cyber literary criticism undoubtedly sounds risky, as we may be talking about something that will only happen in the future and is non-existent today. This will also pose a challenge to us as we need to aptly theorize about cyber literature and its criticism. As we know, literary criticism is always written after literary creation, and a history of literary criticism should never be written before there are numerous works of literary criticism. The writing of a history of China's cyber literary criticism is no exception to this rule.

Nevertheless, we can prove this proposed project to be viable by actually conducting it. Today, if we come to the "site" of literary production and consumption, if we get on the Internet and start to read there, we can hear the critical voices rolling toward us from readers who read the radiant and flourishing cyberwriting, and we can see how scholars make their efforts to analyze and discuss an abundant number of phenomena in cyber literature. We can, from an increasing number of academic publications, gather remarkable resources and conceptions to help us establish a history of cyber literary criticism. Therefore, it is no longer unreasonable and unfounded for us to rethink the necessity and possibility of writing a history of cyber literary criticism: it has become, indeed, a project that is quite valid, or even inevitable; it has become

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an important part of the general history of literary criticism in China, as there have already been enough meaningful practices of cyberwriting and as there is the need to construct theoretical discourses on such practices. If we are to write a history, we shall always begin with a study of certain facts and then use theories to interpret such historical facts to eventually form a unity between facts and theories. Based on this idea, we can use the Internet as our departure point, literature as the horizontal axis, and criticism as the vertical axis, to start a journey of academic exploration that allows us to go through historical facts all the way into the theoretical discussions on cyber literary criticism.

The Necessity and Possibility of Writing a History of Cyber Literary Criticism

To argue that cyber literature criticism should have a history of its own, we need to discuss the relationship between the development of literature and the development of society in the specific context of the Internet as the new mass media. In my view, the writing of a history of cyber literary criticism both as a part of the general history of literature and as a part of the general history of literary criticism can be fully justified by people's practices and conceptualizations concerning literature, as there have already been abundant resources and achievements in the field of cyber literary criticism. Three points can serve as the theoretical basis for this.

First, cyber literary criticism is a phenomenon of historical significance, and we need to examine it objectively with an awareness of its historicity. There has been a huge body of critical texts on cyber literature, which, altogether, has a great influence on our society: it thus enriches the history of contemporary literature and has become an integral part of China's literary criticism today. Thus, cyber literary criticism, as a cultural existence, deserves a history of its own.

Second, cyber literary criticism is culturally valuable. We can examine cyber literary criticism's socio-cultural values and analyze how it plays a role in today's society and culture. Cyber literary criticism has helped ordinary people to make their voices heard—they can now write literary commentaries online. As a result, the conceptualization of literary criticism is renewed and expanded, and there are more ways for literary criticism to be delivered to readers, which are no longer limited by time and space in the traditional sense. We should have the insight to grasp such a new condition.

Third, cyber literary criticism has new functions. It can provide us with a broader view and constantly change our ideas about the history of literature to a certain degree. Our ways of literary criticism, based on theories since Aristotle's *Poetics* and Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wenxin diaolong), can be continuously updated.

Therefore, as we see that different elements—ideas about the development of literature, ideas about literary criticism, ideas about literary history, and ideas about society and history in general—are all necessarily connected, we

can not only theoretically justify the writing of a history of cyber literary criticism but also recognize the necessity and significance of doing so. Cyber literary criticism not only has abundant literary resources to support its entry into the history of China's contemporary literary criticism as an integral part but also has enough new intellectual ideas to support the writing of a history of its own. While facing historical materials, facts, and achievements concerning cyber literary criticism, we should be confident: armed with adequate views and theories of history, we can seek to lay a logical basis for the history of cyber literary criticism.

Cyber Literary Criticism as a Historical Fact

While historical facts serve as the premise for the writing of history, the historicity of such facts is the ontological basis on which history is built. As we know, no matter how disorderly and immature today's cyber literary criticism is, it is already objectively existent and historically factual, and there is no doubt about this. If we visit the "site" of cyber literary production and consumption, we can see a large number of historical facts and materials about cyber literary criticism, many of which have been examined and analyzed by various scholars.

First, cyberwriting, which is radiant and flourishing, naturally demands cyber literary criticism; the huge body of literary works and critical texts thus ontologically validates our writing of a history of cyber literary criticism. Since the 1990s, when cyber literature written in Chinese was born in North America, with the quick popularization of the Internet in China and the thriving of literary websites, it has become a cultural trend that people now write with computers in replacement of their pens and post their writings on the Internet. As the Internet, structured like a spiderweb, allowed people to enjoy freedom in a virtual world, stored a huge amount of texts, and circulated them to all parts of the globe, a large body of writers with their countless original works and hundreds of millions of readers flooded into cyberspace. In particular, since the rise of "we media," it has become a part of people's daily life to read, write, and post their words on various apps, with handheld devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and e-readers, via mobile networks. In this way, all technical barriers established and maintained previously by traditional literature for its production, circulation, and criticism have been deconstructed. Scholars' elitist monopoly on literary criticism has come to an end, and ordinary people can enjoy a higher degree of freedom in critiquing literary texts. Literature thus gets off its pedestal and returns to the people. While "serious literature" used to be regarded as the absolute mainstream, today we can observe a phenomenal volume of cyber literature in China.

Meanwhile, as cyber literature is growing wildly, due to the discrepancy in cyber writers' writing abilities and the lack of editors as "gatekeepers," cyberwriting, though huge in volume, is not always good in quality: some works are closely associated with cyberspace, yet they are not literature; others are

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supposed to be works of literature, yet they are indeed not “literary” enough. This is the major deficiency of cyber literature and has received a lot of criticism. Therefore, it has become historically important for us to ask scholars to use literary criticism to better guide cyberwriting, to make our theoretical studies helpful in explaining and regulating the mechanisms of cyberwriting, and to call for better interaction and communication between traditional literature and cyber literature: it is in such a historical context that our cyber literary criticism was born and is growing up.

However new it is, cyber literature has grown in volume and in its social impact. Its “massiveness” cannot be denied or ignored. This requires us to objectively represent its condition as a historical fact. If we write a history of contemporary literature, we should not ignore the historical facts of cyber literature, including the achievements in cyberwriting. Without a discussion on cyber literature, our history of contemporary literature would be incomplete. By the same token, if we write a general history of literary criticism in contemporary China, we cannot avoid discussing the history of cyber literary criticism.

I made the following argument in an article to support the idea that cyber literature is essential to our writing of a history of contemporary literature:

Today’s cyber literature is ...in the interplay between “the peripheral” and “the mainstream.” With the increasing number of excellent works, cyber literature is gaining its position in the field of literature and culture and forging a new relationship with the dominant discourse of power in our society. With its unique mode of existence and way of circulation, it creates a certain “field” where it can negotiate with and further change various factors, including the media ecology, the mass culture, cultural theories, the mechanism of political power, and people’s demands, thoughts, and ways of life. Such connection and interaction are the premises for us to argue that cyber literature should have a history of its own.¹

Such a discussion applies not only to cyber literature but also to cyber literary criticism. As an undeniable historical existence, cyber literary criticism effectively intervenes in the interaction between literature and the changing socio-cultural/historical condition, thus making it reasonable to have a history of its own.

The Historical Value of Cyber Literary Criticism

Cyber literary criticism’s existence is not only a historical fact but is also of historical value. While scholars evaluate and examine cyber literature, they constantly consolidate and enrich the history of cyber literary criticism. As the value of literary criticism depends on critics’ interpretations of literary texts, the value of the history of literary criticism originates from the analysis of literary criticism done by the one who writes history. As René Wellek and Austin

Warren remind us: “Values grow out of the historical process of valuation, which they in turn help us to understand.”² Cyber literary criticism’s cultural value makes it valid as an object to be examined in the historical context. In other words, while trying to validate cyber literary criticism as an integral component in the project of “rewriting literary history,” we not only need to make clear its current forms and conditions but also should study its values and significance as a “node” in literary history.

Cyber literary criticism can be viewed as valuable in several different ways. In my opinion, while studying cyber literary criticism, we should first examine the cultural values of our society that are embedded and reflected in cyber literary criticism. We should evaluate how and to what degree cyber literary criticism influences the mainstream cultural values of our society and warn against or eliminate the negative influence if there is any. As we guide cyber literary criticism properly and make it focus more on its cultural values, we also make the history of cyber literary criticism more culturally valuable.

Today, there is a huge volume of cyberwriting and an enormously large body of readers who read cyber literature. Moreover, works of cyber literature have also been adapted into works of various other popular art forms, including films, TV series, theater performances, printed books, pieces of music, video games, cartoons, audiobooks, children’s books, etc. For example, *Love Is Not Blind* (Shilian sanshisan tian), which is the top-grossing movie of 2011, *Empresses in the Palace* (Hougong Zhen Huan zhuan), which is the most popular TV series in 2012, *So Young* (Zhi women zhongjiang shiqu de qingchun), which is the top-grossing movie of 2013, and many TV series and films popular in 2015, including *The Journey of Flower* (Huaqiangu), *Nirvana in Fire* (Langyabang), *Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* (Daomu biji), *Love Yunge from the Desert* (Yunzhongge), *Ghost Blows Out the Light* (Guichuideng), and *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* (Jiuceng yaota), are all adapted from web novels. This manifests that cyber literature has already changed the overall condition of China’s literature and art: it has become one of the most popular among all types of literature and art and a powerhouse in the field of modern Chinese literature; it has made a great contribution to, and had a great influence on, the prosperity of China’s literature and art and the enrichment of people’s cultural life. Because of this, cyber literature is no longer simply an issue about the Internet or an issue of literature; it has become a significant cultural issue that is directly related to the quality of literature, the cultural trend, the humanistic spirit, and the value orientation of our times: as it is phenomenally influential, it is directly related to the construction of the nation’s ideology and culture in the contemporary period, to the country’s control over voices in cyberspace and especially voices in new media, to people’s consumption of mass culture, their reading of literature, and the education of the youth, and even to the construction of the society’s mainstream values, the strengthening of the country’s soft power, and improvement of the country’s image in the international community. Therefore, critics should take their responsibility to interpret, evaluate, study, and even guide such a phenomenal literary and cultural practice while

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recognizing such a job as distinctively valuable. Meanwhile, as we clarify and delineate the process and contents of literary criticism, we can construct a history of cyber literary criticism that is also distinctively valuable.

If we focus on the inherent values of literature, we can see that cyber literature and its criticism are also valuable in the context of media technologies as they are aesthetically novel. We should pay special attention to this point as we are building a consensus as to how to study cyber literature. Cyber technology and the new means of production allow cyber literature not only to break literary traditions but also to construct a “poetics” based on the use of new media: in this way, the aesthetics of literature goes through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Scholars of cyber literature thus have the duty to clarify how such a new type of literature departs from literary traditions, how it can transform our literary theories and conceptualizations, and how it can gain value for itself through this process.

As cyber literature turns technology into a matter of art and turns art into a matter of technology, it creates a tension between art and technology. The charm of writing literature with a pen and reading literature on paper, as a result, disappears. Meanwhile, a new dimension of “digital poetics,” that does not exist in traditional literature, is created. For example, as texts of cyber literature are stored in digital forms, they are not limited in length and can be easily circulated, searched, and duplicated. The fonts can also be freely changed and more than one language may be available as a result of the use of machine translation. Audiobooks allow readers to listen instead of reading. Texts can also be updated in real time and shared among readers without limits. Netizens, as ordinary people, now can participate in the writing and critiquing of literature. All these new conditions make it more convenient for writers to freely create their works as expressions of their thoughts and interests: now, they can “have a broad view of history and reality as if it is right before their eyes” and “express their poetic feelings through typing and clicking”; technology thus has a magical power to help them create an artistic wonderland. This exactly corresponds to what I once argued in an article:

Multi-media works on the Internet incorporate various aesthetic elements, including pictures, texts, sounds, and moving images, thus being able to attract all our faculties and allow us to comprehensively feel their artistic charms... . Literary texts of such a type cannot be found in traditional literature in the print media. They combine pictures with texts and integrate the visual with the auditory. They can be interactive and constantly evolving. With such characteristics, cyber literary works create a poetic wonderland, and cyber literature itself has become a new art form based on the use of digital technology.³

As cyber literature, in the context of new media technology, has new artistic characteristics and aesthetic values, the critical reviews and studies of such a type of literature are valuable in a distinctively new way. Consequently, the

writing of a history for such critical reviews and studies of cyber literature can also be of value.

In addition, cyber literature is also different from traditional literature in that it pays more attention to the commercial value of literature in the culture industry. Consequently, we need to consider how cyber literature sells in the market, and this is where our writing of a history of cyber literary criticism does not simply follow the traditional way. While the commercial value of cyber literature may be regarded as a departure from, or even a dissolution of, the traditional humanistic spirit, it has become a factor that cannot be overlooked as literature has come into an era of mass consumption. If traditional literature is an artistic “vocation” to which writers are dedicated, today cyber literature is mainly an “industry” of mass culture that aims to make profits by following the logic of the market. This is also the economic inducement for cyber literature to boom in recent years in China. Cyber literature is a product to be sold in the market shaped by technologies and readers’ preferences: unlike traditional literature, it is no longer regulated by “writers associations” of different administrative levels and is not hampered by the current evaluation criteria; instead, it only needs to be acknowledged by readers and be shaped by the industry of multimedia entertainment in cyberspace. Ouyang Ting and I once made a description of this condition in an article:

Websites run their businesses independently and are responsible for themselves. Thus, only the fittest can survive. Cyber writers depend on the use of new technology and their identities as ordinary people, as two powerful weapons, to fight in the jungle. Initially, they write alone to please themselves. Then, some of them begin to take writing as a career, a way of earning a living, or even a means of becoming rich. What they (mainly) expect is not to make literary achievements or to create works of timeless values. Instead, they aim to receive more clicks and “favorites” from readers, to let websites represent them to sell their works with full copyrights, and to sell the copyrights of their works to certain companies so that these works can be further adapted and make even more profits. This is what writers and businesses of cyber literature deem as the most important.⁴

Literature always has a spiritual dimension and an economic dimension. In the past, we paid more attention to the former, which was not wrong, but now cyber literature puts more emphasis on the latter, and this is obviously subject to critique. Nevertheless, critics of cyber literature can pass fair judgment on this phenomenon, which is significant and quite necessary. This is indeed an important issue cyber literary criticism must face and deal with. It is also an important “historical fact” we must pay attention to while writing a history of cyber literary criticism.

Moreover, as cyberwriting allows ordinary netizens to participate in literary creation, the identity of writers has been changed. This can be seen as a great revolution in literature brought by digital technology. How to evaluate this

phenomenon has become an issue we must deal with in the writing of a history of cyber literary criticism. The inherent structure of the Internet naturally allows all users to be equal, so netizens enjoy a high degree of freedom to write in cyberspace. This corresponds to a description I once made in an article:

The Internet allows cyber writers to publish their writings without anxiety. As it does not require any qualification, everyone can have the right to publish works online, and no one has any right to prevent others from freely expressing themselves. Everyone with a dream of becoming a famous writer now has a chance. Ordinary people, who are unknown to others, now have an equal opportunity to publish, just like professional writers do.⁵

As a result of this, the era of a “new folk literature” soon came. One does not have to be a professional and qualified writer to write, and the traditional rules in the field of literature are subverted. Thanks to new technologies, literary creation is no longer practiced by an exclusive group of professional writers but by ordinary netizens, and a huge volume of literature comes out. Although this “great leap forward” in literary creation does not necessarily signify progress in literature, as I argued in an article, it is undoubtedly “a rebellion against, and a correction to, the condition that literature has been written exclusively by the elite for thousands of years.”⁶ As I further argued in this article, this “restores literature to its original condition, as people’s ‘expressions of sadness and happiness,’ as their ‘responses to certain incidents,’ as ‘laborers’ songs about their labors,’ and as ‘hungry people’s songs about their desire for food.’”⁷ This is historically significant: “it helps literature return to the study of human nature” and “it allows us to experience what happened more than two thousand years ago when common people used poetry to record their labors and describe the change of seasons.”⁸ Undoubtedly, critics of cyber literature should not and will not ignore such a historical change—indeed, there has already been abundant research on it. The fact that now literature is no longer a domain exclusively for professional writers and that ordinary people can write and publish is the best “gift” given to us by cyber technologies. It is also an opportunity for literature to popularize itself in this period. This is a historical fact that has been discussed by critics of cyber literature. It is also to be further reviewed and written into the history of cyber literary criticism.

Academic Achievements in Cyber Literary Studies

The mainstays of cyber literary criticism, as historical materials that accumulate over time, are academic achievements. At a theoretical level, they give us an overview of critics’ practices and thoughts and allow us to see how such thoughts were developed in the process of criticism. A review of academic achievements can also allow us to examine how effective and valuable literary criticism is. If cyber literary criticism is founded on the study of cyberwriting, then the history of cyber literary criticism should be based on the study of such

academic achievements, as they are the very “facts” that need to be recorded in history. Since the 1990s, when cyber literature in mandarin Chinese started to develop, cyber literature and its criticism on the Internet have always been closely associated with each other. The literary commentaries posted on the Internet have been powerfully influencing the writing and reading of cyber literature, as well as people’s views as to what is good literature and their interactions with writers accordingly. Meanwhile, scholars and media workers have also actively written on cyber literature and published a huge volume of works in print media, such as newspapers.

A Historical Review of Academic Achievements in China’s Cyber Literary Studies

Using three sources, including the databases offered by China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Cyber Literary Research Archive (Wangluo wenxue wenxian shujuku), and *A General Survey of Cyber Literature Across Five Years (2009–2013)* (Wangluo wenxue wunian pucha erlinglingjiu-erlingyisan), I checked and sorted academic achievements and worked out some statistics to reflect the current status of cyber literary criticism in China.⁹

First, let us look at an overview of the condition of related academic achievements on CNKI (see Table 0.1).

CNKI is the largest database of academic publications in China today. It contains articles in academic journals, selected doctoral dissertations and masters’ theses, articles in important newspapers, articles from important

Table 0.1 Search results on CNKI, for papers on cyber literary criticism, on March 2, 2016

<i>Keywords searched for from all contents</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>Keywords searched for from article titles</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>
“research on cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue yanjiu)	11,389	“cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue)	573,929
“criticism of cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue piping)	4,733	“cyber literature and traditional literature” (wangluo wenxue yu chuantong wenxue)	435,506
“commentary on cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue pinglun)	4,089	“publication of cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue chuban)	3,254
“development of cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue fazhan)	12,273	“industry of cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue changye)	1,197
“language used in cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue yuyan)	5,834	“influence of cyber literature” (wangluo wenxue yingxiang)	2,919

conferences, yearbooks, and other reference books. It is the infrastructure that provides databases covering a wide range of materials and the search results it gives are quite reliable and authoritative. From the statistics provided above, we can see that the number of academic papers on “cyber literature” written in Chinese has reached 573,929, the number of papers on “criticism of cyber literature” is 4,733, and the number of papers on “commentary on cyber literature” is 4,089. This indicates that the academic research on cyber literature has been quite developed, and it deserves to be studied and reviewed as a historical issue.

Second, I developed the Cyber Literary Research Archive and some statistical information can be found there. The core contents of the archive are the three components as follows.

The first is the book *The Annals of Cyber Literature in China* (Zhongguo wangluo wenxue biannianshi), which records the development of cyber literature written in Chinese from 1991 to 2013, organized by date, month, and year, including important events, people, works, and keywords.¹⁰ To date, it is the work that preserves the most complete and original materials, including a large number of critical texts and discussions on cyber literature.

The second component is the book entitled *A Dictionary of Words about Cyber Literature* (Wangluo wenxue cidian), which is a collection of 1,177 entries about cyber literature, including terms of the Internet, concepts of cyber literature, literary websites, cyber writers (as individuals and groups), computer applications for cyberwriting, literary works and genres, language styles in cyber literature, the industry of cyber literature, academic research on cyber literature, events concerning cyber literature, and yearly buzzwords on the Internet.¹¹ There is a phonetic index of these entries at the end, which makes it convenient for readers to search. This dictionary includes 13 entries for research institutions, 14 for scholars of cyber literature, 74 for books of cyber literary criticism, 11 for doctoral dissertations, 150 for masters’ theses, 500 for newspaper articles, and 280 for cyber literary works.

The third component is the book entitled *Collected Entries of Major Academic Publications on Cyber Literature* (Wangluo wenxue yanjiu chengguo jicheng).¹² It collects entries of important academic publications since the birth of cyber literature, including 908 journal articles, 1,035 newspaper articles, 229 doctoral dissertations and master’s theses, 143 conference papers, and 83 books. It also includes entries of 1,081 published works of cyber literature and 3,006 blog articles written by 67 cyber writers.

Apart from CNKI and the Cyber Literary Research Archive, there is another source of information—a book entitled *A General Survey of Cyber Literature Across Five Years: 2009–2013*.¹³ This survey, which took one year, was conducted by the research team of cyber literary studies at Central South University. This survey gives a comprehensive overview of the development of China’s cyber literature from 2009 to 2013. As the Internet media developed at an unimaginable speed and as a huge volume of information was incessantly circulated on the Internet, it is significant to draw a clear picture of the

condition of cyber literature and the trajectory of its development: this is a process of “recording history” as it clarifies historical facts and keeps historical materials.

This book covers 16 topics, including literary websites, cyber writers, works of cyber literature, readership of cyber literature, language used in cyber literature, theoretical discussions on cyber literature, the influence of cyber literature, the interaction between cyber literature and traditional literature, the development of cyber literature as an industry, blog/microblog/WeChat literature, online videos and short films, TV and film adaptations from web novels, cyber literature by ethnic minority writers, cyber literature by female writers, cyber literature for children, and cyber literature in foreign languages. It offers a faithful and comprehensive record of the precious historical materials to illustrate how cyber literature has become a spectacular cultural phenomenon.

The sixth chapter of this book, entitled “Cyber Literary Criticism,” gives us statistics of academic articles, books, research projects (sponsored by governments of different levels), and research awards, as well as lists of representative works of cyber literary criticism.¹⁴ According to the statistics, from January 2009 to December 2013, 856 journal articles were published, and 179 doctoral dissertations and master’s theses were finished. During these 5 years, 59 books were published (10 in 2009, 12 in 2010, 25 in 2011, 8 in 2012, and 4 in 2013), covering a wide range of popular issues concerning cyber literature as follows: 1. theories, criticism, and appreciation of cyber literature; 2. the reading, writing, and teaching of cyber literature; 3. the industry and values of cyber literature; 4. the art of new media and digital technology, and the culture of cyberspace. They are textbooks, monographs, collections of academic papers, collections of public speeches, books about the history of literary theories, and dictionaries.

During these 5 years, research projects on cyber literature were sponsored by the National Social Science Fund, the Ministry of Education, and provincial governments. Among them, one project started to receive support from the National Social Science Fund in 2009, 7 in 2010, 3 in 2011, 3 in 2012, and 8 in 2013. Apart from these, 10 research achievements in cyber literature received awards as “excellent research achievements” on the national and provincial levels. This survey, in the form of a book, also lists 20 incidents from 2009 to 2013 as “important incidents about cyber literary criticism.”

This survey indicates a trend that cyber literary research and criticism increase over time, and that such research and criticism are no longer limited to the study of writers and works of cyber literature but gradually become more systematic, specific, and diversified. More and more experts, scholars, and professors got involved in cyber literary criticism; many graduate students wrote dissertations and theses on cyber literature. Overall, there is a growing number of people who are engaged in cyber literary research and criticism.

Meanwhile, there is an increasing amount of articles on cyber literature being published in academic journals on literature and art, such as *Literary Review* (Wenxue pinglun), *Literature and Art Studies* (Wenyi yanjiu), *Theoretical*

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Studies in Literature and Art (Wenyi lilun yanjiu), *Literature and Art Contention* (Wenyi zhengming), *Contemporary Writers Review* (Dangdai zuojia pinglun), and *Novel Review* (Xiaoshuo pinglun), and in important generalist journals in the field of social sciences, such as *Social Sciences in China* (Zhongguo shehui kexue), *Academic Monthly* (Xueshu yuekan), and *Social Science Front* (Shehui kexue zhanxian).

We can see that although China's cyber literary criticism is generally in its early stage of development, there is already a complete team of scholars studying a wide spectrum of issues and a huge volume of academic resources and materials in a variety of forms covering various questions, which altogether demonstrate the vitality and sharpness of scholars' thoughts, along with frequent critical activities that exert a far-reaching influence on society. Based on all this, we can argue that writing a history for cyber literary criticism is necessary not only as an act to preserve historical materials but also as an act to help cyber literature better develop itself.

The Ecology of Cyber Literary Criticism

Based on our review of academic achievements in recent years, we can see the "ecology"—the condition and development—of cyber literary criticism in China.

Unlike traditional literary criticism, which is mainly practiced by professional critics and scholars, cyber literary criticism involves three groups of people: netizens who write commentaries on the Internet, media workers who write critical articles for the market, and professional critics and scholars. Among them, netizens' commentaries are the most dynamic: netizens form the broad audience who read works of cyber literature immediately after they are posted; they freely express their thoughts about these works in forums and other online communities; this creates an effect of "heteroglossia" as their critical voices are all mixed up in cyberspace as a public sphere. Netizens, as readers, can leave a few characters, such as "good" and "bump (the thread)," or emojis/emoticons/pictures, as quick and straightforward responses to what they have just read, while writers can also reply to such short comments. Many websites have systems to help them quickly access readers' responses: for example, they let readers click buttons to recommend, save, rate, or give monetary rewards to certain works. Apart from this, there are book rankings of various kinds, such as those for books recommended by most readers, books that are the most popular among VIP readers, books that have received the most reviews, and books that have received the most "votes" from readers. This can also be deemed a means to evaluate books online. Of course, there are also spam posts for commercial purposes. As cyberspace is open to everyone, people can freely and honestly complain about what they read without the need to consider others' feelings or follow any strict rules. Yet, sometimes netizens' remarks are so subjective that they become unfounded and unfair.

The second group of critics are media workers, including journalists, editors, writers, and other cultural celebrities, who write for the market. They are good at exploring the phenomena of cyber literature that can be valuable for reportage. Sometimes they hype up a particular issue and make the whole society pay attention to it. A series of events were hotly discussed online in the past decades, including the controversy over Mu Zimei's diary, the controversy over Zhao Lihua's poems, the debate between Han Han and Bai Ye, and the sudden success of Yu Qihua's poetry.¹⁵ All these issues make us see how media workers as literary critics can be quite powerful in leading the public opinion about issues concerning cyber literature.

The third group of critics—professional critics and scholars—are well-trained academically. They are good at using theoretical reasoning to analyze cyber literature, and their works are often seen in academic journals, books, conferences, and seminars. However, they are restrained by the academic system and limited by their academic training. They usually use traditional ways to discuss cyber literature, focusing more on the theoretical part than on the specific cyberwriting. In this sense, their works sometimes keep a certain distance away from the actual practice of literary creation.

In recent years, works of cyber literary criticism have been increasing in number and circulating in multiple ways. Take research articles published in academic journals as an example: according to *Collected Entries of Major Academic Publications on Cyber Literature*, there were nine academic articles on cyber literature published in 2000, 32 in 2001, 48 in 2002, 31 in 2003, 42 in 2004, 25 in 2005, 41 in 2006, 42 in 2007, 79 in 2008, 109 in 2009, 54 in 2010, 160 in 2011, 144 in 2012, and 75 in 2013. We can clearly see the trend that the number increased every year.¹⁶ According to Cyber Literary Research Archive (Wangluo wenxue wenxian shujuku) and *A General Survey of Cyber Literature Across Five Years (2009–2013)*, academic books, newspaper articles, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations that discuss cyber literature have all consistently increased in recent years.

This well indicates that cyber literary studies, just like cyber literature, now prosper and flourish; scholars constantly push forward the conceptual transformation and theoretical construction in this field. Meanwhile, compared with traditional literary criticism that is only to be read in print media, cyber literary criticism can take on various forms and be disseminated through various channels. As we can see, apart from print media (such as journals, newspapers, and books) and TV/radio broadcasts, there are Internet media, especially “we media” (blogs, microblogs, and WeChat), which are faster and more dynamic. Moreover, new media allows information to be transmitted in multiple directions, thus making it possible for people to have “two-way” communication connecting “one to one,” “one to many,” and “many to one.” This significantly alters the unidirectional communication via traditional media. Particularly, critics can interact with each other and give prompt feedback to writers, which makes their criticism practical and relevant to cyberwriting.

Moreover, critics have been exploring how to establish a system of criteria for evaluating cyber literary works. This has become a hotspot in cyber literary studies and is of the greatest academic value. We need to have a set of criteria that are suitable for our study of both the “cyber” and the “literary” aspects of cyber literature. Although cyber literature has a short history and its criticism has just started, there are already many scholars who have done excellent research on the evaluation criteria.

Some scholars responded to the question of how to construct the system of evaluation criteria academically. Wang Guoping pointed out:

As we discuss cyber literary works, we should stick to the study of its literariness while paying particular attention to its unique characteristics. We should seek and examine the differences between cyber literature and traditional literature. After writing on and discussing cyber literature for a long time, we will gradually form a system for aesthetically evaluating cyber literary works. That system will suit the actual condition of cyber writing and reading and reflect the unique characteristics of such activities.¹⁷

In an article, I also discussed the uniqueness of cyber literary criticism through a comparison between cyber literature and traditional literature. I summarized the characteristics of cyber literature as follows: “writers are also netizens”; “literary creation is done through interaction”; “literary texts are in digital forms”; “works are circulated online”; “readers read on computers and other electronic devices.”¹⁸ Moreover, I also discussed some relevant issues, such as cyber literature’s mode of existence and mechanism of writing, and how the changes in the ideas of literature have an impact on the evaluation criteria.

As I searched, the earliest article proposing a set of evaluation criteria for cyber literature is Chen Qirong’s “A Call for the Establishment of an Evaluation System for Cyber Literature” published in *People’s Daily* in 2013.¹⁹ In the article, the author articulated: “Although there might be various criteria, two of them were the most important: they were ‘the ideological value and the aesthetic value’ of cyber literature.”²⁰ As to the ideological value, he pointed out: “Cyber literature should first and foremost serve the people. At the ideological level, it should actively shoulder the responsibility for the country and the nation.”²¹ As to the aesthetic value, he proposed: “Cyber writers should have an elegant and fine aesthetic taste. They should have a feeling of awe toward literature and an ambition to create excellent works in cyberspace.”²²

The theorization of cyber literature is a historical process that takes a long time and requires many scholars’ collective efforts. While such a process is like a road with no end, every academic work serves as a road sign, marking the accumulation and development of critical thoughts in history. Today, people have expressed different ideas, but they have not yet reached a consensus as to what criteria we should use for evaluating cyber literature. Nevertheless, their discussions are academically valuable as they lay the foundation of the system of criteria that will eventually be established.

The History of Cyber Literary Criticism and Its Theoretical Discussions

To write a history of cyber literary criticism, we need to not only cover the historical facts, but also give interpretations of such facts, particularly focusing on the interaction between literature, media, and society in recent history. There are various ways to do so: we can sort out critical articles on writers and works, examine events of literary criticism in chronological order, and study the changes in the concept and theory of literature; we may also use the ideas of modernity to interpret the historical development of literature, just like what Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen did in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. In *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren discussed whether it would be possible to write a book that is both about literary history and literary criticism. They argued that to write a book of literary history, the writer should have adequate knowledge of literary criticism: “The whole supposed immunity of the literary historian to criticism and theory is thoroughly false. . . . ‘The literary historian must be a critic even in order to be a historian.’”²³ Meanwhile, they also argued: “Conversely, literary history is also highly important for literary criticism as soon as the latter goes beyond the most subjective pronouncement of likes and dislikes. A critic who is content to be ignorant of all historical relationships would constantly go astray in his judgments.”²⁴ Then, how shall we grasp the progress of cyber literary criticism and use a conceptual framework to write a history of it?

As cyber literature has neither a long history nor a rich and organized archive of critical texts, we can only tentatively use “historical facts” and “theoretical discussions” as the two dimensions to represent both the practice of cyber literary criticism and the progress in the theorization of cyber literature. The whole book will be divided in this way: the first five chapters discuss “historical facts,” while the remaining five chapters give “theoretical discussions.”

Representation of the History

We shall first give a diachronic representation of the development of cyber literary criticism. In other words, we need to give a historical account of the past and the present of cyber literary criticism, focusing on a few issues that are particularly important in this process. Such issues also correspond with the first five chapters of this book, and the outlines of these chapters are as follows.

New Media and the Evolution of Literary Criticism in Cyberspace

Both the history of literature and the history of literary criticism are closely associated with the changes in media. This is true of cyber literary criticism because its evolution—from its appearance to all events that happened thereafter—is based on the use of Internet media and digital technology. Cyber

literary criticism can thus be seen as a cultural byproduct of the new media. Tan Dejing discussed this issue:

What role does the Internet play in its interaction with literature and literary criticism? What characteristics does it have? We have to make clear these issues before we can adequately study cyber literature and its criticism. The best way to do so is to use a comparative perspective to look into history. By examining the historical changes in media and its relationship with literature and literary criticism, we can clarify the great significance of “media,” or “media platform,” to literature and criticism and understand how the Internet is particularly important to today’s literature and criticism.²⁵

The importance of media changes to literature and criticism has been well confirmed in literary history. In ancient times, literature was initially written on bamboo slips and engraved on metals and stones. Later, there came the “movable type” as a technology of printing. In the past few decades, there was “laser phototypesetting.” In different historical periods, there were different ideas of literature, and scholars discussed literary works in different ways.

However, in the past, whether carved on animal bones and turtle shells, engraved on bronze bells and cauldrons, brushed on bamboo slips and silk pieces, written on paper, or printed with the use of laser phototypesetting, the words of literary criticism were accessible only to a limited number of people and were belated as responses to literature. Today, as information is transmitted via digital media, the situation is different. As Tan Dejing pointed out, “in the age of digital media, the so-called ‘criticism’ is always exerting its influence on our reading and even our literary tastes,” and the Internet brought a high degree of freedom and “allowed literature and its criticism to enter into a completely new stage of development.”²⁶

Internet technology directly influences cyber literature and becomes an integral part of it. It also completely renews the media to change the way of writing, publishing, and reviewing. As people’s relationship with literature is changed, their aesthetic experience of the world is changed as well. Therefore, we should view the evolution of cyber literary criticism from the perspective of media changes. Three basic issues should be clarified: first, the birth of cyber literature and cyber literary criticism, including the rise of we-media literary criticism; second, the changes and developments embodied by cyber literary criticism as compared with traditional literary criticism; third, the significance and contribution of cyber literary criticism to the general development of literary theories. By studying these issues, we will see how the new media, as new platforms and channels based on digital technology, takes the historical responsibility to serve literary criticism while changing its traditions and norms.

Major Types of Cyber Literary Criticism

In the Internet era, changes happen to the identities of literary critics. There are mainly three groups of them in the field of cyber literary criticism. First, some professional critics, especially those who pay attention to the development of literature and like to comment on current issues, have now started to study cyber literature. As academics and professionals, they promptly change their focus and have the acumen to express thoughts on literature in the new media. They form the most “orthodox” school among all critics of cyber literature.

Another group of critics is media workers who write for the market, including journalists, editors, writers, and other cultural celebrities who pay attention to cybermedia. They are good at discovering works, writers, and phenomena of cyber literature that can be valuable for reportage. Sometimes they hype up a particular issue and make the whole society pay attention to it.

Netizens can also write as critics. They write a wide variety of words that can be viewed as literary criticism, including short comments as expressions of personal thoughts, words that manifest fans’ craze for some works, spam posts posted in forums to flood screens, brief messages on literature to exchange thoughts and make friends, appreciative articles that dissect specific works, and promotional writings for commercial purposes.

These three groups of critics have their strengths and weaknesses in their writings of literary criticism. While separate from each other, they work in the same direction to develop a variety of forms and contents for cyber literary criticism. Among them, professional critics are well-trained academically. Some of them have rich experience in research or even have good publications. Academically speaking, their works are the mainstays of cyber literary criticism. Nevertheless, they are restrained by the academic system (e.g., universities may only recognize articles of certain lengths and in certain journals as valid contributions) and limited by their academic way of thinking and writing. They usually use traditional ways to discuss cyber literature, focusing more on the theoretical part than on the specific cyberwriting. They are keen on getting to the “logical essence” of the issue and constructing theories to explain it. In other words, they seek to discover the universal law behind certain literary phenomena. Yet, they do not pay much attention to specific writers, works, and literary phenomena: they either do not talk much about them or remain quite insensitive when discussing them, which makes us feel that they always keep a certain distance away from the actual practice of cyberwriting. Their critical works, therefore, are neither valued by other academics nor cared about by cyber writers.

Media workers as the second type of critic report or comment on incidents about cyber literature. They usually take advantage of the mass media to grasp discursive power in the current cultural sphere. With a wide readership and the authority of the media, they define certain phenomena in cyber literature, pass value judgments on them from the position of mainstream culture, or

write critically on them, so as to guide public opinion. These critics are keen on discussing social problems with a strong sense of responsibility. They use clear words to dissect and critique the real conditions and use pertinent language to offer solutions to problems in cyber literature. Nevertheless, if they just give critiques from the perspective of media workers or focus merely on the media that carries literature, then they will be too rash and superficial and unable to go deeper into the issues. Media workers are not good at using theories to help their reasoning. Meanwhile, they have to work for profit and conveniently hype up some issues to better market their writings. Their words may be unfair and inappropriate, unable to give a clear and reasonable evaluation of literary works. Sometimes they may even misguide cyber literature and its readers.

Netizens' comments on cyber literature can best represent the characteristics of cyber literary criticism. This means the online interaction between netizens and authors and among netizens themselves, which is best seen in online forums. Cyberspace allows people to "push" information to others and "draw" information from them. Here, everyone can open a column and write interesting and sometimes strange words to impress readers and to show their unique personalities. People can write whatever they like to comment on whatever they read. There is no need to care about the form, style, and meaning of their expressions. There is no need to consider other people's feelings either. Netizens can write casual words, sometimes just for fun, sometimes to express their thoughts, sometimes to show their disagreement with the works they read, and sometimes even to attack writers personally.

Academic Achievements in Cyber Literary Studies

Academic publications are embodiments of scholars' theoretical discussions and critical thoughts. To be published, articles and books have to be effective and valuable as literary criticism. Thus, they constitute the mainstays of cyber literary criticism as historical materials. Although there are fewer publications on cyber literature than on traditional literature, there are still a considerable number of them. They are often seen in academic journals, books, newspapers, online media, conferences, and seminars. They can be articles, books (including edited collections and translations), postgraduate theses and dissertations, conference papers, and online reviews. Journal articles constitute the bulk of these works. They represent the best contributions to academic studies in this field and are also the most influential. From the 1990s on, there are thousands of them, covering a wide range of topics, including the current status and problems of cyber literary criticism, the importance and necessity to write cyber literary criticism, the characteristics and values of cyber literary criticism, the system of criteria for evaluating cyber literature, the study of critics and their identities, and analyses and reviews of particular websites, writers, works, and phenomena of cyber literature.

In these works, scholars gave theoretical analyses of cyber literature. Some of them are keen to blaze the trail and lead the way in the field of cyber literary

studies. Others, however, simply use traditional theoretical frameworks to study cyber literature. In this sense, their discussions cannot keep up with the times. They may have a condescending attitude toward cyber literature or have limited means to address the real issues. What can make up for such a shortcoming are netizens' commentaries posted in forums and in "we media": this is cyber literary criticism in its narrow sense and can also be called "online literary criticism."

The Forms, Contents, and Rhetorical Expressions of Netizens' Critical Commentaries

While academic publications on cyber literature most exist as hard copies, here netizens' critical commentaries exist in electronic forms in cyberspace. We can see the three differences between these two types of cyber literary criticism: their modes of existence, textual forms, and rhetorical expressions.

In terms of the mode of existence, online criticism can be further divided into three types: "texts that are fragmentary," "texts that are interactive," and "commentaries in the form of monologues." The first type—fragmentary texts written by netizens to give their responses to cyberwriting—is the most common. Such texts tend to discuss specific works. They are concise, straightforward, and unrestrained. With just a few words they can accurately hit the targets. By joking, laughing, and cursing, netizens can be blunt enough to let cyber writers feel either embarrassed or enlightened and to make other readers feel amused. The weakness, however, lies in that these netizens do not have deep thoughts and analyses based on a knowledge of literary theories. Rather, they often write casually without a good sense of responsibility.

The second type—"texts that are interactive"—refers to posts in forums and discussion sections on certain web pages that serve as a means of communication for readers and writers to share their views of certain works or literary phenomena. These texts are of the greatest vitality among all texts of cyber literary criticism, as they allow people to come together and directly exchange thoughts.

The third type is "commentaries in the form of monologues." There are review articles (such as blog posts) by professional critics. While relatively long and well-reasoned, they also highlight critics' personalities. There are also well-written commentaries (such as messages posted on microblogs and WeChat, or delivered via e-mails) by netizens. They directly address concrete issues and fully express netizens' opinions, thus being quite effective as cyber literary criticism.

Netizens' critical commentaries often break the conventions and go "beyond paradigms." In terms of content, they can also be divided into several types. First, there are commentaries discussing netizens' direct experiences of the essence of literature. A netizen who delves deep into a story may be able to share his/her personal feelings and understanding of various aspects of a story, including characterization, representation of characters' life, plot, tension,

narrative style, and language use. Second, there are commentaries as netizens' casual and unrestrained discussions. They correspond to the fragmentary texts of criticism, which we just mentioned in this section. A commentary of this kind is usually short, with just a few sentences. Third, there are subversive commentaries that break rules and traditions. They assert values and morals that are unconventional and highly personal and deconstruct what has been viewed as sublime and authoritative. Netizens who write these types of commentaries tend to take the stance of postmodernists: they embrace typical postmodern ideas such as "depthlessness," "loss of historicity," "death of the subject," and "abolition of critical distance."²⁷ Their words are thus superficial and fragmentary. Sometimes they even use spoofing as a way to mock certain literary works and subvert their intended meanings.

As to the language style, there are a few rhetorical strategies to facilitate netizens' freedom of expression. First, netizens use a massive volume of "netspeak" in their critical commentaries. "Martian language" (*huoxing wen*) is a unique system of characters and symbols used by young netizens. These characters may look childish, fanciful, absurd, and hard to read, but they also make online communication more interesting and can help netizens better express their unique personalities. As a kind of youth subculture, "Martian language" also allows young netizens to have a sense of belonging in terms of culture and language.

Second, netizens use colloquial and vernacular expressions to express their views of certain works. Such a style makes netizens look approachable, unaffected, amiable, and even humorous. It is often seen in forums as dialogues between netizens.

Third, some netizens use vulgar words as a language strategy to convey their thoughts and feelings. As an embodiment of the wisdom in folk culture, vulgar words gradually become an important phenomenon as they are now widely used in cyberwriting and its criticism. Specifically, netizens use slang words and vulgar expressions to deconstruct the sublime, subvert the sacred, despise the authoritative, scorn the grand narrative, and dispel the idea of hierarchy. As I discussed in an article, netizens use vulgar words to "worship the commonplace while dragging down those who are above us, directly touch people's hearts while not hiding desires, straightforwardly express unique personalities instead of being pretentious and affected, freely spread personal feelings rather than use reason to strangle feelings."²⁸ This is true for both cyber literature and its criticism.

Fourth, netizens use "netspeak" widely in their critical commentaries, including popular buzzwords and language styles. Examples of buzzwords are "give power" (*geili*, meaning "excellent"), "you know" (*nidongde*, meaning "I cannot say it, but you know what I mean"), "the gods and horses are all floating clouds" (*shenma doushi fuyun*, meaning "everything will be alright"), "sell cute" (*maimeng*, meaning "perform as cute"), "spit complaints" (*tucao*, meaning "to complain"), and "you are cheating me, your dad" (*kengdie*, often meaning "you must be kidding"). As to language styles, examples include

“Taobao style” (taobao ti), “roaring style” (paoxiao ti), “harem style” (hougong ti), and “story for dummies” (xiaobai wen). The use of such netspeak makes netizens’ commentaries stylistically close to the literary texts under review and can well manifest the linguistic characteristics of today’s online literary criticism.

Important Events in the History of Cyber Literary Criticism

As people are more attached to the Internet as a new media platform and as cyber literature is inherently interactive, netizens’ critical views concerning cyber literature can draw a lot of public attention and become phenomenal incidents. The history of cyber literary criticism is filled with such incidents. From April 1991, when the first Chinese online magazine *China News Digest* (Huaxia wenzhai) was launched in North America, to December 2015, when the Cyber Literature Committee of China Writers Association (Zhongguo zuoxie wangluo wenxue weiyuanhui) was established, there were many incidents of cyber literature each year. Here are some examples:²⁹

- a. *The First Intimate Contact* (Diyici de qinmi jiechu) was hotly discussed online after its publication in 1998.
- b. *Outside the City* (Chengwai), the first short story to be read on cellphones, attracted a lot of attention and stirred up some debates after its publication in 2004.
- c. The first series of books on cyber literary studies—“Professors’ Discussions on Cyber Literature” (Wangluo wenxue jiaoshou luncong)—was published in 2004.
- d. Zhao Lihua’s poetry in “pearl flower style” (lihua ti) was spoofed by netizens in 2006.
- e. Professional critics questioned cyber literature and gave it negative reviews, such as Tao Dongfeng’s critique of fantasy novels in 2006.
- f. The famous work *Stories of the Ming Dynasty* (Mingchao naxie shi’er) caused some controversies after its publication in 2006.
- g. Han Han and Bai Ye had an intense debate as to whether the “post-80s generation” writers could write good literature, which happened in 2006.
- h. The “Review of Cyber Literature in the Past Ten Years” (Wangluo wenxue shinian pandian) was launched in 2008.
- i. The first seminar on cyber literature was held in Beijing in 2012.
- j. The academic journal *Internet Literature Review* (Wangluo wenxue pinglun) was established in 2016.

As we study such events’ historical significance, there are two things to be done. First, we should analyze their status and value in contemporary cultural ecology. Second, we need to clarify their significance to contemporary literary criticism.

We should put such events of cyber literature into the social and cultural context so as to have a better understanding of them: we need to consider the market economy, mass consumption, the rise of cultural studies, and the strong power of new media. The transition from planned economy to market economy, fully launched in the 1990s, not only liberates the productive forces but also greatly liberates people's minds and gives them new ways of thinking. It also allows them to enjoy more material wealth so that they can participate in mass consumption. Literature in the traditional sense, which used to be worshipped, has begun to lose its aura. Meanwhile, with the economic boom and increasing consumption of cultural commodities, people's daily life has become more filled with aesthetic experiences. As a result, the "marriage" between literature and the Internet not only leads to the rapid development of cyber literature but also gives netizens a perfect media platform to freely express themselves. As we can see, behind every event of cyber literature there is a collaboration between economy, culture, and digital media. In other words, these events are echoes of the spirit of the times: they are shaping and shaped by the contemporary cultural ecology at the same time. Because of these events, people get to know how vital and powerful cyber literature, cyberculture, and cyber media can be, and what role cyber literary criticism can play in contemporary cultural ecology.

Meanwhile, we need to consider how these events contribute to the development of contemporary literary criticism. These events demonstrate how literary criticism can be critical and personal, thus being able to redress and remedy the kind of traditional literary criticism that is too bland: some professional critics tend to rigidly follow fixed patterns to formulate their articles; they do not present a sharp critique of literary works, but write in a mild and pragmatic way; as they blindly praise some literary works, they try to maintain their good relationships with a circle of writers and critics as their friends. Critical articles of this kind are just like clouds drifting across the sky. They cast shadows on the ground but do not help the field of literature thrive. Sometimes they may even affect the growth of literature.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned events of cyber literature also have their negative aspects. For example, many of them just aim to hype up writers and works, so they stir up people's emotions without giving them a chance to do serious thinking. In this sense, they draw many "onlookers" but do not actually give a proper critique of literary works. Sometimes, such events are well packaged and pushed to the front by companies and cultural brokers to make profits. Thus, they can harm cyber literary criticism.

A Review of the Theoretical Discussions

As we study cyber literary criticism, we should not only observe its historical development but also evaluate and analyze the changing ideas of literary criticism that underlie such a historical process so as to establish a basis for further theorizing about the historical facts and make clear the significance of such a

history. Such changing ideas can be seen in various aspects of cyber literary criticism, which will be discussed respectively in the second five chapters of this book. The outlines of these chapters are as follows.

The Conceptual Transformation in Literary Criticism in the Internet Era

First, we need to examine how people's ideas of literature changed in the Internet era. According to the famous ancient literary scholar Liu Xie (ca. 465–520), “if it [i.e., literature] changes, it will endure; if it adapts itself to the changing tide, it will lack nothing.”³⁰ Cyber literary criticism inherits ideas of literature from traditional literary criticism in history and further develops such ideas—this signifies a spirit of change and creativity. As literary criticism must adapt to the development of literature, our observation should start from the “evolution” of ideas in the field of cyber literature. Cyber literature has a series of new characteristics: everyone now can write with a high degree of freedom to create works with multiple meanings; they do not follow fixed patterns and rules and tend to avoid the traditional literary idealism that writers must pursue “grand narrative,” “truth,” and “essence” in their writings; readers' reading experience has become fragmentary yet immersive, and it has become a mass consumption of cultural commodities. All these conditions make writers lose their subjectivity: they no longer make efforts to meticulously design their works; instead, they write more casually and carelessly. Meanwhile, the boundary between literature and non-literature begins to be blurred. Zhao Xianzhang discussed this issue in an article: “Cyberwriting has already entered into our daily life as a new form of writing activity. Such a new form fundamentally differs from traditional writing not only in its technical aspects but also in its ideological aspects. The traditional way of writing cannot compete with it, as its circulation is much faster and wider and its social influence is much stronger.”³¹

In the face of these changes, critics must adjust and adapt their ideas of literature. They need to review their positions in relation to the past and the future, so as to decide which ideas in the literary tradition should be kept, modified, suspended, transcended, or even subverted respectively. In recent years, many scholars have already made efforts to do research in this field.

Based on such an understanding of the changing ideas of literature, we also need to further clarify the cultural factors and the important notions of cyber literary criticism. First, we need to pay attention to a series of cultural factors, including media convergence, postmodern culture, aesthetic turn, and the creation of hypertexts. We also need to pay attention to a series of important notions related to cyber literary studies, such as “intersubjectivity,” “worship of the mediocre,” “the blasphemous tendency,” “the parody of classics,” “the use of vulgar words,” “the spread of feelings,” “spoofing,” “disenchantment,” “posts in forums,” and “virtual persona.” These factors and notions are the building blocks that we use to construct a conceptual system that guides our cyber literary criticism.³²