The Re-institutionalisation of Popular Fiction – the Internet and a New Model of Popular Fiction Prosumption in China

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Abstract

The rising popularity of internet literature is closely associated with a new model of production and consumption of popular literary works as the internet has become the platform for the new model.   Acknowledging this transformation, this paper aims at examining various changes in a digital Chinese literary field rendered by the internet. By adopting Bourdieu's notion of the literary field, this paper attempts to analyse the rise of the new digital literary field in China using Qidian Zhongwen Wang as a case study.   The example of this most commercially successful literary portal website demonstrates the shift in the roles of various agents in an online literary field.

Popular Literature from Mass Media to Social Media: the Notion of the Prosumption of Literature
 Part of the production and consumption of popular literature has today moved from mass media (printed works) to social media (the internet). Whereas one major attribute of the mass media is regarded as being "[…] a unidirectional relationship between a few trained professional media producers and many untrained media consumers […]" (Mandiberg, 2012: 1), social media reconfigure this into a multi-directional relationship flowing around producers and consumers. The boundary between producers and consumers has become blurred owing to the fact that consumers can now

produce and disseminate their own media contents. This profound change in the model of production and consumption is rendered into a model of 'prosumption', where production and consumption can be easily crossed over, or merged into one. This allows participants who used to be conventionally confined to the role of 'consumers' a chance to produce and publicise pieces of work of their own.

The notion of prosumption was initially proposed by Toffler (1981). He argued that prosumption was nothing new in a pre-industrialised society as people always produced the food they consumed. It was the Industrial Revolution that brought about a division between the notions of production and consumption. Since the advent of the internet, the tendency towards prosumption has been growing. Tapscott and Williams (2008: 127) defined the digital economy as "a new model of prosumption, where customers participate in the production of products in an active and ongoing way". Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) theorised prosumption following in Baudrillard's footsteps by linking the notion with capitalism, stating that online prosumption leads to a new form of capitalism in today's world. They argued that the earlier form of capitalism, of which producer and consumer capitalism were the main constituents, was characterised by prosumption. With the easy accessibility of the internet, prosumption capitalism will be the main trend. Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson (2012) revisited their previous argument that prosumption capitalism was a primordial idea and further extended the notion of prosumption, indicating that prosumption has great significance and diversity in the present day, with people spending their everyday lives as users. The notion of prosumption not only refers to the possibility of consumers changing their roles to become producers because of the participatory culture created by the internet, but also indicates customers' active participation – suggestion, feedback or criticism – being integrated into the process of production. The extensively practised notion of prosumption can be best exemplified by the online streaming video site YouTube and the social media of Facebook. Users produce and upload their works for sharing, while other users offer various types of feedback on and insights into the product. They both provide a platform on which amateurs can produce and share their media contents as general users.

Interestingly, the notion of prosumption has not been widely applied to the study of popular literature even though it has already infiltrated the realm of

popular literature. Because of the internet, the prosumption of popular literature is a global phenomenon. Fanfiction.net, based in North America and claiming to be the largest fan fiction site in the world, set up a literary sphere where netizens can post their literary works by appropriating their favourite characters from mass-media contexts (such as the recent vampire phenomenon *Twilight Saga* series or the Japanese anime *Naruto*). Each piece of work comes with plenty of feedback and suggestions from readers. By doing this, netizens share their amateur creations with other fans. On Amazon, a new notion of 'CreateSpace' is provided for self-publication. Users can register an account, beginning their journey of publication to target potential readership for a royalty fee. In Japan, mobile phone users are encouraged to participate in the creation of *keitai shousetsu* (mobile phone fiction) by uploading their works to a designated server for public sharing over mobile phones as the platform (Erban 2009).

 In China, the notion of the prosumption of popular literature is also widely practised, as more netizens engage in producing and sharing their own literary works, while others are enthusiastic about giving feedback and suggestions about those literary works. Being the world's largest wired nation, the number of netizens in China who participate in internet literature has reached 248.37 million, and internet literature was the eleventh most popular online activity up to June 2013 (CNNIC, 2013: 28). The prosumption of popular literature has been commercially institutionalised, leading to a rather exclusive Chinese online commercial model for the prosumption of popular literature. In this article, I shall attempt to examine the new commercial model of the online prosumption of popular fiction in China. Using Qidian Zhongwen Wang (Qidian Chinese Net), arguably the most popular literary portal website in China,[1] as a case study, I shall examine the notion of agents and institutions – two crucial elements in Bourdieu's literary field – to reveal the way in which and the extent to which overall literary practice on the internet has been reconfigured. The core of the examination will be the notion of literary text. Whereas in a paper-based publishing business authors, editors, publishers and printers are directly involved in the production of a literary text, with booksellers and readers placed at the receiving end as the end-users, in the new model authors and readers have been centralised into the heart of the production of

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[1] Qidian indicates that their current market penetration rate in China has reached 80%. <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/ads/default.html> [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

a literary text, with publishers, editors and printers edged out and decentralised. Booksellers, now playing a minimal role in terms of significance in distributing literary commodities, remain as receivers at the end of the line. The centralisation of authorship and readership into the core of production and the decentralisation of other agents and institutions will be discussed consecutively in the following sections.[1]

The notion of prosumption has been previously explicated as consumers producing products and also offering feedback and suggestions which are to be incorporated in the process of production. In this article, however, I shall use the term 'user' rather than 'prosumer' to refer to general netizens who are engaged in popular internet literature, because the implication of a user in an online context usually includes prosumption behaviour to a certain extent. Any user is given access to the potential of full prosumption; however, there are some who choose to practise the notion of prosumption to a lesser extent whereas others prefer to put it into practice to the fullest. There are also users who are not at all interested in active participation in production. For this reason, I have decided to use the term 'user' in the following text to include various groups of users who practise prosumption to different extents. In addition, when I use the terms 'prosumption' or 'prosumerism', I do not intend to go so far as to claim that the notion of prosumption is being practised to its fullest extent. Many online readers still play the role of a traditional reader – they neither intend to become authors nor do they demonstrate proactivity towards the production process. Nonetheless, I prefer to use the terms 'prosumption' and 'prosumerism' to show the potential, possibility and relative ease of a user practising the notion owing to the existence of the internet, which forms a sharp contrast to printed literature, where production and consumption are not so easily interchangeable.

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[1] As previously mentioned, prosumption is a global phenomenon. However, this paper will focus on the prosumption of popular literature in China. While I recognise the significance of a comparison between different prosumption models of popular literature across the globe, a comparative study would divert the focus of this paper. By choosing Qidian as a case study, I aim to analyse the prosumption model of popular literature in present-day China. Arguably, there are a number of similar portal websites. However, Qidian is the most commercially successful of its kind and holds the largest number of works. Therefore, I believe that Qidian best reflects the prosumption model of popular literature in today's China.

Bourdieu and the Literary Field

Bourdieu's literary field has been widely examined and discussed in Western academia. His notion of field, much of which was inherited from Marxism, with power struggle being a key element, refers to a system that is internally structured by social agents, their position, and their position-taking in relation to power. It was defined by Dubois (2000: 89) as "[…] a structured site of relations as well as a dynamic competitive space, and this structuralization generates an ensemble of interdependently related positions […]". Seeing fields as areas where struggle to control valuable resources takes place, Bourdieu believes that no position within a field is equal to another, and that various dominant and subordinate positions come with different types and amounts of capital. Thus, in a field, the aim of position-taking, which is a struggle for positions, is to acquire different types and amounts of capital, such as economic, political or symbolic capital, possessed by the field. The fact that social agents intend to control the capital objectifies the competitive struggles in a field where each type of capital is being pursued.

Bourdieu bases his discussion of the literary field on the nineteenth-century French literary field, dividing writers into two groups: best-selling writers and autonomous writers. Whereas the former group gained commercial success (economic capital) with relatively less symbolic capital, the latter group tended to seek recognition by their peers, rather than commercial success, for the wider acceptance of their works. In this regard, the latter group did not have much economic capital but they received, relatively speaking, much more symbolic capital. Bourdieu's initial notion of various types of capital applying to writers in a literary field can arguably be applied when examining various literary agents. All literary agents – be they authors, publishers, editors or readers – are going along a similar path. Having once assumed the position of a literary agent, an individual, a group or an institution is given access to capital of different kinds. For example, a best-selling author, such as Dan Brown, can have access to substantial economic capital. A prestigious publishing house, such as Cambridge University Press, can gain significant symbolic capital. The general readership does not attract much capital. Because of the different forms of capital, various literary agents are vying for various types of capital to establish their power in the field.

From a Printed Literary Field to an Online Literary Field

In Western European countries, a printed literary field can be divided into material production (authors, literary agents, publishers), distribution (bookshops, book clubs, public libraries) and reception (symbolic production such as criticism, the reading public) (Hocks, 1999: 17). In Republican China, authors, most of whom came from well-educated backgrounds, assumed multiple roles in the material production by taking up different positions, whereas the reading public was placed at the receiving end without getting involved in either material or symbolic production (*ibid.*: 61-78). After 1949, the literary field in China was somewhat less market-driven. Instead, it was more policy-driven and state-dominated. In the context of the literary field in Communist China, where state-run publication was the norm, playing a role in the material and symbolic production process involved conforming to the notion of political and ideological correctness. Market-driven popular literature was to a great extent pushed to the margins.

In the sphere of contemporary online Chinese popular literature, where authors and readers possess unprecedented autonomy,[2] Bourdieu's literary field is restructured to reflect the new online literary phenomenon, in the sense that agents and institutions have been repositioned. While Bourdieu emphasises the symbolic capital in a literary field, describing "[…] the literary world as 'the economic world reversed' and symbolic capital […] as the opposite of economic capital" (Hockx, 2011: 59), Hockx (*ibid.*: 60) argues that "[o]ne aspect of Bourdieu's reversed economy never gained ground in modern China", since the notion of receiving "[…] greater recognition (symbolic capital) is alien to the modern Chinese writer" because "[v]irtually all modern Chinese writers write fast and publish much. Distinction is achieved through frequent interaction with the readership". In other words, the popular literary works produced and consumed for the mass and by the mass in the Chinese online sphere are largely market-driven.

With the internet serving as the platform for the production and consumption of literary commodities, the power dynamics among the various literary agents have undergone several major and dramatic changes. In terms of material production, authors can publish almost anything online without

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[2] The unprecedented autonomy does not mean that it is censor-free. China is well known for its heavy censorship online. The term 'autonomy' is used in a relative sense as a contrast to the previously state-controlled publications in China before the 1980s (Hockx, 2011: 58-62).

consulting editors. Editors have been disempowered, since they hardly have any say on the formation of a literary commodity. On the other hand, readers have a direct impact on this formation as a result of their symbolic production, such as feedback and suggestions. Readers' suggestions and feedback can, to a certain extent, dictate the formation of a literary commodity when it is presented online in a serialised form. Moreover, readers can assume the position of an author much more easily than they could during the Republican and Communist eras in a printed literary field. As for distribution, institutions such as bookshops and libraries are facing the challenge of competing with the convenience of reading online or on a portable device such as a tablet PC or an e-reader. As far as reception is concerned, readers are given equal access to resources in an online literary field only if they are willing to write and publish in a designated virtual space. In other words, authors and readers have been centralised as the core of prosumption, whereas other agents and institutions have been decentralised to the periphery of the formation of a literary commodity.

In the case of Qidian Zhongwen Wang (Qidian Chinese Net; hereafter Qidian),[3] the above-mentioned features demonstrating the centralisation and the decentralisation are clearly visible. Those features will be elaborated and illustrated in the following sections. It is true that applying Bourdieu's notion of the literary field to the exploration of modern Chinese literature does cause debates.[4] Nonetheless, I shall still use Bourdieu as the theoretical framework for this paper because the notion of a literary field helps in addressing the drastic change in the Chinese online literary sphere for popular literature.

Qidian Zhongwen Wang: a New Model of Prosumption of Literary Commodities in China

Qidian is a fully-fledged and frequently replicated commercial model that has emerged in China to encourage the prosumption of popular literature.[5] Qidian

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[3] The homepage is <www.qidian.com>.

[4] Some scholars of modern Chinese literature express their doubts about the extent to which Bourdieu's notion can be applied to modern Chinese literature. See Lee (2001) and Liu (2003).

[5] At <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/ads/default.html>, Qidian specifies that they have 200,000 contracted authors, with more than 30 million registered members [Last accessed: 31 August 2013]. Looking at the proportion of authors to readers, the notion of prosumption is not that obvious. Nevertheless, I would like to emphasise the fact that when the notion of

has several allied websites (such as Yanqing Xiaoshuo Ba [Romance Fiction Bar], Hongxiu Tianxian [Perfumed Red Sleeves] and Xiaoshuo Yuedu Wang (Read Novel Net), all together taking a large market share of internet literature. Qidian commenced in 2001 as a small-scale fan club sharing works of fantasy fiction, and is now run by an international enterprise called Shengda Zaixian (Shanda Online, hereafter Shanda) based in Shanghai.[6] All of Qidian's allied websites are heavily popular-literature-oriented. In this regard, the mass readership is Qidian's target group.

Initially, when it started as a fantasy fiction fan club, Qidian mainly attracted a young male readership. In November 2009, Qidian launched a new literary portal website, Qidian Nüsheng Wang (Qidian Female Net), on popular romance, mainly targeting a young female readership.[7] In November 2010, Qidian launched another new portal website known as Qidian Wenxue Wang (Qidian Literary Net), with the specific intention of encouraging more serious literary works.[8] On these websites, users are provided with multi-functional, interactive services to make prosumption relatively easy (*see* Illustration 1). The model has generated an unbeatable profit, with many other literary portal websites becoming their allied partners.[9]

Illustration 1: Homepage of Qidian Chinese Net *(at the top is a list of interactive functions; slightly lower down is a list of fiction genres)*

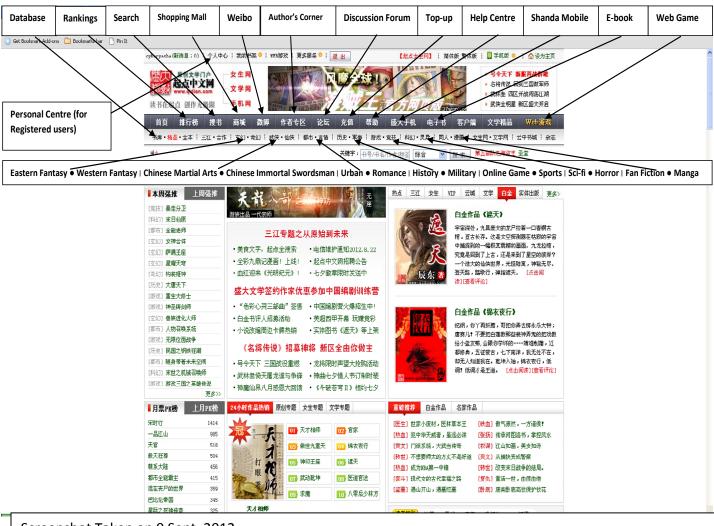'prosumption' is used, I intend to point more to the potential and possibility of users performing prosumption than to their actual performance.

[6] See <http://www.qidian.com/HelpCenter/default.aspx?type=0&categoryid=28&id=32> [Last accessed: 09 March 2013].

[7] <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/aboutus.aspx> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. Qidian Female Net was formerly a channel affiliated to Qidian. However, owing to its massive popularity among female readers, the Qidian female channel was upgraded into a literary portal website in its own right.

[8] This is an interesting concept that Qidian intends to incorporate, because by using the phrase *wenxue* (literature), Qidian seems to imply that they know that the works of fiction they carry are far from being regarded as real literary works. It seems that the most obvious difference between works on Qidian Zhongwen Wang and Qidian Wenxue Wang is that the former are more fantasy-oriented, whereas the latter are more realism-oriented. See: <http://www.qidian.com/News/ShowNews.aspx?newsid=1016883>
[Last accessed: 02 Sept. 2013].

[9] For the list of the websites, please see the bottom of the page at <http://www.qidian.com/Default.aspx> [Last accessed: 02 Sept. 2013].

| Database | Rankings | Search | Shopping Mall | Weibo | Author's Corner | Discussion Forum | Top-up | Help Centre | Shanda Mobile | E-book | Web Game |

Personal Centre (for Registered users)

Eastern Fantasy • Western Fantasy | Chinese Martial Arts • Chinese Immortal Swordsman | Urban • Romance | History • Military | Online Game • Sports | Sci-fi • Horror | Fan Fiction • Manga

Screenshot Taken on 9 Sept. 2012

The Repositioning of Agents in the Online Chinese Literary Sphere: the Centralisation of Users to the Core of Text Production and the Decentralisation of Mediators

Users: A Virtual Space of One's Own[10]

Qidian, as well as many other literary portal websites (or weblogs), offers a space for users to create and publish their works of fiction. The gradually disappearing borderline between authorship and readership leads to the rise of users who assume various roles in the core production process. Internet users put the notion of prosumption into practice to different extents, and it cannot be denied that they include 'passive' users who only browse and read. For the purposes of this discussion, I shall analyse the different roles assumed by users from the basic notion of authorship and readership to show the way in which they integrate into the core of production, and the extent to which authors and readers overlap, leading to prosumption, because of the existence of the internet. However, with regard to the use of the terms 'author', 'reader' and 'member' in the following text, I would like to emphasise that these three terms are used in a context where the practice of prosumption is becoming the norm and where the borderline between authorship and readership is becoming blurred.

From Online Users to Users in a Virtual Literary Sphere - (Active) Readership[11]

In a commercial printing market, readers are seen as a major source of profit; luring readers to pay for the literary products is therefore strongly encouraged. Nonetheless, readers in the online literary Chinese cyberspace are also given unprecedented opportunities to be involved in editorship and marketing, enabling them to interact with authors, literary texts and other

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[10] The following analysis of what functions a user can perform and the extent to which they can perform various functions on Qidian is based on my own experience as a registered member.

[11] There are readers who do nothing else but consume literary works online. Therefore, I intend to divide readers into 'passive readers' and 'active readers'. Active readership refers to those who are active in fully exploring the interactive features on Qidian, because the right to use some of the important interactive features is not simply given out to any reader; it has to be 'earned'. The 'earning' process will be elucidated later in the article. In this article, whenever the terms 'readers' or 'readership' are used, they refer to the notion of active readers/readership unless indicated otherwise.

readers. If a reader is deeply interested in being an author, he/she can simply apply to become one with Qidian[12] in order to engage in prosumption to a greater extent.
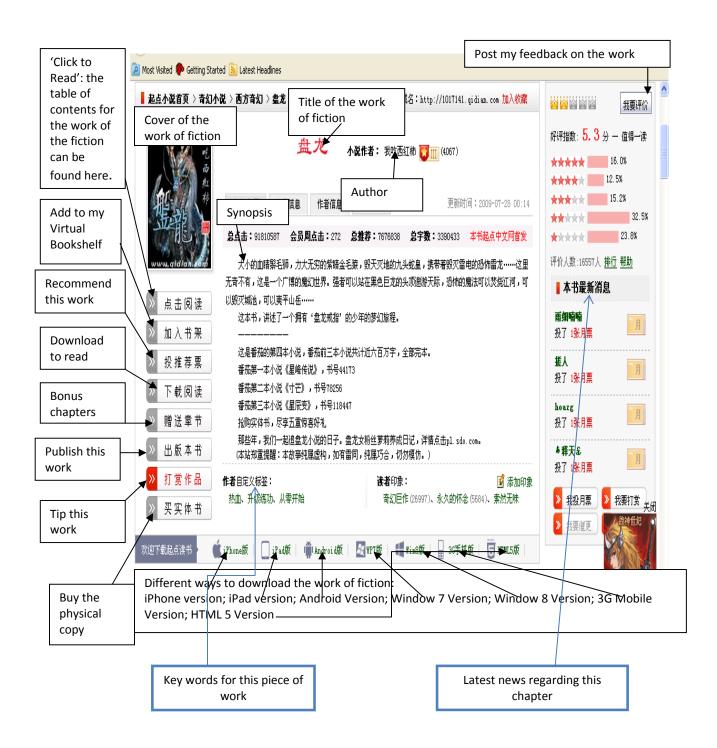
In terms of profit-generation, Qidian has designed a new pay-to-read scheme so that readers can decide the extent to which they want to be involved in the consumption of various literary products. The relationship between the profit-generating target of Qidian and the potential of being a user on Qidian has become reciprocal, in the sense that the more actively a reader engages with the scheme, the greater the variety of functions he/she is able to access.
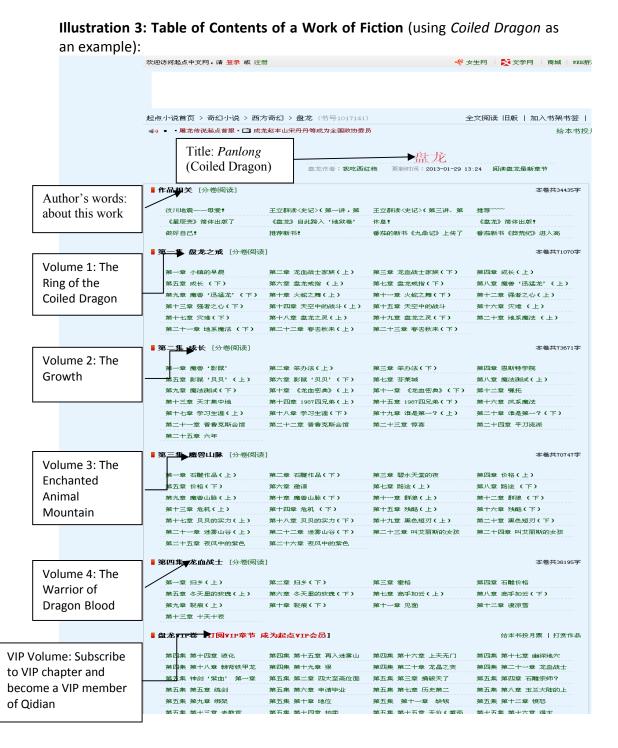
Someone visiting Qidian for the first time can choose any '*gongzhong zhangjie*' (public chapters, meaning non-VIP chapters; hereafter non-VIP chapters) to consume, but only for a limited number of chapters. If users are interested in consuming more chapters, they are encouraged to register an account for free with Qidian to receive general membership. General membership is the first step into using a number of interactive features, which helps to produce prosumption. The registered account is known as a 'Shengda *tongxin zheng*' (Shanda Pass). With this pass, not only can a general member consume more non-VIP chapters for free, but he/she can also wander from Qidian to other literary portal websites affiliated to the Shengda Online enterprise to enjoy a service similar to that which they receive on Qidian.

Usually the first few volumes (each volume carries roughly ten to thirty chapters, but this is not always the case) of each work of fiction are labelled non-VIP chapters and they can be accessed for free by general members. Later volumes only become accessible when general members pay a specific rate per thousand words. They can obtain information on this by visiting a 'book cover section' (see Illustration 2). Not only can general members receive more information about a work of fiction, but they will also find a link on the 'book cover' page for a function called '*dianji yuedu*') (Click-to-Read), which will direct them to a Table of Contents, where they can get a clear idea of the chapters for which a reading fee applies (see Illustration 3).

Illustration 2: The 'Cover' of a Work of Fiction and the Interactive Functions for Readers

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[12] The way in which readers move towards becoming authors will be discussed in the second part of the article.

'Click to Read': the table of contents for the work of the fiction can be found here.

Add to my Virtual Bookshelf

Recommend this work

Download to read

Bonus chapters

Publish this work

Tip this work

Buy the physical copy

Cover of the work of fiction

Title of the work of fiction

Synopsis

Author

Post my feedback on the work

Different ways to download the work of fiction: iPhone version; iPad version; Android Version; Window 7 Version; Window 8 Version; 3G Mobile Version; HTML 5 Version

Key words for this piece of work

Latest news regarding this chapter

Illustration 3: Table of Contents of a Work of Fiction (using *Coiled Dragon* as an example):

If a member is strongly attracted by the free chapters and would like to continue reading, the charge will apply. Once a member decides to continue reading, he/she has three options: (1) remaining a general member; (2) being upgraded to a 'Primary VIP', or (3) being upgraded to an 'Advanced VIP'. Different status is attached to different reading fees. For a general member, the reading fee is 0.005 RMB per thousand words; for Primary VIPs, it is 0.003 RMB per thousand words, and for Advanced VIPs it is 0.002 RMB per thousand words.[13] Topping up a registered account is easy, and can be done by mobile phone, an ATM machine, Paypal, or just over the internet by using a credit card.[14] The top-up value is transformed into Qidian virtual currency; at the time of writing (October 2013) the exchange rate stands at 0.01 RMB to one unit of Qidian currency. Qidain has come up with a variety of methods to encourage members to upgrade their membership status.[15]

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[13] More details regarding VIP status can be found on the Qidian website at <http://www.qidian.com/Help/vipshenqin.aspx> [Last accessed: 09 March 2013]. Qidian is extremely dynamic in terms of commercialisation. As a result, there are always new features being introduced which have not been formally updated in Qidian's membership section. For instance, I came across a new stratification of membership (general user; general member; advanced member; primary VIP, and advanced VIP). The five types of membership are listed in the page linked to the 'subscription to the VIP chapters' of a newly popular work of fiction called *Dazhuzai* (Grand Master) at <http://vipreader.qidian.com/BookReader BuyVIPChapterList.aspx?BookId=2750457> [Last accessed: 29 August 2013]. This work is unfinished and new chapters come out in serialised form. On this page, a cross-table is given to show the different reading rates for different types of membership. The more advanced the membership, the cheaper the reading rate is. When I visited other pages linked to works of fiction which were published some time ago, such as *Panlong* (Coiled Dragon), the five types of membership were not there. Therefore, I assume that the five types of membership have been recently added and that it will take some time for the information to be officially updated on Qidian's help centre section. For this paper, I still treat the information I received from Qidian's help centre as definitive.

[14] It is worth noting that users around the world can top up using various methods (for example, Qidian has set up a top-up zone only accepting New Taiwan Dollars). This suggests that Qidian, although targeting Chinese netizens, also aims at netizens in the Greater China Region. Those who live outside the Greater Chinese area can purchase Qidian currency using a credit card. Hongxiu Tianxian (Perfumed Red Sleeves), one of the literary portal websites affiliated to Qidian, also accepts Paypal as one of the payment methods.

[15] It is only necessary to top up 50 RMB to obtain primary VIP membership, but acquiring advanced VIP membership will need top-ups amounting to 3,650 RMB within twelve months. <http://www.qidian.com/Help/vipshenqin.aspx> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

Apart from the top-up system, which obviously is the ultimate goal of Qidian because of the profit-generating purpose of the portal website, Qidian has also designed a system to generate a sense of achievement among members, regardless of their level of membership. The system is known as 'Qidian *jingyan zhi*' (Qidian Experience Value). Experience value is offered to any member in the form of 'points' based on various factors, such as how regularly a member logs into his/her Qidian account, how long the member stays on Qidian, how frequently the member participates in the feedback-giving scheme, the extent to which a member takes part in the various activities that Qidian offers, and how willing a member is to take over the responsibility of helping to manage a discussion forum for Qidian.[16] There are a total of fifty levels in the Experience Value system. Some activities through which members can earn Experience Value Points simply expect members to show the extent to which they devote themselves to Qidian; other activities require members to pay a small fee. Overall, what Qidian has come up with is a system which will not only generate profit but also establish a sense of achievement among readers by outsourcing some responsibilities to them.

Having obtained membership (either general or VIP), a member is allowed to move back and forth freely between a public literary space (such as the portal website homepage displaying the main menu, see Illustration 1) and a more private sphere (a designated virtual space of one's own with membership, see Illustration 4). The notion of a virtual private space is similar to that of a social networking website such as Facebook, where a registered member is allocated a private space on the platform to build a personal community for socialising online. In this private space, the member, who can be a potential user, is offered various interactive features to individualise his/her private space. This is where members can maximise their experience by using a number of interactive features (some of them require extra payment depending on membership status). Generally speaking, a member can conduct two types of activity: literature-related activities and non-literature related activities.[17]

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[16] For more circumstances in which a member can be rewarded with points, see <http://www.qidian.com/HelpCenter/default.aspx?type=0&categoryid=37> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[17] There are a number of non-literature-oriented features such as game playing and merchandise exchanging or purchasing, which constitute the grand picture of Qidian's

Literature-related activities are more complex than the other type, which consist mainly of game playing, online shopping, online socialisation and networking.

To use literature-related interactive features (some of them request a small fee depending on membership status) to the fullest extent, in his/her space a member is given unprecedented opportunities to be involved in the process of literary consumption and production. Generally speaking, members can do the following: browse and search for preferred literary texts via Qidian's rapidly growing database; vote for their preferred works of literature (this function requires Qidian currency);[18] compose literary criticism or (principally) offer suggestions and feedback on works already published on Qidian; order their virtual bookshelf and library according to their favourite works on Qidian; share their reading habits by organising a book or reader's club (a club of any other kind is also welcome), and start any topic for public discussion, ranging from gossip concerning authorship to topics of national interest. Last but not least, a member can apply to become an author in his/her personal space. All of these features can be easily managed on one's Qidian account.

The interactive literary features enable members to move efficiently between different roles, such as those of readers, editors or even authors, which is part of the notion of prosumption. The Qidian homepage offers a simplified flowchart of five steps explaining how to join the readership: '*zhuce – kanshu – chongzhi – shengjiwei* VIP *– dingyue*' (Registration – Read – Top-up – Upgrade to VIP – Subscription). However, in the role of a reader, a member can do much more than the steps illustrated on the simple flowchart. While it is clear that a member can search for and consume his/her preferred text, which comes out in serial format or as a complete piece, he/she can also oversee the process of production by actively participating in criticism, suggestions and feedback, all of which will be centralised in a section entitled '*pingba*' (Cyber

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business model of marketing and profit generation. These features will be briefly discussed in the section about the changed role of a publisher.

[18] There are several different types of ranking on Qidian that determine the level of popularity. For example, at the bottom of Illustration 1, there is the word '*guan*' (champion). In this context, 'champion' refers to the work of fiction which has been the best-seller in the past 24 hours. Even though the notion of 'best-seller' is not specified, I assume that it indicates the subscription rate of a work of fiction during the last 24 hours. Qidian has diverse approaches to achieving its goal of promoting the notion of the 'popularity' of a work of fiction and getting users involved.

Salon of Criticism and Feedback, hereafter Cyber Salon, see Illustration 5).[19] The function of Cyber Salon not only enables members as readers to interact directly with authors, but also facilitates the outsourcing of editorship to readers.

Illustration 4: The Designated Private Space with a Qidian Account

Screenshot taken on 10 March 2013

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[19] Cyber Salon is located at <http://pingba.qidian.com>. Qidian encourages readers to offer public opinions about literary works. Cyber Salon is one of the major menu functions manifested on the Qidian homepage. The slogan '*wupinglun, budushu*' (No Criticism, No Reading) is displayed on the Cyber Salon section to stimulate more discussions from the readers involved. This is a scheme by which Qidian outsources the editorship workload to readers.

Nonetheless, members are not simply given the opportunity to switch easily into other roles; they have to earn it. The setup of Cyber Salon epitomises the notion. Newly registered members cannot post an opinion by simply participating in Cyber Salon; they can only do so either by purchasing top-up credits or by having successfully obtained 500 points worth of Qidian Experience Value. Some members prefer to go for both systems, while others decide to go for either top-up or earning Qidian Experience Value. In this regard, members are given considerable freedom to decide how they want to be engaged with Qidian. Whereas top-up is a more straightforward way to show support for Qidian, members can be awarded Qidian Value points by engaging in various designated activities, such as staying on the Qidian webpage for a particular length of time, logging into their accounts on a regular basis, and various other options.[20] These methods are designed to show how willing a member is to take part in the various activities which Qidian offers. The notion of Qidian Experience Value is similar to the notion of '*shengji*' (On to the Next Stage), which a player encounters in game playing. The more Value a member earns, the higher the rank to which he/she can be promoted to enjoy more of the resources that Qidian provides.

If a member has obtained sufficient Qidian Experience Value points or has purchased enough credits, the extent to which he/she can put into practice the notion of 'user' is rapidly augmented. This is when he or she can become part of Cyber Salon and interact directly with authors and readers. Upon finishing a selected piece of work on Qidian, a member is invited to click on the '*canyu benshu taolun*' (Participate in Discussion of This Book) icon at the bottom of the page which brings up the literary text (or a reader can do this in his/her private space, see Illustration 4), and then redirects the member to Cyber Salon to publicise his/her opinion on the message board allocated to the specific popular work (*see* Illustration 5).

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[20] For example, one thing a member can do to earn points is to stay longer than ten minutes on Qidian and thus claim five points of Qidian Experience Value. Users can claim up to twenty points per day if they stay on for at least one hour. This is only one of the many ways to earn Qidian Experience Value. For more details regarding Qidian's 'Experience Value' earning scheme, see <http://www.qidian.com/HelpCenter/
default.aspx?type=0&categoryid=114&parented=20> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

Illustration 5: '*Pingba*' (Cybersalon) (using *Coiled Dragon* as an example)

Cyber Salon is proving to be a popular community where readers and authors can interact directly, which helps to lessen the editorship task for/of Qidian. Topics ranging from typographical mistakes to severe criticism of the whole work are allowed for open debate and discussion unless a public objection is made, requesting the intervention of the webmaster. Readers can freely express their opinions about the work to be heard by authors. On the one hand, authors have the autonomy to decide whether they will react to the public opinion expressed on Cyber Salon; on the other hand, it can be said that readers on the internet have largely taken over the role of editors, whose role has been minimised[21], to the point where the authorship cannot ignore readers' opinions.

Given the significance of the opinions and the active participation of readers,[22] authors usually tend to pay attention to the overall reaction of readers. After all, the attention given by readers is the main concern of an author who is competing for popularity with other authors across the portal website. In this regard, part of the task of online editorship has been outsourced to readers, providing more direct feedback to authors, who are obviously eager to know readers' consumption preferences. Thus, a development of the reader from being a 'passive' reader who consumes literary products to being an 'active' reader who actively participates the formation of literary products through the outsourcing of the task of

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[21] In spite of the fact that readers can interact and communicate with authors over the internet, this does not mean that readers comprehensively take over the role of editors. That is why I emphasise the point that the responsibility of editorship has been 'largely' taken over by readers. The way in which and the extent to which the role of editors has been minimised will be examined in the section on mediators.

[22] Popular works of fiction and the discussion surrounding the works epitomise the active influence of the readership opinions being shared on Qidian. *Fanren Xianxiu Zhuan* (From Everyman to Demigod), one of the most popular works of fiction on Qidian, has given rise to 545,468 relevant topics for discussion. The total number of messages posted on this discussion forum reached 4,693,347. <http://forum.qidian.com/bookforumnew.aspx?BookId=107580> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. Another extremely popular work of fiction, *Panlong* (Coiled Dragon), has generated 223,080 topics concerning the work, with the total number of messages amounting to 1,631,539. <http://forum.qidian.com/bookforumnew.aspx?BookId=1017141> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. Both authors make good use of the forum to communicate directly with their readers. The authors' participation always leads to voluminous amounts of replies to the message initially posted.

editorship can be observed, and this is helping to shape literary prosumerism in the online Chinese literary sphere.

Authorship

Apart from online activities involving criticism, feedback and other social networking behaviour, Qidian members can apply to become authors. Those who compose internet literature are also known as '*xieshou*' (writing hands). This term suggests that many writers have a high volume of output, which does not necessarily indicate a high quality of literary text. The standard or quality of writing expected from an author is not necessarily lower, but is definitely looser than in traditional paper-based publishing. Anyone who is interested in telling a story simply needs to start the online application, which is advertised on the Qidian homepage as an easy four-step process: '*shenqing zuozhe – fabiao zuopin – shenqing qianyue – huode gaochou*' (Applying to become an author – Publishing one's original work of creation – Applying and agreeing to sign a contract with Qidian – Being Rewarded with Author Payment and Royalties). In reality, the initial two stages are a lot easier than the latter two stages.

To set out on the path towards authorship, a member needs only to send an application to join authorship to the webmaster. Afterwards, the 'author's corner', already present in each member's private space, will be activated (see Illustration 4). The applicant is required to upload a writing sample – the first few chapters of his/her work consisting of a maximum of 5,000 words – within forty-eight hours (the 'corner' will be deactivated either when no activity in it is detected within forty-five days following the activation, or when the quality of the work submitted is too low to be granted the opportunity for publication).[23] The applicant will receive notification of whether or not the work will be published. The review of the 5,000-word sample is conducted by Qidian editors. Once authorship is granted, Qidian editors virtually withdraw from supervising the new author's work, presumably because of understaffing, and partially owing to the marketing strategy of allowing authors to tell their

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[23] There are no clear statistics about the 'passing rate' from readers to authors. However, it can be assumed that the passing rate could be high given the rapidly growing number of literary works published on Qidian.

stories, unless special circumstances arise.[24] This overseeing job will be continued by fervent readers, whose public opinions flowing into Cyber Salon help to scrutinise all aspects of the ongoing process of text production.

The granting of authorship means that autonomy is placed mainly in the hands of authors. The only counterbalance is generated from their readers' participation. Editors and publishers will neither approach an author to rush the appearance of the next chapter (which used to be part of an editor's job description), nor will they halt the serialisation (again, unless special circumstances arise). This job of pushing forward new chapters has been largely outsourced to readers.[25]

In the face of a large amount of feedback and numerous suggestions, authors are also given full autonomy to manage the readers' responses. In other words, once authorship is granted to a member, he/she is also granted the task of managing the discussion forum/Cyber Salon section of the work.[26] Authors can log into their accounts to manage all the responses, many of which might prove to be valuable because readers tend to express directly

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[24] There are generally two circumstances in which editors will presumably resume their role of reviewing a text: one is when a public concern is raised through peer censorship such as issues of plagiarism or guideline-breaching regarding a piece (or a section) of work being reported; the other circumstance is when an author makes a request to sign a contract with Qidian. In this case, editors will review his/her written works, ensuring that the works meet specific writing standards before a contract is signed. Other than these two circumstances, editors generally assume a more passive role.

[25] There is no specific rule to indicate how frequently an author is expected to renew his/her works. Authors are, however, fully aware that the more frequently a piece of work is renewed, the more likely it is that readers will be attracted to it. To outsource the job of pushing forward new chapters from authors and editors to readers, Qidian has devised a system called '*gengxin piao*' (Renewal Ballot). Anyone who is not satisfied with the renewal speed of a serialised work can use the Renewal Ballot system to urge the author to produce new chapters. One ballot represents the demand for a 3,000 word renewal, and each reader can cast four ballots at most. Each ballot will cost 100 units of Qidian virtual currency. If the author adds the number of words that readers demand within 24 hours, he/she will be rewarded with credits into his/her account in proportion to the ballots submitted asking for the renewal. Otherwise the renewal ballot will be returned to the readers for them to use on future occasions. See <http://big5.qidian.com/help/gengxin.aspx> [Last accessed: 09 March 2013].

[26]   See <http://www.qidian.com/HelpCenter/default.aspx?type=0&categoryid=61&parentid=59> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

what they want to read. If an author finds the management task too much, he/she can recruit enthusiastic readers as assistant managers. Any reader who has earned at least 500 points of Qidian Experience Value can apply for the role of assistant manager, maintaining and overseeing the Cyber Salon section for a specific work. In this regard, Qidian once more outsources editorship to both authors and readers, creating an online environment where readers and authors can interact directly with each other.

Notwithstanding the pressure from readers, authors are entirely in control of their writing process and can choose to revise, to delete any chapters, or even to stop serialisation at any time. In addition, authors are allowed to publish as many works of fiction as possible simultaneously.[27] Moreover, authors have the absolute autonomy to decide which genre/subgenre their works will be categorised under. Once a work has been categorised, the author is strongly advised that the work's category should remain unchanged.[28] Finally, authors are marketers as well. On publishing, authors must put together a synopsis of their work (not more than 400 words, see Illustration 3 for the 'cover' of an internet work of fiction), carefully providing several key words highly relevant to the work for search purposes. Authors normally know that this is the key to self-promotion/self-marketing, so the plot synopsis and the key words must be eye-catching and directed straight at the basic desires of readers in order to attract their attention.

Even though authors are granted a high degree of autonomy, this does not necessarily mean that they are rewarded with high payment. Authors appear to be paid according to the number of words they publish on Qidian, along with the royalties from copyrights and future franchises.[29] Nevertheless, it is

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[27] Qidian has a rule requiring that there should be a difference between the word count of two works by the same author. An author can publish as many literary works as he/she wishes only if the difference between the word count of each work is at least 20,000 words. <http://www.qidian.com/Help/tougao.aspx> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[28] More details regarding genre/subgenre categorisation, key word selection, upload of plot synopsis and other features of an author's corner can be found at <http://www.qidian.com/Help/zuoping.aspx#管理> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[29] Only extremely popular works of fiction will be given the opportunity to receive royalties from paper-based publication and franchise. Qidian indicates that the total number of works of fiction being released into book form is around 40. This number was initially accessed on 10 December 2010, and it has not been updated since then; see <http://www.qidian.com/Help/qianyue.aspx> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. Therefore, we

not as easy to become an author with Qidian as indicated on the 1-2-3-4 flowchart. To receive payment from Qidian, authors need to choose whether or not to operate on a contract basis with Qidian. Only authors whose works amount to at least 100,000 words and are exclusively published on Qidian will be considered for a contract. Even so, signing a contract does not guarantee a profitable income.[30] The payment made to authors seems to be low. The income relies heavily on several factors: (1) how many words an author produces; (2) the number of readers (both general members and VIPs) who are willing to pay to read a VIP chapter – a proportion of the reading fee per thousand words goes to the author; (3) how willing readers are to 'tip' an author for a job nicely done[31] – on Qidian a public broadcasting system placed in the top left corner of the Qidian screen will regularly show how much a reader tips his/her favourite author for a satisfying job.[32]

The relationship between authors and readers, two crucial agents (the former as the original literary text provider and the latter as the ultimate consumer of the literary commodity) in a digital literary field, has been modified by a number of features precipitated by the gravitation of the internet towards

can assume that the number 40 does not necessarily reflect the current situation. Despite lacking the latest number of works being franchised into paper-based publications, however, we can still safely assume that the number must be rather low in proportion to the actual number of works of fiction flowing on Qidian if we convert the two sets of numbers into percentages, especially given the fact that the cumulative number of literary works published on Qidian had reached 903,069 by 10 March 2013.

[30] Interestingly, Qidian specifies how the model works in great details, but not with regard to the payments made to authors who agree to enter into a contract. It is vaguely mentioned that the payment is made differently based on different types of contract; some successful authors have been rewarded up to as much as a few hundred RMB per thousand words. <http://www.qidian.com/help/qianyue.aspx> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. However, other sources indicate that the standard payment made to authors is 20 RMB per thousand words (Shangjin, 2009). The more successful an author becomes, the higher the payment he/she gets per thousand words. For more details regarding the ways in which an author receives payment and royalties, see *ibid*.

[31] This is a new scheme devised by Qidian to encourage readers to tip their favourite authors for doing a good job of writing a satisfying chapter. By doing this, Qidian transfers part of its payment obligation directly to the readership. This scheme also cleverly encourages users to consume Qidian virtual currency so that more top-ups are needed.

[32] The public broadcasting system also functions as a marketing and social networking device. Marketing messages to inform users of special promotions and activities, or social networking messages such as wishing someone a happy birthday can be broadcast through this system.

prosumerism. Their relationship has become closer to the core of production where the responsibilities of editorship and censorship are outsourced to readers. Readers are encouraged to become involved in the process of production by voicing their opinions about authors. By doing this, readers can receive financial rewards. Authors, on the other hand, are regulated more by Qidian because of the rules they have to abide by when it comes to publishing their works on Qidian. While following the regulations, authors are also involved in editorship because they are encouraged to interact directly with readers so that readers' opinions can be properly incorporated during the writing and editing process of their works. Nevertheless, this is not to say that authors aim for approval by Qidian. Given the fact that authors are not generously rewarded by Qidian, and readers can have a strong voice regarding any works on Qidian, authors are fully aware of the importance of readers to them.

Thus far, I have examined the significance of readers' attention and the extent to which authors and readers cooperate to be integrated into the core of the production of literary texts. While producing and consuming works of fiction on the internet has been becoming a popular trend, other agents in a literary field where paper-based literary works are the cultural product have been repositioned and their functions have been modified. In terms of the repositioning of agents, in the next section the roles of publishers, editors and booksellers will be examined to exemplify the ways in which this repositioning takes place.

The Decentralisation of Mediating Agents/Institutions: Publishers (Publishing Companies), Printers (Printing Houses), Editors, and Distributors (Bookshops)
Commercial publishers,[33] printers,[34] editors and booksellers[35] are mediating agents and institutions which have been indispensable mediators between authors and readers in the paper-based publishing business. As a literary

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[33] There is a blurred line between publishers (the agent) and publishing companies (the institution), both of which are crucial elements in a literary field. Because of this blurred distinction, in this section the discussion of the agents and the institution to which they pertain is combined into an overall discussion of their decentralisation and reformulation.
[34] The term 'printer' is used to refer to the agent, whereas 'printing house' is used to refer to the institution.
[35] The term 'bookseller' is used to refer to the agent; 'bookshop' is used to refer to the institution.

commodity, the text of a popular literary work will have come under various forms of scrutiny before it hits the market. The text will have been created and revised by the author, and then proofread with suggested changes or censored by editors before it goes through several institutions (printing, publication, delivery service, bookshops/educational institutions/libraries), eventually to be accessed by readers. Marketing strategies such as promotion and advertisement are also involved to make the literary commodity popular enough to generate economic capital that will support the institutions and agents in the literary field in producing and promoting cultural capital.

Before the advent of internet literature, the relationship between authors and readers was like two ends of a production line with mediators coming in between. Nowadays on the internet, authors and readers are two merging bodies overlapping with one another. Conversely, the role of mediators has been reformulated or minimised owing to the percolation and permeation of prosumerism. The issue of the reformulation of the mediators' role can be tackled by examining publishers, printers, editors and booksellers one by one.

Publishers

The traditional role of a publisher has been described as that of the "the boss" of the publishing business, "the power behind the throne", who "must give the lead [...] and must co-ordinate, guide, support, counsel, coach and inspire [...]" (Wharton, 1992: 12). However, the digital trend is diminishing and challenging the dominant role of the publisher. As the leading figure in publishing, a commercial publisher has to be versatile in order to make publishing a sustainable and profitable business. To achieve this goal, he/she usually needs to assume multiple roles, which I generalise as follows: provider (providing economic capital to recruit appropriate agents and equipment), coordinator (coordinating between agents and institutions to work towards one goal), decider (determining what to publish, what tasks to prioritise), regulator (censorship issues and making rules for agents to follow), and marketer (promoting literary commodities independently or through cooperation with booksellers). These five roles overlap with one another to various extents.

On literary portal websites such as Qidian, publishers still assume these five roles, but the roles are performed in a technical-oriented and profit-driven fashion, except for the role of coordinator, which remains much the same in

terms of making the different agents and institutions under the business model work smoothly together. To begin with the role of provider, online publishers still provide economic capital, yet a large proportion of this capital is used to recruit new agents – software developers, web designers, computer engineers – to offer technical support such as running servers, maintaining webpages and adding new online interactive features. In this regard, the online publishers' role of a provider is closer to that of a technical supporter who aims to offer users an up-to-date virtual environment in which they feel comfortable producing and consuming literary commodities, and exercising their prosumptive power in different roles.

The roles of regulator and decider, both of which used to be closely and directly associated with the production of a piece of literary text, have been minimised or weakened on the internet.[36] Publishers do not have much of the final say about what literary commodities to produce – that decision will be made by users. Conversely, publishers are tolerant toward users, allowing almost anything to be created on their websites (as long as the state censorship is not breached), for two practical reasons: one is because literary commodities can be produced and consumed without the cost of traditional publishing and printing; the other is that, with a voluminous flow of literary texts pouring in, online publishers presumably do not have enough manpower to evaluate the market potential of each piece of work.[37]

Apart from these practical reasons, the priority on Qidian's overall agenda, similar to that of all commercial publishers throughout Chinese history, is to generate profit, which will only be gained through fierce competition with all other similar literary portal websites and by maintaining a market-leading advantage.[38] By observing the popularity rankings, it is easy for online

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[36] The way in which the publisher's role has been minimised has been discussed in the previous section. With regard to regulating and making decisions concerning a literary text, editorship is also tightly related to the production of a literary text. The changed role of editors is discussed after the discussion on publishers and printers.

[37] In 2009, the average number of users applying to become authors on a daily basis on Qidian was 1,100 (Shangjin, 2009). The statistics, though taken a few years ago, show the difficulty of evaluating the market potential of each piece of work given the high volume of works submitted.

[38] In an effort to convince advertisers to cooperate, Qidian claims that its current market penetration rate has reached 80%. Of the remaining 20%, one half pertains to other literary portal websites which are part of Qidian's alliance partnership, such as Hongxiou Tianxian

publishers to discover which type, or what popular works of fiction grassroots' attention has been redirected towards. The users' attention becomes the best index for online publishers to determine which works to publish in book format later. Moreover, the prosumption model points to a path of other forms of franchise for a higher return. As a result, online publishers are more concerned about the management of the portal website and the quantity of output, and arguably less concerned about controlling the quality of the literary commodity.[39]

  In drafting guidelines and making rules, online publishers appear to play the dominant role of regulator and decider. However, the content of guidelines and rules can be divided into two areas: state security and copyright issues. With regard to state security, publishers execute PRC State Council Order No. 292 from the central government.[40] Since 2000, the CCP government has generated a list of forbidden contents for any online publication, such as pornography or politically sensitive material. Qidian, in accordance with this state order, reminds users at the bottom of the website that it is imperative that they abide by the order of the state council, or any messages posted will be removed and their membership will be revoked. In spite of the endeavour to execute the state order, Qidian is constantly being accused of circulating pornographic and violent texts.[41] As far as the issue of intellectual property

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(Perfumed Red Sleeve) and Yanqing Xiaoshuo Ba (Romance Fiction Bar), and the other half is shared by all other similar literary portal websites independent of Qidian. <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/ads/default.html> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[39] A piece of advice to writers has been offered on the Qidian author login page. The adviser describes him/herself as an editor on Qidian, and suggests that the list of factors that a new writer should take into account are (in order of importance) plot, high frequency of new chapters, characters and rhetoric/language. This editor depicts internet readers as the most tolerant readers who are not meticulous about typographical mistakes or inconsistency over details. They only need a smooth story to satisfy their daydreams and fantasies, without caring much about the artistic achievement of the story. In this regard, internet readers can be described as extremely easy to satisfy. <http://forum.qidian. com/ThreadDetail.aspx?threadid=90000025> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[40] For details of Order 292 see
 <http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/fwxx/bw/gjgbdydszj/content_2263004.htm> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013].

[41] In 2010, a news programme aired on CCTV's financial channel openly accused Shanda of promoting pornographic and violent texts as an extreme marketing strategy for commercial profit. This programme called for the intervention of the central government (Hu, 2010). This

rights is concerned, Qidian declares that it owns the copyright to all the works published on its platform, yet plagiarism and piracy permeate the internet.[42] The pressure from plagiarism and piracy come not only from outside Qidian, but also from within.[43] As a seemingly weak executor of the state council order and a weak protector of copyright, Qidian therefore depends on users to adhere to the guidelines and rules. The way to achieve this is through peer censorship carried out by users, who report any works breaching the state council order, violating copyright or committing plagiarism. Thus, although limited by actual manpower, the responsibility which Qidian strategically outsources to users not only involves producers/consumers, but also helps Qidian with regulating and decision making in managing the literary portal website to ensure the integrity of the virtual community.

In contrast to its minimised role as regulator and decider, the online publisher's role as a marketer has grown enormously. Behind this growth lies the overwhelming bombardment of the user with online advertisements, along with the rapid and large-scale enfranchisement of literary commodities which a literary portal website carries. Advertisements designed to impress readers with non-literary commodities appear on the same page where the

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is not the first time that Shanda has come under suspicion for breaching State Council Order No. 292.

[42] Many online users copy and paste original works from Qidian (including VIP chapters) into a multitude of discussion forums, BBS or portal websites. With *Xie Long Dao* (The Way of Evil Dragon) for instance, 562,000 matching outcomes were generated by using the title as the key word search on Baidu (the Chinese counterpart of Google), indicating that this work of fiction can be fully accessed on many different websites other than Qidian. <http://www.baidu.com/s?wd=%E9%82%AA%E9% BE%8D%E9%81%93&rsv_bp=0&ch=&tn=baidu&bar=&rsv_spt=3&ie=utf-8&rsv_n=2& inputT=546> [Last accessed: 10 March 2013]. In 2010, the Copyright Society of China issued a strong statement claiming to support the legal actions taken by Qidian against Baidu, because for a long time Baidu has tacitly permitted its users to copy and paste works of fiction from various internet portal websites, including Qidian, thus compromising the copyright of the authors and the portal websites they belong to (Zhongguo Wenzi Zhuzuoquan Jiehui, 2011).

[43] Qidian does not seem to have an impeccable record of protecting intellectual property rights. One author filed a charge against Qidian, believing that Qidian had intentionally appropriated the title of his popular internet work of fiction to confuse readers on the internet (Jia, 2010). One paper-based publisher complained that users on Qidian were downloading their publications without legal authorisation (Dong, 2010).

readers consume their preferred literary texts.[44] Even though publishers do not have much of the final say on literary texts, they do have considerable influence on the franchising of literary commodities, such as the right to adapt them into online games or films. Large-scale literary portal websites like Qidian have their own economic capital that enables them to dominate the rights to franchise the literary commodities produced and consumed on their websites, whereas other smaller-scale portal websites choose to collaborate with other businesses for a profit share from the enfranchisement. Whether by advertisement or franchise, whether through domination or cooperation, online publishers come up with new marketing strategies to expand their businesses into other areas and promote their literary commodities.

Qidian was one of the first of these websites to bring literary commodities into the next phase by its introduction of virtual currency. Virtual currency is nothing new in the online game sector, but it is a relatively new idea in the online literature sector. On the one hand, Qidian promotes the virtual currency system with the intention of converting as much free membership as possible into VIP membership (at the point of writing, 26 out of every 1000 registered members were VIPs);[45] on the other hand, using its high market saturation rate and versatility, Qidian aims at attracting more advertisers to use the Qidian platform as a showcase for their products. Qidian initiates strategies to link the notion of virtual currency with consumers' physical products (well-known enterprises such as McDonald's). Marketing strategies such as encouraging users to purchase consumer goods by using their account

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[44] A list of the famous international brand manufacturers and merchandise providers cooperating with Qidian can be found at <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/ads/client.html> [Last accessed: 11 March 2013].

[45] The figure is calculated from the statistics published on Qidian. The company's webpage indicates that so far there are 30.58 million registered members, and 800,000 VIP members. This page does not indicate if the 30.58 million include VIP members, nor is there further indication about the ratio of primary VIP accounts to advanced ones. In calculating the ratio between registered members and VIP members, I assume that the number of VIP members is included in the figure of 30.58 million <http://www.qidian.com/aboutus/ads/default.html> [Last accessed: 11 March 2013]. It is also worth noting that the statistics have not been updated since 2009. Therefore, it may be assumed that the actual ratio between VIP members and general members today is quite different from the figure calculated here.

credits, many of which can be earned through Qidian currency top-ups and other credit-rewarding schemes, are set out.[46]

Literary commodities are closely associated with the notion of enfranchisement. As the literary portal website which dominates the internet literature market in China, Qidian endeavours to maximise business opportunities. Many popular works of fiction on Qidian have been adapted into online games to be promoted by Shanda, Qidian's online game sector. Not only online games, but also TV dramas and films are the targets of the Qidian enfranchisement scheme through cooperation with the TV or film industries. In terms of literary commodities *per se*, different formats for enjoying literary commodities have been newly introduced into the publication business. Members of Qidian are encouraged to take advantage of the notion of media convergence by consuming works of fiction on portable devices such as their mobile phones, Jinshu (Bamboo, the e-reader which Qidian has specifically developed for Qidian users),[47] or tablet PCs (see the bottom of Illustration 2). As well as consuming literary commodities in the traditional sense of reading texts, members can also listen to the audio version of the text when they go online or on their mobile phone by subscribing to an audio book service.

Qidian dominates the market of literary portal websites which produce and consume popular literature. But this does not mean that Qidian does not face any domestic competition. In addition to the competition from other literary portal websites,[48] Qidian also has to handle issues such as pirate copies

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[46] This goes back to my previous explanation about Qidian Experience Value Points. Apart from active participation in helping to form a literary product by offering feedback and by voting for their favourite works, users can also earn points by clicking on information about commercial goods advertised on Qidian. For more details, see
<http://www.qidian.com/help/jifenxitong.aspx> [Last accessed: 11 March 2013].

[47] Bamboo has a Wi-Fi function. Users can get online, consume literary texts and subscribe to works of fiction from other bookshops which are in alliance with Qidian. Qidian boasts about having recruited 220 different publishers to provide publications open for subscription through an alliance named Yunzhong Shucheng (Book Castle in the Clouds). The number of books provided by the alliance is as many as 3 million. <http://cloudary.sdo.com/index.aspx> [Last accessed: 11 March 2013].

[48] One example is 17K Xiaoshuo Wang (17K Fiction Net; hereafter 17K) at <www.17k.com>. 17K is not part of Qidian's alliance. They publicise that they offer better benefits to authors who successfully sign a contract with them. Unlike Qidian, 17K is also willing to pay authors for short and mid-length works. See <http://www.17k.com/fuli>
[Last accessed: 02 Sept. 2013].

circulating on discussion forums and BBS. On the one hand, Qidian takes legal action against pirate copies circulating online;[49] on the other hand, Qidian fiercely promotes its business model by advertising some of the most well-known internet fiction authors who have acquired prestige, fame and wealth in China. Well-known authors such as Tangjia Sanshao (The Third Son of the Tang Family), Tianchan Tudou (Silkworm Potato) and Wochi Xihongshi (I Eat Tomato) acquired their economic and symbolic capital by publishing on Qidian. Apart from advertising authors who have gained economic and symbolic capital from them, Qidian also aggressively recruits new writers to provide a larger quantity of original works than other non-allied literary portal websites. Qidian already has more than one million pieces of original work in its database.[50] One of its major opponents, 17K, only has 250,000 pieces of work.[51] In this regard, Qidian tries to differentiate itself from other similar, non-allied portal websites, BBS or discussion forums.

Examining Qidian from the perspective of an online publisher reveals features which distinguish an online publisher from a traditional paper-based publisher. For online publishers, the tendency is to minimise their role in interfering with the contents of literary commodities because users registered with their websites will clearly show what is popular by gravitating towards specific types of literary commodities, meaning genres or subgenres. Only when special circumstances arise will publishers (along with editors) intervene to resolve disputes or conflicts of interest, or to ensure that state laws are properly exercised, after peer censorship raises a concern. The roles which an online publisher assumes with great significance are those of technical supporter and marketer. By creating a comfortable environment in which users can devote themselves to producing and consuming, online publishers are dedicated to generating profits through franchise and media convergence consumption. Various innovative marketing schemes are designed to attract more general

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[49] In June 2012 the webmasters of the website Xiaoshuo 5200 (Novel 5200) were sentenced to several years in prison for illegally distributing Qidian's works of fiction on their website for general readers to consume. One of the extremely popular works on Qidian - *Doupo Cangqiong* (Break through Sky) - had received more than 130 million clicks. <http://www.qidian.com/News/ShowNews.aspx?newsid=1028451>
[Last accessed: 02 Sept. 2013].
[50] The exact number is 1,034,467. <all.qidian.com/Default.aspx>
[Last accessed: 03 Sept. 2013].
[51] The exact number is 258,715. <all.17k.com> [Last accessed: 03 Sept. 2013].

users to their websites, where profits can be generated to sustain the growing online publication business at the same time.

Editors, Printers (Printing Houses) and Distributors (Bookshops)

The multiple tasks performed by online publishers arguably cast a shadow over the existence of editors, printers and booksellers, who used to be an essential element of the commercial publishing and printing business as a whole. However, the crucial role which editors enjoy in a paper-based publishing company where editors, authors, and publisher form a close, triadic relationship is not to be found in today's online literary sphere. The notion of editorship in a traditional paper-based publishing business is an umbrella concept which covers different types of editor, such as commissioning editors, copyeditors and line editors. Their job descriptions, according to the type of editor, include "[…] drawing up the project plan to organising the launch […] developing the concept with the author, negotiating the contract, writing the publishing proposal, drawing up the budget, assembling the publishing team and supervising production" (Mackenzie, 2004: 6). In contrast, editors in the online publishing sphere, based on the previous analysis, seem to have lost their traditional prestige. Unlike online publishers, whose multiple roles have been transformed – some minimised and others aggrandised – editors face a reduction in their significance in the Chinese online literary sphere. The most prominent part of the job of choosing a potentially profitable text and communicating between a text, the authorship and the readership at which it is targeted has been largely outsourced to users. Users are the agents who determine which texts to produce and to consume. Their collective literary taste, either good or bad, is the index of both attention and profits.

It is true that editors on Qidian still exercise the power of evaluating a text and making a decision about whether or not it is suitable for publication. Nevertheless, this power remains only at the very beginning of the publishing process. As stated earlier, when a user decides to assume the role of an author, he or she is required to submit a piece of work of 5,000 words to the Qidian editors. The editors then review the work to see if the user has the potential for writing. It does seem like an important job. Yet as soon as a piece of work has been approved for publication on Qidian in serial form, readers can be said to take over the role of editors. Their feedback and suggestions, to a certain extent, have a direct impact on the formation of a piece of ongoing

work, arguably, for one simple reason: authors want to keep readers with them, and to attract more readers to consume their works. After all, everything on Qidian is about 'being popular'. Thus editors, in going from being active agents who engage with the production of a text to passive agents who intervene only when called upon to review a writing sample and to respond to readers' requests over a piece of work if a censorship issue is involved, have undergone a dramatic transition from being in positions of great power to having minimal roles.

The remaining two agents (institutions) – printers and distributors – perform even more menial roles in the digital world of publishing. Although printers were not traditionally involved in the production of a text, they were involved with the materials through which a text would be circulated. Since today a literary commodity can be produced and consumed without the use of paper, printers (and printing houses) are being edged out of the role of mediator into the role of end-user, because printers have to wait for the decision of online publishers to determine whether the digital literary commodity will be converted into book form. On Qidian, there is a menu beneath the 'cover' of a book (see Illustration 2), which comes with an option of 'Publish this Book'. Once this option is clicked, three further options (publication in book form; adaptation into online games, and adaptation into films and TV dramas) are provided, asking the user which form of publication the user is interested in: Qidian will contact the user for further discussion in terms of publication issues. Even though Qidian has not specified what types of institution make contact over publication issues, it can be assumed that the institutions that contact Qidian include not only printing houses, but also publishing houses targeting the printed literature market.[52]

A similar situation applies to booksellers. The fact that the physical literary commodity has been substituted by a virtual commodity implies the decline of the traditional book. Documents created and converted for e-readers, mobile phones, computers (desktops and laptops) and tablet PCs are gradually but steadily coming to dominate the reading preference of general consumers. Arguably, nowadays it is becoming more difficult to promote Qidian works in physical form, given the fact that popular works on Qidian are usually

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[52] The relationship between Qidian and other print –media-based publishing houses will be an interesting topic for further examination. Owing to the length of this paper, I shall not pursue this topic further here.

lengthy.[53] The cost of acquiring a whole set of one popular piece of work can be quite high. Booksellers (as well as non-profit, educational institutions such as libraries) are withdrawing from the field of circulation and seemingly becoming less significant. Bookshops have to promote different platforms of literary consumption, like Barnes and Noble with their e-reader Nook. Today, bookshops also engage in providing more electronic versions of books for tablet PC owners to download to their portable devices.

The rise and ebb of the roles of agents/institutions illustrated here illuminates a dynamic reformulation of the digital Chinese literary field. Since authors and readers are combined in the single role of users taking charge of producing the literary commodity for mass consumption in line with the preferences of the general readership, mediators such as editors, printers and booksellers have been marginalised. Publishers, although still appearing as dominant figures in charge of the overall management of the new production and consumption model on the internet, have had their power internally eviscerated, in the sense of making way for more grassroots tactics for producing literary commodities, but externally fortified, in the form of aggressive marketing strategies to transform the literary commodities which are carried on Qidian into a variety of entertainment formats through franchises, media convergence and alliances with other agents/institutions.

Conclusion: The Impact and Implication of the Prosumption Model of Virtual Literary Commodities

The prosumption model, such as that presented on Qidian, paves the way for general readers to head towards authorship and editorship. Formerly the prerogative of an elite, writing has now been transformed into an activity practised in everyday life by anyone. Theoretically, anyone who has access to the internet and who has a basic knowledge of using word processing programmes can come up with their own stories and search for an opportunity to publicise their works in the virtual space. Whether or not their works will become popular is determined solely by other users sharing the same space.

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[53] For example, on Qidian there is a 'total word count' ranking. The number one work is *Congling Kaishi* (Scratch from Zero). Its current word count is 15,521,628 <http://top.qidian.com/Book/TopDetail.aspx?TopType=5> [Last accessed: 09 Oct 2013].
Eight works of fiction out of the top ten ranking have their word count amounting to more than 10 million words respectively.

Yet what sets an elite and an everyman apart, arguably, is that the latter is satisfied with narrating a story which appeals to ordinary people like himself/herself. To common users, being a storyteller narrating an entertaining and attractive story serves as the priority at the top of the agenda today. The story does not necessarily have to make sense; neither does it need to contain a high standard of moral values, or literary/rhetoric aesthetics. As an average consumer him/herself, a user understands the motivation which drives other similar users towards internet fiction. Consuming internet fiction is mainly for leisure. A work of fiction which contains a philosophical discussion or a serious contemplation on the meaning of life would be the last one readers would want to consume.

Thus, the majority of general readers, including users, tend to crowd towards a story with an exciting plot and fantastic adventures to take them to an imaginary wonderland, replete with amazing characters fresh from Japanese Manga, where anything can happen and where they can achieve everything, as a way to escape the harsh reality and repetitive daily routine of being human pawn in an aggressively industrialised/capitalistic society like today's China.[54] With popular literature pouring into the online market, prosumption indeed facilitates the rapid dissemination of internet literature; however the quality and the aesthetics of this popular literature become questionable. This is an issue that deserves further academic attention within the general topic of the prosumption of internet literature in China.

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[54] One link located at the section of 'Applying to become an author' will lead users to a webpage where one piece of advice to novice authors is displayed. It advises new authors to learn the skill of creating characters from Japanese Manga. A section entitled 'Wangluo Shangye Xiezuo Xinshou Zhinan zhi Jiaose Suzao' (How to Create Characters for Your Work: Guidelines for Newbie to Internet Fiction) carries information and advice on the formula of a commercially successful piece of work. According to this section, a character distinctive enough to be remembered helps a story with a repetitive, similar plot to stand among the ocean of works of fiction on Qidian. One important piece of advice on creating a distinctive character is to consult the way a character is created in Japanese Manga. For more details, see <http://forum.qidian.com/ThreadDetail.aspx?threadid=90000024> [Last accessed: 13 March 2013]. This notion is interestingly consistent with Wang's argument in *Brand New China* that the literary sensibilities of the younger Chinese generation are nurtured by Japanese Manga (Wang, 2008:204).

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