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Leaves Gleaned from the Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web in Heaven: *Chinese On-Line Publications in Canada*

As with popular culture generally, Chinese popular fiction borrows from elite and folk traditions in the creation of popular texts. Historically, Chinese audiences developed a variety of innovative ways to accomplish the transmission and distribution of texts and, just as importantly, to provide opportunities for communal participation and commentary. In this article, three Chinese electronic magazines at Canadian sites are examined in light of the wider traditions they share with earlier forms of Chinese popular culture. A sample of volumes from each publication formed a comparative analysis focusing on history and duration of publication, format, content, and some important common themes found in contributors' poetry and prose. Methodological challenges associated with this type of research are considered, including the issue of authorship.

THIS DISCUSSION BEGINS AT THE CONNECTION of one central question with two vivid memories. Having noticed some key websites during my doctoral research that served as repositories for Chinese electronic popular fiction, and a few journals that featured articles on this as well as classical and other modern Chinese literature, I asked myself: "What is the significance of Chinese electronic publications to readers in Canada?" The question is straightforward enough. By contrast, the accompanying memories span nearly two decades and seem disconnected. I see myself as a child seeking out the most vivid autumn maple leaves I could find and capturing their beauty between sheets of waxed paper. Later, I sense as a young Canadian adult that it is somehow my "duty" to travel the length of the country, and attain some level of technological proficiency, before I could honestly say that my formal education had come to a successful—or even reasonable—conclusion.

The point at which these seemingly disparate experiences intersect informs the worldview, theoretical perspective, and narrative frame from which I must necessarily write about this subject. First, an apparent Canadian tendency to connect the Internet, or "the Information Super Highway" as it was termed in the early 1990s, with other transportation conduits, most notably the national railway and especially the Trans Canada Highway, is noteworthy. Perhaps it reflects McLuhan's notion of "transportation as communication, and then the transition of the idea from transport to information by means of electricity" (1994:89). However, as Irwin Shubert

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astutely observes, the political rhetoric surrounding the construction of these transportation/communication systems, and the positive force each would prove to the future of Canadian identity and national unity, share a number of important similarities—even though the Internet’s possibilities went beyond a purely nationalistic scope, and therefore its “virtual virtues” were more deliberately emphasized (1999:18–19).

Second, any discussion of the World Wide Web, and specifically any discussion around web pages and links, is similar to pressing leaves in wax paper to preserve them. Although the leaves may remain, detached from their changing landscape, the seasons change and their vitality fades. In order to talk about Chinese electronic magazines, it is necessary to grasp a moment of inscribed creation that is inevitably subject to reworking. The electronic pages examined in this article have all altered significantly. Some have grown, others have been archived as textual artifacts, and these processes were underway by the time this research was completed in 1997.

As a historical exploration, however, this study is timely for two reasons. On the one hand, the Chinese electronic ethnic press is still largely unexplored (Zhang and Hao 1997). On the other, the Chinese electronic ethnic press in Canada is even *less* well known, despite the fact that, as I discovered, Canadian-based Chinese e-zines were among the first on the net, and Chinese expatriates now or formerly resident in Canada are responsible for some excellent and internationally respected electronic resources, such as the extensive and self-sustaining *Sunrise* site in Montreal (www.sunrisesite.org).¹

Finally, to establish the theoretical framework for this discussion, I situate this study of Chinese e-zines between two ideas offered by Canadian scholars who have had a profound influence on communications theory and whose observations have sharpened my own reflections. In “Media as Translators,” McLuhan wrote: “All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms” (1994:57). A central argument of this work, as outlined in the next section, is that an understanding of Chinese electronic discourse must consider at least some of the traditional metaphors and ways of knowing that are part of that culture. Chinese users have created their own unique cultural expressions on the web that draw on their social values, language, and imagery.²

Balanced against this premise are Harold Innis’s conception of the inherent “bias” of many communication media, particularly those that are paper or print-based, toward space (1951:33), and his assertion that, historically, the margins have been the sites of technological/media change (1972:136–139). Although essentially print based, Stephen Jones argues that the Internet is paradoxical in that it also manifests an overriding concern with time, particularly when the spatial bias is removed through connectivity (1997:12). Space is constructed and time is ordered through narrative on the Internet (1997:15), a communicative form that often mediates between an emphasis on the styles and conventions of speech and print, and therefore between the biases of time and space. On the Chinese net, and on the e-zine sites in particular, these shifting biases are apparent in such things as the inclusion of excerpts of classical texts with readers’ more anecdotal submissions, and in the link to a chat room or bulletin board from a magazine site. Speaking of the emergence of

new media from the margins, it should be understood that this article examines “a slice of on-line everyday life” from the mid-1990s. However, the actual technology for Chinese language communication described here has kept pace with the emerging capabilities of the medium for nearly ten years prior to this research. It is telling of the impact of this “marginal technological activity” that most web browsers and current office suites have integrated the Chinese character input and display protocols originally developed as shareware and freeware applications by Chinese students and professionals in order to make the Internet speak their language.

A Brief Look at Metaphors of Space and Time: Naming the Chinese Web

Many students of Chinese folklore and language are aware of stories of humorous or tongue-in-cheek transliterations of English and other Western-language proper names and specialized terms. Sometimes, however, such renderings provide apt metaphors that may then frame and motivate additional scholarly inquiries. One example is the explanation of the Chinese term for *World Wide Web*, coined by some of the individuals involved with the electronic publication of the *China News Digest* (CND) and its associated servers and sites:

Before we made the announcement of the opening of this server, we discussed the translation of WWW. CND translates World Wide Web as meaning 万维天罗地网 Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web in Heaven and Net on Earth, and WWW as the abbreviation 万维网 which also starts with three W's. Literally, wan4 is ten thousands, wei2 is dimension, tian1 is heaven, luo2 is web, di4 is earth, wang3 is net.³ The combined word indicates that the global information-sharing network is based on a multitude of satellite connections in the space and fiber-optics and other links on the ground.⁴

In this article, I extend this metaphor beyond the purely technological spaces outlined above in order to explore the social spaces of Chinese electronic communication—“the Net on Earth.” I will demonstrate how the voluntary editors, contributors, and, indeed, the readers themselves cooperatively construct and maintain an informal community of intra-cultural exchange within the context of a potentially global network. I say *potentially* here because, as many researchers acknowledge, the promise of universal Internet accessibility has not been fully or even partially realized in many parts of the world. The social groups I discuss, as well as the texts they produce, reflect a high degree of both education and awareness of—and often individual proficiency with—a wide range of computer applications as well as a concomitant availability of the requisite hardware.

The Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web in Heaven is also a fitting descriptive image when looking at the various ways in which this new technology could be incorporated into ideas of Chinese cosmology and worldview. In his outline of the oppositional configurations of Scandinavian mythological space and time, Eleazar Meletinskij describes how the various worlds, whose special characteristics define their boundaries and populations, operate simultaneously as distinct realms, *and* as part of an integrated system. Within the organizational structure, changes in one relational hierarchy frequently permit or require transformations in another (1973:

251, 257–259). Similarly, despite certain fundamental differences in demographics and landscape, Chinese cosmology posits Heaven (*tian*, 天) and Earth (*di*, 地 or *tu*, 土) in a complementary, interdependent relationship (Eberhard 1986:89–90, 141–142).

While Chinese cosmogonic myths describe the creation as the necessary, permanent, structural separation of Heaven and Earth by supernatural intervention, Chinese folktales frequently detail the romantic separation of mortals and their celestial consorts. These separations are likewise enacted as necessary and permanent by the heavenly authorities, unless they are moved to some compromise by compassion for the lovers' plight or the eloquent observations of another Immortal. Common to both creation myths and folktales is the notion of the permeability of the horizon as a frontier and the dangers that can threaten to shift and collapse the empires of Heaven and Earth⁵ when the boundaries become structurally or socially attenuated through excess.⁶

Cross-culturally, creation myths and wonder tales illustrate how words can become creative acts in themselves. In the narrative, a word is spoken, and its referent exists. When some aspect of creation or a creative decision manifests a problem, it is fixed through language—through timely intercession, argument, and the articulation of a workable solution. In the case of the communities and texts discussed here, language also *articulates* the Chinese net in terms of the web and *vice versa*—at once linking Chinese social and cultural experiences and perspectives to a larger communicative context and giving those understandings a uniquely Chinese voice.

This is accomplished most efficiently through the use of the Chinese language. Each Chinese character can be thought of as a visual, phonic, and symbolic unity that is fragmented if one of the component dimensions is absent or suppressed. For example, if a character has the same tone but a different ideographic representation, then it is a different character, with a different and probably incorrect meaning for the context in which it is situated. Likewise, although it is possible to communicate in *pinyin* (phonetic spelling) with accompanying tone values, as shown by the excerpt from the CND web page, most Chinese I have interviewed do not like to use this system. Its only advantage is that it circumvents the limitations of using the default standard for “plain text,” called the American Standard Code for Information Interchange, or ASCII, “unplugged.”

Removing the visual-symbolic dimension of the Chinese language effectively mitigates the Chinese reader's richness of experience. Reading in Chinese fosters an in-depth engagement with the text. As one man explained to me, even when you pick up a Chinese newspaper, each character encapsulates levels of history, memory, emotion, and narrative that, in some ways, seem to operate independently of what may be an otherwise journalistic or formulaic writing style. Undoubtedly, this assertion requires a degree of qualification, since the morphology of any language is not comprehensible without syntax and framed meaning. Moreover, meaning is itself subject to regional variations of emphasis that may be the result of the combined influence of social, political, or other cultural factors, such as is evinced, for example, in a comparison of editorials in newspapers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and Mainland China.

I think it is reasonable to suggest that, while style is certainly important, the characters themselves can resonate in ways that allow the reader to compensate for other kinds of textual silences. I was told: “In each character, you have everything, it’s all right there” (Liu Quanshan, conversation with author, October 12, 1996), a remark from a reader’s viewpoint that echoes Hanan’s comment on the elastic qualities of the Chinese language. Hanan suggests that the natural propensities of written Chinese characters provide a standard script regardless of changes over time in dialectal pronunciation or syntactic combination. These features in part accommodated the development of intermediate vernacular writing styles that successfully combined what he terms the “expansive” tendencies of the oral world with the more succinct inclinations of the literary. He states: “The Chinese writer, even in modern times, tends toward conciseness as a cultural habit, assured that the morphemic script will keep his work intelligible” (1981:14, 16). By separating the sounds of Chinese from the standardizing influence of their ideographic representation, intelligibility and enjoyment are significantly reduced.

Given these linguistic factors, for the purposes of this discussion,⁷ I feel that it is necessary to follow a discursive structure that considers at least to some extent the diachronic and synchronic nature of contemporary Chinese language and the emergence of these popular cultural performance texts. Firstly, therefore, I present a historical overview of the place of popular, serialized fiction, in the development of readership communities and informal, audience-centered distribution networks in China. Secondly, I summarize some of the kinds of resources and texts found on the Chinese net. Thirdly, I analyze a selection of issues from three Canadian-based Chinese electronic magazines: *Feng hua yuan*, (楓華園), *Lian yi tong xun*, (聯誼通訊), and *Zhonghua daobao*,⁸ (中華導報), with regard to such features as format, content, and frequency, and duration of publication. For brevity’s sake, future references to these magazines will make use of abbreviated titles: FHY, LYTX, and ZHDB, respectively. In this third section, I also discuss themes in contributors’ poetry, a popular expressive genre. Finally, I conclude with suggestions for future research.

*“If You Wish to Know What Happens Next . . .”:
Reading the Social History of Chinese Audiences*

An understanding of contemporary Chinese popular texts and their readers requires a historically based consideration of three interrelated issues. The first of these is *the interplay of oral and written traditions* in Chinese popular culture. The second involves a corresponding appreciation of *levels of receptive literacy and social access to texts*, not only for consumption but also frequently for the production and reproduction of written works through commentaries and formal and informal discussion. Finally, because as Peter Narváez observes: “texts . . . always possess the potential of being extricated from their social matrices” (1992:16), *genres* should be thought of not only as kinds or classes of popular texts with certain defining features but also as dynamic textual masks or forms that are subject to transformation by audiences’ uses and methods of distribution. It is certainly true that such an

investigation could never be undertaken with a view to proving that a given on-line publication could claim a particular published ancestry within the domain of Chinese printed ephemera. However, research of this nature is useful as a means of placing modern electronic magazines and digests within a larger tradition of story creation and transmission, serial publication, and, most importantly, audience reception and participatory culture in China.

Because they are frequently both involved in transmission, many folklorists have emphasized the need to consider printed as well as oral versions in the analysis of traditional texts, whether ballads (Dugaw 1984) or belief narratives (Danielson 1979). The study of Chinese popular traditions foregrounds this interaction to an even greater degree because of the longstanding influence of the oral and written domains on vernacular literature. In his *Notes on Chinese Story-Tellers*, Wolfram Eberhard illustrates the different ways storytellers and puppeteers in Taiwan used and reworked printed texts in their performances, telling stories drawn from summaries of episodes from popular novels and elaborating or shortening them according to skill level and aesthetic preferences, perceptions of audience reactions, and other performance-related factors (1970).

In a similar vein, there is an enduring debate as to whether certain literary genres and particular classical works have their origin in some sort of ancient “prompt-book” storytelling tradition,⁹ or whether “the storyteller’s manner”¹⁰ used by certain authors, as W. L. Idema suggests in the case of late Ming (A.D. 1368–1644) writer Feng Menglong (馮夢龍), was a consciously cultivated literary device (1974:35–36). These issues, while historically significant for literary scholars, are less important to folklorists than an appreciation of the dynamic nature of the exchange of elite and folk cultural elements in popular literature, since “more often than not, they [oral and written traditions] influence and draw on each other” (Wang 1988:839). Furthermore, there is textual evidence to suggest that in certain instances, as A. E. McLaren finds with the relationship between early chantefables and the classical novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi yanyi*, 三國志演義), the earliest written versions of some narratives may have incorporated considerable material from oral tradition. These were later edited “to conform with the conventions of historiography” (1985:162).¹¹ The site of this exchange remains Chinese popular culture, which manifests the ability to negotiate the two spheres and to transcend, often quite successfully, the constraints of literacy, class, gender, and geography that shape them. Speaking of vernacular fiction that developed from *bian wen* (變文), cycles of heroic stories that had become established as a written popular genre by the ninth and tenth centuries A.D., David Johnson states:

it was not typically intended for a narrow audience of sophisticates. Moreover, it combined elite and folk traditions, just as the *p'ien wen* had, and therefore it played a powerful role in bridging the gap between the rulers and the ruled by bringing ideas and attitudes of each group into a new form which could appeal to both. [1980:505]

Prior to the emergence of early mass publishing of newspapers and other serials in China, there were several popular print traditions that developed at various times

and were aimed at particular target audiences. Evelyn Rawski's investigation into the spread of literacy in the Qing period (A.D. 1644–1911) provides strong evidence that the sons of many more non-elite households attained a higher level of literacy than previously assumed (1985:11). Caution is required, however, as inquiries into such phenomena as literacy and mass culture at any point in China's pre-Revolutionary history must acknowledge that the proliferation and reception of mass-mediated texts is a recent, largely urban, middle- and upper-class development. Despite the fact that by the onset of the 20th century "the problems of mass culture were already being widely discussed, the 'masses' were not being reached by modern media" (Lee and Nathan 1985:373). These demographic limitations notwithstanding, it is useful to think of literacy and oral/written consciousness or worldview in late Imperial China as a function of many complex intersecting factors, such as geography and class. In this way, it is apparent that levels of literacy existed in society that in turn extended the potential range and numbers of moderately literate reading publics far beyond highly schooled male literati (Idema 1974:1-1ii; Johnson 1985:37–39).

While the factors influencing the spread of female literacy differed in many significant respects from those governing educational opportunities for men, exemplified perhaps by the traditional Confucian injunction that a virtuous woman should remain unlettered, there were popular genres that appealed to and were specifically geared for women audiences. For example, Daniel Overmyer's examination of the heavily Buddhist-influenced "precious scrolls" (*bao juan*, 寶卷) revealed that not only were literate, pious women involved in financing the publication of these materials, particularly during the late Ming, when the genre appears to have received a certain degree of official sanction, they were also involved in the oral transmission of these tales to other women.¹² Often, these tracts and ephemera took the form of short, sermon-like exempla, exhortations, or stories of virtuous people who ultimately overcome profound spiritual struggles. Despite the expression of basically orthodox Buddhist precepts, it is interesting to note that the heroines of many narrative *bao juan* resembled strong female saints who were unconventional in the expression of their convictions. Overmyer concludes that these texts embrace "a duality between Confucianism and Buddhism, with Buddhism providing the theoretical support for dissent" (1985:228, 250, 253). Across cultures, centuries, genders, and genres, the possibility for subversive readings has remained an important source of narrative pleasure.

On the one hand, the overtly didactic nature of many of the works designed for consumption and emulation by female readers may be looked upon as outwardly "preaching to the converted" who occupied the inner chambers of traditional Chinese domestic, social space. On the other, these publications themselves, however traditional their message, embodied a fundamental contradiction between the possible content properly suited to the education of women and the *impossibility* that an educated woman could *ever* be deemed entirely proper by traditional standards (Ko 1994:55–56). As a result, Ko asserts that an increasing number of literate women deliberately exploited and traversed these grey areas:

Although women could not rewrite the rules that structured their lives, they were extremely creative in crafting a space from within the prevailing gender system that gave them meaning, solace and dignity. Their impressive array of tactics . . . ranges from reinterpreting the dicta [of traditional Confucian society] through writing, revamping the meaning of such dicta in practice, to boring through the cracks of the morally laudable and permissible both in writing and in practice. [1994:8–9]

Stemming in part from the rapid social and economic changes engendered by specific patterns of economic growth, such as the development of a monetary economy and regionally based cash crops like silk as described in Ko's historical examination of women's lives in 17th-century Jiangnan, as well as changing ideas about the education and social position of women, greater opportunities developed for women to respond to literature in more lasting ways. It became possible, for example, for women to publish commentaries and original works. However, this was still frequently undertaken through private, family-based publishing concerns. Occasionally, as shown perhaps most notably by works such as *The Three Wives' Commentary on the Peony Pavilion* (*Sanfu ping Mudanting zaji*, 三婦評牡丹亭雜記), women made their literary marks by adopting the name of a male family member or publishing under a masculine pen name (Ko 1994:37, 70–71).¹³

During the late Qing era, with the increasing availability of cheap editions of books and especially the growing prevalence of serialized fiction in newspapers and magazines, circulation of popular print ephemera increased remarkably. However, as some researchers emphasize, press figures for this period and later decades of the 20th century do not give a true picture of audience size, because the actual readers/copy ratio significantly exceeded the number of copies bought or subscriptions sold (Lee and Nathan 1985:371–372; Link 1981:190–91). The real extent of informal, reader-centered distribution networks for mass-mediated texts was, and may well remain, much larger. Moreover, it seems that this phenomenon is neither restricted to a particular historical moment or cultural milieu. In her ethnography of supermarket tabloid reading, S. Elizabeth Bird described how women readers would save sections or entire copies of tabloids and make them available to other family members and friends (1992:143). In a much different historical and cultural context, Perry Link traced the widespread distribution of hand-copied entertainment fiction, commonly referred to as “flying books,” among young urban readers and those “sent to the countryside” during the Cultural Revolution, and found that: “If truly popular, the story would become a ‘flying book’ (*feishu*) that never found its way home” (1989:18). In the case of one hand-copied novel that was published after this period: “[it] eventually ‘flew’ the length and breadth of China” (1989:18).

Interestingly, reading historically fulfilled three of Bascom's four functions of folklore for Chinese audiences: amusement, education, and cultural validation (1965:290, 292–293). At a time when May Fourth writers were advocating a wider acceptance of Western writers, literary styles, and ideas, authors of popular “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” romantic fiction adhered to traditional allusions and themes, while also allowing readers to vicariously experiment with certain aspects of Western modernity, like new ideas of womanhood, from a safe remove (Link 1981:20–21, 146). As Janice Radway states, however, reading as an activity—even

the reading of genres that ostensibly perpetuate traditional values and patriarchal structures and ideologies—tends to subvert rather than support cultural norms (1987:118).

Finally, much like many contemporary printed and electronic publications and periodical supplements, newspapers and journals, from their late Qing origins as commercial papers, missionary publications, and political forums, diversified their contents to include popular entertainment fiction, sampling widely from Chinese and translated Western genres in an effort to attract and hold readers (Lee and Nathan 1985:362, 364, 382; Link 1981:12). The preceding examples cannot account for either the precise format, content, or distribution of today's Chinese electronic magazines, or, indeed, the constitution and complex motivations of their audiences. They do hopefully go some way to demonstrating that when and where there are readers, there are vernacular texts and ways of accessing, sharing, and using them that will continue to sustain and transform Chinese popular tradition.

Ethereal Calligraphy: Reading Chinese Language and Resources on the Web

At this point in the discussion, I want to explain certain points pertaining to Chinese language and the technology that makes possible its electronic presentation, as well as describe the approaches taken in my research and some of the difficulties that may confront ethnographers constructing inquiries of this sort. Primarily, I would like to attempt to clarify a common misconception that many Westerners seem to have about the Chinese language, the seemingly infinite number of Chinese characters. While there are an estimated several hundred thousand characters extant, only a subset of a few thousand are regularly employed in everyday discourse.

As already discussed, the written Chinese language is constant across dialects, although it should be mentioned that it is not uncommon for specific characters to be used in some contexts to express the nuances of a particular dialectal convention or flavor, such as in written representations of spoken Cantonese, for example. However, folklorists interested in the study of Chinese culture must appreciate that there are two working *versions* of the written Chinese language as a result of post-Liberation literacy reforms in Mainland China that were instituted after 1949. These are commonly referred to as *simplified* (*jianti*, 簡體), and *complex, traditional, or full-form* (*fanti*, 繁體). The most common simplification of the writing system involved a reduction in the number of strokes that comprise a given character.

However, not all characters were simplified in this way. There are therefore many characters common to both systems, and in some cases, the simplified character is based on a traditional “short-hand” variant codified as the “official” ideograph during reforms. Generally, the use of the two systems can be geographically and historically specified. In short, simplified characters are used in Mainland China, and, more recently, Singapore, while traditional characters are used by people in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and by many overseas Chinese who do not come from Mainland China, or whose families emigrated before 1949. Because of retrocession to Mainland China, many people in Hong Kong also learn the simplified system.

The different systems of script representation have implications for computerized Chinese text processing. In essence, the simplified and traditional systems require different encoding protocols in order to transform an ordinary ASCII file into Chinese characters. Several input methods are available. One of the most common involves the user entering the *pinyin*, or phonemic spelling, and tone value of a word onto the screen. In some cases, the tone, represented as a number from one to four, is optional. The software simply comes up with more possibilities. The program then generates a set of characters with the same pronunciation, and the correct one is selected by means of a specified keystroke or numeric sequence. In a sense, the actual display of the characters, as a technological event, may be thought of as an electronic palimpsest overlaying the ASCII code, a surface reflecting another surface through a kind of transposing filter. This is not actually far removed from the way Western alphabets appear on the computer screen. Furthermore, it should be remembered that for many Chinese readers, the possibility to read in their own language creates the potential for readings of great depth and personal significance.

As a final note, some e-zines also provide electronic copies as Postscript files for printing, or image files (GIF or Graphic Interchange Format), which display Chinese text regardless of browser type or version. These file types, however, are much larger and take longer to download and print. Furthermore, because these are generally less popular formats, the PS or GIF index on e-zine sites usually lists a limited number of available issues. FHY's GIF index appears quite complete. However, because I was able to view Chinese e-zines on-line from the start of this research, I did not closely examine the extent of this archive.

Researching the Surface Grammar: Methodology and Challenges

Many theorists and scholars commenting on the influence of postmodernism on the shaping of the scholarly enterprise have discussed the superficial "depthlessness" of images and texts in our society and the apparent ability of texts to create endless pastiches and intertextual re-inscriptions (Dorst 1989:104–107; Jameson 1988:16, 28; McRobbie 1994:2; Turkle 1995:47). While this may well be a feature of texts, particularly electronic texts, such that "postmodern theorists argue that the privileged way of knowing can only be through an exploration of surfaces" and that this development "makes social knowledge into something we might navigate" (Turkle 1995:47), ethnographic research into this medium must continue to concern itself with more than browsing. According to Angela McRobbie, superficiality need not equate with a negative loss of meaning: If surfaces are what the electronic field presents to us, we must find ways of re-examining their intertextuality (1994:4). She advocates a return to greater concern with ethnographic investigation and "a turning away from the temptation to read more and more from the cultural products and objects of consumption" (1994:41). In fact, she argues that those readings, pleasurable and compelling interpretive exercises though they are, have in some ways "led to an extrapolation of cultural objects out of the context of their usefulness (or their materiality); they have been prised away from their place in history and from their role in social relations" (1994:27). By contrast, Nancy Baym's research

into participatory culture and performance aesthetics among soap opera fans on a Usenet group exemplifies the fruitful potential of ethnographic techniques systematically applied to the study of computer-mediated communication (1993).

However, Merrill Morris and Christine Ogan propose that different Internet contexts may require different “critical masses” of interactive communication (1996:45–47). A newsgroup may be thought of as a shifting constellation of texts revolving around a particular frame of reference—a shared interest in soaps, animation, or kite flying, for example—whose discourse is temporally constrained but spatially expanded in terms of both volume and potential accessibility. In comparison, the experiences of readers and contributors to an e-zine are filtered through processes of editorial decision making, making participant-observation more problematical. Although it is certainly true that newsgroups and e-zines share specific, common features, such as a relatively small core of regular contributors (Baym 1993: 148), there are some fundamental differences between their respective grammars.

For one thing, although each final issue is published in an electronic format, the contributions may be submitted in a variety of forms. While most people submit computer-generated Chinese documents, some articles are sent by fax, post, or as scanned images that are then typed in as Chinese text by e-zine staff.¹⁴ Also, as with the more traditionally circulated printed ephemera discussed earlier, it is difficult to form an accurate picture of an e-zine’s audience size based on the number of people who visit a website or have e-mail subscriptions. Because most Chinese-enabled browsers can also print Chinese text, copies of e-zines can be made available to family members or colleagues who may not have direct access to the necessary technology.¹⁵

Finally, in order to protect the interests and identities of authors and contributors¹⁶ who voluntarily submit pieces for review and the regular readership whose abiding interest provides the rationale for continued publication, there is no direct way to contact members of the larger e-zine public without prior editorial approval. Narváez finds that “the grammar of many electronic media (television, radio) makes it technically impossible for an audience to respond in an instantaneous, direct, personal manner to the performance of a popular performer” (1992:17). I was similarly constrained by the grammar of this particular electronic medium from directly contacting individual readers, either to find out more about their own contributions or their responses to submissions made by others. It was obvious that my first step would have to be a series of electronic “letters to the editors” of the three magazines.

Consequently, after careful scrutiny of the FHY website¹⁷ in the autumn of 1996, I decided to write first to Ji Zhang, a volunteer and, as I later discovered, former editor of FHY. From the frequency of his e-mail address on the various pages, I surmised correctly that he was personally involved with all technological aspects of electronic publishing, including the maintenance and improvement of these Canadian e-zine websites and their associated links. He passed on a substantial amount of helpful technical information and suggested that I also write to other staff at the recently amalgamated FHY-LYTX board and to the editors of the Ottawa-based ZHDB.

Following this advice, I sent similar letters to the other editorial addresses. In due time, these were answered by Zheng Huang of FHY-LYTX and Jinqing Yao, one of the editors of the printed version of ZHDB, the source of content for the electronic copy. Despite their busy schedules and numerous commitments—it is not uncommon for an editor to serve as a consultant for several e-zines simultaneously (Ji Zhang, e-mail correspondence with author, November 13, 1996) in addition to work, study, and family obligations—my questions regarding target readership, major changes in formatting and content, publication history, perceived mandate, and relationship to other Chinese electronic magazines were answered expediently and with thoughtful insight.

To supplement these initial on-line contacts, I downloaded issues of each magazine at quarterly intervals in order to obtain a representative and manageable sample. During the period of my analysis, I found that LYTX was published on a monthly basis. FHY appeared on the first, tenth, and 20th day of each month, and ZHDB followed a slightly irregular bimonthly pattern. While LYTX seems to have a longer span as an established periodical—my cross section from the issues available from the site archive began with volume 20, dated August 15, 1993, compared with the first volume of FHY, which made its debut on the 20th of September the same year—FHY's greater frequency of publication accounted for a larger proportion of the overall sample. In addition, I also downloaded all of the extant FHY "special/supplemental issues" (*te kan*, 特刊) that I could find on the main site. One of the issues of ZHDB contained encoding errors and was discarded from the sample.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, in the case of ZHDB, the record of its existence in electronic format appears substantially shorter than its comprehensive history in print. All of the issues of ZHDB surveyed, seven in total, were taken from the same year, 1996. During some months, contrary to its customary pattern, ZHDB published three issues. This, combined with the comparatively small number of issues readily available on the ZHDB homepage, hopefully explains my corresponding deviation from an otherwise standardized means of data collection. In the next section, I discuss the main features of each of the e-zines and summarize my comparative findings. Additionally, in an attempt to render some expression of audience voice, I explore aspects of contributors' poetry and prose around two common themes that are, I feel, singularly pertinent in a Canadian context: the concept of place and seasonal references, especially to autumn, winter, and *snow*.

*Pressing Leaves, Part Two:
An Exploration of Three Chinese Electronic Magazines*

The proliferation of technologies and electronic media has, in many ways, changed our perception of distances and boundaries, stimulating thought about the emerging nature of global-local relationships and identities (Morley and Robins 1995). As folklorists, we have also had to confront previously accepted notions of local categories as unmarked and authentic, as if possessed of some special quality because they constituted our ways of talking for and about "the folk" (Shuman 1993:358, 361). The question of whether an electronic community constitutes a

folk group is a contentious and challenging one. Although Baym has argued convincingly that a shared knowledge of topic, technology, and discourse “are enough to create distinct ways of speaking, and hence distinctive folk groups and folkloric traditions” (1993:144), I prefer to refer to these groups using different terminology. For reasons that I suspect are similar, at least in intent if not historical significance, to researchers who prefer to speak of *vernacular* rather than *folksong* traditions, I have elsewhere used the term *rhetorical communities* to describe participants on the Chinese Internet and their performances (Kozar in press).

This concept, developed by Narváez in his study of the influence of a popular Newfoundland radio broadcast, succinctly captures the way in which individuals, by creatively interpreting the media and messages of technological innovation and social change, form groups “united by sensory perceptions rather than by contiguity in physical space” (1991:192). While separations between rural and urban landscapes and realities and, perhaps more specifically, between traditional and modern ideologies, have always existed in China, these boundaries have often been the site of the creation of works of powerful literary and folkloric importance.¹⁸ In contemporary Chinese political history, however, the marking and unmarking of “authentic” categories of people, such as “the masses,” and the ideological distinctions that coexisted with inclusion or exclusion in certain social classes, have also become deeply recalled sites of pain, alienation, and loss. I sense that, as a folklorist interested in cross-cultural research, I must be flexible in my labels and conventions, as some of them may gain unintended shades of meaning in translation.

Electronic magazines, as cooperatively constructed, shared texts, are a cohesive force in the larger rhetorical communities of readers. According to Ji Zhang, LYTX was the first Chinese e-zine to receive ISSN classification, followed by the popular, widely distributed *Hua Xia Wen Zhai* (华夏文摘), a news and literature magazine published under the auspices of *China News Digest* (CND). As stated earlier, my survey of LYTX only included issues from volume 20 (August 15, 1993) onward, as these were accessible from LYTX’s homepage. However, Zhang informed me in our initial correspondence that the earliest issues of the e-zine can be found on an ftp site in Sweden but that: “they were short, and the format was poor.—it was LYTX history :-).” Though I did not examine these earlier volumes, their existence, combined with LYTX’s current monthly publishing rate, suggest that the magazine was started in 1991 or 1992,¹⁹ an indisputably respectable age for a publication of its type.

According to the masthead, LYTX was originally the result of the collaborative efforts of members of the Chinese Students’ and Scholars Association of Ottawa, but since its recent amalgamation with FHY in late 1996, the editorial board has a wider provenance. The premier issue of FHY, dated the 20th day of September, 1993, was itself established by merging other magazines together. When I asked editor Zheng Huang whether there was anything distinctively Canadian about FHY besides the literal translation of its name *Chinese Maple Garden*,²⁰ I received the following reply:

The Magazine of FHY was launched under the structure of “Federation of Chinese Students and Professionals in Canada”, by joining forces of three magazines in Toronto, Ottawa and Calgary.

That might be the Canadian mark. But presently, quite many editorial members resides outside Canada, although there are still many Canadian contributions. A big portion of contributors and readers are all over the world. We also regularly carry some news about the oversea Chinese community, mostly from Canada. [Zheng Huang, e-mail correspondence with author, November 26, 1996]

Canadian and Chinese symbols also construct mutual points of signification on some FHY web pages. A recent FHY homepage depicted a winding Great Wall, and the title bar above the index page juxtaposed a maple leaf with stylized Chinese characters.

ZHDB's homepage featured what appeared to be a reproduction of the masthead of the original Ottawa weekly newspaper, comprised of the publication's name represented in large calligraphy, too large, in fact, to fit within the dimensions of my monitor. The simple but prominent design may reflect the e-zine's close affiliation with its printed namesake. LYTX's original homepage used basic headers, and the reader's attention was immediately drawn to the lists of hyperlinked issues that could be downloaded or displayed.

A common feature of most Chinese websites, including those that are the focus of this work, is a concern with the technological aspects of reading. Accordingly, links to differently formatted versions of the same issues are provided and clearly marked. In addition, there are instructions for reading Chinese on various platforms or using certain types of software. Also, most e-zines have image files of recent issues, though as I mentioned previously, the files are large, and there are generally fewer back issues. For interested readers, there are often links to more detailed guides (FAQs) that note ftp sites where the latest versions of public domain viewing programs may be obtained and describe the main features of the programs in order to aid selection. A very comprehensive introduction to Chinese computing is contained in FHY's second special issue (FHYtk02).²¹

While I was unable to determine ZHDB's electronic origins and history, editor Jinqing Yao noted some of the contrasts between Chinese publications produced in Canada and in Mainland China. Besides editors' awareness of the practical complexities of the different encoding protocols and their relation to simplified and full-form writing scripts, coupled with the fact that, potentially, "readership comes from everywhere" and not all readers may have a complete command of both character systems, he stated:

Politically, publications produced by Chinese in Canada do not have to follow a particular political line as the publications in China do. Culturally, the publications in Canada pay much more attentions to the cultural differences and similarities between China and Canada, or between the East and West and probably are much more interested in all kinds of cross-cultural activities. [Jinqing Yao, e-mail correspondence with author, December 6, 1996]

As might be expected, FHY/LYTX also has a widely dispersed and varied readership. Huang constructed an audience profile that, while predominantly made up of educated, overseas Chinese from the Mainland, also included ethnic Chinese from elsewhere and non-Chinese readers:

Our present composition of readers roughly reflects what we are aiming for: Oversea Chinese. Most of our readers seem to be the Chinese students, intellectuals and business people, all of them seem to have received higher education and understand Chinese, English, and basic computer skill quite well. Most of the readers seem to have come from the mainland of China. We do have quite many subscribers from Hongkong, Taiwan. Some from Singapore. There seem to be a small percentage of readers with native language being Japanese and English. There are a few subscribers seem to have come from governmental agencies from some countries.

While considerable overlap obtains in the composition of the e-zine audiences, the magazines' respective contents and emphases differ sufficiently to suggest not only distinct aims but also the identification and successful exploitation of more or less discrete niches. A comparison of all three e-zines revealed general similarities in layout—the arrangement of articles under seven or eight section headings per volume, for example—and a propensity toward a maximum file size not exceeding 60K, probably to aid quick, uninterrupted transfer. As might be expected, ZHDB was the “newsiest” of the three publications discussed here. The seven issues in my sample contained on average at least one major news feature, several headline summaries or news excerpts, and two articles that may be called editorials or news-related commentaries, depending on their byline.

This contrasts with the 16 issues of FHY and the 11 issues of LYTX sampled. Normally, FHY contained a section of headlines, but the inclusion of a feature story was by no means constant, and editorials were also comparatively rare. I was only able to identify this news genre conclusively in about one-third of the issues I examined. Conversely, LYTX contained few news items of any kind, with the striking exception of announcements of events that would primarily interest the local and regional Chinese student communities, though national happenings, such as CSSA conferences, were also highlighted. The effects of restructuring are reflected in LYTX's tendency to carry more shared news items since the consolidation of the two editorial boards. Later issues of FHY also seem to contain more news and information, but this may be partially due to FHY's periodic publication of special issues that often take the form of literary supplements. According to Ji Zhang, LYTX's essential mandate has remained to provide a vehicle for the publication of previously unpublished material from contributors, and as such it has never adopted a literary digest model. Where deemed appropriate, however, lyrics or poetry by classical or contemporary authors, and even popular singer-songwriters,²² are sometimes used.

Understandably, many contributions pertain to domestic concerns. All three e-zines ran articles that can be construed as belonging to a kind of “children's corner.” ZHDB periodically included a section on “Health Notes,” and LYTX has a regular section featuring articles on the theory and practice of traditional *qigong* (气功) exercises and techniques. A complex exercise regimen, belief system, and philosophical discipline, the practice of *qigong* is often marked by highly individualized expression. Because every practitioner is likely to have very articulate opinions regarding best practice in *qigong*, articles on the subject draw a wide range of readers. Both FHY and LYTX occasionally published “homestyle” recipes, and advice and opinions on a wide range of vexatious topics, from relationships to mortgages to immigration

policies; all are likely to find their way into the electronic pages of FHY. Across all three e-zines, the range of personal and family-oriented topics, juxtaposed with literature from classical, translated,²³ or contemporary Chinese sources, reflects a desire to provide readers with texts that convey not only timely information but also to present texts that transcend the ephemeral nature of the medium and genre. The achievement and maintenance of a balance that continues to appeal to the readership is of paramount importance to the people responsible for e-zine production. As Huang puts it, appreciating the many facets of readers' needs and worldview is an on-going challenge:

this is a gradual progress of self-perfection/improvement. There always some need to better serve the readers, and better reflect the views and feelings of the oversea Chinese community. Keep in touch with the pulse of our readers might be one of our "features" we try to achieve. . . . As a diversified community, I think our readers are diversified in terms of tastes. Our editorial staffs are also diversified, with many of them have special interest in one or more aspects. Actually, it has been our endeavour to include various views and emotions our intended readers have.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the reality of living in Canadian society quietly pervades the e-zines, but it is not the sole focus. That does not mean topics such as the economy, the future of Canadian unity, French language sign laws, and racism²⁴ do not figure beneath the section headings. They certainly do, along with articles about Hong Kong, contested geographic regions such as China's contention with Japan for the *Diaoyu* Islands,²⁵ the Three Gorges Dam Project and its environmental and social effects, and, indeed, the future of *Chinese* unity,²⁶ society, and the economy.

Even more than the themes that recur in the news, contributors' poetry and prose may reflect one of the audience's most potent forms of symbolic, intra-cultural communication. Most issues I examined contained at least one section devoted to poetry or prose and poetry together. As Pauline Greenhill states, folk poetry "makes an issue appropriate by appropriating it" (1989:59). Like other traditional idioms, vernacular poetry draws on collective knowledge, symbols, and values, and expresses even critical or challenging responses in culturally resonant ways (1989:101–102). I suggest that one of the important themes dealt with in contributors' writings is that of *place*—the displacement of the self in a foreign cultural milieu and the individual's articulation of a historical and communal sense of place that permits a negotiation of the seemingly incommensurable solitudes of East and West.

Referring specifically to a Newfoundland context, Gerald Pocius suggests that "Once people decide to leave places, culture becomes objectified" (1991:25). In Chinese readers' reflections on the places from which they came and to which they belong, there appears a strong cyclical and temporal dimension as well, which is inexorably connected to nature and the elements, and specifically to the seasonal motifs of autumn and snow. It is possible that this association of particular seasonal conditions with remembered—or even nostalgically reconstructed—geography, people, sights, and sounds, functions to make the experience of Canada a little more comprehensible. Regardless of the reasons behind it, leaving a place involves initially positioning the self outside familial and social networks. In Chinese culture, these networks are a major influence and defining force on an individual's identity.

Outside “the Net on Earth,” at least, separated from personal connections with one’s own common ground of *xiang* (鄉) and *jia* (家), place and home/family, the dimensions of somewhere like Canada must seem vast and disconnected indeed. Their compositions connect seasons and states, like autumn and the changing moon, to participatory rituals such as Mid-Autumn Festival (*zhongqiu jie*, 中秋節), which provides a collectively sanctioned symbolic space in which to deal with homesickness through the active recollection of absent loved ones and distant moments and places. Through the construction, presentation, and distribution of cultural texts, readers can put Canada into perspective. As with the telling of narratives, the unfamiliar becomes understandable if taken in context. To borrow from W. F. H. Nicolaisen: “This landscape of otherness is largely a projection of the landscape of home” (1991:7).

Before giving a synopsis of contributors’ submissions focusing on the subjects outlined above, I want to emphasize that not all selections were poetry in the strict sense of free or rhymed verse following a structure comprised of couplets or lines of fixed length. However, contributors’ prose concerned with the topic of remembered place frequently displayed a remarkably vivid, poetic character. As a classical genre, Chinese poetry tends to be very aphoristic, and it is conceivable that prose provided a vernacular medium more suited to elaborated descriptions.

Also, I have taken care not to refer to readers who submit pieces as “authors.” In many cases, people submit texts that they have compiled or selected from other sources. As such, they act in ways that are very similar to the presenters of popular poetry in Greenhill’s study. She concludes that “Authorship is not an absolute, it is part of a continuum with presentation. . . . Authorship, as seen here, is from an ethnographic point of view, a variable and relative entity” (1989:107, 111), a statement that likewise applies to the relationship between texts and sources in these e-zines.

Briefly, the randomly selected issues included in my survey, combined with an on-line Chinese keyword search of relevant terms in FHY’s holdings,²⁷ yielded the following results. Firstly, *place* (*xiang*) figures as the central topic in 19 pieces, mainly prose. These works generally describe memories of home or people and periods associated with this locale, like close relatives and childhood. Place carries deeply personal connotations, as shown by its usual modifiers: “homeland/native place” (*guxiang*, 古鄉, literally: “old place”) and “my homeland” (*wo de guxiang*, 我的古鄉). Secondly, autumn (*qiu*, 秋) and winter (*dong*, 冬) appeared at least eight times as a central theme, and snow (*xue*, 雪) provides the focus in six poems. Conversely, spring (*chun*, 春), despite its importance as a signifier of regeneration (Eberhard 1986:275), seems to be reserved mainly for references to Spring Festival (*chunjie*, 春節), the Chinese New Year celebration. I found only a few clear mentions of this season, and one of them, “Lu Ming’s” (魯鳴) “Reflections on the Start of the New Year” (年初心情), opens with a reference to the snowy weather and mentions Lu’s “calm and peaceful heart,”²⁸ a reference that commonly appears in Chinese poetry and commentary as an invitation to the reader to enter into a space of personal reflection inspired by the text.

I recognize that the limitations of this thematic inquiry prevent me from making a truly accurate estimation of the real significance of place and seasonal allusions in

the total corpus of e-zine contributions found in the poetry and creative prose sections. For one thing, the search is basically restricted to subject words appearing in first lines. I suspect that there are actually many more pieces describing personal remembrances of this sort; however, I used a small number of search terms. Rather unexpectedly, “family” (*jia*, 家) did not result in the identification of specific references to place, but it is possible that searches for particular family members, “grandfather,” “uncle,” and so on, might have generated more examples. Predictably, perhaps, the most poetically inclined subject seems to be romance, both fulfilled and unrequited. Other poems discuss a variety of personal feelings and reactions, including loneliness. Nevertheless, from the preceding, it is evident that this is an important, interrelated set of themes and motifs.

As a signifier, snow presents an intriguing set of possible connotations. According to Wolfram Eberhard, snow is associated with “old age and the god of transitoriness” (1986:269). From people to whom I have spoken on other occasions, snow is connected less to senescence and temporary conditions than to the potential for *transition*. Snow is described as beautiful and especially as clean: It covers all surfaces and objects equitably, and—most importantly, perhaps—it balances the harsher realities of the landscape, quietly transforming the world with a kind of steady perseverance, setting the stage for the promise of greater transformations. Snow does more than signify the initial, flabbergasted encounter with “a typical Canadian winter,” especially since many Mainland Chinese have had ample firsthand experience with snow as they hail from parts of China that see a fair share of the white stuff and the wind and cold that goes with it. In poetry, snow at once “quiets the heart” and quickens memories, *possibly* even of times and places where snow has never fallen, or where the individual has never been. It becomes a symbolic constant for the poet, presenter, or reader now conspicuously absent from once familiar geography, whether real or imagined.

To close this section, I have excerpted a poem about snow that embodies many of the cultural and performance aesthetics just described. The poem,²⁹ presented by “Xiao Tian” (晓天), makes use of highly evocative imagery. The landscape is, I suggest, most likely an imagined vista, but the various allusions and descriptions of the scene would be attractive and easily grasped by most readers, especially those with backgrounds in Chinese classical literature or who are actively interested in classical poetry. The poem has a clever and rather fascinating structure. I cannot comment as to the craftsmanship of the scansion; however, in the second part, there is a definite juxtaposition of complementary images. This poem is followed by the presenter’s response, under the heading “Analysis of Appreciation.” I have translated the contributor’s summary by way of introduction, and a translation³⁰ of the piece also follows:

At first, the author even told us, snow is nature’s masterpiece. Through personal experience, he reached his subtle observations of snow’s singular beauties “quiet, clean, orderly, bright.” To tie the whole story together, these points are clearly stated: A charming scene, regardless of the place, is full of the joys of life at all times. Because there is no place that does not delight in snow, and on a snowy day nothing is without enjoyment. It needn’t be necessarily on high mountains. In this

work, besides describing the snowy scene, it also reveals the author's mood and philosophy of life, which is worthy of our consideration.

雪

曉原 (作者不詳)

天工冲水宇宙飄花品之有四美焉

落地無聲	靜也
沾衣不染	潔也
高下平鋪	勻也
洞窗輝映	明也

宜

長松修竹	老梅片月
怪石稜層	深林渺盍
寒江遠涌	斷岸小橋

古剎層巒	疏籬幽徑	老叟披蓑垂釣
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騷人跨尋詩 . . .

Snow

Xiao Tian (not the original author, unknown)

The products of Heaven's handiwork, cosmic flowers, have four inherent beauties

Descends to earth without a sound,	quiet
Dampens clothes without a stain,	clean
Deals with even hand high to low,	orderly
Pierces shining through the window.	bright

Delight

Lengthens pines, mends bamboo, shrivelled plums grow round
Strange rocks, ridged and layered, deep forests, vast and secluded
Cold rivers, distant surges, bridges dot rugged shores.

Ancient temple on a craggy peak, scanty fence furrowed path,
an old man in a straw cape fishes
a restless poet rides, seeking poetry . . .

Conclusions and Future Directions

I began this discussion with reference to the "Ten-Thousand-Dimensional Web," one way of naming the Internet as it is conceived by rhetorical communities of Chinese users. *Ten thousand* is a traditional superlative, signifying everything from long journeys to wishes for longevity. It could, therefore, represent simply an example of hyperbolic folk speech. Given my explorations of the Chinese net so far, however, I have the sense that, in many ways, the number is a somewhat conservative estimate of the ethnographic possibilities of computer-mediated, cross-cultural research. Far from being the conceivable limit of distance or desire, it is just the beginning.

In this study, I have investigated three Chinese electronic magazines based in Canada. These publications cannot be adequately understood as part of the latest appendage fixed onto a linear continuum of popular cultural performances and texts. However, I think that they can be described contextually, like the poem above, as a recently emerging aspect of the larger historical inscription of Chinese popular fiction and its audiences. The medium, like the genre, is likewise understood in terms of the synchronous pairing of complementary opposites. Through the dynamic interplay of folklore and popular culture, longstanding written and oral traditions encounter contemporary technology in the creation of new vernacular texts.

There are many other areas beyond the scope of the present work. Despite the obvious challenges, I think that long-term research with regular contributors to Chinese e-zines would greatly enhance our knowledge of readers' uses and aesthetics and would add a valuable comparative dimension to the field of audience studies. Web pages may provide us with new configurations of performance repertoire. Folkloric communication on Chinese newsgroups and chat sites also merits systematic observation. Finally, the increasing facility with which images and sound can be electronically transmitted has opened up opportunities for the study of Chinese music and art as well.

I think curiosity originally piqued my interest in Chinese computer-mediated communication. I wanted to know how it was done. More specifically, I wanted to know why many non-Chinese people I spoke to thought that, principally because of linguistic constraints, it either could not be done or had to be approached very differently. With perceptions that recalled much earlier possibilities of innovation, I surmised that the keyboard alone would have to be of a size that would make it practically impossible for an ordinary person to sit comfortably and type. A few years ago, before I seriously began my research, I also sensed that my perceptions of "global electronic culture" were probably quite ethnocentric. People sent electronic mail and posted to newsgroups using essentially alphabetic writing systems. Bandwidth was narrow. Communicative experiences, while far-reaching, were all uniformly vanilla ASCII flavored. But I did not have any other experiences, so I did not know what else to think. Then I walked in on a student in a lab who was intently staring at a Chinese screen display. As unobtrusively as possible, I checked: The computer did not seem to have undergone any lasting modification. The student reacted to my utter amazement with a shrug. "I was just reading a newspaper," he said. With a keystroke, the paper was gone and the screen was filled with the results of a recent experiment. Then I *really* did not know what to think. I had witnessed the impossible, or so I had assumed, as part of everyday life. In larger terms, I had witnessed a small example of the established, *familiar* use of technology in the transmission of folklore and popular culture in a different language for another cultural milieu.

Since then, I have come to realize that electronic communication, for all its global potential, is endowed with local meanings and practices that are, or can be, culture-specific. As with many Western societies, the introduction of computers has profoundly influenced patterns of communication among Chinese users. However, they have approached technology with their own traditions and worldview, and in

their own language, successfully adapting it into a medium that reflects their own experiences, understandings, and preferences.

The e-zine editors thanked me for my interest in this aspect of Chinese culture. By sharing it, it is my hope that I can highlight some of the common points Chinese on-line communication shares with the discourses of other electronic communities. Chinese on-line communication is used for similarly mundane purposes: to contact friends, distribute texts, tell jokes, debate, and so on. In addition to the similarities, I also hope to elucidate some of the differences, so that they can be appreciated and celebrated, and so that other scholars will be encouraged to undertake further research in this area, in the context of a culture that has played such a significant role in Canadian history and in the formation of Canadian society. Through our collective efforts, the scent of vanilla and the specters of “enormous Chinese keyboards” will surely fade away, and our grasp of technological societies, our own and others, will be richer for it.

Notes

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¹*Sunrise* began as a Chinese text-driven gopher site at McGill University several years ago. It has evolved into an independent server supported by banner advertising. At present, it appears to be one of the main archive sites for e-zines that are not in active publication.

²See also Mitra (1997) for an examination of this phenomenon among Indian Internet users.

³Mandarin Chinese has four tones. The numbers that follow the phonemic representations of each Chinese syllable in the full translation of *WWW* refer to the tone value of each character.

⁴Although I have not found this item in any standard Chinese dictionaries to date, its omission might be explained by its very recent provenance. While this may not be the “official” translation of this phrase, given the technological and cultural implications of the Chinese net, it seems a reasonable and insightful one. CND publishes in English as well as Chinese. Publications, software, and other resources can be accessed through their main website, <http://www.cnd.org>. CND also has mirror sites in several countries, including Canada. It should be noted, however, that although they have links to many other publications—including those that are featured in this discussion—the *China News Digest* is not a Canadian-based publication.

⁵As Eberhard notes, the day-to-day operations of Heaven and a harmonious Empire were considered almost mirror images of each other: “later mythology has arranged these [deities] into various ‘ministries’ on an analogy with the Emperor and his administrative hierarchy on earth,” culminating with the “year-end” reports that the domestic gods present in their audiences with the Lord of Heaven around New Year (1986:141). The title of the earthly Emperor, as “the Son of Heaven,” reciprocates and perpetuates this cosmological relationship (1986:95).

⁶Two well-known folktales that depict the compromise of the border between Heaven and Earth are “Nü Wa and the Rainbow” (Hensman 1971:1–3) and “The Spinning Maid and the Cowherd” (Carpenter 1973:182–189)—the first as a result of excessive rain and the second due to the acute sorrow occasioned by the forced separation of two lovers. The latter story is also found in Eberhard's *Folktales of China* under the title “The Bank of the Celestial Stream” (1965:43–44). For additional readings in Chinese mythology, see Birrell (1993).

⁷Due to literacy reforms instituted in Mainland China after 1949, there are basically two representations of the Chinese written language, *simplified* and *traditional* (or *full-form*). This article uses traditional characters throughout. In some instances, the magazines are available in both simplified and full-form electronic formats. Phonemic representations are given in standard *pinyin*, although certain quoted passages may make use of other sound spellings.

⁸The e-zine *Zhonghua daobao* (now archived on *Sunrise* and elsewhere and apparently out of print) is the electronic version of its parent publication of the same name, based in Ottawa. The English title is *The Canada-China News*.

⁹The origins of the vernacular short story or *hua ben* and the genre's connections to Song (A.D. 960–1279) storytelling traditions and Yuan (A.D. 1271–1368) dramatic cycles represent controversial subjects for 20th-century Chinese literature specialists. Compare, for example, the views expressed in Lu Xun's *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (1976) and W. L. Idema's *Chinese Vernacular Literature: The Formative Period* (1974).

¹⁰Idema summarizes the "storyteller's manner" as a complex of literary conceits used in the writing of some vernacular fiction that included such features as chapter-driven structure (*hui*) and the use of opening prefaces and suspense endings, presence of "oral" terms such as *idioms* and *proverbial phrases*, use of set descriptive pieces that were generally poetic in nature, and the use of didactic comment by the author (1974:70).

¹¹It should be noted, however, that McLaren also suggests that in generic form, these 15th-century printed chantefables probably bore a closer resemblance to broadsides than storytelling scripts (1985:170). Also, although the first printed examples may have emerged in the 15th century, certain aspects of the story and its principal characters would have circulated in oral tradition much earlier.

¹²On a like note, Hayes describes the popularity of women's ballad recitations with listening audiences (1985:89).

¹³As might be expected, many of women's marginal discourses did not enter the formally published record, although they were still of fundamental importance to their enjoyment of reading. Referring to the immensely popular *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*, a play by Tang Xianzu published in the latter part of the Ming Dynasty), Ko cites the common practices of distribution of hand-copied texts to other female readers and the insertion of the reader's comments and insights into the margins of personally owned copies for later discussion and reflection (1994:73).

¹⁴All replies were received in English, and excerpts are unedited.

¹⁵This possibility of extended distribution was revealed to me during my thesis research. I posted a reader questionnaire to a Chinese bulletin board from a site in the U.K. Shortly thereafter, I was sent a message by a man saying that he would take the survey home, as it would be of interest to a particular member of his family. Some weeks later I received a posted reply, the detailed answers to my questions having been meticulously provided in a small and precise hand by the man's 70-year-old father-in-law.

¹⁶In general, postal and e-mail addresses are not included with published pieces. As a further complication of the issue of identity, many individuals also appear to use pen names.

¹⁷The URL for the main FHY website is www.fhy.net. FHY also has a useful page of other links that can be accessed from the homepage. Like *Sunrise*, the FHY page carries banner advertising and other sponsorship and has expanded significantly. As of July 2000, it appears that both LYTX and ZHDB are archived. The simplified script version of LYTX is located at www.sunrisesite.org/library/_gb?url=/magazine//lytx. ZHDB can be similarly accessed at www.sunrisesite.org/library/gb/magazine/zhdb. Other formats and archives at mirror sites may also be available.

¹⁸See, for example, Link's (1984) discussion of revolutionary cross-talk (*xiangsheng*).

¹⁹The ftp archive accessible in 1997 contained issues "before volume 13," according to Ji Zhang's reckoning. The homepage links to an archive that commences with volume 20, leaving several issues unaccounted for. If LYTX consistently followed its present publication schedule, on the 15th day of each month, then the e-zine would have first appeared late in 1991. It is possible, however, that the shorter volumes were published more frequently, which would correspondingly place the debut of LYTX later in 1992. Zhang did not give an exact date for the first installment of LYTX.

²⁰The official English name of FHY is *Chinese News and Culture Magazine*.

²¹Filenames of individual e-zine issues are given in brackets.

²²See, for example, singer Cui Jian's "Egg under the Red Flag," (*Hongqi xia de dan*) in LYTX vol. 36, January 15, 1995. Cui Jian is a popular performer whose songs are closely identified with the Democracy Movement and the political sentiments of (especially urban) youth since 1989. Preceding this piece is a poem by contemporary poet Bei Dao.

²³In general, ZHDB included a substantial sampling of translated fiction and nonfiction selections. ZHDB vol. 27, October 18, 1996 (zd9610b), for example, contains an article on "Canada's Mark Twain—Stephen Leacock," followed by one of Leacock's short stories.

²⁴See, for example, ZHDB vol. 11, February 29, 1996 (zd9602c); the reprinted translation of Prime Minister Chrétien's "I Chose Canada" address in vol. 15, April 26, 1996 (zd9604b); vol. 24, August 30, 1996 (zd9608c); and LYTX vol. 48, January 15, 1996 (lytx48). Also, it should be mentioned that FHY initiated a discussion of various aspects of life in Canada in the early stages of its circulation that stimulated debate and encouraged readers' responses. Questions and replies were published in alternating installments. Before the end of FHY's first year, the forum spanned more than ten published segments.

²⁵In 1996–97, the FHY homepage had a pictorial commentary on *Diaoyutai* detailing the history of the conflict, and protest efforts initiated by Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese.

²⁶See the FHY Special Issue, vol. 6, May 17, 1996 (FHYtk06).

²⁷At the time of this research, FHY was the only e-zine of the three with a built-in search facility. Because of the time required for individual analysis of each volume without the aid of a search tool, I was unable to conduct a more comprehensive inspection of the other e-zine archives.

²⁸See FHY, vol. 82, February 1, 1996 (FHY9602a).

²⁹See FHY, vol. 8, January 5, 1994 (fhy08). Earlier volumes used a different naming convention for files, including the volume number but omitting the date.

³⁰As with any translation, my rendering of this poem reflects certain compromises; however, I have tried to capture some of the qualities of both the natural scene and the contributor's mood as described in the excerpt. In Chinese, the word I have translated as "delight," also means "fitting or suitable." In reference to the bamboo, the word for "mend" also carries the meaning "to embellish." My feeling that this poem is excerpted from or modeled on a classical one demonstrates one aspect of the interplay between oral and written forms—the parallel image of the old fisherman and the poet and their lonely quests was used by Chinese students on other occasions in casual conversations.

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