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Popular Literature in Contemporary China: Production, Diffusion and Genres

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White Collar Readers? Contemporary Chinese "Workplace Fiction" and Its Public(s)

This presentation will focus on a category of popular novels which appeared in mainland China in the 2000s, the "workplace novels" or *zhichang xiaoshuo* 职场小说, and on its readership. This genre, which has produced hundreds of works and a few best-sellers, is defined by the centering of the plot on the professional life of the main character, but encompasses a great variety of works. The researchers Zhang Yonglu and Xu Daojun¹ propose to divide the genre into three subcategories according to the "morphology" of the novels, following the work of Vladimir Propp on Russian folk tales². Zhang and Xu thus distinguish the "coming of age workplace novels" or *zhichang chengzhang xiaoshuo* 职场成长小说, which describe how a young and inexperienced character makes his or her first steps in the workplace, the "survival workplace novels" or *zhichang shengcun xiaoshuo* 职场生存小说, which give particular importance to the difficulties one has to overcome in his or her professional life, and finally the "warfare workplace novels" or *zhichang zhengzhan xiaoshuo* 职场征战小说, which depict fierce business competitions between companies and high ranked managers. This three subgenres, which are each represented by a major best-seller,³ are supposed to attract different types of readers, the division will thus be useful for the following analysis.

The relevance of an interest in the consumption and reception of workplace novels is linked with one of the most prominent characteristics of the genre, namely that the novels it encompasses are often sold as "career handbooks". Indeed, in their descriptions of the books,

1. ZHANG Yonglu 张永禄 & XU Daojun 许道军. "Zhichang xiaoshuo: xin de wenxue jueqi" 职场小说：新的文学崛起 [Workplace Novels: A New Literary Phenomenon]. *Dangdai Wentan* 当代文坛 [Contemporary Literary Criticism], 2011, 2001/6, pp. 45-48.

2. PROPP Vladimir (1968). *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Austin (TX): University of Texas Press.

3. Defined here as a work which has ranked among the thirty best-selling novels of the recent years according to the media studies website OpenBook (www.openbook.com.cn).

the authors' and editors' often assert that their target readers are university students arriving at the end of their curriculum, as well as college graduates who are looking for their first employment or who recently found it and have to adapt to their new working environment. These young readers are invited to use the novels to better their chances of success in an increasingly competitive job market. The fact that the authors of workplace novels are generally successful businesspeople, and not full-time writers, bestows an aura of authenticity and efficiency on the fictional narratives inspired by their experiences. Indeed, the novels are described as realistic and as displaying their authors' thorough knowledge of the workplace. This characteristic represents the main advertising strategy of the genre.

While workplace novels has received little attention in the Western academic circles, numerous Chinese scholars have studied this literary trend, which they describe as a major socio-cultural phenomenon of the 21st century. The appearance and success of this literary category is indeed perceived as a proof of the maturation of the economy and rise of the middle class in contemporary China. Researchers also explain that holding a college degree does not insure access to a prestigious and high-paying job anymore, and that the urban youth is thus eager to find new ways to increase its competitiveness on the employment market, partly explaining the success of workplace novels. Scholars generally seem to accept the idea of the utility of these novels as truth, if not as efficient career handbooks — the examination of the narratives casts doubts on their concrete utility as professional guides — at least as a source of identification, of experience sharing, and thus of support, comfort and hope for the young readers who struggle with the hardships of their professional lives. Moreover, researchers generally assert that the narratives giving the most importance to the learning process of the main characters, namely the "coming of age workplace novels", are the ones which have been the most popular among readers. They even tend to use this characteristic as a demonstration of the value of works which would otherwise be disparaged for their lack of literary qualities and for their commercial dimension.

As we can see, the researches on workplace novels seem to be based on the assumption that the target readers and the actual readers belong to the same group, and that the books are bought as an attempt to find guidance in the difficult transition from university to workplace, as well as to alleviate the urban youth's feeling of loneliness, helplessness and uncertainty towards the future. However, no market research or sociological enquiry is ever mentioned to back up this hypothesis. This presentation thus proposes a first attempt to apprehend the readers' identities, interests and concerns, through the exploration of online discussions about workplace novels. To do so, we have examined the questions and dialogues which have attracted the most clicks and responses on three different forums — Tianya Club or *Tianya*

luntan 天涯论坛, Baidu Zhihu 百度知乎, and Book Douban or *Douban dushu* 豆瓣读书 — when searching the words "workplace novels", as well as the titles of the three major best-sellers of the category mentioned above, namely Li Ke's *Du Lala's Promotion Diary* or *Du Lala shengzhi ji* 《杜拉拉升职记》⁴, Cui Manli's *Drifting Along* or *Fuchen* 《浮沉》⁵, and Fu Yao's *Lose&Win* or *Shuying* 《输赢》⁶. As these three narratives belong to different subcategories of the genre — *Du Lala's Promotion Diary* is described as a "coming of age workplace novel", *Drifting Along* as a "survival workplace novel", and *Lose&Win* as a "warfare workplace novel" — which are supposed to attract different readerships, it can be expected that the kind of discussions they give rise to will also vary.

To sum up some of the results of our observations, it can be noted that the forum providing the most entries on all the three novels is Tianya Club, followed by Book Douban, and then by Baidu Zhihu. Moreover, on all the three forums, *Du Lala's Promotion Diary* is the novel giving rise to the most discussions and clicks, followed by *Drifting Along* and then by *Lose&Win*, corresponding to the order of the novels which give most to least importance to the learning process of the main character. These quantitative differences corroborate the hypothesis that the "coming of age workplace novels" attract more numerous, but also younger readers, who are more likely to express their opinions online.

As for the content, the greatest amount of discussions is related to the entertaining dimension of the novels (adaptations for television and film, relationships between the characters, etc.), followed by comments on the literary quality of the works (interest of the plot, writing style, comparisons with other texts, etc.), and finally by questions and reflections related to the workplace, even if the two later categories are often intertwined as the degree of realism and thus of usefulness of the narratives is an important criteria to judge their quality. This characteristic allows us to think that the descriptions of the novels as career handbooks create specific expectations among readers, who then use this characteristic to determine if the reading experience was satisfactory or not. It should also be noted that the most discussions related to the workplace are found on Baidu Zhihu, which offers fewer but longer and more articulated comments, then on Book Douban, the forum with the strongest literary

4. LI Ke 李可 (2013). *Du Lala shengzhi ji* 《杜拉拉升职记》 [Du Lala's Promotion Diary], Haikou: Nanhai chubangongsi 南海出版公司.

5. CUI Manli 崔曼莉 (2012). *Fuchen* 《浮沉》 [Drifting Along], Xi'an: Shanxi shifan daxue chubanshe 陕西师范大学出版社.

6. FU Yao 付遥 (2012). *Fuying* 《输赢》 [Lose&Win], Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe 中国商业出版社.

orientation, and finally on Tianya Club, which seems mainly concerned with entertainment. As we have seen, to some extent, workplace novels give rise to discussions and questions about their usefulness in the professional lives of the Internet users. If these topics are marginal, they nonetheless reveal the anxieties of individuals confronted with an increasingly competitive job market forcing them to endlessly seek for new ways of self-improvement and distinction, and to pursue unreachable ideals. Moreover, they shed light on the ambiguous perceptions of social climbing in today's Chinese society. Indeed, everyone is encouraged to have aspirations and to work hard to make them a reality. However, the access of more and more people to higher levels of educations, and thus to employments requiring more qualifications and offering better salaries, also implies a further increase of the competitiveness of the job market, and the gradual disappearance of some of the prestige and privileges of the current members of the urban white collar workers' group. It is specifically this last element which will be examined in detail in the oral part of the presentation, on the basis of discussions found on Baidu Zhihu when searching for the title *Drifting Along*.