Chinese society

The Subplot: What China is Reading and Why it Matters

Megan Walsh brings this illuminating insight into the web fiction, sci-fi (and subtle dissent) read by one-fifth of humanity

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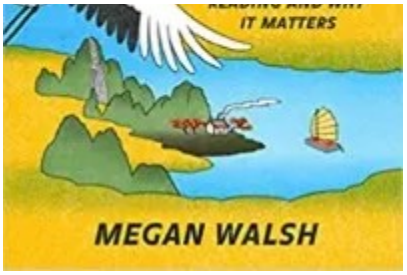
Isabel Hilton 6 HOURS AGO

Earlier this month, one man's story caught the imagination of millions of China's "netizens". Mr Yue is 44, a former fisherman. He had left home to look for his son, who had vanished after working in the capital as a chef. Yue left behind a paralysed father, a mother with a broken arm, a wife and child, all of whom he continued to support in a gruelling round of poorly paid shift work across Beijing. His was a schedule that barely allowed for meals, let alone sleep.

We know this because Yue's life was laid bare when he tested positive for Covid-19 and his travels around the city were tracked. He was one of the shadow army of migrant workers in China's glistening cities, whose stories are largely unheard.

Except that now, as critic Megan Walsh reveals in *The Subplot*, a short but illuminating exploration of the reading habits of one-fifth of humanity, the prose and poetry of migrant workers such as Yue are one of several new genres that have blossomed in China's digital spaces. The Chinese internet may be a place of unpleasantness and censorship, but it is also, as Walsh explains, a creative space that has given migrant workers an unprecedented platform, beginning with the viral success of the 2017 diary of a domestic worker, *I am Fan Yusu*.



There are several other literary phenomena in this fascinating account. Another is the cut-throat world of Chinese web fiction, in which novels are pushed out at punishing speed and in staggering volume on online fiction platforms, in the hope of attracting a film or TV deal. China's online reading platforms, she notes, carry some 24m fiction titles by writers who hammer out between 3,000 and 30,000 words a day. This disorderly energy apparently worries President Xi Jinping, not least because it bypasses the traditional gatekeepers of the Chinese Writers Association, who used to be able to weed out authors who might signal trouble for the Party.

There is still, of course, a more formal publishing world in which established authors try to make sense of the massive upheaval and disruptions of the past 40 years. Writers such as the 2012 Nobel laureate Mo Yan, best known for his 1986 debut *Red Sorghum*, or Yan Lianke, author of the novel *Hard Like Water* and the memoir *Three Brothers*, continue to write — if not always to be published in the People's Republic.

Readers seeking to understand Chinese society should explore the fictional worlds beyond the 'political and economic narratives'

For many authors who must navigate the uncertainties of shifting official red lines, science fiction offers a safe haven. It is a genre in which to address the disruption and dislocations between past and present, and between official narratives and reality, and to explore otherwise dangerous themes such as social injustice.

Liu Cixin, a computer engineer and bestselling sci-fi author, locates real-world problems such as pollution and human greed on distant planets, while in the story *Regenerated Bricks*, Han Song describes recycling the rubble of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which contains victims' remains, into "intelligent bricks" for space colonisation, thus populating distant planets with unhappy ghosts.

rural nostalgia of "cottagecore", espionage fiction, crime stories and fantasy martial arts heroics. Little of it — despite official exhortation — seems to sing the praises of the Party, preferring to grapple with the massive social and personal dislocations of recent times.

Despite this teeming landscape, there are, however, still missing voices: Uyghur and Tibetan writers and intellectuals have all but vanished from the public sphere — some have fallen silent, others have literally disappeared. Han authors write versions of China's "minorities" but their own stories await a future reckoning.

The Subplot: What China is Reading and Why it Matters by Megan Walsh, *Columbia Global Reports $16, 136 pages*

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